

# PARSHAS VAYISHLACH

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*Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Vayishlach, 5631/37/38*

This ma'amar begins with a surprise. Almost always, the Sfas Emes starts his ma'amar with a comment on the parsha's first Medrash Rabba. This week, however, he goes well into parsha before he starts his discourse. Thus he begins with the Medrash Rabba's comment on the posuk (Bereishis, 33:18): "Vayavo Ya'akov shaleim ... va' yichan es penei ha'ir." (ArtScroll: "Ya'akov arrived intact" -- [i.e., whole] -- "at the city of Shechem ... and he encamped before the city.")

The Medrash to which the Sfas Emes skips also comes as a surprise. Usually, we have a sense of where the Medrash is coming from and what it is trying to teach us. Not so in this case. The message that the Medrash is trying to convey is not all evident. Likewise, the methodology -- how Chazal got from the text in the Torah to reach this message -- is also not clear. To see what I mean, here is the Medrash's comment (Bereishis Rabba, 79:6) on the posuk just quoted: "He arrived with the last glimmer of daylight on erev Shabbos"; 've'kava techumin'; 'and he set the limits on the space to which he had access on Shabbos'. The commentaries explain this as saying that he made an eruv techumin [1].

You see why I find this Medrash puzzling. Let us try to understand it, first the methodology and then the substance. The Sfas Emes's text for the year 5637 is more complete than the text for the year 5631, so we will work for a while with the Sfas Emes of 5637.

The Medrash speaks of a link between Shabbos and Ya'akov Avinu's arrival at Shechem. The Sfas Emes easily deals with this link. He explains that the posuk's word "shaleim" implies shalom, i.e., Shabbos. The connection with eruv techumin is less apparent. The Sfas Emes tells us that the posuk's word "vayichan." can be taken as an allusion to eruv techumin. This allusion may be coming from the similar sound of the words 'techumin' and 'vayichan'.

We return now to the Sfas Emes's ma'amar for Vayishlach in the year 5631. Here the Sfas Emes focuses on the connection between Shabbos and the weekdays. The Sfas Emes usually refers to the weekdays as "yemei hama'aseh" -- the days in which we do "asiya": action. The Sfas Emes's choice of words signals his whole attitude toward the life that we live on days other than Shabbos .

Clearly, the Sfas Emes views "asiya" -- weekday activities -- positively. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that the quality of our Shabbos depends on our avoda during the week. (Note that the word "avoda" has two meanings. It can mean "work" and/or it can mean "serving HaShem". In the present

context, the Sfas Emes is evoking both senses of the word.) Continuing in this vein, the Sfas Emes tells us that during the week, too, we can connect with the chiyus (vibrancy; vitality) of HaShem.

How? By the way we view performing our melacha (weekday activities). In fact, the Sfas Emes defines "melacha" as finding HaShem by action ("al yedei asiya mamash"). Doing mitzvos requires action ("ma'aseh"). This is why HaShem gave us mitzvos -- to enable us to relate to Him by the actions of our everyday life.

But there is a difference between Shabbos and yemei hama'aseh. During the week, we encounter HaShem in the form of forces of nature -- i.e., mal'achim ('angels'; messengers; agents). By contrast, on Shabbos -which HaShem blessed -- all creation is elevated, enabling us to have a closer relationship with Him. (Note an implication that follows from the Sfas Emes's formulation. To facilitate the closer relationship with HaShem on Shabbos, we abstain from contact with 'mal'achim' on that special day. Hence, to avoid engagement with the world of action (asiya), on Shabbos, doing melacha is prohibited.)

Understanding the connection between Shabbos and the weekdays is crucial. To aid our understanding on this subject, we go to the ma'amar of another year (5638), where the Sfas Emes sums up on the connection. During the week, we deal with Teva (i.e., the mal'achim, the forces of Nature). Doing mitzvos in the world of Nature requires action; in particular, actions in accordance with HaShem's will. Hence, by doing mitzvos, we subordinate the world of Nature and human actions to HaShem. Chazal express this mastery over the mal'achim by saying, in figurative term, that by performing mitzvos, we create 'mal'achim tovim' ('good angels').

More generally, by going about our daily lives in full recognition that Nature is HaShem's handiwork (and not vice versa), we can achieve what the Torah (Shemos, 20, 9) has in mind (in the Sfas Emes's non-pshat reading): "Six days shall you work, ve'asisa kol me'lachte'cha". That is, on the six workdays, we can "create all of our angels". Then, having achieved this "Tikun Ha'ma'asim", we can come close to HaShem on Shabbos. We return now to the text of the Sfas Emes in the year 5637.

This text can help us address a basic question that we have not yet answered. What is the message that the Medrash and the Sfas Emes want to convey when they tell us that Ya'akov Avinu arrived in Shechem "at the last glimmer of light before Shabbos"?

The Sfas Emes explains that in conducting himself in this manner, Ya'kov Avinu was emulating his Master. For the posuk (Bereishis, 2:2) tells us that HaShem also continued with creation until the very last moment. As the Torah phrases it: "Vayechal Elokim bayom hashevi'i" (ArtScroll: "By the seventh day, God completed His work ..."). So, too, did Ya'akov Avinu do melacha until the very last moment before Shabbos.

By continuing with melacha until the last moment before Shabbos, Ya'akov Avinu enlarged the period of time available for melacha. This is the very opposite of the idea of "tosefes Shabbos" -- commencing Shabbos earlier than sunset, and thus reducing the time available for doing melacha. I

suggest the following further development of the Sfas Emes's exposition. Note what Ya'akov Avinu was doing in that last moment: He was preparing an eruv techumim [1]. That is, he was arranging to reach space that would otherwise be halachically inaccessible to him on Shabbos. Thus, by his actions in both dimensions -- space and time -- Ya'akov Avinu was enlarging the domain of feasible 'asiya'. Clearly, the Sfas Emes's interpretation here reflects his view of melacha and asiya as positively valued activities.

[1] What is an 'eruv techumin'? On Shabbos, we are not permitted to walk more than 2000 amos (cubits) from our place of dwelling (or from the last house in the city in which we dwell). However, if before Shabbos, we put out some food that we might, in principle, eat on Shabbos, we have in effect shifted our dwelling to that spot. We may then walk 2000 amos from that spot. Thus, an eruv techumin enables a person to reach space that would otherwise be halachically inaccessible on Shabbos

A Post -Script. What was right for Ya'akov Avinu -- doing melacha until the last moment before Shabbos -- is not necessarily right for us. On the contrary, most of us badly need to stop melacha well before sunset; for we need time to decompress and prepare ourselves spiritually to welcome Shabbos HaMalka.

PPS. You may be wondering: why does the topic of mal'achim ('angels'; agents) figure so prominently in this week's Sfas Emes? The answer is straightforward. Our Parsha begins: 'Vayishlach Ya'akov mal'achim...' (ArtScroll: 'Then Jacob sent angels...') On which phrase Rashi comments: 'mal'achim mamash' 'real angels'. Further, the topic of 'mal'achim' leads directly to 'melacha', and hence to 'asiya'.

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