**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYETZE**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Vayetze of Yaakov’s famous dream which he dreamt as he slept along the road during his trip to Charan. God appeared to Yaakov and promised to care for him during his period of exile, to eventually return him to his homeland, and that his descendants would inhabit the land: “…the land upon which you lie – I will give it to you and to your offspring” (28:13).

Rashi, citing the Gemara (Chulin 91b), comments, “The Almighty folded the entire Land of Israel underneath him, alluding to him that it would be easy for his descendants to capture it.” On one level, of course, the Gemara makes this comment to explain the meaning of God’s promise to give to Yaakov and his offspring “the land upon which you lie.” It might seem strange for God to make a promise concerning the small piece of territory where Yaakov slept. *Chazal* therefore explained the God somehow “folded” the entire country underneath Yaakov at that moment, and thus all *Eretz Yisrael* was included in this promise.

The question, however, arises as to the significance of this image. What might be the message of God’s “folding” the land underneath Yaakov?

The answer, perhaps, is that *Chazal* seek to teach us that we have within us far more potential than we recognize. Yaakov slept on just a small piece of property that night, but the prophecy he received granted him rights and dominion over the entire land. We often see ourselves limited to a very small “territory,” confined to limited capabilities and hence to limited achievements. The Gemara here perhaps encourages us to see beyond our current standing, to recognize that there is more within us than we might think. Even if we see ourselves occupying only a very small area, we have the capacity for more, as God tells Yaakov in the next verse, “You shall burst forth to the west, to the east, to the north and to the south.” Rather than comfortably and complacently remaining confined to our current position, we are challenged to “burst forth,” to recognize that we are capable of far more than what we’ve already achieved, and it’s up to us to make the effort to realize our full potential.

Sunday

The Torah relates in the beginning of Parashat Vayetze that as Yaakov journeyed from home towards his uncle’s home in Lavan, “he encountered a place” (“*va-yifga ba-makom*”) when the sun set, and so he slept. It was there that he beheld the famous dream of the ladder extending to the heavens, and received God’s prophecy promising that he would produce a great nation that would inhabit the Land of Israel.

The Torah’s description of Yaakov’s arrival at that site – “*va-yifga ba-makom*” – implies that this encounter occurred randomly, by chance, without any intention on Yaakov’s part of sleeping specifically at that location.

In direct contrast to this implication, *Chazal* explain that Yaakov not only intended to arrive at that particular site, but took great pains to go there. The Gemara (Chulin 91b) tells that Yaakov traveled all the way to Charan, and then regretted having passed by Mount Moriah, the future site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and the place where his father was bound upon an altar, without stopping to pray. He therefore turned around and began traveling back to Jerusalem. To explain the phrase “*va-yifga ba-makom*,” which connotes a random, unexpected encounter, the Gemara relates that Yaakov experienced a “*kefitzat ha-derekh*” (literally, “jump of the road”), such that when he reached Beit-El, a town north of Jerusalem, he immediately found himself at Mount Moriah. It was there, the Gemara comments, that Yaakov slept and beheld his dream.

*Chazal*’s reading is striking in its contrast with the plain reading of the text. Whereas the plain reading indicates that Yaakov dreamt his dream in a random place where he happened by chance to sleep because he was there when night fell, *Chazal* explain that Yaakov specifically wanted to visit this site, and even went well out of his way to go there.

Underlying this discussion, perhaps, is the question surrounding the possibility of experiencing a prophetic vision without any advanced preparation. According to the simple reading, Yaakov arrived at the “the house of God” and “the gateway to the heavens” (28:17) and beheld a vision without having planned any kind of spiritual experience. It might be for this reason that *Chazal* viewed this encounter as planned. They found it inconceivable that Yaakov could have experienced this kind of revelation without some kind of preparation, without having gone there with the intent of praying and communing with God at the sacred site.

If so, then the different approaches to the text highlight a certain tension that exists between the value of spontaneous, unexpected opportunities and the vital importance of advanced and proactive planning. According to the plain reading of this account, Yaakov’s encounter shows that we can receive inspiration and experience a significant moment of growth unexpectedly, that even as we go about our ordinary daily lives, we can suddenly find ourselves at “the gateway to the heavens,” at valuable opportunities for meaningful growth. *Chazal*, however, alert us to the fact that we must not wait for these unexpected opportunities to present themselves. We should follow the example of Yaakov, who inconvenienced himself to journey to the “gateway of the heavens,” and work hard to create opportunities for growth, rather than sit passively until they come to us. Spiritual achievement is something we should be actively and intensively pursuing, even as we recognize the value of the unexpected opportunities that we often encounter as we go through life.

