**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYISHLACH**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Vayishlach begins with the description of Yaakov’s frantic preparations for his dreaded reunion with his brother, Esav. Upon hearing that Esav was approaching with a battalion of four hundred men, Yaakov assumed that Esav’s intent was to wage war and kill Yaakov and his entire family. He immediately divided his family, his servants and his property into two camps, figuring that “if Esav descends upon one camp and strikes it, the remaining camp will be saved” (32:9). As Rashi explains, Yaakov’s plan was that one camp would engage Esav and his men in battle, such that even if the camp is ultimately defeated, the other camp will have the opportunity to escape in the interim. Yaakov proceeded to offer a prayer to God for protection, and then sent a large gift of cattle to Esav in order to bribe him and thereby avert conflict altogether.

Rav Natan of Breslav, in his *Likutei Halakhot* (Rosh Chodesh, 7:51-52), sees Yaakov’s strategy of dividing his camp as a symbol of the proper approach to take when facing spiritual threats that one fears he may be unable to overcome. Yaakov somberly acknowledged the likelihood that Esav, who was approaching with a considerable army, would wage a successful war against him, even as he prayed and offered a bribe in a desperate attempt to avoid conflict. Recognizing this possibility, Yaakov devised a strategy whereby at least half his family and belongings would be salvaged. He did not see his looming confrontation with Esav as an “all-or-nothing” situation, in which he would either be triumphant or lose everything. Even as he did everything he could to secure victory, he made plans to minimize his losses in the case of defeat. Similarly, Rabbi Natan writes (based on the teachings of his mentor, Rabbi Nachman of Breslav), we should not view our spiritual efforts as an “all-or-nothing” enterprise. When we fail, or when we find ourselves as yet capable of meeting the standards we should meet, we should ensure, as Yaakov did, that “*ve-haya ha-machaneh ha-nish’ar li-fleita*” – that we salvage what we can. People who, for whatever reason, fail to properly observe *Halakha* as they should, or have succumbed to certain temptations, should not then conclude that they might as well despair altogether. Rabbi Natan gives the example of a person in a state of emotional turmoil who finds himself unable to stand before God in prayer. Such a person, Rabbi Natan writes, should not give up on prayer altogether. He should try to salvage whatever inspiration he can to, at very least, briefly cry out to God for help. Even if one finds himself defeated, there is great value and importance to minimizing the extent of his defeat to whatever extent possible.

Rabbi Natan’s teaching reminds us of the dangers of perfectionism, of approaching our obligations and our aspirations with an “all-or-nothing” mindset. We do not need to achieve perfection in order to justifiably feel accomplished. And our inevitable mistakes and failures do not absolve us from our obligation to “salvage” what we can, to continue struggling and accomplishing to the best of our ability. Failure should never be allowed to be total; instead, we must always preserve a “*machaneh ha-nish’ar li-fleita*,” a “remnant” of commitment and achievement that does not have to be threatened by our occasional missteps.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells of Yaakov’s preparations for his feared encounter with his brother, Esav, and we read that he made his way towards Esav with his wives and “his eleven children” (32:23). Rashi, noting that Yaakov at this time had twelve children, cites a famous and startling comment of the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 76:9) that this figure excludes Yaakov’s daughter, Dina, who was kept hidden in a chest. Yaakov feared that Esav would be attracted to Dina, and so he kept her hidden such that Esav would not see her. Surprisingly, the Midrash adds that Yaakov was punished for preventing the possibility of Dina’s marriage to Esav, as she might have positively influenced him, and because of this mistake Dina was later abducted and defiled by Shekhem.

Many writers struggled to explain the Midrash’s comment, to understand how Yaakov could lock his daughter in a chest, and why he was punished for not anticipating her positive influence upon an evil, violent man such as Esav. We might perhaps avoid these questions by interpreting the Midrash’s remarks as an allegorical illustration of a mistake that many of us make. Possibly, in speaking of the potential positive influence that Dina could have exerted upon Esav, the Midrash refers to the potential within each and every one of us to have an impact and make a difference in the lives of the people around us, and, less directly, in the world generally. We all have a “Dina” within us, a set of skills, character traits and assets that can be used to spread goodness, and to neutralize, if only to some slight extent, the evil of “Esav” that abounds in the world. Often, however, due either to laziness, apathy or cynical despair, we keep this potential “locked” within us. We are uninterested or afraid to get involved, and so we keep our talents and capabilities cloistered in a “chest,” denying the world the potential benefits they have to offer.

