

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Vayetze)

When I was in Officer's course, we had a Battalion Commander named Eyal, who made an indelible impression on me. A Kibbutznik from the Golan, he was a rather short fellow, of slight build, not exactly the image of the mighty war hero. But he was one of those men who had been there; he was a veteran of the Yom Kippur war, and during the first week of the course he told us a story that came with a challenge.

He had actually been stationed down along the Suez Canal when the war broke out and was part of a company of British-made Centurion tanks caught in the catastrophic Egyptian advance deep into the Sinai. At that point he was still a tank driver with the rank of private first class, so his position was in the driver's compartment. In order for the turret to rotate, the driver sits in a compartment separate from the rest of the crew, at the front of the tank. Since most enemy fire, for obvious reasons, is aimed at this area of the tank, the driver's compartment is heavily armored.

The Centurion tank's driver compartment was designed with two heavily armored hatch-doors that close down on top of the driver's compartment for maximum protection. The only problem with this arrangement, was that it was impossible for the driver to open the doors on his own from inside the tank; they were simply too heavy. So, as a matter of practice, when maneuvers were done, one of the other crewmembers would jump down on top of the hatch and help lift the hatch doors, so the driver could exit the tank.

Of course, this could be somewhat problematic for a tank crew under fire, needing to exit the tank in a hurry, which was exactly what happened to Eyal. On the fourth day of the war, his tank was hit by enemy fire, and burst into flames. Trapped in the driver's compartment, which was rapidly filling with smoke, he called out to his tank crew to no avail; injured or dead, they could not help him. In no doubt, at any moment the fire would spread to the enormous fourteen hundred liter gas tanks, and he would die in the inevitable huge fireball that would result.

In desperation, he managed to squirm around in the tiny compartment so that his back was on the driver's stool, and, placing his legs against the heavy steel hatch doors above his head, he pushed with all the strength he had left, successfully throwing wide open the hatch doors. Clambering out of the burning tank, he managed to get about ten feet from the tank when it exploded, throwing him in the air on top of a nearby sand dune. A few more seconds, and he would have been watching the rest of the war with the angels...

After the war, he tried on numerous occasions to repeat this superhuman feat, but though with more sleep, and better fed, was never again able to successfully throw open those doors from inside the tank.

So, a week into our Officer's training he issued what became known as 'Etgar Eyal', the 'Eyal challenge': any one of us who would succeed in repeating his wartime feat, would be rewarded with a weekend pass. To a soldier in the grueling, depressing world of Officer's training, this was like a pot of gold. On any given Friday morning, you could see dozens of cadets down by the Centurion tanks trying to do the same thing, I myself tried a number of times; not one of us ever succeeded.

At the end of the course, just before we were to receive our bars, he told us the point of the whole exercise:

“What you will succeed in doing will ultimately be more about what you know you must do, than about what you think you should. Wars are won not by strength and strategy alone, but mostly by will.”

This week's portion, *Vayetze*, is all about the power of will, and the meaning of determination.

Yaakov, it appears, is forced to flee before the wrath of his brother Esav, who has sworn to kill him for taking the blessings that he considers to have been rightfully his. Yet Yaakov is not just running from his past, he is very clearly heading towards his future as well.

It is interesting to note, (Genesis 27:42-46) that although Rivkah does tell Yaakov to seek safe haven in the home of her brother Lavan (after learning that Esav has sworn to kill Yaakov), this is not the reason Yitzchak ultimately sends him away.

Rivkah, almost as a ruse, tells Yitzchak (27:46- 28:5) she cannot tolerate the daughters of Chet, and she wants Yitzchak to send Yaakov to *Padan Aram*, her ancestral home, to find a wife from the extended family of Abraham.

Thus, Yitzchak sends Yaakov (28:1-5) to the same place where, years earlier, Eliezer, the servant of Abraham journeyed to find a wife for him. All of which raises a number of questions. Why does Rivkah not tell Yitzchak that Yaakov is in danger? And why does Yaakov wait until his father actually tells him to go? Why doesn't he immediately depart for Padan Aram? Why this process of making a joint decision for Yaakov to go to Padan Aram and find a wife from the family of Abraham?

Yaakov leaves Be'er Sheva (at the beginning of this week's portion, *Vayetze*) and has a rather unique metaphysical experience.

“And Yaakov departed Be'er Sheva, and went towards Charan. And he encountered (“Va'Yifgah'”) a place, and leaned (stayed the night) there, because the sun had set.” (28:10-11)

Again, a number of questions: We already know Yaakov is leaving (or has left) Be'er Sheva, as that is the place of the home of Yitzchak and Rivkah, so why the need for the Torah to share this? We also know he is headed to Padan Aram and the area of Charan, so why is this information provided again? And most interesting, why does the Torah tell me the reason for Yaakov's staying the night in this 'place'? The verse might have simply read 'And Yaakov slept in a certain place...?'