Monday

Towards the end of Parashat Vayetze, we read of the tense exchange that took place between Lavan and Yaakov after Yaakov clandestinely fled from Lavan’s town in the middle of the night. Lavan pursued Yaakov, caught up to him, and searched through his belongings for his *terafim* (idols, or oracles) which, unbeknownst to Yaakov, had been stolen by Rachel. After Lavan failed to find any of his possessions among Yaakov’s belongings, Yaakov became angry at Lavan (“*Va-yichar Yaakov va-yarav be-Lavan*” – 31:36) and berated him for pursuing him and searching through his things. Yaakov noted his loyal, devoted and honest service as he shepherded Lavan’s flocks for twenty years, despite Lavan’s devious attempts to cheat him. Lavan defended his actions by claiming that everything Yaakov owned was, in truth, his, as Yaakov had married his daughters and earned wealth through his work with Lavan’s herds. In the end, Lavan proposed a truce, whereupon Yaakov hosted a feast to celebrate the pact struck with his father-in-law.

The Ramban (31:46) makes an interesting observation, noting that Yaakov invited to his feast Lavan’s family members, but did not invite Lavan himself. This omission was intentional, the Ramban writes, as an expression of respect to Lavan. He treated Lavan as though all his possessions belonged as well to Lavan, such that there was no need to extend an invitation to his feast. Yaakov therefore invited Lavan’s men, but not Lavan himself, as though Lavan were cohosting the event, rather than participating as a guest.

Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm, in [*Chokhma U-mussar* (p. 109)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41658&st=&pgnum=124&hilite=), finds it significant that Yaakov was now treating his father-in-law with respect just moments after angrily berating him. Not only did Yaakov make a point of respecting Lavan, he also implicitly acknowledged an element of truth in Lavan’s response to his condemnation: “The girls are my daughters, the boys are my sons, the sheep is my sheep, and everything you see is mine” (31:43). While there is certainly no indication that Yaakov rescinded his claim that he rightfully owned everything he had, it does appear – at least according to the Ramban – that he granted Lavan the respect he deserved by virtue of his having been the source of Yaakov’s success in building a large family and amassing great wealth. And thus despite Yaakov’s obvious frustration with Lavan, he nevertheless treated him with respect and acknowledged the truth in Lavan’s counterargument.

The Alter concludes on this basis that Yaakov’s “anger” was not a spontaneous emotional outburst, but rather a calculated response to Lavan’s actions. Yaakov did not “erupt” in a fit of rage, but rather reached the rational decision that the situation demanded harsh criticism. Only this, the Alter claims, could explain how Yaakov could so quickly “shift gears” and speak to Lavan with respect and congeniality as soon as Lavan proposed a peaceful truce. If Yaakov had spoken with raw, unrestrained emotion, freely releasing pent-up resentment and umbrage, it is hardly likely that he would be capable of changing his demeanor so suddenly. Necessarily, then, Yaakov remained fully in control of his emotions all throughout. Despite having been relentlessly victimized by Lavan’s duplicity for twenty years, Yaakov retained his composure and acted and spoke with reason. Even his expressions of anger were carefully crafted as the most effective means of handling the situation, and were not a spontaneous outburst of raw emotion.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayetze tells of Yaakov’s agreement with Lavan whereby he would work as Lavan’s shepherd for seven years, after which he would marry Rachel, Lavan’s younger daughter. We read that because of Yaakov’s special love for Rachel, these seven years were in Yaakov’s eyes “*ke-yamim achadim*” (29:20), which is generally translated as “like several days.”

Many commentators raised the obvious question as to the logic of this verse. Seemingly, if Yaakov loved Rachel and very much wished to marry her, then the waiting period should have felt long and drawn-out, and not like a small amount of time as the verse suggests.

An especially creative interpretation of this verse was proposed by Rav Zev Wolf Tannenbaum (the Verpeleter Rav) in his [*Rechovot Ha-nahar*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=38208&st=&pgnum=171&hilite=). He notes the verse in Sefer Bamidbar (28:4) which formulates the command of the daily *tamid* sacrifice with the phrase “*ha-keves echad*” (literally, “the one sheep”). The Gemara (Megilla 28a) understands the word “*echad*” in this verse to mean “*meyuchad be-edro*” – “singular in his flock” – that the sheep selected for the *tamid* must be an animal of particularly high quality. Accordingly, the word “*echad*” can be used in reference to a special quality, to something that is special and unique.

On this basis, Rav Tannenbaum suggests a novel reading of the phrase “*yamim achadim*” here in Parashat Vayetze. Yaakov regarded this seven-year period as a special and significant time. Out of his love for Rachel, and his strong desire to marry her, he viewed the seven years of work as “*yamim achadim*” – a very important and meaningful time. As these were the years that led him to the goal he desired, he considered them precious and valuable.

