

Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series
Portion of Vayeishev

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Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Yad Avraham Institute
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B"H

Vayeishev

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Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*

Dean

1. The Subtleties of Negative Influences

The Torah states that after Yaakov had encountered his brother Esav, **“Yaakov arrived complete/intact at the city of Shechem...”** Rashi explains, “The term ‘complete (*shaleim*)’ refers to the fact that Yaakov was intact financially, physically and in his Torah. Although Yaakov had sent a valuable gift to Esav, it did not detract from his financial standing in any way.” After Yaakov had encountered and struggled with the archangel of Esav, who had attempted to destroy him and did not succeed; however, he had sustained an injury to his hip during their struggle. The Torah tells us that soon after he had passed through a location called Peniel, G’d caused the sun to radiate and heal Yaakov’s injury. Seemingly, the Torah should have stated immediately after he was healed that “Yaakov arrived complete (*shaleim*)” prior to his encounter with Esav. Why did the Torah delay informing us of Yaakov’s complete state until after his meeting with Esav, his brother?

The Torah states at the beginning of the portion of Vayishlach, **“To my lord, to Esav so said your servant Yaakov: I have sojourned with Lavan and lingered until now (*im Lavan gartie*.)”** Rashi cites the Midrash, which interprets **“*im Lavan gartie* – I have sojourned with Lavan”** to mean “I observed the 613 mitzvos of the Torah, although I was in the house of Lavan. The word **“*gartie*”** is numerically equivalent of **“*taryag*,”** which are the 613 mitzvos of the Torah. Yaakov was telling Esav that although he had lived for a period of twenty years in the home and community of his evil father-in-law, Lavan, his spirituality had not been diminished as much as an iota. When Yaakov encountered his brother Esav, he had come face to face with an embodiment and personification of evil. One would think that although his meeting with Esav was brief and not for an extended period of time, being exposed to this level of evil is bound to diminish and affect even someone of Yaakov’s dimension of spirituality. In fact, there is a law that one is not permitted to gaze upon the face of an evil person (*rasha*). The Midrash tells us that one of the reasons Yitzchak became blind in his old age

was because he had gazed upon the face of his son Esav, who was the epitome of evil. The Torah therefore attests to the fact that although Yaakov had bowed many times before Esav, which is an act of subordination and subservience, he was not negatively affected by this gesture to any degree. Therefore, the Torah only reveals the fact that he was complete after the meeting with his brother Esav. How was Yaakov able to remain unscathed by his encounter with Esav?

Chazal tell us that the angel that had battled with Yaakov was the archangel of Esav. He was unable to defeat Yaakov, despite the fact that it was an angel pitted against a mere mortal Sferno explains, “It was because Yaakov was attached to G’d, the blessed One, continuously in his thought and speech.” Because he had committed every aspect and moment of his being to G’d, he could not be defeated even by an angel. Reb Chaim of Volozhin states in his work, *Nefesh HaChaim*, that if one truly internalizes the fact that “there is nothing (other than G’d) Himself,” that nothing could affect a person unless G’d wants it to be so, then one will remain unaffected. Yaakov’s level of attachment surpassed this concept. Although Yaakov had encountered Esav and interacted with him on many levels, since every aspect of his existence was dedicated to G’d to guarantee that there should be a Jewish people, he was not diminished by his encounter with Esav.

The Torah states in the Portion of Vayeitzei, **“Yaakov departed from Beer-sheva and went toward Charan.”** Why is it important for the Torah to tell us the location from where Yaakov had departed? Rashi cites the Midrash which explains, “When a tzaddik leaves a location its beauty, glory, and splendor of that location leaves with him.” Although Yitzchak, our Patriarch and Rivka, our Matriarch, remained in Beer-sheva, Yaakov’s departure caused a diminishment of that location. This is a testament to the degree of holiness that Yaakov possessed. Yaakov’s presence in Beer-sheva elevated and caused it to assume a spiritual dimension. Limitation does not exist within the context of spirituality. Although Yaakov was a

physical being, his essence was spiritual, and thus not subject to the limitations of physical existence.

The Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers tells us that one of the miracles that took place on the Temple Mount was that when the Jewish people worshipped in the sanctuary, they were pressed against one another. However, when they heard the pronouncement of the Holy Name of G'd they prostrated themselves on the ground and there was sufficient room for them to do so. How was this possible? Although the sanctuary was a physical location, circumscribed by limits, because its value was spiritual, it had an unlimited capacity.

The encounter with Esav had no consequence to Yaakov because he functioned as a spiritual being and thus remained unaffected. When the Jewish people descended to Egypt, although it was a location of the most intense level of spiritual impurity, Yaakov's presence generated a level of spirituality which insulated his family from any level of negative influence. Although they were physically located in Egypt and engulfed by the Egyptian culture and values, his presence created an insular environment for the Jewish people. His exceptional dimension of spirituality was rooted in who he was, **"the perfect man who dwelt in the tent (of Torah)."**

2. The Exceptional Quality of Rachel, Our Matriarch

The Midrash states, "Whenever the Torah uses the expression 'and he settled' it is an expression of anguish and pain." When Yaakov had seen Esav and his princes, he had become frightened. He had said, 'How is it possible to stand up for me to stand up against them?' G'd said to him, 'One spark of yours will consume them, this being Yosef.' As it states in the verse, The house of Yaakov will be flame. The house of Esav shall be straw, and they will be consumed by them.' Therefore the Torah states, 'And Yaakov settled' and follows it with 'these are the progeny of Yaakov, Yosef.' Meaning, Yosef is the remedy to the concern of Yaakov."

The Torah states in the Portion of Vayeitzei, **"...When Rachel had given birth to Yosef, Yaakov said to Lavan, 'Grant me leave that I may go to my place and to my land...But Lavan said to him, '...I have learned by divination that Hashem has blessed me on account of you...Specify your wage to me and I will give it...'"** Why did Yaakov decide to leave the house of Lavan only after the birth of Yosef? Rashi cites the Midrash which explains that Rachel had given birth to the

antagonist of Esav, who is Yosef. As the Midrash states, "A fire without a flame cannot affect something that is at a distance. However when Yosef was born, because he was the extension of his father Yaakov, who is compared to fire, he would be able to consume Esav, who is compared to straw." At the moment Yosef was born, Yaakov understood that it was the appropriate time to return to the Land, where he could encounter Esav.

The Midrash explains the destruction of Esav with allegory: "Camels laden with flax were entering to be attended to by the blacksmith. The blacksmith wondered how could camels laden with such an abundance of flax enter into his workplace? An individual standing close had said in a joking manner, 'It should be no problem, one spark from your bellows will consume all the flax and the camels will be able to enter.'" Identically the spark will be emitted by Yosef and consume Esav and his princes.

Why does the Midrash use flax the material that will be consumed by Yosef? The Midrash asks, "Why were the Patriarchs barren? It is because G'd desires the prayers of the righteous." By bringing difficult tests upon the righteous, G'd allows them to advance themselves spiritually in order to actualize their potential. Chazal explain that the Midrash uses the example of flax to allude to the Patriarchs. If superior quality flax is pounded, it will reveal its quality. However inferior quality flax will turn to dust when it is pounded. G'd, brought difficult tests upon the Patriarchs because through them, they were able to advance and achieve spiritual perfection. This is the equivalent of pounding the superior quality flax. However, if G'd were to test the ordinary person in a similar vein, he would be destroyed, as the inferior flax turns to dust when it is pounded.

The verse states, "Yaakov became frightened from Esav and his princes..." Why was Yaakov frightened by Esav and his princes at this moment, if he had already understood after the birth of Yosef that he had the ability to consume him? When Yaakov was in the house of Lavan, Esav did not have princes. However, over the period of time that Yaakov remained in the community of Lavan, the representation of Esav increased and advanced itself in the world and thus became something of a formidable dimension. Yaakov thought that Yosef had the ability to consume the representation of Esav, as an individual and a family; however, when Yaakov realized that he had increase into princes and kingdoms, he had become frightened. G'd therefore reassured Yaakov that Yosef's representation could not only consume Esav and his family, but also all that is represented by the existence of Edom. Meaning, all who emanated from Esav will be

destroyed through Yosef. What is the power of Yosef over Edom?

