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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

"Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob. A Pharaoh made his decree only about the males whereas Laban sought to destroy everything." This passage from the Haggadah on Pesach-evidently based on this week's parsha-is extraordinarily difficult to understand.

First, it is a commentary on the phrase in Deuteronomy, Arami oved avi. As the overwhelming majority of commentators point out, the meaning of this phrase is "my father was a wandering Aramean", a reference either to Jacob, who escaped to Aram [=Syria, a reference to Haran where Laban lived], or to Abraham, who left Aram in response to God's call to travel to the land of Canaan. It does not mean "an Aramean [=Laban] tried to destroy my father." Some commentators read it this way, but almost certainly they only do so because of this passage in the Haggadah.

Second, nowhere in the parsha do we find that Laban actually tried to destroy Jacob. He deceived him, tried to exploit him, and chased after him when he fled. As he was about to catch up with Jacob God appeared to him in a dream at night and said: 'Be very careful not to say anything, good or bad, to Jacob.' (Gen. 31: 22). When Laban complains about the fact that Jacob was trying to escape, Jacob replies: "Twenty years now I have worked for you in your estate-fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for some of your flocks. You changed my wages ten times!" (31: 41). All this suggests that Laban behaved outrageously to Jacob, treating him like an unpaid labourer, almost a slave, but not that he tried to "destroy" him- to kill him as Pharaoh tried to kill all male Israelite children.

Third, the Haggadah and the seder service of which it is the text, is about how the Egyptians enslaved and practised slow genocide against the Israelites and how God saved them from slavery and death. Why seek to diminish this whole narrative by saying that, actually, Pharaoh's decree was not that bad, Laban's was worse. This seems to make no sense, either in terms of the central theme of the Haggadah or in relation to the actual facts as recorded in the biblical text. How then are we to understand it?

Perhaps the answer is this. Laban's behaviour is the paradigm of anti-Semites through the ages. It was not so much what Laban did that the Haggadah is referring to, but what his behaviour gave rise to, in century after century. How so?

Laban begins by seeming like a friend. He offers Jacob refuge when he is in flight from Esau who has vowed to kill him. Yet it turns out that his behaviour is less generous than self-interested and calculating. Jacob works for him for seven years for Rachel. Then on the wedding night Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel, so that to marry Rachel, Jacob has to work another seven years. When Joseph is born to Rachel, Jacob tries to leave. Laban protests. Jacob works another six years, and then realises that the situation is untenable. Laban's sons are accusing him of getting rich at Laban's expense. Jacob senses that Laban himself is becoming hostile. Rachel and Leah agree, saying, "he treats us like strangers! He has sold us and spent the money!" (31:14-15).

Jacob realises that there is nothing he can do or say that will persuade Laban to let him leave. He has no choice but to escape. Laban then pursues him, and were it not for God's warning the night before he catches up with him, there is little doubt that he would have forced Jacob to return and live out the rest of his life as his unpaid labourer. As he says to Jacob the next day: "The daughters are my daughters! The sons are my sons! The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" (31: 43). It turns out that everything he had ostensibly given Jacob, in his own mind he had not given at all.

Laban treats Jacob as his property, his slave. He is a non-person. In his eyes Jacob has no rights, no independent existence. He has given Jacob his daughters in marriage but still claims that they and their children belong to him, not Jacob. He has given Jacob an agreement as to the animals that will be his as his wages, yet he still insists that "The flocks are my flocks."

What arouses his anger, his rage, is that Jacob maintains his dignity and independence. Faced with an impossible existence as his father-in-law's slave, Jacob always finds a way of carrying on. Yes he has been cheated of his beloved Rachel, but he works so that he can marry her too. Yes he has been forced to work for nothing, but he uses his superior knowledge of animal husbandry to propose a deal which will allow him to build flocks of his own that will allow him to maintain what is now a large family. Jacob refuses to be defeated. Hemmed in on all sides, he finds a way out. That is Jacob's greatness. His methods are not those

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he would have chosen in other circumstances. He has to outwit an extremely cunning adversary. But Jacob refuses to be defeated, or crushed and demoralized. In a seemingly impossible situation Jacob retains his dignity, independence and freedom. Jacob is no man's slave.

