**SALT – PARASHAT VAYETZE**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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Dedicated in memory of Tsirele bat Moche Eliezer

whose yahrzeit is 11 Kislev,

by Family Rueff

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayeitzei tells of Yaakov’s famous dream which he beheld as he slept along the road during his journey to Charan. In this dream, God appeared to him and promised to protect him and to return him safely to his homeland. He also granted to Yaakov the blessing that had been given to Avraham and Yitzchak, that he would beget a large nation that would take possession of the land of Canaan.

The Torah tells that before going to sleep, Yaakov took “from the stones in the place” on which to lay his head (28:11). This verse sets the background for the vow which Yaakov later pronounced upon awakening, pledging – among other things – to consecrate that stone as “a house of God” when he would return from Charan (28:22). We read about Yaakov’s fulfillment of his vow in Parashat Vayishlach (35:7).

The simple meaning of the expression “*mei-avnei ha-makom*” (“from the stones of the place”), as the Rashbam and Ibn Ezra explain, is that Yaakov took one of the many stones which he found in the area. The Gemara (Chulin 91b), however, as Rashi famously cites, understood that Yaakov actually took several stones. As he slept, the stones quarreled with one another, each insisting on being granted the privilege of having Yaakov rest his head on it. God intervened by merging the stones into a single stone, which is why later, after Yaakov awoke, he made reference to “this stone.”

What might be the symbolic meaning of this seemingly peculiar image – of stones quarreling under Yaakov’s head, and their miraculous merging into a single stone?

Rav Moshe Mordekhai of Lelov, in *Kedushat Mordekhai*, suggests that the Gemara speaks here of the phenomenon of people seeking to perform *mitzvot* out of a desire for honor and prestige. If we approach *mitzvot* with pure sincerity, then we will not compete with others for opportunities to perform an important task. We would feel just as satisfied knowing that it is capably done by somebody else as we would if we had done the deed ourselves. The quarreling stones depicted by the Midrash thus represent those who pettily fight over the privilege to perform a *mitzva*, such as prestigious communal service roles. Just as each stone demanded the privilege of having Yaakov rest his head on it, so do people sometimes demand the privilege to serve, and bitterly oppose others who vie for the same privilege. The solution to this problem, the Rebbe of Lelov teaches, is to see ourselves not as separate “stones,” but rather as a single, organic entity. If a necessary task has been completed, then we should all feel gratified, regardless of who ended up receiving the privilege of completing it, because we are all a single “stone,” working together to fulfill our nation’s mission of bringing honor and glory to the Almighty.

Sunday

Parashat Vayeitzei begins with the story of Yaakov’s trek from his hometown, Be’er Sheva, to Charan, where he fled to escape from his brother who sought to kill him. As he slept along the road, he beheld a dream of a ladder extending to the heavens, and saw God standing above him promising to care for him and that he would produce a large nation.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 69:10) cites in reference to Yaakov’s dream a verse in Tehillim (63:2) in which David exclaims, “*Tzam’a lekha nafshi kamah lekha besari*” – “My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for you.” Hiding in the Judean Desert from King Shaul, David compares his yearning for closeness with God to his thirst for water. The Midrash comments that David here uses the specific word “*kamah*” (“yearns”) as an allusion to “*kemeihot*” – mushrooms, which, in the Midrash’s words, “eagerly await water.” The Midrash cites and discusses this verse in Tehillim without explaining its connection to the story of Yaakov’s dream.

One approach that has been taken arises from the *Eitz Yosef* commentary to the Midrash, which discusses the significance of the comparison to mushrooms. Unlike other plants, which grow from underneath the ground, mushrooms are attached to the ground’s surface, but are not rooted in the ground. They grow from the surface, not from underneath the surface. Therefore, they cannot draw moisture from the ground, and are thus more dependent on rainwater than other forms of vegetation. Later writers explained that the Midrash understood David’s plea to God as expressing a similar idea – that he looked to the heavens for assistance, instead of the “ground.” Even as he experienced hunger and thirst, he resembled mushrooms – craving not physical enjoyment, but closeness with God. He focused attention not “downward,” on earthly matters, but heavenward, on seeking God’s assistance. This remained his priority, because he recognized that it was God who provided all his needs.

