**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYETZE**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

In the final verses of Parashat Vayeitzei, we read of the tense exchange between Yaakov and Lavan after Yaakov secretly left with his family from Lavan’s home, an exchange which ended in a truce and a peaceful departure. The Torah concludes by telling that Lavan blessed his daughters and grandchildren (Yaakov’s wives and children) and then returned home.

Seforno offers a meaningful explanation for why the Torah found it necessary to inform us that Lavan blessed his daughters and grandchildren. He writes that the Torah sought to instruct that a parent’s sincere prayer for his or her children is significant, and is worthy of being answered “due to the power of the divine image of the one granting the blessing.” Seforno’s intent, seemingly, is that although Lavan was an evil person, nevertheless, his sincere prayers had value. Even Lavan was created in the divine image, and so he, like all people, had vast spiritual potential. As such, his sincere prayers were significant and impactful. Despite all the evil he committed, his genuine, heartfelt blessings to his children and grandchildren were meaningful and worthy of having a positive effect upon them.

The Mishna in Avot (4:3) famously warns, “Do not be scornful towards any person…for there is no person who does not have a moment…” We are taught never to deny any person’s potential for greatness, his or her ability to achieve. Even if a person strikes us as unimpressive, or even evil, we are bidden to recognize the divine image with which that individual is endowed, and trust in his or her capacity for greatness. As corrupt and sinful as Lavan was, he felt genuine love for his children and grandchildren, and he blessed them with all his heart. As pedestrian as this act might at first appear, the Torah, according to Seforno’s understanding, wanted us to appreciate the value and significance of Lavan’s blessing, in order to teach us to look for and respect the fine qualities of all people. Although there might not be much about Lavan to admire, the Torah wanted to draw our attention to one positive act he performed, something noble which he did and which originated from a place of sincere goodness deep within him, to teach us that such a place exists within all people, and that it is our job to find it, even when it cannot easily be seen.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Vayeitzei of Yaakov’s famous prophecy which he beheld in a nocturnal vision as he slept on the roadside during his journey from Canaan to Charan. Upon awakening, Yaakov exclaimed, “Indeed, the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know!” (28:16). Rashi explains Yaakov’s response to mean, “If I had known, I would not have slept in a place as sacred as this.”

Rav Meir Horowitz of Dzikov, in his *Imrei Noam*, notes the symbolic significance of Yaakov’s response. Often, he writes, a person assumes that he is incapable of prayer or other forms of spiritual engagement in his “place,” in his current condition or circumstances. He feels that his shortcomings and failures, or the spiritually hostile conditions in his current environment, make any religious act he performs undesirable before God, and his prayers unwanted. Such thoughts can easily lead a person to “sleep,” to despair, to cease all efforts to serve God and to build a connection with Him. Convinced of his own unworthiness and his undesirable status in the Almighty’s eyes, he falls into a state of spiritual slumber, figuring there is no value to any effort he would think to invest in his *avodat Hashem*.

Yaakov’s response, the Rebbe of Dzikov taught, is one which we should all be telling ourselves at all times: “Indeed, the Lord is present in this place.” At whatever religious level we currently find ourselves, God is there, eagerly awaiting our prayers and devotion. As long as we are sincere in our efforts to reach higher and to connect with Him, then He is present even “in this place,” at our current level, in our current condition, and in our current circumstances. Once we become aware of God’s presence in whichever “place” we happen to be, we will not allow ourselves to “sleep,” to despair and lose faith in the value of our efforts. This precept, that God “is present in this place,” helps ensure that even at times when we feel inadequate and deficient, we will not lose our energy, passion and zeal in the service of the Almighty, as we will remain confident that He is present even then, lovingly embracing every bit of work we invest to serve Him.

Monday

The Torah in the beginning of Parashat Vayeitzei tells of the famous prophetic vision that Yaakov beheld in a dream as he slept on the roadside during his journey from Canaan to his uncle, Lavan, in Charan (28:12-15). Yaakov saw a ladder extending from the ground to the heavens, and angels ascending and descending the ladder. He then beheld a vision of God standing over him and assuring him that He would care for him during his sojourn in Charan and eventually bring him back to his homeland. God further promised Yaakov that he would produce a large nation that would inherit the Land of Israel, effectively confirming his right to the blessing given to Avraham and Yitzchak, which Yitzchak had granted him just before leaving home (28:3-4).

It is told (in *Likutei Yehuda*, Parashat Vayeitzei) that the *Imrei Emet*, the third Rebbe of Ger, once asked his son (and eventual successor), the *Beit Yisrael*, why in Yaakov’s dream he did not join the angels up the ladder. If he was given a ladder with which to ascend together with the angels all the way to the heavens, why did he remain on the ground? The *Beit Yisrael* reportedly replied by noting that in Yaakov’s dream, “the Lord was standing over him…” Yaakov had no reason to ascend to the heavens, because God was right near him where he was, on the ground where he slept.