Laban is, in effect, the first antisemite. In age after age, Jews sought refuge from those, like Esau, who sought to kill them. The nations who gave them refuge seemed at first to be benefactors. But they demanded a price. They saw, in Jews, people who would make them rich. Wherever Jews went they brought prosperity to their hosts. Yet they refused to be mere chattels. They refused to be owned. They had their own identity and way of life; they insisted on the basic human right to be free. The host society then eventually turned against them. They claimed that Jews were exploiting them rather than what was in fact the case, that they were exploiting the Jews. And when Jews succeeded, they accused them of theft: "The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" They forgot that Jews had contributed massively to national prosperity. The fact that Jews had salvaged some self-respect, some independence, that they too had prospered, made them not just envious but angry. That was when it became dangerous to be a Jew.

Laban was the first to display this syndrome but not the last. It happened again in Egypt after the death of Joseph. It happened under the Greeks and Romans, the Christian and Muslim empires of the Middle Ages, the European nations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and after the Russian Revolution.

In her fascinating book World on Fire, Amy Chua argues that ethnic hatred will always be directed by the host society against any conspicuously successful minority. All three conditions must be present. [1] The hated group must be a minority or people will fear to attack it. [2] It must be successful or people will not envy it, merely feel contempt for it. [3] It must be conspicuous or people will not notice it. Jews tended to fit all three. That is why they were hated.

And it began with Jacob during his stay with Laban. He was a minority, outnumbered by Laban's family. He was successful, and it was conspicuous: you could see it by looking at his flocks.

What the sages are saying in the Haggadah now becomes clear. Pharaoh was a one-time enemy of the Jews, but Laban exists, in one form or another, in age after age. The syndrome still exists today. As Amy Chua notes, Israel in the context of the Middle East is a conspicuously successful minority. It is a small country, a minority; it is successful and it is conspicuously so. Somehow, in a tiny country with few natural resources, it has outshone its neighbours. The result is envy that becomes anger that becomes hate. Where did it begin? With Laban.

Put this way, we begin to see Jacob in a new light. Jacob stands for minorities and small nations everywhere. Jacob is the refusal to let large powers crush the few, the weak, the refugee. Jacob refuses to define himself as a slave, someone else's property. He maintains his inner dignity and freedom. He contributes to other people's prosperity but he defeats every attempt to be exploited. Jacob is the voice that says: I too am human. I too have rights. I too am free.

If Laban is the eternal paradigm of hatred of conspicuously successful minorities, then Jacob is the eternal paradigm of the human capacity to survive the hatred of others. In this strange way Jacob becomes the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind, the living proof that hate never wins the final victory; freedom does. *© 2011 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

He said,"It was because his name was Jacob that he has outwitted me these two times."(Genesis 27: 36).

This week's portion begins with Jacob's leaving his parents' home in Beersheba and setting out for exile in the home of his uncle, Laban. Our portion will conclude 22 years later, when he begins his journey back. Jacob falls in love with Laban's daughter, Rachel, and 11 of his children are born there. These are the most crucial years of his development, when he is at the height of his physical strength and laying the foundations for future generations.

Strangely, the Jacob whom we see in Vayetsei is quite different from the Jacob we first got to know in Toldot, which we read last week. Jacob as a young boy was a naïve, whole-hearted, and scholarly a dweller in tents; the antithesis of his brother Esau, a wily hunter and devotee of the fields. Jacob is interested in continuing the Abrahamic birthright; Esau is far more moved by material acquisitions. Hence Esau gladly gives up his familial birthright for lentil porridge when he returns, famished, from the hunt.

When Isaac summons Esau to receive the familial blessing and birthright, and Rebekah cajoles Jacob into pretending to be Esau so that he may receive the birthright, a furious and disappointed Esau vows to kill his brother - so Rebekah and Isaac send him to Uncle Laban.

In the beginning of this portion, Jacob dreams the great dream of the Abrahamic covenant; a ladder linking heaven to earth, ascending and descending angels, with the Almighty promising that his descendants will inherit the Land of Israel and will bring blessing to the world. He works seven years for Laban for the hand of Rachel, and after he is deceived under the nuptial canopy, and forced to marry Leah, he agrees to work another seven years for Rachel, with nary a complaint. Indeed, Jacob remains a dweller in (scholarly) tents, rather than an aggressive outdoorsman.

But as the portion of Vayetsei develops, a new Jacob emerges. He puts his mind to animal husbandry, amassing much livestock for his employer, Laban. When his beloved son Joseph is born, he threatens to leave and return to Israel, only agreeing to remain with Laban for a partnership, or at least a share of the profits.