And then Yaakov has an incredible dream.

“And he dreamed, and behold there was a ladder standing (firmly) in the ground, with its top reaching up to the heavens, and behold, angels of G-d are going up and down it (the ladder).” (28:12)

Yaakov's dream continues, and Hashem (G-d) is standing above him, and calls to him:

“I am Hashem, the G-d of your father Abraham, and the G-d of Yitzchak....” (28:13)

Hashem promises Yaakov that the land on which he is laying will one day be his, and his descendants', forever, and that He (Hashem) will be with him and watch over him.

“And behold I will be with you, and watch over you wherever you will go, and I will return you to this ground, for I will not leave you until I have done all that I speak to you.” (28:15)

This must be an amazing moment in Yaakov's life. Alone, in the wilderness, running from home to an uncertain future, G-d comes to him in a dream, and promises Yaakov that He will be watching over him. There is no better travel insurance plan in the world! Yaakov must feel great, right? Because now he knows G-d is with him, so this must affirm that the path he is on is a good one, right? One would expect Yaakov to be full of thanksgiving and gratitude; after all, if G-d says 'I've got you covered' then you're done; no more worries, somehow you know it will all work out.

Which is what makes what follows so strange.

Firstly, Yaakov awakens from his slumber and exclaims:
"Behold! G-d is in this place, and I did not know!" (v. 16)

One wonders: Yaakov didn't know G-d was everywhere before G-d personally assured him he was coming with him to Charan?

And then, even stranger, Yaakov proceeds to make a pact with G-d:

"And Yaakov swore an oath saying: 'If G-d will be with me and watch over me on this journey, and He will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and I will return in peace to the house of my father, then Hashem will be for me a G-d (Elokim).'" (28:22-21)

What exactly is Yaakov saying here? Hashem has already promised to protect and watch over Yaakov, and now Yaakov is making deals? Worse, Yaakov is saying Hashem will only be his G-d if He watches over him, and gives him food and clothing? This is Yaakov, one of our forefathers? Could Yaakov be suggesting that our relationship with G-d is quid pro quo?

Imagine deciding you are not reserving your Rosh Hashanah seats this year until G-d gets you that beautiful leather jacket you've had your eye on...? What is this all about? After all, G-d is G-d whether we like it or not; His existence does not depend on us, so who is Yaakov kidding here? How can Yaakov suggest that his relationship with G-d be dependent on bread and clothing?

Obviously, there is more to this oath than meets the eye. It is worth noting that the phrase *"Ve'Haya Hashem Li' L'Elokim"*, *"And then Hashem will be for me a G-d"* may not be the result of G-d fulfilling His promises to Yaakov, but rather the continuation of Yaakov's requests to G-d. In addition to bread and clothing, Yaakov prays for Hashem to be with him: *'If, in addition to all this, you will be with me, says Yaakov, then I will tithe to you....'* (Verse 22).

But this does not help us, because Yaakov has already been promised all this, and he is still making his service to G-d dependent on G-d's goodness to him. So what does it mean?

Rashi points out that the meaning of this phrase *"Ve'Haya Hashem Li' L'Elokim"*, (*"And then Hashem will be for me a G-d"*) is that G-d's name will fall on Yaakov. Up until this point (see verse 13) G-d is "The G-d of Abraham, and the G-d of Yitzchak". Now He will also be the G-d of Yaakov. Which is even more challenging! Not only is Yaakov making deals with G-d, but he also wants to be on the same level as Abraham and Yitzchak?

If the beginning of his request to G-d is so humble as to ask only for food and clothing, now he expects to be likened unto Avraham and Yitzchak? After all, we may perceive the greatness of Yaakov, but one does not expect *Yaakov* to assume he is on the level of Avraham and Yitzchak, even if he is....

There is a story in the **Jerusalem Talmud**, which may unlock not only this phrase but Yaakov's strange behavior as well. King David, beseeching G-d, takes note that Hashem is called 'the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchak, and the G-d of Yaakov', and asks why He is not also referred to as 'the G-d of David'? And Hashem replies: 'because I have tested them, and they have passed and (apparently) have earned the right to have my name associated with them.

So David responds: 'Test me as well!', whereupon G-d tests him (with the challenge of BatSheva), and he fails. This allegory in the Talmud raises many questions, chief amongst them how King David could be so arrogant as to ask why he is not included in the list of 'who's who' along with Abraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, not to mention his assumption that he too, can succeed in like fashion.

In truth, King David was not looking for titular honor. Rather, the fact that each of the three forefathers is associated with the name of G-d means that they have succeeded in bringing some dimension of G-d into the world. Jewish tradition teaches that when the prophet Yechezkel saw his vision of G-d in this world, Hashem appeared as a chariot of fire, and tradition teaches that there are four individuals who represent the four wheels of this chariot, namely Abraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, and David.