We see a demonstration of the inner strength of Yosef, when Esav had approached Yaakov and his family. Yosef had stood in front of his mother Rachel in order to protect her from Esav. Although Esav would notice Yosef's action, and may have taken it as an affront to him, Yosef was not concerned or frightened. It was Yaakov who bowed to Esav seven times in order to find favor in his eyes. In contrast, Yosef stood confidently against Esav. Rashi cites Chazal who state, "Yosef had said, 'My mother is an exceptionally beautiful woman, and perhaps the eye of that evil man will gaze upon the beauty of my mother. Therefore, I will block his view so that he will not be able to gaze upon her. Because Yosef did not allow the eye of that evil person, Esav to come upon his mother, he merited to receive from his father Yaakov the special blessing of *'alei aayin* - You are above the eye." Meaning, Yosef was not susceptible to the evil eye- measure for measure. From where did Yosef acquire the inner strength to stand strongly in the presence of Esav? It was because his essence had the ability to consume any representation of Esav.

The Gemara in Tractate Bava Basra states, "The progeny of Esav could only fall into the hands of the progeny of Rachel." Esav was the embodiment of pure physicality. He is referred to by the Torah as "**The hunter, the man of the field.**" Yosef, the son of Rachel had possessed an exceptional level of beauty and genius. Although he could have pursued and favored material aspirations, he like his mother chose to consecrate his physicality for the service of G'd. Therefore, Rachel's progeny have the unique ability to dominate and subordinate the physical, which is the personification of Esav and his descendants.

3. The Light that was Extracted from Darkness

The Torah tells us that after Yosef's brothers had sold him into slavery they had presented their father Yaakov with his tunic saturated with blood. Yaakov said, "**My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him!...Then Yaakov rent his garments...and said, 'For I will go down to the grave mourning for my son.'**" For twenty-two years, Yaakov grieved and wept over the loss of his son Yosef. Why was Yaakov's mourning so profound, that he needed grieve for Yosef his entire life? Seemingly, Yaakov grieved to such a degree because he had lost his most special and beloved son. Rashi cites Chazal who

explain that he understood through tradition that was passed down to him that if any of his children were to pass away during his lifetime, it would be an indication that he had failed in his capacity as the Patriarch of the Jewish people. He would therefore be subject to the depths of *geheimom* to atone for his serious failing. Yaakov wept because he believed that he had failed and thus there would be no Jewish people.

Sforno explains that Yosef's brothers had mistakenly believed that he was a pursuer (*rodeif*). His intent of tale bearing to their father was to ultimately cause Yaakov to curse his children for their evil behavior. Yaakov's curse was the equivalent of death. They therefore believed that it was imperative to their own survival that Yosef be killed.

The Torah states that when Yosef's brothers were about to kill him Reuvain interceded by saying, "**Shed no blood! Throw him into this pit in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him!**" Sforno explains, "If the brothers had killed Yosef as they had initially intended, because of their hatred towards him, their impulsive reaction would have brought about an inequity that could never be corrected. This can also happen to a righteous person, as we find regarding the incident of Reuvain and Bilhah (After the passing of Rachel, Yaakov has placed his bed in the tent of Bilhah, the maidservant of Rachel. Reuvain was personally offended and therefore removed his father's bed and placed in the tent of Leah, his mother. Before Yaakov passed away, he had blessed his children. Regarding his eldest son, Reuvain, he had said, '**you are as impulsive as water...**'" The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos states that although the Torah tells us that Reuvain had cohabited with Bilhah the concubine his father, it is a grave error for one to believe so. Rather, the moving of his father's bed into the tent of Leah is considered to be as serious.

Because Reuvain had personally experienced the irreversible consequences of his own impulsive behavior, which caused him to forfeit his kingship and priesthood, he understood that he needed to prevent his brothers to act impulsively regarding their brother Yosef. Had Reuvain not interceded at that moment, Yosef would have been killed and there would not have been a Jewish people. Although Reuvain's impulsive behavior had caused him irretrievable loss, G'd allowed him to experience a personal tragedy because it was worthwhile for this lesson to be learned to ultimately save his brothers from destroying the future of the Jewish people.