Laban cuts a deal, but Jacob cleverly succeeds in manipulating the livestock so that he emerges with great wealth. The ultimate expression of Jacob's transformation comes in another dream, in which instead of ascending and descending angels, Jacob sees ringed, spotted and speckled sheep (Gen. 30:25-43; 31:10-14). Voila! Jacob has out-Esaued and out-Labaned his brother and his uncle! How and why does this happen? Did Jacob forget about the birthright, and block out the Abrahamic covenant, in order to secure his own version of lentil soup?

I believe the issue is far more complex, and harks back to Abraham, and the confused legacy he bequeathed to his sons. Our children watch us carefully to perceive our deepest values and desires. They learn not from what we say so much as from how we act and whom we admire. Abraham was chosen by God to be a blessing to the world because he discovered ethical monotheism, and would teach succeeding generations compassionate righteousness and moral justice (Gen. 18:18,19). This is the familial birthright and Abrahamic covenant.

But Abraham was also a wealthy cattleman, military hero and highly respected leader. He had a first-born son, Ishmael, who was an aggressive conqueror, who feared no man. He also had the religious, righteous and introspective Isaac. Abraham is naturally drawn to this wild and ebullient firstborn, and when God informs him of the impending birth of Isaac - Abraham suggests "Would that Ishmael walk before You." God blesses Ishmael at Beer-lahai-roi, and Isaac remains obsessed by this place all his life; he is constantly going back and forth from there (Gen. 24:62). Despite the fact that God tells Abraham "through Isaac shall your seed be called," Isaac lived under the dark suspicion that his father really preferred Ishmael, and hoped that the akeda would completely remove him, Isaac, from the scene.

In a similar fashion, the more passive Isaac was drawn to the more aggressive Esau, which is why he initially summons Esau for the birthright and the blessings. Jacob desperately yearns for his father's love - and perhaps for that reason is quick to heed his mother's advice. After all, the Abrahamic legacy includes material success, military prowess and aggressive leadership. Thus he decides to assume not only the garb but also the inner characteristics of Esau. In the aftermath of his deception, he indeed becomes Esau!

In time, Jacob understands that while the voice of Jacob may require the hands of Esau, the true essence of Jacob/Israel must remain the God of compassionate righteousness and moral justice, bringing true blessing to the world. Jacob will yet turn into Israel and reclaim his legacy of the Abrahamic covenant as a whole-hearted man and scholarly dweller in tents, but he will also have learned the art of conquest and mastery.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The story of our father Yaakov as portrayed in this week's parsha was always seen by the commentators to Torah as being the matrix for the future events and trials of the Jewish people in their long centuries of exile and subjugation amongst the nations of the world. In truth the first word of the parsha - vayetzei - illustrates much of Jewish history in the Exile. Jews are constantly on the move, restless and nervous.

Even when Jews find themselves seemingly comfortably ensconced within the general society, they are notoriously uneasy and dissatisfied. And eventually, this unease is proved to have been prescient, for all of the places of exile have closed down and the Jews have been forced to move on and find a new home for themselves.

Jews were in Spain for eight hundred years; in Central and Eastern Europe for almost one thousand years but eventually their stay in those areas came to an end. Vayeitzei has haunted Jewish existence for millennia. The ground under Jewish feet was always unsure and uncertainty was the omnipresent condition of Jewish life.

Only in the Land of Israel did the Lord promise us that we would live in a place of menucha v'nachala - secure rest and permanent inheritance. Yet even there we were forced out of the country twice and in fact most of Jewish history has occurred outside of the Land of Israel. And even now, when the Jews have returned in their millions to their homeland, the sense of impermanence and restlessness inculcated within us over the ages of exile remains a striking characteristic of our existence as a people.

It is interesting to note that the rabbis of the Mishna listed ten tests and challenges that our father

Avraham faced and overcame in his lifetime. They made no such list nor did they mention explicitly the many tests and challenges that our father Yaakov faced. In this week's parsha alone, Yaakov complains that Lavan cheated him ten times regarding his wages. The incident of the substitution of Leah for Rachel, Rachel's barrenness and her tragic death, the necessity to flee from his home because of his brother Eisav, and the further necessity to flee from the house of Lavan are but some of the factors and occurrences that could be listed if we were to record Yaakov's challenges in life.

And over the next few parshiyot of the Torah, other challenges, tests and seeming tragedies in the life of Yaakov will be listed and described to us. None of the serenity that was apparent in the life of Avraham, in spite of his ten tests, was present in the life of Yaakov. Even when he wished to live in security and peace those ideals were never achieved.

That is the source of our restlessness and uncertainty in the Exile. Would that we would be able to shed those feelings here in Israel when he have finally arrived at our menucha v'nachala! I think that once we realize that our future here in our land is God's gift to us, we will emerge triumphant from this parsha of Vayeitzei in Jewish history and life.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"And Leah became pregnant and she gave birth to a son, and she named him R'uvain, for she said, 'because G-d has seen my shame; now my husband will love me" (B'raishis 29:32). The reason Leah named her first son R'uvain is stated explicitly in the Torah: Leah was the "other wife," and she was hoping that being the mother of Yaakov's child would improve her status. Yet, the Talmud (B'rachos 7b) provides a different reason why Leah gave him the name R'uvain: "Look ("r'u") at the difference between my son ("vain") and my father-in-law's son. As for my father-in-law's son (referring to Eisav), even though he sold his birthright willingly (B'raishis 25:33), see what is written about him-'and Eisav hated Yaakov' (27:41) and 'he tricked me twice' (27:36, with Eisav claiming that Yaakov's acquisition of the birthright was done through deception rather than with his full knowledge and participation). My son, however, even though the birthright was taken from him against his will, as it says (D"H I 5:1), 'and when he profaned his father's bed his birthright was given to the sons of Yosef,' he nevertheless did not become jealous of him, as it says (B'raishis 37:21), 'and R'uvain heard [what his brothers were planning to do to Yosef] and he saved him from their hands."

The questions are rather obvious. First of all, how could the Talmud suggest an alternate reason for R'uvain's name if the Torah explicitly tells us why Leah gave him that name? Why look for a different reason if the reason is already stated? Additionally, how could Leah have named R'uvain based on events that are years from happening? Even if Leah knew there would eventually be 12 Tribes (see Rashi on 29:34 and on B'rachos 7b, d"h Ha'pa'am), did she know-during the first year of her (and Rachel's) marriage-that her sister wouldn't be able to have children right away, would therefore give her maidservant to Yaakov as an additional wife, and would die at a young age, thus setting the stage for R'uvain to "profane his father's bed?" Did she know that the brothers would consider fratricide, thus necessitating R'uvain to step up and prevent it? Why didn't she warn Yaakov about what was happening (or going to happen)? [Although we do find other instances where a child is named based on future events, it is never as specific, and could easily be understood as the parents expressing their hopes (such as Noach bringing comfort, see B'raishis 5:29) or assessing the situation and predicting what will happen (see 10:25, where Peleg's father could have seen what Nimrod was trying to do and realized that there would have to be multiple cultures rather than one forced culture). Even if there was prophecy involved (see Rashi on 10:25), it was never as specific as the Talmud seems to be saying Leah's was.] The specifics themselves are not hinted to in the name "R'uvain." Although the word "son" is in there (as opposed to any hint of Leah's "shame" or "suffering"), where in R'uvain's name is there any indication that Leah was comparing her newborn son to her brother-in-law in any way, let alone how each reacted regarding their lost birthright?

The most common explanation for the need to suggest a reason other than the one stated in the Torah (see Vilna Gaon, Radal on Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer 36, and Nachalas Yaakov and Maskil L'Dovid on Rashi; see also Moshav Z'kaynim) is based on whether the reason for the name is stated before or after the name itself. For all of Yaakov's other children (especially those of Leah; Yosef has a reason given both before and after), the reason for the name is stated first, then the name. Since R'uvain's name is given first, then the reason, the Talmud realized that there must be another, unpublicized reason why Leah named him R'uvain. This is supported by the expression "for she said," which implies that she gave one explanation publicly, while having a different reason that she was unwilling to share.

The Talmud isn't the only source that provides an additional reason for R'uvain's name. Midrash HaGadol makes three suggestions, the second of which is the same as the Talmud's. The third one has a similar theme, with Leah saying, "look at the difference between my son and my father-in-law's son

(Eisav); my father-in-law's son is a thief and an extortionist, he has every fault, whereas my son uses all of his resources to avoid stealing, as it says, 'and R'uvain went during the days of the wheat harvest' (when there was plenty of grain to bring back home, yet he brought back something that was ownerless instead, see Rashi on 30:14). Here too, Leah is comparing her son to Eisav, using an event that won't occur for years.

The first suggestion expands upon the reason given in B'raishis Rabbah (71:3), which understands the name "R'uvain" to mean "see [this] son amongst the sons," adding "not tall and not short, not light and not dark." Although this suggestion does not share the issues of the other two (which base the name on future events, without any hint to the message behind the events being in the name itself), it is still quite puzzling. What kind of praise is it to just be "one of the boys," with no extra-ordinary features?

Leah had been expecting to marry Eisav, which upset her greatly (see Rashi on 29:17). Part of her concern had to be that if Eisav was her husband, then he would be the father of her children. Even after marrying Yaakov, Leah was still concerned about her children (see Chidushay Gaonim, a commentary on Ein Yaakov). After all, Avraham's oldest son (Yishmael) wasn't a model child. Neither was Yitzchak's. Would her children, specifically her oldest child-who was Yaakov's eldest son too-also be unworthy of being part of the Chosen People? Or would he be the oldest of the 12 Tribes of Israel. Because of this concern, Leah was committed to making sure her children deserved to be part of the Nation of Israel. Therefore, when she gave birth to her first son, she gave him a name that reflected this commitment, and would be serve as a constant reminder of what was at stake. "Look at my son, he is going to be one of the sons of Yaakov, one of the Children of Israel." Unlike Eisav, who was physically different (see 25:25), reflecting the "zuhama" (spiritual impurities) that Yitzchok still had from his ancestors that had to be cleansed from him in order to allow Yaakov to be completely pure, R'uvain looked like a normal child; not too big, not too small, not too red, not too white, something that was not lost on a mother who was afraid that her son would be "different" from Yaakov's other sons.

The most important thing, of course, was how her son would behave, and this was reflected in the name she gave him too, as she was determined not to let him grow up to be anything like Eisav. Not that she had to know the specifics of what her son would do years from now so that she could compare it directly with what Eisav had done. Just as Lemech was hoping that his son Noach would bring comfort to the world without necessarily knowing that he would, Leah was hoping/praying that her son would be completely different from Eisav without knowing for sure that he would. We know that she got what she was hoping for, and we can point to specific things that highlight how different R'uvain was from Eisav (see Ben Yehoyada; baruch she'kivant-sort of), but she didn't have to know the specifics in order to express how she hoped things would turn out.

Yet, despite how noble her hopes were, she couldn't share them with anybody. There was already enough tension between Yaakov and Eisav; how would Eisav react if he found out that Yaakov's oldest son was named "Not Like Eisav?" What kind of relationship could Leah expect to have with her father-in-law, Yitzchok, if the name she gave her oldest son compared her son to his? Did Yitzchok need further reminding that his oldest son, the one he loved so much, had failed spiritually? Therefore, although Leah named her son "R'uvain" to reflect her desire and commitment that he wouldn't turn out like Eisav, she didn't share that reason with everybody. Rather, she said that the reason she had named him R'uvain was because G-d had seen her shame, and given her a son. That may have also been true, but it wasn't the only reason, or the main reason.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

How is it possible that Yaakov (Jacob) didn't know that he spent his wedding night with Leah rather than Rachel? The text says, "and it came to pass in the morning and behold it was Leah." (Genesis 29:25)

Some commentators suggest that this reveals the extraordinary modesty of Yaakov and Leah-all through the night, they did not see or even speak to each other. (Radak)

The Talmud explains that Yaakov could have been fooled in another way. Suspecting that Lavan (Laban, Leah and Rachel's father) would switch Leah for Rachel, Yaakov gave Rachel signs through which she could identify herself to him. When at the last moment, Lavan exchanged Leah for Rachel, Rachel feared Leah would be embarrassed, and gave her sister the special signs. (Megillah 13b)

But all this leads to another question. If in fact Yaakov didn't know it was Leah, how could the marriage have been legitimate? Isn't this a classic case of an agreement which is considered null and void because of faulty assumptions, known as mekah ta'ut?

Perhaps it can be said that Yaakov's surprise came that evening, yet he still accepted Leah as his wife. When the text indicates that on the next morning "behold, it was Leah," it is the community that learned of the switch.

Outside of these attempts to understand Yaakov being fooled, there is a kabbalistic approach. This approach teaches something fundamental about love. Rachel represents the woman Yaakov wished to marry. But it is often the case that once married, we find elements in our spouse's personality of which we were

previously unaware. These unknown factors are represented by Leah. In any relationship, there will be pieces of our partner's personality that take us by surprise.

These elements may be distasteful. In such a case, the challenge is to make peace with that side of our beloved and realize that love means accepting the whole person. But, it can be that this hidden side is a positive one that never formerly surfaced. These traits have the capacity to add vibrancy and a new excitement to the relationship. At times, these new qualities can even turn out to be exactly what was always needed. In the words of Rabbi David Aaron, "Leah was not Jacob's bride of choice, but she was actually a great source of blessing to him..." (Endless Light, p. 38).

"Ve-hineh hi Leah" teaches that in every relationship there will always be an element of surprise, the element that we don't consciously choose, the element represented by Leah.

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RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

In Parshas Vayetzei, Yaakov took "from the rocks of the place". Rav Yehuda teaches in the Medrash that Yaakov took 12 stones, symbolic of the Almighty's decree that the Jewish people would be founded based on a family consisting of 12 Tribes. Yaakov said to himself, "My grandfather Avraham was not able to fulfill this decree; my father Yitzchak was not able to fulfill this decree. If these 12 stones that I am placing under my head will merge into a single stone, I will take it as a Divine Sign that I will be able to fulfill this decree." In the morning, when Yaakov saw that the 12 stones had indeed merged into one, he knew that he would be the progenitor of a single nation emerging from a family of 12 sons.

Rav Simcha Schepps, z"l, asks a question on this incident. It would have been more logical to request a symbolic sign that he would be the father of a 12 tribe nation by taking a single stone and having it turn into 12 stones by the next morning. Yaakov's symbolism seems counter-intuitive. Twelve stones joining to form one stone appears to symbolize just the reverse of the sign he was looking for.

Rav Simcha Schepps answers his question by citing a second Medrash. When G-d told Avraham "I will make you into a great nation" [Bereshis 12:2] Avraham asked Him (according to the Medrash) "but you already have 70 nations who are descended from Noach, what will be so special about another nation?" The Almighty answered Avraham-"The nation that will descend from you is the nation about whom it will be said "For which is such a great nation?" (ki mi goy gadol) [Devorim 4:7] -- that is the nation that will emerge from you."

What is the meaning of "goy gadol" (literally, big nation)? The biggest "goy gadol" in the world today is the Chinese. There are more Chinese in the world than any other people. The second largest nationality is the Indians. There are approximately 12 million Jews in the world. Never have we ever been the "goy gadol". So what is the interpretation of the aforementioned Medrash? What is the nature of this peculiar dialog between Avraham and the Almighty?

The answer is that there is a special connotation to the world "gadol". "Gadol" does not mean 'big'as in numerically large. Rav Dessler points out that the interpretation of "gadol" is revealed to us by its first appearance in the Torah [Bereshis 1:16] "es haMaor haGadol" (the great light, referring to the sun). "Gadol" means the ability to give to others. The sun is not called "gadol" because it is so big. The sun is called "gadol" because it provides light and heat for the entire universe.

Likewise, when Moshe Rabbeinu tells G-d "You have begun to show "Gadlecha" to your servant" [Devorim 3:24] what does "Gadlecha" mean? Rashi explains in Parshas V'Etchanan "this refers to the Attribute of your Goodness" (zu midas Tuvecha). The Almighty is the ultimate Giver.

Similarly, when we praise G-d in Shmoneh Esrei in the expression "haKel haGadol" the word Gadol does not mean "big", it means He is the Master of Kindness and Goodness. Another similarity is the meaning of "and Moshe became a Gadol and went out to see his brethren's suffering" [Shmos 2:11]. Since Moshe was a "gadol" he wanted to become aware first hand of how his brethren were suffering and see how he might be able to help them.

The technical definition of "gadol" is the capacity to do for others, to help others, to be concerned about others. When we talk about an "Adam Gadol" (a person who is a gadol), we are not speaking merely about erudition. It is not merely defining someone who knows the entire Torah. Every Gadol who we can think of was a person that was always concerned about the community.

That is the definition of a Gadol.

