

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Vayetze)

“War is Hell”; so said General William Tecumseh Sherman in the Civil War. But what exactly makes war ‘hell’? Most people, when hearing or reading about the horrors of war, think of the inevitable destruction, the fear of dying, and even the pressure of making a mistake that costs someone else their life. Indeed, war is full of uncertainty. But sometimes the devil is in the details, and one aspect of combat and military operations that does not get its due is pure exhaustion. It is hard to describe what it feels like to be expected to go on, after two and even three days with no sleep; when all you want to do, more than anything else in the world is curl up on the ground and close your eyes, but you can’t....

I can still remember being in Lebanon lying in an ambush waiting for terrorists that might come out of the darkness at any moment desperately trying to keep my eyes from closing, with the only thing keeping me awake the fear of being asleep and caught by surprise in an attack....

Sleep; why do we need it so? Why did Hashem (G-d) make it such an integral part of the human experience?

There is a fascinating detail in this week’s portion *Vayetze* that is often overlooked:

Yaakov in last week’s portion (Toldot) is described as the “*Ish tam Yoshev Ohalim*”; the dweller of tents. (Bereishit (Genesis) 25:27). Rashi explains that Yaakov is unfamiliar with the ways of the world and is indeed, naïve. He is the apple of his mother’s eye, subsequently needing her help even to deceive his aging father who is practically blind.

In contrast to his brother Esau the hunter, Yaakov seems the innocent and passive son, the ‘mama’s boy’. In fact, our portion begins with Yaakov fleeing his home before the wrath of Esau whom he (really his mother?) has deceived.

And yet, as this week’s portion *Vayetze* unfolds, Yaakov seems to come of age, rolling boulders off of wells, tricking the master con artist Lavan, and winning his bride, his beloved Rachel in the process.

What happened? Rashi also points out (ibid.) that Yaakov’s ‘tents’ are actually the yeshiva tents of Shem and Ever even noting (ibid. 28:9) based on 14 years that seem to be missing in the Torah’s chronology of Yaakov’s life, that Yaakov spent fourteen years studying in the fabled yeshiva (*Yeshivat Shem ve’Ever*) where the select few studied monotheism and existential philosophy with Shem, the legendary son of Noach.

How came the dweller of tents immersed in Torah and living in the intellectual ivory tower (today’s equivalent of Harvard and Yale?), to be the hero and warrior Yaakov has become?

When Yaakov leaves Beer Sheva, according to the Midrash (see Rashi ibid. 29:11) he is accosted by Esau’s son Eliphaz who threatens to kill him until Yaakov succeeds in averting disaster by giving Eliphaz all his worldly possessions. His only solution seems to be to avoid conflict; he takes the passive route, which fits the character of Yaakov we have come to know. After all, when seeking the blessings from his father Yitzchak he does not confront Esau, rather deceiving him with his mother’s help. And yet, a short while later (ibid. 29:1-11), when arriving at the well on the outskirts of Haran where he will encounter his future father in law, the cunning Lavan, suddenly Yaakov becomes larger than life, confronting the shepherds and rolling a massive boulder off the well!

How did this transformation come to be? What did Yaakov experience that seemingly transformed him? What happened in between Yaakov's departure from his childhood home (and midrashically from the house of study) and his arrival at the well in Haran?

Well, actually, he took a nap!

The only real action Yaakov takes between leaving Beer Sheva and arriving in Haran is ... to fall asleep! The Torah, which does not normally pay attention to such details, takes the time to note that Yaakov arrives at... "The place" (ibid. 28: 11) and sleeps there because the sun has set.

This, it seems, is no ordinary nap; Yaakov here has his famous dream of a ladder with angels, and has a deep spiritual encounter with G-d who then promises him that he will one day return to inherit the land (Israel) on which he lies.

Incredibly, though aroused from his slumber (ibid. v. 16), declaring his realization that he is in 'the place of G-d', he actually goes back to sleep! Only in the morning (ibid. v. 18), will he build an altar, subsequently continuing on his journey to Haran and the encounter with the shepherds at the well.

Why is his sleep important? The Torah could easily have told us Yaakov encountered G-d, or even had a dream, from which we would have deduced that he slept. As an example, when G-d first comes to Avraham (ibid. 12:1) there is no mention of whether Avraham was awake or in a dream; a pattern that repeats itself throughout Avraham and Yitzchak's encounters with G-d. (ibid. 15:1; G-d comes to Avraham in 'a vision' but it does not say whether he was awake or asleep...)