The Midrash applies this quality also to Yaakov, who, fleeing from his home, alone and emptyhanded, dreamt of a ladder extending heavenward, and beheld God standing over him to protect him. This experience demonstrated how Yaakov “yearned” for God even in the “desert,” when he lacked his most basic needs. Like mushrooms, which depend solely on the heavens and not on the moisture in the ground, he recognized God as the exclusive source of everything he needed. And thus he dreamt of a ladder extending from the ground to the heavens, symbolizing that fact that although we are physical beings involved in worldly matters, we must constantly aspire to “extend to the heavens,” to connect with God and strive to live a life of spiritual achievement.

Monday

We read in Parashat Vayeitzei of the famous dream which Yaakov dreamt as he slept during his journey from Canaan to Charan. He saw a ladder stationed in the ground and extending to the heavens, with angels ascending and descending the ladder. Many different approaches have been taken to explain the significance of this vision.

An especially insightful explanation is offered by Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary:

He [Yaakov] sees messengers of God, and notices that these messengers of God go up the ladder to get a picture of the ideal humanity, how human beings really should be, and then come down and compare what they find here below, with that picture to decide, according to that standard, whether to behave in a friendly assisting manner towards any particular member of mankind, or in very much the reverse way.

According to Rav Hirsch, Yaakov saw angels going to the heavens and then returning to earth to compare the state of affairs here on earth with the ideal state of affairs intended for them in the heavens. Rav Hirsch cites in this context the Gemara’s comment about Yaakov’s dream in Masekhet Chulin (91b), explaining that the angels “would ascend and look upon his image in the heavens, and then look upon his image down below.” The angels saw that Yaakov’s image here on earth was identical to his “heavenly” image, to the portrait of what he was supposed to be. This vision teaches that we must always strive to ensure that we live up to our “heavenly image,” to our full potential, and realize the purpose for which we have been brought into this world.

Significantly, Yaakov was shown this vision specifically now, as he was embarking on a journey to a period of uncertainty and instability. Life would be very different living in Charan, far away from his homeland and his parents, with his wily and idol-worshipping uncle. Yaakov was shown that even under trying circumstances, we must endeavor to lose sight of our ideals, of our “heavenly image.” Even if conditions necessitate certain adjustments, we must remain forever cognizant of the ideal picture of who we are supposed to be, and try to make our portrait here on earth as similar as possible to that image.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayeitzei of the prophetic vision shown to Yaakov as he slept along his journey from Canaan to Charan. Upon awakening, Yaakov exclaimed, “Indeed, the Lord is present in this place, and I had not known!” (28:16).

A number of commentators, including Rashi and the Radak, explain that Yaakov expressed here regret for having slept in such a sacred place. Had he known that “the Lord is present in this place,” as evidenced by the extraordinary vision he had just beheld, then he would not have slept there.

Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, however, in *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, questions this explanation. Why, he asks, would Yaakov have regretted sleeping at that spot, if his decision to sleep there resulted in a prophetic vision in which he received several promises from God? If his sleep in that location brought him these promises, then clearly, it was not a mistake.

Rav Mecklenberg therefore offers a much different explanation of Yaakov’s reaction. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, chapter 5) famously establishes that a prophet must invest a great deal of effort in order to be worthy of prophecy. An especially high standard of piety and extensive knowledge of Torah and about God are necessary prerequisites for beholding a prophetic vision. Rav Mecklenberg thus suggests that Yaakov humbly wondered how he could have experienced prophecy, given that – in his estimation – he had yet to achieve the level required for receiving prophecy. According to Rav Mecklenberg, the words “*ve-anokhi lo yadati*” – commonly translated as, “and I had not known” – should actually be read to mean, “but I am not knowledgeable.” Yaakov did not feel that he had attained the intellectual level needed for prophecy, and thus he was startled that he received a prophetic vision.

Rav Mecklenberg applies this approach to explain also Yaakov’s exclamation in the next verse, “*Ma nora ha-makom ha-zeh*” – “How awesome is this place!” (28:17). In his humility, Yaakov attributed his prophetic vision not to his own intellectual and spiritual accomplishments, but rather to the unique qualities of the place where the vision was shown to him. Sensing that “*anokhi lo yadati*” – he had yet to attain the uniquely high standards necessary for prophecy, he marveled, “*Ma nora ha-makom ha-zeh*” – that the site where he slept must be exceptionally sacred, such that he was able to experience prophecy there despite being unworthy of prophecy.

An important element of humility is recognizing how much of our accomplishments can and should be attributed to our background, our upbringing, our environment, and to all the external influences under which we have been privileged to come. Of course, we should feel proud of the work and effort we’ve invested to capitalize on the opportunities we have been given to achieve all we have achieved. At the same time, however, we should recognize the many different people and circumstances without which we would have been unable to reach the goals we have attained. This realization will help us avoid inappropriate arrogance, condescension, snobbery and judgmentalism. The more cognizant we are of the external factors that influenced us and enabled us to achieve, the less likely we will be to look down on those who have been denied these opportunities. We will be more sensitive to the impact that people’s surroundings have on their emotional, intellectual and spiritual development, and will thus be less inclined to belittle those who strike us as less accomplished or less impressive than us.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeitzei tells of Yaakov’s arrival in Charan, where he went to live in order to escape from his brother who sought to kill him. We read that when Yaakov reached the well outside the city, he saw the city’s shepherds assembled with their flocks around the well, which was covered. Yaakov thought that the shepherds were bringing their herds back to town, despite the fact that it was still well before dark. He turned to the shepherds and asked them why they were bringing in their flocks instead of giving them water and leading them to pasture. The shepherds explained that they were waiting for all the town’s shepherds to assemble so they could remove the large, heavy stone that covered the well and draw water for the sheep. As they were talking, Yaakov saw his cousin, Rachel, whom he later married, arriving with her father’s sheep, and he promptly proceeded to singlehandedly remove the large stone from the well and draw water for the flocks under her care.

This incident is briefly referenced in the *Zekhor Av* hymn traditionally chanted as part of the special prayer for rain on Shemini Atzeret. In this hymn, we mention various righteous figures in *Tanakh* who had some association with water, and we pray that God should provide us with sufficient rainfall in their merit. One such figure is Yaakov, about whom we say, “*Yichad leiv ve-gal even mi-pi be’er mayim*” – “He focused his heart and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well.” As many have noted, the author of this hymn appears to attribute Yaakov’s ability to remove the stone – a task which normally required the joint effort of all the local shepherds – because “*yichad leiv*,” he was focused and determined.

Accordingly, it has been suggested that the shepherds’ explanation to Yaakov was just an excuse. As Yaakov showed, if they were truly devoted to their herds and committed to doing their work properly, they could have removed the stone from the well. If Yaakov was capable of singlehandedly pushing off the stone, then certainly the group of shepherds that had gathered could have done the same without having to wait for the others. This incident, then, demonstrates the human tendency to make excuses to justify mediocrity and underachievement. Indeed, the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 70:8) suggests numerous different allegorical interpretations of the well outside Charan, one of which is that it alludes to the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclinations). The Midrash proceeds to comment that the shepherds coming together to remove the stone symbolize the congregation assembling for the public Torah reading, through which we gain guidance for overcoming our negative impulses. Extending this symbolism further, the stone might represent the tendency to make excuses, to say “I can’t” when we really can, to comfortably wait and procrastinate instead of taking the initiative and making a proactive effort to achieve all that we are capable of achieving. Yaakov shows us that if “*yichad leiv*,” if we are dedicated enough to a goal, then, very often, we are capable of realizing it, even if we are initially inclined to assume that we are not.

Of course, not every “stone” can be moved; some obstacles are truly too large to surmount, and we must be wary of wasting our time and energy on the pursuit of unrealistic goals. However, the story of Yaakov at the well of Charan teaches that before we make excuses, we must consider whether with “*yichad leiv*” – with full devotion and focus – we will be capable of achieving that which initially seems beyond our reach.

Thursday

Parashat Vayeitzei concludes by telling of the truce made between Yaakov and his uncle, Lavan, as Yaakov made his way back home to Canaan. The Torah relates that Yaakov instructed “his brethren” – “*echav*” – to collect stones which they made into a pile, and he then designated the pile as a symbol of the treaty between him and Lavan (31:46-47).

The Ramban explains that the term “*echav*” in this verse refers to Lavan’s family members who had accompanied Lavan when he pursued Yaakov, as the Torah relates earlier (“*Va-yikach et echav imo*” –31:23). The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 74:13), however, explains that the word “*echav*” refers to Yaakov’s sons. They were called Yaakov’s “brothers,” the Midrash explains, because they were “mighty like him, righteous like him.” As Yaakov’s sons resembled him in physical strength and piety, the Torah refers to them as his “brothers.” The Midrash then cites a second explanation for why Yaakov’s sons were called his “brothers,” stating, “A person dons his father’s garment, he becomes like him.” It seems that Yaakov’s sons dressed like him, and for this reason, according to this second view, they were called “his brothers.”