The message that emerges from this creative insight is that the process leading to a final goal is inherently significant. Too often, in our impatience, we regard the waiting period as wasted time, an unwanted necessity, and this leads to aggravation and frustration. We must remember that whenever we work towards any goal, the interim period is “*yamim achadim*” – an important and significant block of time that should be cherished and regarded as something valuable, rather than causing us resentment and angst.

Wednesday

The Torah tells in Parashat Vayetze that Leah gave her first son the name “Reuven” because she said when he was born, “*Ra’a Hashem be-onyi ki ata ye’ehavani ishi*” – “The Lord has seen my torment, as now my husband will love me” (29:32). This name reflects Leah’s belief that God quickly granted her a child after her marriage to Yaakov out of compassion, seeing that she was less loved by her husband than his other wife, her sister Rachel. Indeed, this belief was correct, as we read in the preceding verse, “The Lord saw that Leah was despised, and so He opened her womb, while Rachel was infertile” (29:31).

The Gemara, in a surprising passage in Masekhet Berakhot (7b), gives an additional reason for why Reuven was given this name, explaining that Leah said, “*Re’u ma bein beni le-ven chami*” – “Look at the difference between my son and my father-in-law’s son.” Leah noted that her brother-in-law, Esav, resented losing the firstborn’s blessing to his brother despite his having knowingly sold him the birthright, to the point where he even threatened to kill Yaakov for seizing his blessing. Reuven, on the other hand, had the birthright taken from him and given to his second-youngest brother, Yosef (Divrei Hayamim I 5:1), but he did not protest, and even rescued Yosef when the other brothers tried to kill him. And thus while Esav tried to kill his younger brother who was given the birthright due to his having knowingly relinquished it, Reuven tried to save his younger brother who was given the birthright against Reuven’s will.

Many commentators have noted the seeming peculiarity of the Gemara providing a different explanation for Reuven’s name than that explicitly given by his mother who named him. If the Torah tells us very clearly what the name “Reuven” signifies, then there does not seem to be any reason for the Gemara to propose a different explanation of the name’s meaning.

One way to approach the Gemara’s comment, perhaps, is to note the irony of Leah making the observation ascribed to her by the Gemara, specifically in this context. Leah names all her sons to commemorate her feelings of triumph and vindication in the tense struggle for Yaakov’s love. The background of this struggle is the Torah’s introduction to the account of the births of Yaakov’s children: “He even loved Rachel more than Leah” (29:30). Leah found herself in a struggle with her younger sister, vying for Yaakov’s affection and for the position of favored wife. It might therefore strike us as ironic that right at the outset of this process, with the birth of Leah’s first child, she makes a prophetic comment about Reuven’s ability to rise above sibling rivalries and show devotion to his younger brother in favor of whom he lost his stature of firstborn. Just when Leah triumphantly revels in her victory in her struggle with her sister, we are told of Reuven transcending internecine struggle and rivalry, and showing unbridled devotion to his younger brother who usurped his favored status.

In light of this contrast between Leah’s struggle and Reuven’s rising above family struggles, we might suggest that the Gemara did not actually mean that Leah prophetically foresaw Reuven’s greatness already at the time of his birth. The contrast between Reuven and Esav was made not by Leah, but by *Chazal*, perhaps as a subtle criticism of Leah’s competitive mindset. While we can certainly empathize with her frustration of being the less loved wife, it seems that *Chazal* found something inappropriate in the competitiveness that Leah repeatedly expressed with the birth of her children. Family members should not be struggling against one another, but should rather be working together. They should see themselves as equal partners, not as competitors. Of course, Leah and Rachel found themselves in a very unusual position as a result of the former’s deceptive marriage to Yaakov, an arrangement which made competition difficult to avoid. Nevertheless, as Leah celebrates her moments of triumph in this competition, *Chazal* draw our attention to the noble response of her oldest son, Reuven, who was in a somewhat similar position, having forfeited his status of distinction to his younger sibling, and yet managed to avoid competition and struggle. The Gemara’s comment is meant to urge us to follow Reuven’s example, to avoid the tendency to struggle and compete for positions of stature and importance, and to instead see our fellow Jews as equal partners in our collective effort to serve the Almighty.

Thursday

After Yaakov completed the years of work he had committed to his uncle and father-in-law, Lavan, in exchange for his daughters’ hands in marriage, he proposed to Lavan an arrangement whereby he would continue his work. His “salary” for shepherding Lavan’s flocks would be all the striped and spotted animals, thus guaranteeing a simple and guaranteed way to avoid suspicion. As Yaakov says to Lavan, “My righteousness shall bear witness to me on a future day, when you review my payment…” (30:33). All Lavan would have to do is look over Yaakov’s animals and see if his herds included any animals that were not striped or spotted.

