**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 Vayetzei tells of the twenty years which Yaakov spent with his uncle and father-in-law, Lavan, a period which ended with Yaakov’s sudden, covert, unannounced and wholly unanticipated escape from Lavan’s home with his family and cattle. Upon hearing of Yaakov’s departure, Lavan pursued him, and caught up to Yaakov while Yaakov was encamped for the night in the Gilead region. Lavan proceeded to search through Yaakov’s tents for his *terafim* (statues), which, unbeknownst to Yaakov, Rachel had stolen. The Torah relates that Lavan searched through five tents – Yaakov’s tent, Leah’s tent, the tents of Yaakov’s two concubines (Bilha and Zilpa), and, finally, Rachel’s tent (31:33). He never found the *terafim*, because Rachel was lying on them.

The question arises as to why Yaakov pitched a separate tent for himself. Understandably, each of his four wives was assigned a tent to herself, but we would presume that Yaakov would sleep in one of those four tents. Why does the Torah speak of “*ohel Yaakov*,” Yaakov’s own, separate tent?

Rashi, based on the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 74:9), explains that in truth, there were only four tents, as Yaakov shared a tent with Rachel, his primary wife. When the Torah tells of Lavan first searching through Yaakov’s tent, and then, searching through Rachel’s tent, it means that he returned to Yaakov and Rachel’s tent to search a second time, because he suspected Rachel.

The Ramban explains that “Yaakov’s tent” was where Yaakov ate his meals together with his four wives and his children.

The *Pesikta Zutreta* offers a surprising interpretation, explaining that Yaakov had pitched a separate tent as a site of prayer. Yaakov pitched not only tents for sleeping, but also a separate tent where he would go to pray during his overnight stop in Gilead.

The Tolna Rebbe commented that the *Pesikta* here impresses upon us the importance of praying in a location especially designated for prayer. Despite the fear of Lavan’s pursuit, and the tumult of his frantic escape with his large family and all his possessions, Yaakov nevertheless went through the trouble of setting up a special site for prayer, showing us how vital it is to have a site set aside for praying. Certainly, the Rebbe remarked, we should not forego on prayer in a synagogue for the sake of convenience, and should instead make a point of joining the public services in the synagogue whenever possible.

More generally, perhaps, the *Pesikta*’s comment shows us the importance of prioritizing our spiritual pursuits even in periods of instability and hardship. The *Pesikta* depicts Yaakov as erecting a site for prayer during an especially stressful and turbulent moment in his life, during a frenzied escape from his wily, hostile father-in-law. Our natural tendency is to compromise our religious standards when we are harried and under pressure. The *Pesikta* here perhaps urges us to try, as much as reasonably possible, to make religious excellence a priority even in times of stress and confusion, to always ensure to set up a “tent” of spiritual devotion even under difficult circumstances.

Sunday

Parashat Vayetzei begins with the words, “Yaakov departed from Be’er Sheva,” and Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 68:6), famously comments that the Torah does not mean merely that Yaakov left the city to live in Charan. Rather, Rashi explains, this verse implies that “a righteous person’s departure from a place makes an impression. For when a righteous person is in the city, he is its majesty, he is its radiance, he is its glory; when he leaves from there, its majesty is gone, its radiance is gone, and its beauty is gone.” The phrase “Yaakov departed from Be’er Sheva,” according to the Midrash, means that Yaakov’s departure was felt by the people of Be’er Sheva. The simple meaning of the Midrash’s remark is that it emphasizes the profound impact that a righteous person has on his community, to the extent that a righteous resident can be considered the source of the town’s “majesty,” “radiance” and “glory,” which are lost once he departs.

Rav Yosef Nechemya Kurnitzer (*Chiddushei Rabbeinu Yosef Nechemya*) offers an additional understanding of the Midrash’s comment. In his view, it is obvious that a *tzadik*’s presence brings honor and glory to the community, and the Midrash would not have any need to make this point. Rav Kurnitzer therefore suggests that the Midrash speaks of the impact that remains after the righteous person’s departure. If people still remember the *tzadik*, preserve his legacy, speak of his example of piety and seek to emulate it, then the city can be described as a place of “majesty,” “radiance” and “glory,” because they strive to grow and to learn from the example set by the righteous people in their midst. Their preserving the *tzadik*’s memory and legacy, which testifies to their dedication to adhering to the values, principles and ideals which the *tzadik* embodied, is a source of honor and pride for the city. But when the *tzadik* “leaves from there,” if the righteous person is forgotten, then “its majesty is gone, its radiance is gone, and its beauty is gone.” It is to a community’s shame if they choose to forget a spiritual leader and guide, and ignore his teachings and example once he is gone. We attain “majesty,” “radiance” and “glory” when we work to keep alive the memory of spiritual giants in an effort to learn from and apply all that they embodied, thus demonstrating our commitment to continued religious growth and advancement.

Monday

We read in Parashat Vayetzei (29:18) of the arrangement agreed to by Yaakov and his uncle, Lavan, whereby Yaakov would work for seven years shepherding Lavan’s herds in exchange for the right to marry Lavan’s younger daughter, Rachel. In the end, Lavan deceived Yaakov, bringing him on his wedding night the older daughter, Leah, and then demanding another seven years of work for Rachel.

A number of writers addressed the question of whether Yaakov’s initial arrangement with Lavan could be reconciled with the Rama’s ruling (C.M. 333:3), based on earlier sources, that one may not commit to a period of three-years or more of work. This ruling is rooted in the Gemara’s discussion in Masekhet Bava Metzia (10a), stating that a day worker is permitted to quit his job in the middle of the day by force of the verse in Sefer Vayikra (25:55), “For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants.” One is entitled to work as an employee, but not to become somebody else’s property, except in specific circumstances, because we are all God’s servants, and may thus not enter into another person’s service. Therefore, a worker is allowed to quit his job, because otherwise, he would be a servant, and not an employee. By the same token, the Rama rules, one may not pledge more than three years of service, because the Torah in Sefer Devarim (16:18) mentions a three-year period as the maximum duration of an employee’s contract. Committing to more than three years constitutes servitude, and is thus forbidden. The question arises, then, as to whether Yaakov’s agreement with Lavan violated this *halakha*.

One possibility is that Yaakov’s commitment was indeed forbidden according to Torah law, but the Ramban, earlier in Sefer Bereishit (26:5), famously posits that the patriarchs observed the Torah’s laws only in the Land of Israel, and not elsewhere. The Ramban applies this theory to justify Yaakov’s marriage to both Rachel and Leah, which violates the prohibition against marrying two sisters (Vayikra 18:18). Although the patriarchs obeyed the Torah despite its having yet to be given, the Ramban writes, this was only in the Land of Israel, and thus Yaakov did not adhere to Torah law during the years he spent with Lavan in Charan. Hence, he was not bound by the prohibition against committing to more than three years of work.

Rav Yosef Patzanavsky, in *Pardeis Yosef*, explains that Yaakov’s arrangement with Lavan was permitted under the circumstances, in light of the *Shakh*’s ruling (C.M. 333:16) allowing a contract exceeding three years in the case of dire poverty. The Rambam, in the beginning of *Hilkhot Avadim* (1:1), allows a person to sell himself as a servant if he otherwise would have no money for food. *A fortiori*, the *Shakh* reasons, one who cannot afford basic necessities may, if necessary, commit to a period of work exceeding three years. According to Midrashic tradition, Yaakov arrived in Charan penniless, and indeed, Yaakov would later recall crossing the Jordan River with nothing than a walking stick (“*…ki ve-makli avarti et ha-Yardein ha-zeh*” – 32:10). Hence, it was permissible to Yaakov to commit to a long-term period of service for Lavan, who, presumably, supported him during this period.

Rav Patzanavsky adds a second possibility, noting the *halakha* (Megilla 27a, *Shulchan Arukh* Y.D. 270:1) permitting one to sell a *Sefer Torah* if he needs the money in order to get married. Although it is generally forbidden to sell a Torah scroll, *Halakha* makes an exception for the sake of enabling one to get married. The *Minchat Chinukh* (42) explores the possibility of extending this provision to permit selling oneself into servitude if this is necessary to obtain funds to marry. If so, Rav Patzanavsky reasons, then Yaakov was permitted to commit to an extended period of service for the sake of marrying Rachel.

(See Rav Yosef Chai Siman-Tov’s [*Eshkol Yosef*, Parashat Vayetzei, 5773](https://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/90_07_73.pdf))

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayetzei that after Yaakov had spent twenty years with his uncle and father-in-law, Lavan, during which time he shepherded Lavan’s herds, married his daughters and begot twelve children, God appeared to him and commanded him to return home, to the Land of Israel (31:3).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 74:1) states that this command to Yaakov came in response to Yaakov’s prayer to be brought back home. Yaakov’s prayer, the Midrash comments, was the prayer which King David would recite many centuries later, as we read in Tehillim (142:6): “I have cried out to You, O Lord; I said: You are My refuge, [You will grant me] my portion in the land of the living!” According to the Midrash, this plea was uttered by Yaakov during his stay in Charan, as he pleaded with God to bring him back to “*eretz ha-chayim*” (“the land of the living”), referring to his homeland, the Land of Israel.” The Midrash proceeds to explain that *Eretz Yisrael* is referred to as “the land of the living” because the deceased in *Eretz Yisrael* will arise first during the time of the resurrection.

