

# THE MERIT OF 20 YEARS OF HONEST WORK SURPASSED THE MERIT OF THE FOREFATHERS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

## Parshas Vayeitzei

### The Merit of 20 Years of Honest Work Surpassed the Merit of the Forefathers

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 834, Talmud Torah vs Kibud Av. Good Shabbos!*

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This week's parsha contains Yaakov's famous dream of the ladder with its legs on the ground and its head reaching heavenward. The Angels of G-d ascend and descend the ladder. The Baal HaTurim makes the following interesting but almost inscrutable comment: The numeric value of the Hebrew word for ladder (sulam) equals the numeric value of the Hebrew word for money (mamon). This common "gematria" of 136 obviously teaches some kind of symbolism between the Angels ascending and descending the ladder and money. What is this connection?

One of the standard interpretations of this Baal HaTurim is based on the fact that one of the great tests in life is how we handle money. I once read an essay from my good friend Rabbi Yaakov Luban on this subject. We have all observed a phenomenon in life whereby when a person is in Yeshiva he strives for matters of spirituality, growth in intellectual accomplishment, and acquisition of Torah knowledge. Many times however, when this same person leaves the protective walls of the Yeshiva, his priorities change. He is no longer interested in growth and his spirituality begins to slip.

The primary reason for this is that when a person leaves the Yeshiva and certainly when he goes from being single and supported by his parents to being married and responsible for his own livelihood, his outlook on life changes. The burden of making a living skews a person's entire outlook on life. A person becomes so consumed with trying to earn a parnasah for himself and his family that the priorities that were important to him as a yeshiva bochur (getting a good chavrusa, having a 'good Elul', etc.) often fall by the wayside and are no longer important. Instead, "I have to put food on the table" and "I've got to pay the mortgage" become important.

The yoke of earning a living is one of the major tests of life -- not only in terms of making a living but also in terms of the tests a person confronts within the working world -- remaining honest, dealing with integrity, not cutting corners, not trying to cheat people, etc.

Perhaps this is what the Baal HaTurim means here when Yaakov is leaving the comfort and protection of his parental home and he's about to embark on the rest of his life's journey into the "real world". He sees the 'sulam' [ladder] representing the challenges of 'mamon' (money=earning a living). He sees the Angels of G-d ascending and descending the ladder. He sees both the potential for ascent as well as the potential for descent in trying to traverse the ladder = attempting to earn a living.

Yaakov Avinu passed the test of earning a livelihood with flying colors. Not only did he not cut corners, he was impeccably honest. He was impeccably honest with a father in law who was a crook. This did not give Yaakov the rationalization to say "You need to cheat a cheater; you need to fight fire with fire." This was not part of his calculation.

When Yaakov finally left the house of Lavan, Lavan chased after Yaakov and overtook him at Mt. Gilead. The Almighty came to Lavan in a dream and told him "Take heed that you not speak to Yaakov -- either good or evil!" In effect, G-d warned Lavan: "Don't lay a finger on Yaakov Avinu." The Medrash Tanchuma says a very interesting thing on this pasuk: We see from here that the merit of Yaakov's honest work for Lavan brought him more protective merit even than the merit of his fathers (zecus Avos). The Medrash bases this on the pasuk: "Except the G\_d of my father, the G\_d of Avraham, and the Fear of Yitzchak, had been on my side, surely now would you have sent me away empty. G-d has seen my affliction and THE LABOR OF MY HANDS and He chastised last night." [Bereshis 31:42]

I always felt that this dialogue here between Yaakov and Lavan is one of the most moving dialogues in the entire Torah. Lavan comes to Yaakov and says to him "What are you doing? You took my daughters! You cheated me! What kind of business is this?" Yaakov Avinu then pours out his heart at his father-in-law. He goes through the whole litany of complaints against Lavan. "I didn't cheat you. You cheated me! I suffered the cold. I suffered the heat! I faithfully took care of your sheep for these 20 long years! I hardly had time to sleep at night. You kept changing the terms of my service to improve your position! If not for the G-d of Avraham and the Fear of Yitzchak (e.g. -- my zecus Avos) that stood by me, I would be left penniless. I would have left your house a pauper. Furthermore, G-d saw my efforts and the work of my hands and He chastised last night."

The Medrash interprets this pasuk as follows: The Zechus Avos (merit of the ancestors) only aided him in that it allowed him to escape Lavan without being penniless. However, the fact that Lavan was not able to touch him, the fact that he escaped intact, as a wealthy man with a large family -- that was a reward for the faithfulness of his work. It was because Hashem saw his honesty and dedication to his work that He appeared to Lavan and prohibited him from harming Yaakov in any

way, shape or form.

The Medrash says we see from here that a person should not slough off on his job. He should not say "I can take it easy and not put out 100% effort for my employer." A person must put in a full and honest effort in all his labors so that Hashem can send forth His blessing to him.

The Rambam writes in the last law of Hilchos Sechirus [13:7]: Just as the employer has to treat the poor (worker) honestly, so too the poor (worker) is warned not to "steal" the work of the employer and take off a little time here and a little time there, thereby spending the entire day in deceit. Rather, he must be meticulous with himself during the time he is working because (the Rabbis) were particular that he should not recite the fourth blessing (of Birkat haMazon since it will "waste" the time he is obligated to be working for his employer). So too, he must work with all his strength as the Tzadik Yaakov said "For with all my strength I worked for your father". Therefore, he took reward for this even in this world, as it is written "And the man prospered very very much."

It is interesting to note that the Rambam refers to Yaakov here as Yaakov haTzadik (a term usually reserved for Yosef), not merely Yaakov Avinu. Why is he referred to as Yaakov haTzadik? It is because he was an honest worker. He is the paradigm of an honest employee.

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## **Dudaim, Educating Children, and Transjordan -- What's the Connection?**

The pasuk says "And Reuven went during the days of the wheat harvest and collected dudaim [mandrakes] for his mother..." [Bereshis 30:14]: The Medrash quotes the pasuk in Mishlei, which says, "Educate a lad based on his nature, even when he becomes old he will not deviate from it." [Mishlei 22:6]. The enigmatic Medrash then adds that when the descendants of Reuvain came into Eretz Yisrael hundreds of years later, they would be given their portion in Aver HaYarden [Transjordan].

What is the connection between these three disparate matters (the dudaim, the education of a child according to his nature, and the inheritance of Aver HaYarden by Bnei Reuvain)? What do they have to do with each other? The commentaries on the Medrash explain "And Reuvain went out during the days of the harvest of the wheat crop..." Why did he go then? Reuvain went out then because that was when the crop was hefker [ownerless]. Reuvain was particular that there should be no theft involved in his collection of the dudaim.

Where did Reuven learn this honesty? Reuven learned this legacy of honesty and meticulousness in his observance of monetary laws from his father, Yaakov, who throughout his life represented the attribute of truthfulness (Titen EMES l'Yaakov).

"Educate a lad based on his nature": Reuven gave over this lesson of honesty and truthfulness to his

children and then his children gave it over to their children, and so it continued from generation to generation. As a result, hundreds of years later, when it was time to enter the Land of Israel, what happened? The pasuk says, "And there was a large quantity of cattle that belonged to the Children of Reuvain..." [Bamidbar 32:1] Large flocks of sheep and cattle tend to graze on other people's land. The Children of Reuvain were concerned that if they lived in the more densely populated area west of the Jordan River, they would perhaps be guilty of allowing their cattle to graze on and damage other people's land. This would be in violation of their legacy of concern about honesty and faithfulness in monetary dealings. They expressed a preference to settle in Aver HaYarden, where there were fewer people and there would be less concern that they might come to theft due to the multitude of their cattle.

The only way to educate our children with honesty is for us to be honest and meticulous in our own business and other monetary dealings. That is the connection between Reuven going out during the harvest to collect dudaim and Reuven asking to settle in Aver HaYarden.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for this Parsha are provided below:

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