Each of these four giants was brought into this world to introduce respectively, the concepts of **Chesed** (Abraham's character trait of loving kindness), **Gevurah** (Yitzchak's character trait of inner strength), **Tiferet** (Yaakov's character trait of balance and synthesis of the two) and **Malchut** (David's character trait of royalty). David realized that if G-d is not yet the 'G-d of David' it is because he has not yet lived up to the David he is meant to be.

This is the significance of the concept of *Nisayon*, or tests. The tests and obstacles we face in this world reflect the challenges that allow us to live up to our own potential, and become vehicles for bringing Hashem's presence into this world. And these challenges are generally very much reflective of who we are and why we are here. The challenges of Avraham are not given to Yitzchak, because they would not allow him to become the person he is meant to be; they would not fit Yitzchak in the same way they allowed Abraham to rise to his potential; Yitzchak needs his own challenges.

Indeed, each of these three giants, are vehicles for introducing to the world some new aspect of the service of G-d, such that the G-d people relate to, will now somehow be a result of their achievements in this world.

And that is precisely what King David is saying. He wants the opportunity to live up to who he is meant to be. David is simply trying to understand what he was meant to bring into the world, and how he can go about achieving it.

So what went wrong? If David's intention is so good, why does G-d set him up?

There is an important idea regarding the concept of *nisayon*, which we have had occasion to discuss in the past, and that is that a true *Nisayon* is really *impossible*.

When G-d tells Abraham to offer up his only son, Yitzchak, as an offering, despite having promised him that through Yitzchak the Jewish people would be born, G-d is really demanding the impossible.

It is impossible for Yitzchak to both die childless and be the father of the Jewish people, which should have been Abraham's natural question: 'that's impossible'? Perhaps Avraham didn't say that, because he understood what G-d's response would have been: 'You're right; it is impossible; now go do it.'

And it is precisely the fact that a true test (*nisayon*) is impossible that reveals its essence. The root of *nisayon* is related to *nes*, or miracle. Because when we succeed in rising to the challenge of a true *nisayon*, a small miracle occurs: it is revealed that we are really not alone, because alone, we could not possibly have succeeded in this seemingly impossible task. So, when we do succeed, we become vehicles for revealing our silent partner in this world: Hashem.

The process of *nisayon* allows us to become vehicles for revealing Hashem's presence in this world. And this is what David was trying to achieve.

(**Rav Dessler** in his *Michtav Me'Eliahu* points out that if a *nisayon* is impossible, you cannot really suggest, much less assume, that you will succeed in it, and this was David's flaw. So he actually needed to *fail* the *nisayon* to learn this, and begin his journey to becoming who and what he was meant to be...)

And this is at the root of having G-d's name associated with a person's name; it means that they have become a vehicle for introducing a certain aspect of G-d to the world.

Maybe this was Yaakov's struggle; perhaps Yaakov was trying to discern who he was meant to be, and how he was to go about becoming the person he was meant to become. When I connect with how I can become a vehicle for revealing the G-d within me, I am really connecting with who I am, and why I am here.

Yaakov is all alone, having just pretended to become Esav in order to gain the blessings meant for Esav. He is told by his mother to pretend he is Esav, and his father Yitzchak doesn't know who he is. So as we learned in the prior parsha, maybe Yaakov is struggling a bit with who he is. And all he really wants is to become a vehicle for revealing Hashem in this world.

This is, perhaps, what "*Lechem Le'echol U'Begeg Lil'bosh*", ("*Bread to eat and clothing to wear*"), is all about.

Bread represents the sum total of all that we do in this world. "*By the sweat of your brow will you eat bread*", G-d tells Adam before he must leave the Garden of Eden. All that you accomplish, and all you achieve, the bread of this earth, will be through hard work; you will have to earn it.

But there are two types of breads, suggests the **Sefat Emet** (Gerer Rebbe at the turn of the nineteenth century). There is bread from the earth - the bread we labor over and produce, as our part of our partnership with G-d. And then there is bread from heaven (represented in the Torah by the Manna) that Hashem gives us, which allows us to do all that we are meant to do in this world.

And this, too, is the meaning of *Begeg*, or the clothing Hashem gives us.

When Yitzchak wants to determine whether the son before him, awaiting his blessing, is Yaakov or Esav, he smells his clothing (27:27) and smells the scent of the field; the same field wherein Esav resides. The *Begeg*, which clothes the man, and protects him from the elements, allows him to achieve that which he wishes to achieve. Clothing is generally associated with a person's identity: different uniforms and modes of clothing allow us to assume much about who a person is, and what he or she is trying to accomplish on this earth. And even Yitzchak, apparently near blindness, still accesses Yaakov's clothing as a means of determining who he is. It is the clothing, which carries the smell of the field, which again represents where a person has been, and therefore a clue towards who and what he is.