Rashi, interestingly enough, follows the Midrash’s interpretation of the word “*echav*,” as referring to Yaakov’s sons, but he seems to offer his own explanation for why this word – which normally denotes “brothers” – can be used also in reference to sons. He writes: “*Hayu lo achim nigashim eilav le-tzara u-le-milchama*” – “They were brothers, coming to him to [help] in times of trouble and in war.” The word “*achim*” (“brothers”), Rashi writes, can be used to refer to those on whom one can depend for support and assistance during times of hardship, and for this reason, Yaakov’s sons, who assisted him, are called “*echav*.”

Rav Chaim Hirschenson, in his *Nimukei Rashi*, proposes – albeit with some ambivalence (writing, “*Ve-efshar*…”) – that perhaps Rashi was not offering his own interpretation of “*echav*,” but rather explaining the intent of the second view cited by the Midrash. In Sefer Shemuel I (17:38), we read that when David prepared to confront the Philistine general Golyat, King Shaul gave David his royal uniform to wear – “*Va-yalbeish Shaul et David madav*.” Perhaps, then, the description of somebody wearing another person’s clothing can be understood allegorically to mean that they came to assist him in his period of struggle and crisis. Thus, when the Midrash says that Yaakov’s sons were called his “brothers” because they wore his clothing, it means not simply that they dressed like Yaakov, but that they came to assist him. Accordingly, it could be suggested that Rashi followed this opinion, and explained that Yaakov’s sons were called his “brothers” because they “wore his clothing” – going to wage his battles and assist him whenever they were needed.

Assisting people in need involves not merely providing their practical needs, but also “wearing their garments,” trying to place ourselves in their position to understand and experience their angst. We are to strive to be “brothers” in the sense of feeling our fellow’s pain, imagining ourselves in their situation, and then doing what we can to help.

Friday

We read in Parashat Vayeitzei of the great wealth that Yaakov amassed while working as a shepherd for his uncle, Lavan. Yaakov and Lavan agreed that Yaakov’s salary would be the animals with stripes and spots, and Yaakov devised a successful technique to have the animals produce these kinds of offspring. The Torah relates that as a result of Yaakov’s success, “he had many sheep, female and male servants, camels and donkeys” (30:43).

Rashi, commenting on the phrase “*tzon rabot*” (“many sheep”), explains these words to mean that Yaakov’s sheep were especially fertile, producing more offspring than typical sheep. The Torah here speaks not of the volume of sheep, but rather of their fertility. Rashi’s understanding of this phrase is likely based on the fact that the Torah uses not the expression “*tzon rav*,” which would refer to a large quantity of sheep, but rather “*rabot*,” which Rashi understood as denoting exceptional reproductive capabilities.

Rav Yechezkel Menachem Ziskind Segel discusses Rashi’s explanation of this phrase in his *Sefat Ha-yam* (Parashat Vayishlach), and writes that Rashi understood on this basis the rest of the verse, which speaks of Yaakov’s acquisition of servants and other animals. As his sheep were especially fertile, they had a much higher market value, and thus he was able to sell them for a significantly higher price than other sheep. Yaakov’s sheep were a highly coveted commodity, and so he would sell them for a large profit, and was able to purchase servants and other animals.

Rav Segel added that this might explain the Midrash’s comment (cited by Rashi to Bereishit 33:18) regarding Yaakov’s temporary settlement outside the city of Shekhem upon his return to Canaan. Following his feared – but ultimately peaceful – encounter with his brother, the Torah writes, “Yaakov arrived ‘complete’ at the city of Shekhem…” The Midrash comments that Yaakov was “complete” in several different ways, including financially. Although he had sent enormous quantities of cattle to Eisav as a bribe, Yaakov found himself, in the Midrash’s words, “*shaleim be-mamono*” – “financially complete,” having lost nothing as a result of this expenditure. Rav Segel explained that Shekhem was a region of grazing, as we know from the story of Yosef’s brothers, who brought their sheep to the area of Shekhem (37:12). The sheep owners in the area coveted Yaakov’s sheep because of their exceptional fertility, and offered him high prices for them. And thus Yaakov earned a great deal of money upon settling near Shekhem, thereby easing the losses he incurred as a result of the bribe he sent to Eisav.