

YAAKOV AVINU'S DISTRESS / HUTS AND THE LITTLE VESSELS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #966 – Matzeva and Other Cemetery Issues. Good Shabbos!

What Was Bothering Yaakov Avinu?

When Yaakov hears -- in this week's parsha -- that Eisav is approaching with an army of 400 men, we are told "And Jacob became very frightened, and it distressed him..." [Bereishis 32:8] Rashi and all the commentaries take note of the double expression in the *pasuk* – first he was very afraid (*va'yeera me'od*) and then he was distressed (*va'yeitzer lo*). What are the nuances of differences implied by these two expressions?

Rashi writes "he was afraid – lest he be killed; and he was distressed – lest he kill others". We could ask why Yaakov was afraid he might kill someone in light of the *halacha* that "one who comes to kill you, you should initiate action to kill him?" Self-defense is a basic concept of Jewish law – a person has the right if not the duty to preemptively kill someone who is coming to kill him. Why then did this possibility "trouble" Yaakov?

I saw an interesting answer to this question in a sefer called *Avir Yosef* by Rav Yaakov Yosef Reinman. The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* in Parshas Re'eh makes a famous comment regarding the *Ir HaNidachas* [a city doomed to destruction by virtue of the idolatrous practices of its inhabitants]. If a city, in its entirety, decides to worship *Avodah Zarah*, the *halacha* is that the entire city must be wiped out – men, women, and children. (There is an opinion in the Talmud [Sanhedrin 71a] that such a case "never happened and never will happen" but rather, it is presented to teach us pedagogical lessons.) Ironically, the Torah there uses the expression "...in order that Hashem will turn back from His burning wrath; and He will give you mercy and be merciful to you..." [Devarim 13:18]. It seems rather strange that in the context of having to kill out all these people, the Torah promises that G-d will grant us mercy and be merciful to us.

The *Ohr HaChaim* has a beautiful thought: When a person murders or kills another person, even in the context of war, it has a corrosive and pernicious effect on his personality. The act of murdering a person alters the personality of the perpetrator of the crime forever. Part of the phenomenon of the post traumatic syndrome of people who return from war – who are never the same after having experienced what they experienced – is that having been involved in killing and having seen so

much bloodshed changes the person. This certainly is true for people who have had to kill (even by mistake) innocent people, and even for those who kill enemy soldiers, the act of killing someone hardens a person, it makes him somehow a crueler person.

The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* says that the Torah is guaranteeing to us that in the context of the *mitzvah* of *Ir HaNidachas* – where those fulfilling the *mitzvah* need to kill all these people – G-d is promising us "mercy," such that the executions will not have a pernicious effect on our souls and personalities. The promise is "You will remain the same compassionate and merciful person you always were, despite having to carry out the demands of the *halacha* of *Ir HaNidachas*." This is a promise that only the *Ribono shel Olam* can guarantee. Under normal circumstances, that is not the way it works. Normally, murdering someone makes the person into a murderer. In the famous statement of Golda Meir, "I can forgive the Arabs for killing my Israeli sons, but I can't forgive the Arabs for making my Israeli sons killers."

Rav Reinman points out that this is only a problem when the killing is in a way that is not 100% "for the sake of Heaven". For instance, if Avraham Avinu were in fact to have slaughtered his own son – as he was initially commanded to do – this would not have made him into a cruel person. He loved Yitzchak and he was only doing it for one reason – 100% for the sake of the *mitzvah*. In that situation, it has no deleterious effect. However, when a person is involved in killing under the rubric of a *mitzvah*, but has personal agendas as well, then there is a danger that he will be negatively impacted – except in the case of *Ir HaNidachas*, where the Torah guarantees it will not have that effect.

This is what bothered *Yaakov Avinu*. He was afraid lest he be killed. However, he was also afraid lest he need to kill Eisav. Even though it would have been permitted and even though it would have been in self-defense, he was afraid of what it would do to him. *Yaakov Avinu* was chased away from home by Eisav. They had been having a running battle between themselves literally from before their birth. Yaakov was afraid that he might kill Eisav not only in self-defense but that at least part of him might feel "Eisav deserves this. He has been harassing me and torturing me my whole life. He has it coming to him!" That would have a negative effect on Yaakov. "*Vayeitzer lo*" means I am afraid of the effect it would have on me because if I am not doing it 100% altruistically then in fact I must be worried about the negative effects of doing such an act.

The Significance of the Huts and the Little Vessels

The following is a thought I once read from Rav Matisyahu Solomon, *shlit"a*.

The Tur writes in Orach Chaim that each of the three Pilgrimage Festivals was enacted to correspond to one of the three patriarchs. Pesach corresponds to Avraham. The connection is based on the *pasuk* "knead and make cakes" [Bereishis 18:6], which occurred on Pesach and commemorates the matzah we eat on Pesach. Shavuot corresponds to Yitzchak because the Shofar that sounded on Har Sinai after the Torah was given [Shemos 19:13] was the ram's horn that

was taken from the ram sacrificed instead of Yitzchak. Both of these items – the matzah and the ram's horn – are significant factors and we can understand how the holidays of Pesach and Shavuot relate respectively to Avraham and Yitzchak.