The Midrash here warns that if we withhold our capabilities from the world, then we unwittingly allow evil the opportunity to spread. If we fail to use the “Dina” within us to spread goodness, it runs the risk of being overrun and defeated by “Shekhem,” by the forces of evil that we are to struggle against. *Chazal* here teach us of the importance of utilizing all our potential for this struggle, to resist evil through goodness, to positively influence the world to the best of our capability, lest we lose ground to the negative elements that we are here to suppress and, hopefully, overcome.

Monday

Parashat Vayishlach begins by telling of Yaakov’s trepidation upon learning that Esav was approaching with an army of four hundred men, and his frantic preparations in advance of this feared encounter. Various sources in the Midrash and commentaries address – explicitly or implicitly – the question of why Yaakov felt afraid, given that God had explicitly assured him when he left Canaan that he would return safely (28:15). One passage in the Midrash, cited by *Da’at Zekeinim mi-Ba’alei Ha-Tosafot*, explains that Yaakov feared that Esav was worthier of divine support than he was. Throughout the previous twenty years, Yaakov lived far away from his home and homeland, while Esav remained in the Land of Israel and cared for his and Yaakov’s elderly parents. Yaakov thus feared that the merit of these two *mitzvot* – living in *Eretz Yisrael*, and caring for parents – tipped the scales in Esav’s favor, such that Esav would receive God’s help to defeat Yaakov, and not vice-versa. These two *mitzvot* – which Esav fulfilled throughout the previous twenty years, while Yaakov could not – may have given Esav the edge, so-to-speak, in the confrontation that was about to take place.

Later commentators struggled to understand how Yaakov could have entertained such thoughts. *Chazal* depict Esav as a cruel, heartless, violent criminal, whose respect for his parents was insincere and deceptive, aimed at making a falsely favorable impression. Yaakov, on the other hand, was a sincere, devoted servant of God who was compelled by circumstances entirely beyond his control to flee and leave his homeland. While it is true that Esav fulfilled two important *mitzvot* over the previous twenty years which Yaakov was unable to fulfill, this was not due to any fault of Yaakov, who, in any event, clearly had many merits to his favor which Esav did not.

The likely explanation (as discussed by Rav Chaim Elazary, in *Mesilot Chayim*) is that the Midrash here seeks to teach us the perspective with which we are to assess ourselves in relation to others. Our instinctive tendency when comparing ourselves to others is to take pride over the positive qualities that we have and others don’t, and over that which we’ve accomplished and they have not. We naturally tend to look for and focus on ways in which we outshine other people. The Midrash here teaches us to have the precise opposite mindset – to respect, admire and envy the positive qualities and accomplishments of others that we have not achieved. Certainly, we are entitled and encouraged to take pride of our own achievements. However, rather than gloating over them and feeling superior to those who have not reached these achievements, we should instead focus our attention on the aspects of other people’s characters from which we can learn and which we can emulate. Just as Yaakov took note specifically of the two *mitzvot* which Esav fulfilled for twenty years which he could not, so should we take note of the impressive qualities and achievements of others rather than feeling superior to them because of our own qualities and achievements.

Tuesday

Earlier this week, we noted the surprising comments of the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 76:9), cited in Rashi’s commentary to Parashat Vayishlach (32:23), relating that Yaakov hid his daughter, Dina, during his reunion with his brother, Esav. Yaakov feared that Esav would desire his niece if he saw her, and so Yaakov concealed her in a chest where she would not be visible. Even more astonishingly, the Midrash writes that God criticized Yaakov for denying Esav the possibility of marrying Dina, as Dina could have perhaps exerted a positive influence on Esav. As we mentioned, many commentators struggled to explain this Midrashic passage, and to understand why Yaakov would be blamed for not wanting his daughter to marry an evil man like Esav.

Rabbeinu Ovadya of Bartenura, in his Torah commentary, suggests that Yaakov was criticized not for concealing Dina per se, but rather for his underlying motivation. Startlingly, Rabbeinu Ovadya of Bartenura asserts that Yaakov knew that Dina had the potential of influencing Esav and triggering a process of growth and improvement – and this is precisely what he wished to avoid. Yaakov, according to this approach, specifically did not want Esav to repent and become a righteous individual. He feared that if Esav did undergo this change, then he – Yaakov – might then forfeit the special blessings granted to him by his father. Thus, according to Rabbeinu Ovadya, Yaakov was punished because his intention was not to protect Dina, but rather to protect himself from the potential challenge to his stature that Esav would pose if he had been inspired to repent.