Now we understand the dialog between Avraham and G-d. There are plenty of nations in the world. There are 2 billion Chinese and a billion Indians. However, G-d promised Avraham that he would make him into a nation that is "gadol", meaning a nation of

people that care about others and have the capacity to give.

So too Yaakov Avinu says, "If I take 12 stones and they become one, this symbolizes a nation that has unity amongst themselves." If there is unity between people (achdus), the members of this nation are not just concerned about themselves but they are concerned about others as well. When people are only into themselves, there is disunity. There is no achdus.

Yaakov knew that the appropriate sign that he would be the progenitor of the "Goy Gadol" promised to Avraham is for him to take 12 stones that would turn into one, demonstrating this property of unity and the capacity for caring for one another.

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

If the image of Jacob's ladder was not the most spectacular prophetic vision ever, it certainly comes close. In his dream, Jacob saw a ladder planted firmly on the ground yet reaching all the way into the heavens, and as he watched in utter fascination, he saw angels ascending and descending the ladder.

Then he wakes up, and lo and behold, it was all a dream. Jacob is shaken, and he reacts rather strangely. How can it be, he laments, that I am in the presence of the Almighty and did not even know it? No expressions of transcendent joy. No ecstatic expansion of the mind as a result of his sublime prophecy. Just chagrin. Why?

Our Sages tell us that he was mortified that he had actually slept in such a holy place. But even this does not fully answer the question. After all, what is so terrible about sleeping on hallowed ground? And if it was really such a terrible transgression, why did the Almighty reward him with this prophetic dream?

The commentators explain that Jacob was disappointed because he had missed an extraordinary opportunity. Had he known that he stood on hallowed ground, had he known he was actually standing in the presence of the Almighty, he would have concentrated on having an even more intense prophetic encounter with Him. But he had been completely oblivious to his surroundings. Indeed, he had gone to sleep!

He could have risen to incredible spiritual levels. He could have attained the most profound prophetic insights. He could have penetrated the deepest secrets of the universe. But he went to sleep. He did have a phenomenal prophetic vision in his dream, but that was where it stopped. So much potential unfulfilled. Such a great opportunity lost. It is little wonder that Jacob awoke disappointed.

A young man came to study in the academy of a great sage. He listened to the sage expound his thoughts and was amazed at their profound wisdom. He bent over the revered texts and pored over every single words in awe. A feeling of humility swept through his soul.

"Oh, what a nothing I am," he muttered under his breath. "What a miserable ignorant nothing."

The sage overheard his words and called him closer.

"Young man," he said, "why do you consider yourself a nothing?"

"Because I am weak, a salve to my physical needs and desires." "I see. And why did you come here?"

"To learn from you."

"If you wish to stay here and be successful," said the sage, "then you cannot consider yourself a nothing. After all, if you are truly nothing, how can you possibly retain wisdom? No, my young friend. Humility is a very good trait, but know your own worth. Know the sublimity of your soul and give it what it deserves."

In our own lives, we sometimes fall asleep on hallowed ground. Driven down by the pressures of everyday life, we can easily fall into the trap of deprecating our own worth. We consider our shortcomings and our failures, and we tell ourselves we have no business setting our sights very high. But this is a serious mistake. Never sell yourself short. You are hallowed ground. You possess a holy soul that is a spark of the divine. You are endowed with incredible spiritual treasures and resources. You have a kind nature and a generous spirit. Most important of all, you are a descendant of the patriarchs, a custodian of the holy Torah here on this world. Your potential is incalculable. You have it within your grasp to reach for the sublime. Don't fall asleep on the job. Don't wake up disappointed after it is too late. Open your eyes and experience the exhilaration of fulfillment.

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week we read the parsha of Va'yaitzay. "Va'yaitzay Yaakov mi'Beer sheva va'yailech Charanah {And Yaakov went out from Beer Sheva and went to Charan}. [28:10]"

A person going from point 'A' to point 'B' is either trying to get away from point 'A' (va'yaitzay-and he went out) or is trying to get to point 'B' (va'yailech-and he went to). In the case of Yaakov, he was doing both. Due to Esav's murderous intentions, Yaakov needed to leave Beer Sheva. Additionally, Yitzchak had commanded Yaakov to go to his uncle Lavan's house in Charan in order to find a wife. He therefore needed to go Charan.