Perhaps Yaakov, having received Hashem's presence on his journey, recognizes that this world is a partnership. And in his search to accomplish who he is meant to be, and what he is meant to do, he asks only to be blessed with the vehicles to do this.

When you think about it, this is our greatest and most beautiful request: to be in tune with what we need and are meant to do in this world, and to ask G-d for the tools to be able to achieve those goals.

This story is all about how we begin our journey to accomplish what we are meant to achieve. Last week, Yaakov receives the blessing and earns the birthright, which may mean that Yaakov now knows *who* he is, and *what* he is meant to accomplish.

Now, he has to figure out *how* he is meant to do that. So he needs to receive the vehicles that will allow him to succeed.

He is running from Esav, but life is not meant to be what we are running from; it needs to be about where we are trying to get. There are very often things we need to let go of, or distance ourselves from, but that is usually because they are obstacles in our journey to accomplish the goals we were meant to achieve.

Which is why Yaakov's journey cannot be just about leaving Esav behind; it needs to be about going to find his partner(s), in accomplishing his life's goals.

Yaakov is beginning what will amount, essentially, to the darkest period of his life: for the next twenty-two years he will be in exile, far from the land of his birth, and alone in the land of Lavan. Perhaps Yaakov has never felt more distant from G-d. This does not mean Yaakov does not see G-d's hand in all that is happening around him, but perhaps this moment represents those periods in our life when we feel G-d is more distant from us. Maybe this is why Yaakov lies down to sleep 'because the sun has set'; he is in the period of sunset, when it looks as though darkness is settling over the land, and specifically his land, which means his life.

This too, may be what Yaakov is experiencing in proclaiming that "*G-d is in this place*". Our conviction of G-d may often be based on an intellectual or rational realization, but our *awareness* of G-d is mostly about our experience. And Yaakov, precisely at the darkest moment of his life, when G-d seems most distant, experiences G-d, and recognizes the gift of tapping into his relationship with Hashem in his darkest moments.

The story of Yaakov is also about goals and objectives. Are we really in touch with why we are here, and what we are trying to accomplish in this world? We have many worthy goals that often permeate all that we do. But they are really vehicles to achieving something much larger, and being part of something much greater. And that greater, larger dream is really the objective.

Whether I am building a great business, developing a worthwhile organization, or even pursuing a valuable relationship, all of these are simply means to an end. They are goals; and the question I have to constantly ask myself, is what the objective of all these great goals really is.

Yaakov is exploring his goals, but he is very much aware of his objective. Perhaps Hashem here is reminding him that if the goals are worthy, then Hashem is with you in the accomplishment of your goals as well.

Which leaves us with one last question: How does one accomplish his goals and achieve his objectives? That then, will be the continuation of the story of Yaakov, as he works fourteen bitter years for the life's

partner (his goal) he loves, and yearns to build a nation with, and seven more years becoming the man he is meant to be, albeit in the midst of the dark world of Lavan. And through all the long bitter cold nights, and the sweltering days (see 31:38-42), Yaakov never falters in his mission, knowing Hashem is always with him and before him.

Perhaps this is the secret of that tank driver, trapped in his burning tank. Nothing stands in the way of a person's will; if you know something just has to be, then no obstacle, no matter how great, will stand in the way of a person's determination, and ultimately, if we do our bit, and are willing to take ourselves to the limits, then Hashem will always be there; our silent partner, ready to effect the impossible, and accomplish the undoable, right alongside us. It is Yaakov's will that fuels the accomplishment of his dreams.

May Hashem give us all the strength to tap into who we really are, and what we are meant to do, the wisdom to find the will to achieve all of our dreams, and the joy of knowing we are never alone on the journey....

One last thought:

It is important, even crucial to note the context within which these above comments are made. There is really no way for us to fully comprehend the greatness of the figures of whom we speak. How does one contemplate and learn from the mistakes of a man such as Yaakov, who literally wrestled with an angel of G-d, and to whom Hashem appears, even in dreams? So, in order to be able to learn from the stories of the Torah, we have to view them as almost ordinary men and women, who, like us, had weaknesses and shortcomings. In fact, that is one of the things that is so wonderful about the Torah; it does not whitewash its heroes. The role models of the Jewish people did not walk on water and were not born of immaculate conception; they were human beings, with flaws and mistakes.

That said, it is equally important to remember that at the end of the day, we are still talking about Yaakov and Yitzchak and Rivkah. These were giants on a spiritual and ethical level of human behavior we cannot even begin to comprehend. And while we must momentarily put this aside, in order to relate these stories to ourselves and the lowlier position we find ourselves in, we must always at the same time, remember of whom we speak. This distinction is not only important; without it, the truth of what the Torah has to share with us, would remain forever elusive, and beyond our grasp.

Shabbat Shalom,

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