The context of King David’s prayer might perhaps shed light on the Midrash’s comments, and the significance of this prayer having been recited also by Yaakov in Charan. The opening verse of this chapter of Tehillim tells that King David recited this prayer “when he was in the cave,” referring to the incident related in Sefer Shmuel I (24) of the time when David hid in a cave in the Ein Gedi desert as King Shaul pursued him. David was trapped, with Shaul and his men combing the region in an attempt to kill him. He turned to God in prayer, pronouncing, “*Ata machasi*” – that God was his “refuge,” his only source of protection as he faced grave danger, and “*chelki be-eretz ha-chayim*” – it was God who could bring him out of the dark, dreary cave back into the “land of life,” to a joyful, fulfilling life. By ascribing this prayer to Yaakov, the Midrash perhaps seeks to draw a parallel between Yaakov’s condition in Charan and David’s condition inside the cave in Ein Gedi. Just as David was forced to remain confined in a cave to protect himself from Shaul, Yaakov, too, found himself “trapped” in a “cave,” banished from his homeland, from “*eretz ha-chayim*,” from the sacred land promised to him and his offspring, and living with his corrupt, wily, idolatrous uncle in Charan. He was forced into a situation and to a place where he did not wish to be, where he felt stifled and constrained, unable to achieve self-actualization. And so he pleaded, like David did later in this chapter (verse 8), “*Hotzi’a mi-masger nafshi*” – that he be released from his “confinement,” from his “cave,” and be allowed to live the life he wished to live.

We, too, might occasionally feel “trapped,” as though we live in a small “cave,” as external pressures and circumstances prevent us from fulfilling our dreams, realizing our aspirations, and actualizing our full potential. In Yaakov’s case, it was Eisav, and in David’s case, it was Shaul; but many of us, even if we are not actually threatened, often feel constrained due to various conditions that prevent us from living as we wish. The Midrash teaches that whenever we feel “trapped” and confined, we should follow Yaakov and David’s example and recognize God’s ability to grant us “*chelki be-eretz ha-chayim*,” the freedom and ability to live as we want to live. In whatever sort of “cave” we might find ourselves in, we are urged to turn to God, place our trust in Him, and plead to Him for assistance.

Wednesday

In the beginning of Parashat Vayetzei, we read of the prophetic dream which Yaakov beheld as he slept along his journey from his homeland to Charan. Upon awakening, Yaakov named this location Beit-El (“the House of the Almighty” – 28:19). On the level of *peshat* (the plain reading of the text), it seems that Yaakov beheld this vision in the area of Beit-El mentioned earlier (12:8), which is situated north of Jerusalem. The Gemara (Chulin 91b), however, as Rashi (28:11) cites, maintains that Yaakov beheld his dream at Mount Moriah, the future site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* in Jerusalem. This is inferred from the Torah’s account of Yaakov “encountering the place” (“*Va-yifga ba-makom*”) and sleeping there, implying that this was a well-known site which had been mentioned earlier. The Sages thus understood that this was the “*makom*” (“place”) where Avraham had bound Yitzchak on the altar (“*va-yar et ha-makom mei-rachok*” – 22:4), the future site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

The Midrash (*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, 35), cited by the Ramban (to 28:11), extends this connection between Yaakov’s vision and the site of the *akeida* (binding of Yitzchak) one step further. It states that the stones which Yaakov took and placed around him as he slept (28:11, see Rashi) were actually stones of the altar which Avraham built and upon which he placed Yitzchak, preparing to slaughter him.

What might be the significance of this association? Why would the Midrash seek to link Yaakov’s stones with the event of *akeidat Yitzchak*?