The *Beit Yisrael*’s response is not merely a clever quip; it points to a significant aspect of Yaakov’s dream, namely, that even though Yaakov lay alongside a ladder extending to the heavens, God was with Yaakov down on earth. We are not expected to be angelic, to live a “heavenly” existence. As the angels climb to the heavens, we are to remain here on earth, and it is specifically here, in our earthly existence, where we encounter the Almighty. We are to serve God not as heavenly angels, but rather as earthly human beings.

This message was especially relevant to the circumstances surrounding Yaakov’s prophecy. He was now leaving the serene conditions of his parents’ home in Be’er Sheva and going to live with his corrupt, wily, idolatrous uncle, Lavan. There he would spend twenty years working as a shepherd, tending to the herds under his charge with unparalleled diligence and devotion, as Yaakov himself attests towards the end of this *parasha* (31:38-40). His lived both geographically and spiritually far from home, submerged in materialism and embroiled in a tense, constant struggle with his crooked uncle. In light of the *Beit Yisrael*’s remark, we might understand Yaakov’s vision as a message that God would always be standing over him, even while he was “trapped” on the ground watching angels ascend to the heavens. He should not feel troubled by being forced to remain on the “ground,” tirelessly tending to his uncle’s sheep, because even there, “God is standing over him.” We can encounter God in any situation into which we are thrust, by doing the best we can under the circumstances to serve God and apply the Torah’s laws and values to our current conditions, whatever they may be.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayeitzei of Lavan’s agreement with Yaakov, allowing him to marry his daughter, Rachel, after shepherding his flocks for seven years, and how Lavan broke the agreement by bringing his other daughter, Leah, instead of Rachel. After Yaakov protested, Lavan said he would allow Yaakov to marry Rachel, too, the next week, in exchange for an additional seven years of service (29:27).

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Mo’ed Katan 1:7), cited by Tosefot (Mo’ed Katan 8b), points to this verse as the Biblical source of the rule of “*ein me’arvin simcha be-simcha*,” which forbids combining two festive occasions into a single celebration. According to the Talmud Yerushalmi, Lavan’s insistence that Yaakov first complete the seven-day celebration of his marriage to Leah before marrying Rachel reflects an accepted halakhic principle, requiring that each happy occasion be given its own celebration. And thus, for example, one may not get married on festivals, in order not to combine the joy of the Yom Tov with the joy of the wedding. The Talmud Bavli (Mo’ed Katan 8b) cites a different source for this *halakha*, noting the account in Sefer Melakhim I (8:65) of the seven-day celebration for the completion of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. This celebration was held for seven days before Sukkot, and the Gemara explains that this was done so as not to combine this celebration with the celebration of the festival.

A number of *Acharonim* addressed the interesting question as to why, in light of this *halakha*, we are allowed to conduct a festive celebration on Simchat Torah for the completion of the Torah. The festival itself – Shemini Atzeret – already requires a celebration by virtue of its being Yom Tov. Seemingly, then, it should be forbidden to also celebrate the completion of the Torah reading on this day. Interestingly enough, Rav Yitzchak Minkovsky of Karlin, in his *Keren Ora* commentary to the Talmud (Mo’ed Katan), draws proof from the customary Simchat Torah observance that it is permissible on Yom Tov to conduct a *siyum* celebration upon the completion of the study of a text. If *Halakha* permits celebrating the completion of the annual Torah reading cycle on Simchat Torah, Rav Minkovsky writes, then it should likewise be permissible to celebrate, for example, the completion of the study of a Talmudic tractate on Yom Tov. The question remains, however – as Rav Minkovsky himself notes – as to why this is permissible.

Several answers have been suggested to this question (as briefly cited by Rav Asher Anshel Schwartz, [*Ma’adanei Asher*, Parashat Vayeitzei, 5777](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/32_07_77.pdf)). The most straightforward, perhaps, is the answer cited in the name of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, in *Halikhot Shelomo* – *Moadim* (chapter 21, note 19). He explained that the rule of “*ein me’arvin simcha be-simcha*” forbids combining two fundamentally distinct festivities, such as a wedding and Yom Tov, or, in Yaakov’s case, one’s marriages to different women. On Simchat Torah, however, both celebrations – the Yom Tov, and the completion of the Torah reading – involve the same experience of joy, rejoicing over our relationship the Almighty. The celebration of Yom Tov, Rav Shlomo Zalman explained, requires more than simply indulging in fine food and drinks. The obligation is to celebrate our special relationship with God, a relationship which is manifest in our devoted study and observance of the Torah. Celebrating the completion of the annual Torah reading – or, for that matter, any other unit of Torah learning – is thus directly relevant to the celebration of Yom Tov, and in fact enhances our celebration of our closeness to the Almighty. As such, this does not violate the rule of “*ein me’arvin simcha be-simcha*.”