4. *G'd Does Not Abandon the Tzaddik*

The Torah tells us that before Yosef was sold into slavery by his brothers they had cast him into a pit to die. They had believed that the objective of his tale bearing to their father was to discredit them in his eyes and ultimately bring about their destruction.. The Torah states, **"They took him and cast him into the pit; the pit was empty, no water was in it."** The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos asks, "If the Torah tells us that the pit was empty, is it not obvious that it did not contain water?" The Gemara answers, "It is to infer that although the pit had no water, it did contain snakes and scorpions." Despite the fact that he was thrown into a snake pit, Yosef emerged unharmed because G'd had performed a miracle on his behalf. One would think that after witnessing their brother's miraculous immergence from the snake pit, it should have been a confirmation that Yosef was indeed devoutly righteous. His dreams were truly prophetic and not delusions of grandeur. However, Yosef's brothers seemed not to have been impressed by his survival. They therefore sold him into slavery the moment the opportunity presented itself. Why did they not recognize that Yosef was indeed a tzaddik who had merited to be saved by G'd?

The Midrash explains that Yosef's brothers were unaware that the pit in which they had placed him contained snakes and scorpions because they were hidden in the walls of the pit. Only Yosef himself was able to see them. They were therefore unaware of the miracle that had transpired on Yosef's behalf. After Yosef was taken out of the pit, his brothers sold him into slavery for twenty silver coins. The Torah attests to the fact that Yosef possessed exceptional beauty, intelligence, and capability. If Yosef was so unique in all of his qualities, why was such a gifted person sold for only twenty silver coins? The Midrash tells us that when Yosef was put into the pit and had seen the snakes and scorpions he was traumatized to such a degree he became as white as a corpse. Thus, when he was removed from the pit, he did not have any semblance of anything of value. Therefore, he was sold for only a pittance.

After Yosef was taken out of the pit, he was sold into slavery. The Torah describes the unusual merchandise and wares that were being transported by the merchants who had bought him as a slave. The verse states, **"A caravan of Ishmaelites from Gilead, and their camels were bearing spices, and balsam, and birthwort..."** Rashi in his commentary cites the Midrash which asks, "Why did the Torah reveal the nature of the merchandise that was being transported - To make known the reward of

the righteous. For it is not common for Arabs to transport anything but naphtha and foul smelling resins. But because Yosef was a tzaddik, G'd caused that the cargo being transported was spices that emitted a (pleasant) fragrance, so that he should not be harmed by the noxious odor." Yosef was being transported at that moment to live his life as a slave in a foreign location. How is experiencing pleasant aromas at this bleak moment considered to be a "reward" for him?

Initially Yosef believed that his dreams were prophetic visions that needed to be shared with his brothers. He believed that ultimately he would be the provider for his family and they would bow down to him because he would assume the role of benefactor. However, when Yosef was cast into the pit to die, he began to question the efficacy of his visions. Perhaps he was mistaken - maybe they were in fact delusions of grandeur. G'd wanted to dispel this consideration from his mind and to communicate to him that he was not mistaken. His dreams would come to fruition. Consequently, G'd brought about a miracle for Yosef to understand that he should not despair. The miracle was not for his brothers to appreciate the fact that he was a tzaddik, but rather it was to confirm to Yosef that his dreams would come to fruition and G'd was with him

When Yosef was taken out of the pit sold to the Arab merchants who had put him on to the caravan, , he immediately noticed that the usual foul smelling fuels, were not there. Rather, there were pleasant smelling spices. Yosef again understood that this was another communication from G'd that He was with him. The "reward of the righteous" that is mentioned by Chazal is not the pleasure of smelling something that is sweet; but rather, informing the tzaddik that he should not despair, because G'd is with him. Thus, despite the bleakness of the moment and with no understanding of the direction in which he was going, Yosef understood with certainty that ultimately this would lead to a positive conclusion.

The blessing of the righteous in the Amidah (Silent Prayer) states, "On the righteous, on the devout...Blessed are You Hashem, Mainstay and Assurance of the righteous." Vilna Gaon explains that G'd allows the tzaddik to have faith despite the trials and tribulations that he may face in his lifetime. Although the tzaddik is tested by G'd to a greater degree than anyone else, G'd Himself allows the tzaddik to see glimpses of the true reality of Divine Providence. Yosef had been greatly frightened by his experience in the snake pit; however, by allowing him to survive, He communicated to him that all would be good. After being removed from the pit, again

G'd reiterated the communication by exposing him to the fragrant spices when he was sold to the Arabs, rather than exposing him to foul smelling odors. Yosef understood that although the present is uncertain, the future will reveal G'd's plan for him.