"And he came to the place... [28:11]" Rather ambiguous. What place was this? Rashi explains that this was the place where the Temple would eventually be built. The Kli Yakar adds that there was no need for the Torah to specify. This was simply 'the place.' The

physical foundation of the world as creation began there and the spiritual foundation of the world as all spiritual influences flow through there.

"The sun had set..." The Kli Yakar continues: Yaakov saw that the sun had set suddenly before its normal time. Generations later, the windows of the Temple built at that place were made narrow on the inside and wide on the outside. It didn't need light from the sun-its glow illuminated the world. Yaakov noticed that the sun paled when he reached there-it set prematurely. He realized that this was the place.

"And he took stones from that place and placed them by his head and he slept there. [28:11]" Rashi explains that Yaakov was afraid of wild animals. In order to quell this fear, he placed stones around his head for protection.

Any campers out there? Anyone ever see that in the Boy Scout manuals?

I could just imagine a pack of bears approaching. "Hey, looks like supper!"

"No way! We can't get anywhere near him. He's got rocks around his head!"

Let's try to understand the protection that those rocks afforded Yaakov.

The Saba of Kelem explains that tzaddikim {the righteous} live with the concept that everything that goes on around us is miraculous. There really is no such thing as teva {nature}. Every event of this world bears the mark of the clear, unmistakable hand of Hashem, though it's often veiled behind the cloak of what we call nature.

Nevertheless, one can't rely on those miracles. One must do all that is within their ability and only then trust that Hashem will pick up from that point.

Yaakov was not afraid of animals! He was afraid that he had not yet done all that he was able in order to minimize the miracle of Hashem's protecting him. The animals themselves are powerless. Hashem is omnipotent. If I haven't done what I can, I have Hashem to fear. Hashem, and Hashem alone. Yaakov was therefore afraid.

He placed rocks around his head. Almost futile in warding off beasts but nevertheless accomplishing the minimizing of the miracle. At that point he was no longer afraid. He went to sleep.

Rav Sholom Shwadron zt"l expounds on this. Imagine if we were on a safari and were separated from our guide and group. Alone and unprotected in the African jungle with darkness stealthily approaching. Surrounded by the roars of lions and the grunts and calls of other beasts we'd try to focus our thoughts on trusting in Hashem's providence. Even if we'd succeed, if we'd look down at our body we'd see that we're trembling. Sleep?! Fahgedaboudit!

Yet, Yaakov was perfectly calm. There was no longer any cause for fear. He'd done what he could. He was now in the hands of his Creator. Time to turn in...He went to sleep...

We find a similar situation with the prophet Yonah {Jonah}. Yonah boarded a ship on its way to Tarshish in order to be exempted from delivering his prophecy to Ninveh. He was sure that the gentile inhabitants of Ninveh would all repent when he'd foretell of the impending destruction. This would reflect negatively on Bnei Yisroel {the Children Of Israel} who hadn't responded so quickly to the warnings that the prophets had delivered to them. He therefore tried to flee to Tarshish.

A fierce storm struck and threatened to sink the ship. All of the passengers were up on deck, frantically trying to lighten the ship by throwing excess belongings overboard while screaming out to their gods to save them.

Meanwhile, Yonah, cool, calm and collected, had gone down to the lower chamber of the ship to go to sleep. Not a light, fitful doze but rather a good, deep slumber. He was as composed and relaxed as if he would be going to sleep in his house.

The water was perfectly calm besides the area immediately around the ship where this violent storm was raging. The sailors realized that this was a supernatural situation and drew lots to determine which passenger was the cause of this strange phenomenon. The lots fell upon Yonah.

"Against who have you sinned that this evil is befalling us? What is your profession? Where are you from? What is your land? What type of nation are you from?"

They couldn't fathom how a person could sleep through such a predicament. What type of person are you? What type of nation are you from? How do you have no fear?

Yonah explained in one sentence. "I am a Jew and I fear Hashem, the G-d of the Heavens, who created the sea and the dry land." When one fears Hashem, there is no reason to fear the sea any more than dry land.

As Yaakov slept he dreamt and saw a ladder that stood on the ground with its head reaching up to the heavens. The Nefesh HaChaim explains that this vision was representative of man. He walks this physical earth while his stature actually extends into the heavenly realm.

Sleeping soundly while the ship is being tossed. Arranging rocks trusting that Hashem will then keep the beasts at bay.

Their feet were on this earth but their heads reached the heavens.

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