

PARSHAS VAYEITZEI - WHAT DID YAAKOV ASK FOR?

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

What Did Yaakov Ask For?¹

Then Yaakov took a vow, saying, "If G-d will be with me, will guard me on this way that I am going; if He will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and I return in peace to my father's house, and Hashem will be Elokim to me..."

Very few of us would hire security guards to watch over an empty warehouse. Yaakov, setting off on a journey with no valuables to show for himself, asks Hashem to guard him. Guard him against what? Was he simply afraid of muggers and highwaymen?

It is telling that *birkas kohanim* flips the order of Divinely-assisted benefits from the one we find here. There, Hashem commands His *brachah* before promising His *shmirah*, His guarding. That order is intuitive. Hashem provides us with possessions, and then promises to guard them against mishaps and loss. Why does Yaakov not follow the same sequence?

Yaakov here had something far more valuable than possessions in mind when asking Hashem to guard him. He asked Hashem to help him retain that which was most valuable to him: his character and integrity. He had every reason to fear that they were greatly imperiled.

Ever since we were ushered out of *Gan Eden*, the struggle for sustenance has been difficult and complex. Too many vocations and employment positions call for much more than skillful performance of a task or service. The most minimal success comes with strings attached and conditions to be met. Many a person began his career with honesty and a pure heart, only to sell himself and everything he stood for to meet those conditions. To put bread on the table - to secure the wherewithal to support a family as Yaakov now set out to do - people have denied their G-d,[2] dropped their moral compunctions, trampled on the honor of their neighbor, and the well-being of their competitors' families. Yaakov recognized the danger in setting out to find a wife and provide for her and a future family. The danger loomed even larger for him, who up until then had carefully nurtured the qualities of the *yoshev ohalim*, the studious and contemplative dweller of tents. He would be trading a spiritually warm, hospitable world for a very different atmosphere.

Yaakov's *tefilah* here is a model for all those who need to order their priorities when they leave the protected environment of their formative years, and step out into the world of earning a living and providing for a family. Pride of place goes to integrity; it is what a Jew should ask for first. He can then seek "bread," meaning a reliable but independent way of providing sustenance. Next, he can

seek "clothes to wear," or the wherewithall to appear respectable to others. Together, bread and clothes amount to a livelihood, and a responsible, participatory position in civic life. He moves on to seeking the "peace," the constant preoccupation of every proper Jew, and finally his "father's house," an abiding intergenerational connection to family.

In the final phrase of Yaakov's *tefilah*, he goes beyond prioritizing our survival needs in the challenging climate of the workplace. He provides us with a glimpse at the way human civilization needs to progress.

Many believe in G-d, especially when they have been privileged to see the *midah* of *rachamim* (Hashem) touch their lives. Who does not want to be the recipient of His largesse? Many have no trouble at all acknowledging the role of the Divine in their lives, and thanking Him for the blessings He has bestowed upon them.

Very few, however, realize that a G-d who gives is also a G-d who demands. In the Jewish conception of Divinity, we come to confidently sense the context in which Hashem provides His blessings: that they be used constructively to further His expressed Will. We understand, therefore, that G-d is not only a Giver (Hashem), but a Lawgiver (Elokim) as well. The laws that He ordains upon us insure that whatever He gives us will be used appropriately and properly. In order to work, they cannot be limited to a handful of moral imperatives. They need to encompass all aspects of our experience and existence, just as our Torah does.

The Torah will later address the descendants of Yaakov, after their redemption from servitude in Egypt with the words "To be for you Elokim."^[3] Hashem tells them that He fashioned them into a people so that they would regulate all aspects of their personal and social lives in accordance with His Will. This is a lesson that has still to be learned by much of the world.

For Whom Do We Toil?⁴

Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you and I will go.

Fourteen years previously, Yaakov contemplated his future as he headed towards the foreign world of *Lavan*. At that time, he stood destitute, penniless. For fourteen years he labors, enduring in silence the machinations and cheating of his evil father-in-law.

What does he have to show for himself after fourteen years of sacrifice and labor? The way some people look at it - nothing! By some measures, his portfolio has shrunk to less than nothing. While earlier he had no assets, fourteen years later he still had no assets, but he did have the mouths of four wives and many children to feed.

Yet Yaakov's position is noble, not pathetic. Yaakov toiled successfully for a gift more precious than material possessions. He labored to gain a Jewish family. By doing so, he set an example for all time of what we ought to regard as important. He also dispelled the myth that the ancient Hebrews

absorbed the supposed values of their milieu, in which men were the rulers and masters, and women were nothing but degraded chattel.

[1] Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 28:20-21

[2] The meshumad Daniel Chwolson, Orientalist at University of St. Petersburg in the 19th century, was a staunch and important defender of Jews and Judaism. Nonetheless, he remarked that he had embraced Christianity "out of conviction." Questioned by a friend who knew that Chwolson was far from a Christian believer, he explained that he was utterly convinced that it was better to be a well-off Christian professor than a poor Jewish teacher of small children.

[3] Vayikra 22:13

[4] Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 30:26