5. The Ability to Evaluate One's Spiritual Worth *(from Vayishlach)*

The Torah tells us that after Yaakov had realized that his brother Esav was approaching him with an army of four hundred men to engage him in battle, he prayed to G'd stating, **"G'd of my father Avraham and G'd of my father Yitzchak, Hashem Who said to me, 'Return to your land and to your relatives and I will do good with you'- I have been diminished by all the kindnesses and by the truth that You have done Your servant...Rescue me, please from the hand of my brother Esav..."** When Yaakov had fled from his home to go to the community of his uncle Lavan, he was concerned that he would be spiritually diminished and influenced by the values of that evil society, which was steeped in adultery, murder, and idolatry, G'd appeared to him and assured him saying, **"Behold, I am with you; I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this soil..."** Thus, G'd gave Yaakov a guarantee that he would be protected, physically and spiritually. Before Yaakov had departed the community of Lavan, G'd appeared to him and said, **"Return to the land of your fathers...I will be with you."** Once again, Yaakov was guaranteed that G'd would protect him. Despite being the most special of the Patriarchs and being guaranteed by G'd on two separate occasions that he would be protected, why was Yaakov concerned to meet his brother Esav? Why did he believe that Esav could destroy him and his family?

Chazal explain that although G'd had promised Yaakov that He would protect him, Yaakov was concerned that perhaps the guarantee was based on his own worthiness and that he had failed in some way, thus allowing him to be vulnerable to Esav. However, G'd appeared to Yaakov after he had spent twenty years in the home of Lavan and gave him another guarantee that demonstrates that he is still worthy of G'd's Divine Protection. If this is so, what was the basis for Yaakov's fear?

When G'd had promised Yaakov that he would be under His Divine protection, G'd had said, **"I will do good with you (v'eiteeva eemach)..."** the Torah writes the word *"eiteeva (I will do good)"* with an additional

letter *"yud," (between the 'aleph' and the 'tes')* which is seemingly superfluous. Baal Haturim explains that when Yaakov supplicated G'd to protect him, besides calling upon G'd's promise, he was asked that he should be protected in the merit of the ten tests that Avraham, our Patriarch had succeeded in passing (the letter *'yud'* has the numerical value of ten). Although, Yaakov was worthy of G'd's protection and blessing in his own right, the fact that he beseeched G'd to protect him in the merit of Avraham is a demonstration of his unique level of humility.

Despite Yaakov's level of spiritual accomplishment and dimension, he did not feel secure. King Solomon writes in proverbs, "Fortunate is the one who is continuously in fear (of G'd)." The Gemara in Tractate Berachos asks, "How could King Solomon esteem one who is continuously in a state of fear? Since one is considered to be a sinner if he is fearful because he should have faith in G'd." The Gemara explains that King Solomon is referring to the one who fears sin. Fortunate is the one who lives in continuous fear of sin because he will be less prone to transgress the Word of G'd. He is thus fortunate. Because of Yaakov's unique dimension of Torah, he had an acute sensitivity to the slightest degree of spiritual imperfection, within himself. He therefore appreciated the fact that if he had failed it would have negative ramifications and consequences. Not only must one be fearful of transgressing a negative commandment, but also that he did not perform a mitzvah in the most perfect manner. This level of sensitivity is dependent upon one's own spiritual state. King Solomon writes in Proverbs, "The hedonist walks in darkness." Meaning, one who is devoid of spirituality has no inkling of his own predicament. He may be on the brink of spiritually destruction; nevertheless, he will have a sense of confidence, not realizing that his eternal demise is imminent. . Therefore, as advanced and as perfect as Yaakov was, since he was not aware of the quality of his own accomplishment, he beseeched G'd in the merit of the ten tests of Avraham.

The Gemara tells us that if one prays to G'd with a sense of entitlement, he will bring prosecution upon himself. If one truly feels worthy and thus deserving of G'd's response to his supplication, it will cause that his spiritual record will be audited to determine if he is as worthy as he presents himself to be. This is the reason one must approach G'd in prayer as a person who is undeserving and is only drawing upon G'd's unlimited Mercy.