Wednesday

In the beginning of Parashat Vayeitzei we read that Yaakov “encountered a place” as he made his way from Canaan to Charan, and as night had fallen, he went to sleep. The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (26b) famously interprets this phrase – “*va-yifga ba-makom*” – to mean that Yaakov prayed at this site after night fell, thus instituting the nighttime *arvit* prayer. Avraham and Yitzchak, the Gemara teaches, instituted the morning *shacharit* service and the afternoon *mincha* service, respectively, and now Yaakov established the nighttime *arvit* service.

Many writers addressed the question of why *arvit* differs from the other two daily prayers in that it is not strictly required. The Gemara (Berakhot 27b) records a famous debate among the *Tanna’im* as to whether the *arvit* recitation constitutes an outright halakhic obligation, like the other two prayers, or is an optional prayer. The *Amora’im* are in disagreement as to which view should be followed, and *Halakha* accepts the view of Rabbi Yehoshua, that *arvit* constitutes an optional prayer (*Shulchan Arukh*, O.C. 237). Of course, as we know, it has been universally accepted to treat *arvit* as an obligatory prayer, but strictly speaking, it is optional. The question thus arises as to why *Halakha* treats *arvit* differently than it treats *shacharit* and *mincha*. If each daily prayer is rooted in the prayer introduced by one of our three patriarchs, why should any distinction be made between their respective levels of obligation?

Rav Yaakov Reischer, in his *Iyun Yaakov* (to Berakhot 26b), points to the Gemara’s discussion later (Berakhot 30b), where it seeks a Biblical source for the requirement to pray with “*koved rosh*” (solemnity). The Gemara initially suggests that this requirement is sourced in Chana’s prayer for a child, which she recited in a state of anguish and despair (“*ve-hi marat nafesh*” – Shemuel I 1:10). However, the Gemara immediately dismisses this proof, noting that Chana’s prayer cannot serve as a precedent for the requirements of our daily prayer service. She was especially embittered and pained by her infertility, and so her solemn demeanor when she prayed is not necessarily a model that we must follow in our daily prayers. The Gemara therefore cites a different source for the requirement of “*koved rosh*.”

Somewhat similarly, Rav Reischer suggests, Yaakov’s prayer differs from those of Avraham and Yitzchak because of the dire circumstances in which it was recited. Yaakov prayed as he was forced to leave his home and travel to a foreign land because his brother planned to kill him. He prayed on the road, as he made his way towards an uncertain future, journeying to his corrupt, pagan uncle where he would have to live for an unspecified period of time. Yaakov’s prayer, then, sets a precedent not of a daily required prayer, but rather of an optional prayer which one may recite when he feels anxious and in distress. Whereas the other two daily prayers, which were instituted by Avraham and Yitzchak under ordinary circumstances, are strictly required, the *arvit* prayer, which was instituted by Yaakov as he fled from home, is a prayer one has the option to recite in periods of hardship.

We might perhaps extend Rav Reischer’s approach further to shed light on the accepted practice to treat *arvit* as an obligatory prayer (a custom noted already by Tosefot, Shabbat 9b). This practice might reflect the notion that at all times, we should see ourselves in some sort of “distress,” recognizing the uncertainties we face and the challenges we need to confront. Even when we enjoy general stability in our lives, we all have struggles and problems of one sort or another. At all times, our lives resemble, if only to a very slight degree, Yaakov’s condition as he fled from his brother, because we all have fears and anxieties, and none of us knows with certainty what the future holds. Thus, the obligatory nature of the *arvit* prayer that applies by force of accepted custom perhaps requires us to recognize the uncertainties in our lives and look to the Almighty for help. Rather than treat *arvit* as an optional prayer, we have accepted this obligation to reflect each day on the “loose ends” in our lives, our worries and concerns, and turn to the Almighty as Yaakov did, begging for the ongoing assistance that we so desperately need each and every day.

Thursday

In the opening verses of Parashat Vayeitzei we read of how Yaakov slept as he traveled from his homeland to Charan, and beheld his famous prophetic dream. Rashi (28:11), based on the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 68:10), comments that God had the sun set earlier than it should have so that Yaakov would sleep at this particular site and behold his prophecy there.

The full passage in the Midrash reads as follows:

The Almighty had the ball of the sun set before its time in order to speak to Yaakov in private. This may be compared to a king’s friend who visits him on occasion. The king said, “Extinguish the candles, extinguish the lamps, because I wish to speak with my friend in private.” Similarly, the Almighty had the ball of the sun set before its time in order to speak with Yaakov in private.