Rav Uri Langner, in *Or La-Yesharim*, answers by noting the approach taken by the *Midrash Tanchuma* (Vayetzei, 2) to explain Yaakov’s vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder which extended from earth to the heavens. The Midrash writes that these angels represented the foreign nations, who rise to power and then decline. Yaakov was shown this vision now, Rav Langner explains, because his departure from *Eretz Yisrael* set the precedent of his descendants’ exile to foreign lands where they would live among hostile foreign nations. Yaakov assembling of stones to protect him thus represents the protection that his descendants would need during exile, when they would be exposed to physical and spiritual dangers. Accordingly, Rav Langner writes, the Midrash identifies these stones as the stones of the altar upon which Yitzchak was bound and nearly sacrificed – to instruct that we protect ourselves in exile through *mesirut nefesh* – self-sacrifice. *Akeidat Yitzchak* epitomizes the preparedness to sacrifice for the service of God, and such sacrifice becomes especially vital when we live under foreign rule and are exposed to foreign beliefs and cultures. We need to draw inspiration from *akeidat Yitzchak* to make the difficult sacrifices necessary to resist the overwhelming pressures and lures that we face. In order to protect ourselves, we must take the “stones” of the “altar” of *akeidat Yitzchak*, gird ourselves with the strength and conviction of our patriarchs, and be prepared to sacrifice for the sake of our principles, values, beliefs and traditions.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted the surprising remark by *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (35), cited by the Ramban (to Bereishit 28:11), that on the night when Yaakov beheld his famous prophetic dream, he had around his head stones from the altar upon which his father, Yitzchak, had been bound. The Torah relates that as Yaakov prepared to sleep along his journey to Charan, he took “from the stones at that place” (“*mei-avnei ha-makom*”) which he placed around his head. According to *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, these stones had been part of the altar which Avraham had constructed at the time of *akeidat Yitzchak*, when he was commanded to offer his son, Yitzchak, as a sacrifice (a command which turned out to be only a test of Avraham’s devotion to God).

To explain the meaning behind this connection between Yaakov’s journey from his homeland and *akeidat Yitzchak*,Rav Yosef Konvitz (in *Divrei Yosef*) considers the thoughts which might have been going through Yaakov’s mind at this time. He likely wondered why he deserved such a fate, being forced to flee from his homeland to escape his vengeful brother. Eisav, as the Sages describe him, was a violent, ruthless criminal, whereas Yaakov was a righteous scholar. The act Yaakov committed which angered Eisav was instigated by his mother, whom Yaakov felt dutybound to obey. We can imagine Yaakov being troubled by the fact that his wicked brother lived peacefully and comfortably with his wives in his homeland, while he – Yaakov – was forced to flee to a foreign land, alone and penniless. To combat these feelings, Rav Konvitz writes, Yaakov drew strength and inspiration from *akeidat Yitzchak*. Avraham obeyed and trusted God even when He commanded him to do something as difficult and insensible as sacrificing his own son, from whom God had promised to produce a large nation. Yaakov took the “stones” of *akeidat Yitzchak*, the message of unconditional faith, and placed them “around his head,” seeking to mold his outlook on his current situation following the example set by his grandfather.

Rav Konvitz adds that this might also be the significance of Yaakov’s dream of a ladder extending from the ground to the heavens. Yaakov was shown that even though he now found himself on the “ground,” at the lowest possible point, he could still rise to the “heavens,” one step at a time, one rung after the other. He was reassured that although his life had seemed to unravel, and the future looked bleak, he would now be ascending a “ladder” extending to the heavens, he was embarking on a journey that would lead to greatness. Even when we feel as though we are, like the ladder in Yaakov’s dream, “*mutzav artza*” (28:12) – stationed on the ground, at the lowest possible point, we must trust in God’s ability to elevate us to “the heavens,” to great heights, one step at a time, as long as we are prepared to put in the work to climb from one rung to the next.

Friday

Rashi, in his famous comments to the opening verse of Parashat Vayetzei, cites the Midrash’s interpretation of this verse (in *Bereishit Rabba* 68:6) as referring to the impact of Yaakov’s departure from his hometown. This *parasha* begins by telling that Yaakov left Be’er Sheva, and the Midrash explains that this verse underscores the fact that “a righteous person’s departure from a place makes an impression. For when a righteous person is in the city, he is its majesty, he is its radiance, he is its glory; when he leaves from there, its majesty is gone, its radiance is gone, and its beauty is gone.” The Torah tells that Yaakov left Be’er Sheva to indicate that his departure had an impact upon the city, which found itself without its source of “majesty,” “radiance” and “glory.”

It has been suggested that the Midrash here seeks to teach not only about the unique importance of righteous people, but also to set an ambitious model to which we must all aspire. We are to strive to be impactful, to make a difference to the people around us, to be a source of “majesty,” “radiance” and “glory” wherever we go and with whomever we interact. The Midrash tells of Yaakov’s departure leaving a void in Be’er Sheva in order to urge us to follow this example, to try to the kind of people whose departure would leave a void. We are to ambitiously strive to make the meaningful contributions that we are capable of making, to lend the assistance that we are capable of lending, and to get involved in ways that we are able to, each person according to his or her unique qualities, talents and capabilities. Rather than simply live for ourselves, we must seek to shine our “radiance” upon our surroundings, to make as great an impact as we can, and to do our share to improve our world.