While it certainly seems difficult to attribute such sinister motives to Yaakov, nevertheless, this reading of the Midrash is significant in drawing our attention to the peculiar kind of gratification that we sometimes experience upon see other people’s moral or religious failings. While few, if any, of us would go so far as to wish for others not to repent or grow, we might be guilty of enjoying the feeling of superiority that results from observing those who do not meet our standards. Just as, according to Rabbeinu Ovadya, Yaakov preferred that Esav remain sinful, so that he could retain his status of superiority, we might similarly at times feel gratified by the flaws and failures of other people, which allow us to feel superior. This reading of the Midrash thus teaches us that we should never feel threatened by the successes and achievements of others, which we should always wish for and celebrate. We must strive to be the best version of ourselves and maximize our full potential, and sincerely wish for all other people to do the same, fully cognizant of the fact that the successes and failures of others say absolutely nothing about the extent to which we have achieved the most we are capable of achieving, and should thus have no bearing whatsoever on our self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells of the mysterious assailant who began wrestling with Yaakov the night before his feared encounter with his brother, Esav. Yaakov wrestled the entire night against his attacker – who we later find out was an angel – until he finally subdued him, but not before suffering a serious injury to his *gid ha-nasheh* (sciatic nerve) in the thigh. The Torah tells that in commemoration of this event, we refrain from eating the *gid ha-nasheh* of animals (32:33).

Different explanations have been offered for why this event was deemed worthy of eternal commemoration through a special command. Most famously, perhaps, the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* (3) writes that we recall this incident because of its symbolic message – that we will always survive and triumph. Just as Yaakov was innocently assaulted and forced to struggle throughout the night, so would his descendants be senselessly persecuted and forced to struggle to survive throughout their long, dark “night” of exile. And just as Yaakov suffered a painful injury, so would *Am Yisrael* suffer much pain over the course its history. However, like Yaakov, our nation has survived despite the assaults it had endured – and this, according to the *Sefer Ha-chinukh*, is the eternal message commemorated through the command of *gid ha-nasheh*.

This explanation, however, fails to explain why we commemorate this event by refraining from eating the part of the body where Yaakov suffered his injury. Seemingly, if the intent is to memorialize Yaakov’s experience, then the Torah should have specifically required eating the *gid ha-nasheh*, rather than forbidding its consumption.

Chizkuni explains differently, suggesting that this prohibition serves as a punishment, of sorts, for Yaakov’s children’s failure to properly protect their father. Yaakov came under attack because he was left alone along the riverbank after bringing his family and belongings across the river (“*va-yivateir Yaakov levado*” – 32:25). Chizkuni asserts that Yaakov’s youthful, able-bodied sons were to blame for his vulnerability that night, as they should have never allowed him to find himself alone in the middle of the night, where he would be susceptible to attack. Forever more, Yaakov’s descendants must refrain from the *gid ha-nasheh* as a reminder that we are to ensure never to allow any member of our nation to be alone and vulnerable, and to instead see to it that every person enjoys the comfort and security of being accompanied and supported by his or her fellow Jews.

Seforno takes a different approach, suggesting, insightfully, that we refrain from the *gid ha-nasheh* so that Yaakov’s injured body part would retroactively be regarded as unimportant. This prohibition, according to Seforno, is intended to lead us to overlook and disregard Yaakov’s injury, to see only his triumph, and not the pain he sustained along the process. By refraining from the *gid ha-nasheh*, we convey the message that this part of the body is not especially important, or even something we care about, and thus Yaakov’s injury is not to be accorded much significance.

Normally, when enduring a difficult and challenging experience, we tend to do just the opposite – to focus our attention on the unpleasant and unwanted aspects of the experience, and on the scars that might remain. In the wake of Yaakov’s wrestle with the angel, symbolizing our struggle against various forms of hardship and adversity, we are told to overlook, as much as possible, the “injury,” the pain and the discomfort, and to focus instead on the ultimate triumph, on the long-term success, on the positive elements of the challenges that come our way. The command of *gid ha-nasheh*, as understood by Seforno, represents the Torah’s demand that we approach life’s struggles with optimism, that we strive to avoid negativity and focus less on the “injury” and more on all there is to celebrate and appreciate even in the face of adversity.

Thursday

Parashat Vayishlach tells the famous story of the mysterious assailant who attacked Yaakov during the night as he returned from Charan and prepared for his feared reunion with his brother, Esav. *Chazal* identify this attacker as an angel, which is indeed implied by the fact that Yaakov, after subduing his assailant, asked for a blessing, and the assailant replied by giving Yaakov the name “Yisrael” (32:29) – a name later confirmed by God Himself (35:10).