Why does the Midrash emphasize God’s desire to speak to Yaakov “in private,” and what is the significance of the analogy to the king putting out the lights when meeting with his close friend?

While dark is commonly associated with gloom and fear, it also offers a special opportunity for focus and concentration. During the daytime hours, when everything around us can be seen, we are prone to distraction. Moreover, before modern-day illumination, most constructive work could be performed only by day, and thus the daytime hours were spent busily tending to one’s activities, taking full advantage of the limited amount of time available for work. The nighttime darkness allowed people to take their minds off the pressures of the workday, and, without illumination, they were able to focus attentively on each other or on their own thoughts and feelings. Darkness seems frightening, but also affords the special opportunity for concentrated thought and contemplation.

The Midrash here expresses the need to “turn out the lights” when we encounter God, when we pray or study. God wants us to “meet” with Him “privately,” without distractions. We are to try, to whatever extent possible, to extinguish all “light” when the time comes for prayer or learning, to take our minds off all that occupies us the rest of the time, so we can devote our full attention and channel all our emotion to the Almighty.

In today’s day and age, we have very little “darkness,” periods of time when we are free from distractions and when we are not rushing to complete more work. Electric lighting and mobile devices have all but eliminated our time for meaningful thought and contemplation. It seems we are always occupied, distracted and busy, without any periods of “darkness” when we can be alone with the people close to us, with God, or with ourselves. When Yaakov left Canaan, it was God who “turned out the lights” and brought darkness so that Yaakov would engage in meaningful, contemplative prayer. In our time, we need to take the initiative and occasionally “turn out the lights” so we can properly focus our minds on what’s truly important to us.

Friday

Numerous different approaches have been taken to explain the symbolic significance of the vision Yaakov beheld as he slept along his journey from Canaan, the vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder which extended to the heavens. Rav Yekutiel Yehuda Teitelbaum of Siget, in his *Yeitev Leiv*, suggests that these two groups of angels – those who ascended the ladder, and those who descended the ladder – represent the moments of “ascent” and “descent” that we experience in our lives. We all enjoy periods of “ascent,” when we experience success and contentment, but also endure periods of “descent” and decline, when we experience anguish and hardship. The *Yeitev Leiv* draws our attention to the fact that there was no difference between the two groups of angels, despite the fact that one was ascending and the other descending. The Torah writes, “*Ve-hinei mal’akhei Elokim olim ve-yoredim*” – “and behold, there were angels of God ascending and descending” – introducing the vision of the angels with the word “*hinei*” (“behold”). The *Yeitev Leiv* cites the comment of the *Sifrei* (Parashat Korach) that this word signifies joy and elation, as evidenced by God’s prophecy to Moshe at the burning bush about his brother Aharon, “*Hinei hu yotzei li-kratekha ve-ra’akha ve-samach be-libo*” – “Behold, he is leaving to greet you, and he will see you and rejoice in his heart” (4:14). The word “*hinei*” is used in reference to the angels in Yaakov’s dream, the Rebbe of Siget explains, to indicate that they were all “joyous,” even those descending the ladder. Although they were leaving their lofty place in the heavens and descending to the earth, they maintained their joy and were no less jubilant than the angels who happily made their way back to the heavens.

The *Yeitev Leiv* writes that as Yaakov made his way to exile, driven from his homeland by his violent, vengeful brother, and now forced to live and work for his crooked uncle, he was shown this vision of the angels so he could emulate their example. This prophecy teaches of the need to strive to maintain one’s composure and joy even in periods of “descent,” during life’s difficult and challenging periods. The angels faithfully fulfill their obligations without any hesitation, and happily accept whatever mission they are given, even when this entails discomfort or inconvenience, such as descending from the heavens. The message shown to Yaakov is that he, too, must strive to retain his joy and vitality even during the difficult period which lay before him, when he driven from the “heavens,” from the comfort and serenity of his home.

Of course, we are not expected to be angels. We are fragile human beings with fragile emotions, and we naturally and justifiably feel dismayed, aggravated and despondent by the hardships we experience. However, the Rebbe of Siget teaches us that we can, and must, strive to minimize our despondency, and to maintain our joy to whatever extent possible even under harsh circumstances. Our lives truly resemble Yaakov’s ladder, as they feature both “ascent” and “descent,” periods of joy and good fortune, and periods of difficulty and hardship. We are to try at all times to retain our joy and enthusiasm, recognizing that, as Yaakov was shown in his dream, “*Ve-hinei Hashem nitzav alav*” (“Behold, the Lord was standing over him”) – we are always under the loving care and protection of the Almighty.

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