Finally, the Tur says that the Yom Tov of Succos corresponds to Yaakov, as it is written (in this week's parsha): "and for his cattle he built booths" [Bereishis 33:17]. This seems like a strange correlation. We do not seem to be talking about anything religiously spiritual or fundamental. It seems like some type of "*Gezeirah Shavah*" or word game: Succos – Succos.

If truth be told, the whole *pasuk* in which this expression appears is strange: "Then Yaakov journeyed to Succoth and built himself a house, and for his livestock he made huts ('*Succoth*'); therefore, he called the name of the place Succos." This seems like a very insignificant incident. Who cares that he made his livestock shelters?

The Torah then tells us "Yaakov remained alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." [Bereishis 32:24]. This is one of the most famous and mysterious incidents in all of *Sefer Bereishis*. Yaakov went back over the river by himself. When he was there alone, he was attacked by the angel of Eisav. The Gemara [Chullin 91a] says the reason Yaakov went back was to retrieve small vessels that he had forgotten. This is also strange for a number of reasons. First of all, why is it that right after he left these vessels over there on the first side of the river, he was attacked by Eisav's angel? It seems that somehow there was something about that incident and that moment that prompted the angel of Eisav to specifically start up with Yaakov at that time.

There is also something even more troubling about these little vessels. In the above referenced Gemara in Chullin Rav Elazar derives from this incident the fact that "from here we see that for *Tzadikim* [righteous individuals] their property (*mamonam* -- literally their money) is more precious to them than their physical welfare (*gufam* -- literally their bodies)." If we would asked to give a list of classic characteristics of righteous people, it is highly unlikely that this characteristic would come to mind. "He cares more about his plastic food containers than his own body." What does that mean? It is so incongruous!

The Alter from Kelm interprets this Gemara as follows: The reason *Tzadikim* care so much about their possessions is that they do not want to be involved in their possessions. They do not like to go shopping! Contrary to that which is the national pastime in the United States of America – forget baseball, forget football – the national pastime is shopping! (I do not call myself a *Tzadik* by any means but I hate shopping. I go shopping like I go to have my teeth cleaned. It just sometimes needs to be taken care of. But the average person loves to go shopping.) *Tzadikim* hate to go shopping because it means involvement in the minutia of the mundane things of *Olam HaZeh* [this world].

Yaakov says "If I forgot the *pachim ketanim* [small vessels] across the river, which means I am going to need to go shopping to buy new *pachim ketanim*, forget it! I would rather go back across the river

to retrieve my old *pachim ketanim*! The problem is that the angel of Eisav did not understand this. He thought that Yaakov was a cheapskate and a hypocrite. Yaakov "the great *Tzadik*" had told Eisav "you take *Olam HaZeh* [this world] and I will take *Olam HaBah* [the future spiritual world] – and now he is going back for some cheap little vessels? This shows, the angel reasoned, what became of Yaakov in the house of Lavan. Twenty years in the house of Lavan has an impact. It can cause a person to get into custom shirts and tailor made suits, \$400 pairs of shoes and fancy cars! He thought that Yaakov had become just another Eisav. He goes back for *pachim ketanim*!

The angel of Eisav totally misunderstood Yaakov. He didn't understand that Yaakov went back for the *pachim ketanim* precisely because he did not want to have anything to do with *pachim ketanim*. That is why the angel thought "Aha! Now it's my moment to attack!" However, after struggling in his attack the whole night, "he saw that he was unable to subdue him" [Bereishis 32:25]. Yaakov convinced him, "You are mistaken. I am not into this "stuff". I have not changed an iota. I lived with Lavan and I kept the 613 mitzvos. I am still the same Yaakov. I am still a person of the 'world to come.'"

Yaakov completes this incident. He returns and camps in the city and he makes huts for his cattle. What are those huts about? Those huts teach us a lesson. Targum Yonasan ben Uziel translates the *pasuk* "And Yaakov traveled to Succos and he built himself a house and for his livestock he made huts (*Succos*). Therefore, he called the name of the place Succos" [Bereishis 33:17] as follows: "... and he built himself a house of study (*Beis Midrasha*)..." This *Beis Medrash* was a house – built out of mortar and stone, lasting materials because the *Beis Medrash* is the main residence of a Jew. "...but for his cattle he built mere huts" – the smallest, minimum, barest dwelling suffices for the cattle – just to keep them protected from the rain. The message is "I am not going to sink a lot of money into housing for my material possessions. This is *Olam HaZeh*. It is so insignificant. This is not where I devote my effort or resources."

I need temperature control in my *Beis Medrash* so I can daven and learn in comfort – this is the essence of life. But I should have a heated garage so that my car does not get cold in the winter? That does not make sense! As long as the cattle are covered – enough! "Therefore, Yaakov called the name of the place Succos [huts]" to call attention to his priorities. He wanted his children and others to know, that he was not into "*Gashmiyus*" [materialism]. Therefore, he emphasized the dichotomy between his spiritual needs (*bayis*) and his material needs (*Succos*) by calling the name of the town Succos, after the huts he built, to suffice for his possessions.

This is the meaning of the Tur. Pesach corresponds to Avraham – we make matzah; Shavuot corresponds to Yitzchak – because of the Shofar; and Succos corresponds to Yaakov. Because when we go out into that Succah, we are declaring the same idea that Yaakov declared: This world is just a temporary dwelling. We do not put all our effort into it.

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