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni*, 130), surprisingly, finds fault in this remark made by Yaakov. Citing the verse in Mishlei (27:1), “Do not pride yourself for tomorrow, for you know not what the next day will bring,” the Midrash says that God responded to Yaakov’s remark by saying, “You said, ‘My righteousness shall bear witness to me on a future day’ – in the future your daughter will go out and be raped.”

Why did the Midrash object to Yaakov’s telling Lavan that his “righteousness” would “bear witness,” and how does this relate to the tragedy of Dina’s abduction and defilement?

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*, explains that the Midrash understood Yaakov’s remark about his “righteousness” to mean that his anticipated success would testify to his pious stature. According to this Midrashic reading, Yaakov here proudly affirms that the sheep God would be giving him would prove to Lavan that he is innocent and righteous, and is thus well-deserved. And this is why the Midrash criticizes Yaakov. A person should never assume that his God-given blessings have been rightfully earned, that they are somehow a testament to his piety. Rav Ginsburg writes that we are entitled and encouraged to make this claim about the success of others, but not of ourselves. As part of our obligation to view people favorably and positively, we should assume that their good fortune has been well-earned. As for ourselves, however, we must be more critical and demanding. While we should certainly take pride in our achievements, we must never feel that we have done enough, that we have accomplished all we can in our service of the Almighty. And thus the Midrash responds to Yaakov’s expression of pride, “You said, ‘My righteousness shall bear witness to me on a future day’ – in the future your daughter will go out and be raped.” If we take the liberty to view our good fortune as testament to our piety, then we must also view our misfortunes as testament to our unworthiness. If we feel we can credit ourselves for deserving our success, then we must also take the blame for deserving our hardships.

The message conveyed by the Midrash, then, is not to make any such assumptions. All people experience both good fortune and sorrow over the course of their lives. Regardless of what we have gone through or are currently going through, in both good times and bad, we must be constantly striving to grow and improve ourselves, and to serve our Creator at the highest standard we can.

Friday

We read in Parashat Vayetze of Rachel’s outburst of emotion after watching her sister, Leah, give birth to numerous children while she remained infertile. Rachel approached Yaakov and cried, “Give me children, for if not, [it is as though] I am dead!” (30:1). The Torah then tells that Yaakov reacted angrily to Rachel’s cry of desperation, and retorted, “Am I in the place of God, who has denied you fruit in the womb?”

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 71) teaches that God criticized Yaakov for his angry reaction to his wife, rhetorically asking the patriarch, “Is this the way to respond to women in distress?” Yaakov’s punishment, the Midrash comments, was that his other sons would one day bow down before Rachel’s son – Yosef – to ask for his forgiveness, and he would then respond, “Do not fear, for am I in God’s place?” (50:19). Yosef used the same phrase in responding to his brothers that Yaakov had used in responding to Rachel – “Am I in God’s place?” – and thus the Midrash associates these two exchanges, asserting that Yaakov was punished for his sensitivity through the difficult exchange that later took place between his children.

One approach we might take in explaining the Midrash’s comment is to suggest that it alerts us to the far-reaching effects of a husband and wife’s relationship upon their children. Strife between parents can, very often, impact upon the children, who are likely to follow their parents’ negative example. The Midrash conveys this message in an especially striking manner, drawing an association between the tense but brief exchange between Yaakov and Rachel, which does not appear to have had any significant long-term impact upon their relationship, and the bitter friction that arose between Yosef and his brothers that yielded devastating consequences. When Yaakov confronted a tense, difficult situation, as his embittered wife was overcome by emotion and irrationally cast upon him the blame for her infertility – “Give me children” – he inappropriately reacted with anger. The Midrash is suggesting to us that one some level, and to some slight degree, this introduced an element of tension in their relationship which ended up impacting upon their children. And when the older brothers were faced with a favored brother who irresponsibly spoke of his dreams of leadership over them, they, too, reacted improperly, resorting to the drastic measure of driving him from the family. The Midrash draws a line from the brief and relatively mild conflict between Yaakov and Rachel, to the devastating conflict between Yosef and his brothers, in order to warn parents of the potential long-term effects of marital strife upon their children. Parents must endeavor to maintain as pleasant and respectful relationship as possible, for several reasons, not the least of which is to accustom and encourage their children to build and maintain healthy and peaceful relationships as they grow older, and not to destroy or strain their relationships through unwarranted anger in difficult and stressful situations.

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