The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (91b) discusses several different aspects of this story, including the angel’s request to Yaakov after wrestling with him through the night, “Let me go, because morning has risen” (32:27). The explanation of this request, the Gemara comments, is that the angel needed to return to the heavens to sing praise to God. The angel said to Yaakov, in the Gemara’s words, “I am an angel, and since the day I was created, it was never my time to sing song [of praise to God] until today.”

Why was it only now that the angel needed to sing praise? Was it merely coincidental that its time to sing happened to come at that moment, when it was subdued by Yaakov?

The Maggid of Kozhnitz (*Avodat Yisrael*) explains that every angel is assigned a mission to fulfill, and upon completing its mission, it returns to the heavens and gives praise to God. The angel that attacked Yaakov represents the various forms of challenges that we confront and struggle to overcome. We all, like Yaakov that night, find ourselves “attacked” by adversity and struggles at different times and in different forms. This angel’s mission is completed, the Maggid explains, when it is defeated. Its purpose is not to succeed, but to fail. The reason why God sends us tests and challenges is for us to overcome them and grow from them. And thus it was specifically then, when Yaakov triumphed over the angel, that its mission was satisfactorily completed, and it needed to return to the heavens and sing to the Almighty.

The message conveyed by this insight of the Maggid of Kozhnitz, of course, is that challenges are meant to be overcome, that we are capable and expected to triumph over life’s tests, and not be defeated by them. Additionally, however, there may also be another lesson that incidentally emerges from this insight. Namely, sometimes our “mission” is specifically not to succeed. Just as the angel was sent to lose his wrestle with Yaakov, similarly, we are not necessarily expected to succeed in every mission we undertake. Our natural instinct when we try something that does not succeed is to feel disappointed and despondent, and to grieve over the wasted time and effort invested in the failed undertaking. The story of the angel, as understood by the Maggid of Kozhnitz, perhaps teaches us that we can – and should try to – “sing” in joy even when we do not succeed. Very often, the effort itself is immensely valuable and rewarding, even if it did not produce the desired result. In situations of unsuccessful efforts, we need to consider the possibility that our “mission,” like the angel’s, was specifically not to succeed, to experience the struggle and not see the results we had hoped for. This experience may itself ultimately prove beneficial, and thus even unsuccessful efforts are, very often, valuable, and reasons to joyfully “sing,” rather than wallow in frustration.

Friday

Towards the end of Parashat Vayishlach, the Torah lists the names of the leaders who ruled in the area of Se’ir, before the region was overtaken by Esav, who established there the kingdom of Edom. Rashi (36:24) writes that this section was added because one of the figures mentioned is Timna, a princess of Se’ir who became a concubine of Esav’s son, Elifaz, and the mother of Amalek (36:12).

The Torah introduces this section by referring to the people of Se’ir as “*yoshevei ha-aretz*” (36:20). The simple explanation of this phrase, as Rashi and the Rashbam explain, is that these people lived in the region that would later be inhabited and controlled by Esav and his descendants. Additionally, however, the Gemara (Shabbat 85a), as Rashi cites, explains the term “*yoshevei ha-aretz*” as referring to this nation’s special agricultural acumen. They were able to identify which parts of the ground were suitable for which type of vegetable or tree, and they could even smell the earth and determine based on the smell which species should be planted there. The Torah alludes to this special skill with the term “*yoshevei ha-aretz*,” which implies not merely that the people of Se’ir lived in the land, but also that they keenly understood the land, knowing precisely which products to grow where.

What might be the deeper significance of this unique talent – knowing which plants should be grown on which pieces of land?

Symbolically, this skill of the people of Se’ir may represent the skill of identifying potential, of recognizing the different, unique capabilities of different people. Just as different tracts of land are uniquely suited to produce different types of vegetation, similarly, different people are uniquely suited for different types of accomplishments. We are born with vastly different innate strengths and weaknesses, have been raised in vastly different environments, and have had vastly different experiences over the course of our lives. All these factors, and others, combine to make each person’s individual potential unique and distinct. The skill noted by *Chazal* in describing the people of Se’ir is perhaps the recognition that no two people have the same abilities, that it is wrong to expect – and certainly to demand – the exact same result from two different people. We must learn to appreciate the many different forms of potential latent within different people, and we must endeavor to identify the unique potential within each of the people around us and do what we can to help that potential reach its maximum fulfillment.

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