So why is it so important here? Why the emphasis on Yaakov sleeping? What indeed is sleep all about?

So how do you stay awake through the long dark hours of an all-night ambush in the middle of Lebanon after a harrowing day of patrols and almost no sleep? I still remember getting the orders over the radio that we were to proceed to a specific site where I was to lay down an ambush as we had received 'highly reliable' intel that terrorists would be coming through the valley below. I was given a new squad from our platoon as we had been on duty for twelve hours, but due to a shortage of officers I could not be relieved.

Our company commander specifically asked me: 'Are you up to this?' 'Of course' was my response; I was an idiot. And I kept telling myself I was an idiot for not begging off the mission as I lay there in the darkness desperately trying every trick I could think of to keep my eyes open. I probably should have told the two soldiers on either side of me in our star formation (a star shaped eight-man ambush laying on a low hill...) to cover for me while I closed my eyes, but as it happened, they were relatively new to the unit and I did not know for sure I could trust them. And what if it hit the fan while I was catnapping? What if I fell into a deep slumber? Would someone get killed because my reaction time was a few seconds slower? Would men have to waste precious seconds in a combat situation shaking me awake? Would I make a mistake as a result and get someone killed? So I kept my eyes open desperately trying to avoid falling asleep.

And then I thought of Ba'hamdoun.

On September 3, 1982, eight IDF soldiers were given orders to man a small outpost on a hill in Ba'hamdoun (in Lebanon). They fell asleep exhausted after too many hours of combat operations and not enough sleep. They were rudely awakened by Haleem Ismaeel, the right-hand man of Abu Jihad who surprised them with a small force of PLO fighters. They surrendered without a fight and all eight men were taken prisoner and held as POW's for over a year until six were released in November 1983. Two of them were only released in 1985 in the Jibril exchange.

The thought of being a POW sent a chill down my spine and my imagination did the rest; I managed to stay awake all night.

I can still remember the welcome sounds of the birds chirping and the signs of first light, as we packed up our gear and made it back to the pickup spot after what in the end, thank G-d, proved to be an uneventful night.

Settling into the back of the armored personnel carrier that transported us the twenty minutes back to base and commanded by a different officer, I could finally trust that it was safe to fall asleep. I did not even remember being woken in the base nor how I got to my cot, but I do remember the ten hours of sleep I finally managed to grab, safe in our base....

Sleep is about many things; it's a healthy reminder that we are not invincible, and it's a chance to recharge and reboot. But it's also about trust. You finally fall asleep when you trust that you, and more importantly that your men or those you love, are safe.

Yaakov is on the road, running from his brother Esau, and in the middle of nowhere he stops and goes to sleep? Jewish tradition points out (tractate *Berachot* 26b; Rashi *ibid.* 28:11) that Yaakov instituted the nightly prayers of *Maariv*. So, before he fell asleep, Yaakov prayed.

Imagine what must have been going through Yaakov's mind: forced to run from home, facing an uncertain future, penniless and close to being destitute; what did he have left? Only trust, that if Hashem had determined he was meant to be in this position, then this was obviously his path towards who he was meant to become.

Interestingly, the Rabbis (Rashi *ibid.*) take note that if the Torah calls this spot "The Place" it is obviously a special place and they conclude it is the place that would eventually be the site of the Temple, which actually makes a lot of sense. Yaakov, heading north from his home in Beer Sheva might well have wanted to stop at *Har HaMoriah* (Mount Moriah today's Temple Mount) where his own father was almost sacrificed, in the binding of Isaac.

In this place Yitzchak demonstrated the ultimate trust, in his father and in G-d, laying himself bare on an altar and essentially declaring that our lives are a gift, our challenge only to struggle with what Hashem wants of us, and how we can best make the world a better place.

Indeed the evening service essentially represents the same idea: that in the darkness of the night, when life is often so unclear, we take comfort in the fact that our loving Father, Hashem, know best, and that somehow things will work out. Our challenge then becomes how we, with whatever Hashem gives us, fit into the picture; what in the end, is our role in the production.

Perhaps Yaakov concludes that it is time for him to take a stand and be a partner in changing the world. And before he takes that step, he reminds himself that it has to be based on a deep trust that he is trying to discern and fulfill Hashem's will, to be a partner in making a better world. Four thousand years later, it is a message we would do well to hear.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman