

Parshas Vayeitzei

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1. Yaakov Our Patriarch and We His Descendents

The Torah states, “**He (Yaakov) encountered the place...**” Rashi cites Chazal who explain that when Yaakov, our Patriarch, came upon Mt. Moriah he prayed. He had established the evening prayer, which is known as *tefillos arvis* (*the evening prayer*). Yaakov our Patriarch is the Patriarch who represents the Jewish people’s odyssey through exile (Golus) until the end of time. He had lived the first 63 years of this life in Canaan; however, subsequently, the majority of his life was lived in a state of exile – outside of the borders of Canaan. Despite the overwhelming negative influences that were contradictory to spirituality (at the most extreme level), he survived spiritually unscathed. *Tefillos arvis* (evening prayer) is recited during the night time, which is associated with exile. The Gemara states, “The physical world has a semblance of night and the world to come has a semblance of the day.”

Within the context of physical existence there is much confusion, distraction, and unanswered questions. One does not see clearly during the night time period, many things appear to be what they are not. Thus, it is fitting that Yaakov, being the Patriarch of exile (Golus), should be the one to initiate the tefillah of arvis.

Why did G’d choose Yaakov to be the Patriarch who charted the course of the Jewish existence throughout exile? It is because Yaakov is the Patriarch who represents the Torah. The Torah states, “He is the man who dwells in the tent (the study halls of Shem and Aver).” He was continuously engaged in Torah study. The only way one can have clarity, despite being in a state of exile, is through the study of Torah. As the Gemara in Tractate Succah says, “I (G’d) have created the evil inclination and the Torah as its antidote.” Thus, the only way to dispel the confusion and overwhelming negative influence of exile is through the Torah.

It is interesting to note that both Avraham and Yitzchak, who were the Patriarchs who preceded Yaakov, received similar blessings from Hashem. They were told that their offspring would be “as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore...” However, Yaakov, in addition, received an unusual blessing which seems to have a double connotation. On one hand, it communicates the level of proliferation that the Jew will experience. However, on the other hand, it seems to allude to the lowly state of the Jewish people. Hashem told Yaakov, “**Your offspring shall be as the dust of the earth, and you will spread out powerfully (in all directions) westward, eastward, northward, and southward...**” How do we understand this?

The Midrash explains that when the wind comes upon dust it is blown and spread in every direction. Similarly, if the Jewish people, who are the progeny of Yaakov, do not adhere to the Torah and its precepts, they will be likened to dust that is scattered in every direction. However, when one adds water to dust it takes on the form of a more stable substance and is thus secured in its location. The Gemara in Tractate Taanis cites many verses which compare the Torah to water. If the Jewish people themselves live and function within the context of Torah (water) they will take on a permanent and secure status. Thus they will be insulated from foreign influences both in the physical and spiritual realm. Because Yaakov is *the* Patriarch of the Torah, he was given this particular blessing. Yaakov established an advanced level of Torah, and consequently he inculcated within himself a spiritual genealogy that his children would inherit. His progeny have the capacity to infuse and integrate Torah within their lives thus giving themselves the permanence and stability to be protected.

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos cites verses which indicate that Avraham and Yitzchak received blessings from G'd that were within limitation. However, Yaakov's portion is without bounds and limits. As it is stated, "...you will spread out powerfully westward, eastward, northward, and southward..." It is only because Torah itself is unlimited and boundless, since it is the wisdom of G'd (who is infinite), that Yaakov, who is the Patriarch of Torah, merited a portion that is boundless. Torah is the wisdom of Hashem and thus is not finite. Therefore, since Yaakov is the Patriarch who represents Torah, his portion is without limit.

Thus, the Jewish people themselves are not confined to limitation. As the Zohar states, "The Jewish people, the Torah, and G'd are all one..." It is because the Jewish people are the Benai Yisroel (the sons of Yisroel) that our potential is unlimited. Yisroel is the name that was given to Yaakov when he rose to a special spiritual level after he had successfully defeated the angel. It was only because he was continuously engaged in Torah that he was able to subdue the angel who was the archangel of Esav. Because the Jewish people are the Benai Yisroel (Yaakov) we have an unlimited capacity for spirituality. However, its value only assumes real meaning when we actually engage in the Torah itself.

2. The Secret to Yaakov's Survival

The Torah tells us that Yaakov had to flee from his community of Be'er Sheva because of his brother Esav. He was instructed by his parents to go to the community of Charan to the home of his uncle, Lavan. Lavan and the community of Charan were evil. Thus, Yaakov, compelled to go there, was concerned about the negative influences of that community. He prayed to Hashem on Mt. Moriah that he should be insulated from these influences. The Midrash explains that he prayed to be protected from the influences of "adultery, murder, idol worship, and *lashon ha'rah* (forbidden speech)." Yaakov's main concern was not his physicality; but rather, he wanted Divine Protection to guarantee that his spirituality should remain in tact. Prior to leaving for Charan, Yaakov spent 14 years studying in the Yeshiva of Shem v'Aver in order to prepare himself for all his future spiritual challenges. Yaakov spent 22 years away from his father's household. He was removed from a location that was the equivalent of the Holy of Holies. As Chazal tell us, "G'd's Presence is found in the location of the Patriarchs."

He was meant to spend the next 20 years of his life under the influence of his uncle Lavan who was the antithesis of his mother and father. Yet he was not negatively affected in any way. As the Torah states, when Yaakov returned from Charan he sent a message to his brother Esav stating, "***...Im Lavan gartie - I have sojourned with Lavan...***" Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the word "gartie" numerically and in its letters is the equivalent of "taryag" which represents 613. Yaakov was communicating to Esav that although he had spent 20 years in dire spiritual straights, he nevertheless is returning spiritually unscathed because he had meticulously adhered to the 613 precepts of the Torah. Chazal state, "He did not learn from his (Lavan's) evil ways."

The Torah tells us that when Yaakov arrived in Charan he came upon a group of shepherds who were gathered around a water hole that was covered with a bolder. They were waiting to water their flocks. They informed him that because the bolder was too

heavy for them to remove, they were waiting for other shepherds to arrive to assist them in removing the rock. However, when Rachel and her flock arrived at the water hole, Yaakov single-handedly removed the stone. He did not display his enormous strength until he had seen Rachel.

It is interesting to note that when Yaakov saw Rachel with her father's flock, the Torah refers to her as, **"...Rachel the daughter of Lavan his (Yaakov) mother's brother..."** The Torah also refers to Lavan's flock as, **"...the flock of Lavan his mother's brother..."** After Yaakov had watered the flock, the Torah states, "Yaakov had watered the flock of Lavan, his mother's brother." However, the Torah had informed us previously that Lavan was the brother of Yaakov's mother, Rivka. So why is it necessary for the Torah to continuously identify and reiterate the fact that Lavan was the brother of Yaakov's mother? If Lavan is the epitome of evil and Rachel is his diametric opposite, why would the Torah want to associate Rivka, a woman who represents holiness, with a person who personifies evil?

At the beginning of the Portion of Toldos when Yitzchak married Rivka, the Torah identifies her as, **"Rivka the daughter of Besuel the Aramean..., sister of Lavan the Aramean from Padan Aram..."** If the Torah had previously identified Rivka as the daughter of Besuel, why is it necessary to identify her pedigree again at this moment? Additionally, why is it important for the Torah to reveal to us again that her brother was Lavan? Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the Torah is identifying her in this manner to communicate the praiseworthiness of Rivka – that despite the fact that her father was evil (rasha), her brother was evil, and her community was comprised of evil people, she was not negatively influenced by them in any way. When Yitzchak took her as his wife, she was spiritually pure.

Mahral of Prague z'tl in his commentary *Gur Aryeh* explains that when Yitzchak our Patriarch initially took Rivka to be his wife, she was only three years old. He asks, "How is it indicated from the Torah's identification of Rivka, her pedigree, and peripheral information regarding her community, that she was truly special and praiseworthy?" Maharal answers that in terms of her father, brother, and community, they were stated previously. However, it is possible that we would not appreciate how special Rivka was based on that background information alone since she was a mere child of three and therefore not subjected to the influences of these evil people; thus, she was pure. Therefore, the reiteration of the information regarding her father, brother, and community at the time of her marriage (which seems to be superfluous), is to communicate to us that in fact although she was only three years old and could have been influenced negatively, she was not.

It is interesting to note that the exact words that Chazal use to tell us that Rivka was not influenced by her surroundings - "she did not learn from their evil ways..." – are the same words that Yaakov had communicated to his brother Esav – **"...Im Lavan gartie - I have sojourned with Lavan"** – meaning, "I have kept the 613 mitzvos of the Torah, and I did not learn from his (Lavan) evil ways." How do we understand this?

Chazal tell us that ultimately Yosef did not sin with the wife of Potifar in Egypt because he saw the vision of his father Yaakov before his eyes. Identically, Yaakov was only able to survive the negative influences of Lavan and his community because he maintained a continuous

cognizance of his mother, Rikva. Anything associated with Lavan he simultaneously identified with his mother Rikva. By identifying Rachel as “the daughter of Lavan, his mother’s brother” and Lavan’s sheep as, “the flock of Lavan, his mother’s brother...” Yaakov continuously remained connected to the influences of his devoutly righteous mother Rivka. She was not influenced by her surroundings, nor was Yaakov influenced by his. He had a special relationship with his mother Rivka. She had prepared him well in how to deal with her evil brother Lavan and his community. Thus, Yaakov’s continuous experience in the household of Lavan was intermeshed with that of his mother who was the ultimate in purity.

Many people may have had a proper Torah upbringing or even had special relationships in the past with Torah personalities. However, later when one has “moved on with life,” does that person continuously maintain a cognizance of those special teachings and experiences of the past? Or are they something in the recesses of one’s mind? We are able to learn from Yaakov our Patriarch that the way one can survive the most overwhelming influences of exile is to retain and maintain a cognizance of those special relationships and spiritual encounters of the past of a continuous basis.

3. The Story of the Dudaim

The Torah tells us that Reuven went out into the field at the time of the harvest season and brought *dudaim* (mandrakes) for his mother Leah. The Commentators explain that *dudaim* is a type of plant which increases one’s chances of conception. At this time, Leah had already mothered four sons for Yaakov. Her sister Rachel was barren and thus was not able to conceive. When Rachel saw the *dudaim* she said to Leah her sister, **“Please give me some of your son’s *dudaim*.”** Leah responded, **“was your taking my husband insignificant – And now to take even my son’s *dudaim*!”**

It is important to note that Leah became the wife of Yaakov only through the sacrifice of Rachel. Initially Yaakov had worked for seven years for Rachel’s hand in marriage. However Lavan deceived Yaakov by substituting Leah for her younger sister Rachel. Because Yaakov had suspected that his future father-in-law, whose nature was one of deceit, he had taken every possible precaution to avoid being deceived. He had given Rachel three code words that she would respond with under the Chuppah when she was in a veiled state. The words were, “Challah, niddah, and hadlakas ha’ner (lighting of the candles).” Rachel understood that the deception would take place. Thus, she shared these words with her sister Leah in order to prevent her public humiliation. Therefore, it would seem that Leah should be beholden to her sister Rachel for enabling her to marry Yaakov and thus becoming the Matriarch of the Jewish people. However, Leah responded to Rachel’s request in a harsh and seemingly cold-hearted manner- despite the fact that Leah had already mothered four of the tribes. How do we understand Leah’s response to Rachel?

When Leah had her second son, Shimon, the Torah states, **“She conceived, and bore a son and declared, ‘Because Hashem has heard that I am despised (by Yaakov).’”** How is it possible that Yaakov, a person of such unique spiritual dimension should despise Leah, when she is not evil? Ramban explains that one can defend Leah by saying that she was coerced by her father, Lavan, to stand-in for Rachel under the Chuppah and that she had no choice but to follow his dictate. However, on the wedding night itself, she could have revealed or alluded to Yaakov

that in fact she was not Rachel. Why was it only at daybreak that Yaakov realized that it was Leah? Yaakov understood that she was at fault for this deception and thus, he despised her.

Ramban explains however that only G'd knew that Leah's intent was pure in wanting to marry Yaakov because he was devoutly righteous. It was because of that purity within her that Hashem granted her a son. Prior to the first born, Leah had difficulty conceiving and thus required a miracle. Yaakov understood that because she was the mother of his children he could not divorce her. Factually speaking, since Leah gave birth to the future tribes of Israel, it was a clear indication that this was the Will of G'd. She was meant to be the Matriarch of the Jewish people and not Rachel.

Leah acknowledged and was beholden to Rachel for being the intermediary that allowed her to become the wife of Yaakov. As the Gemara states, "There are many agents who act on behalf of G'd." Leah understood that her fortune in becoming the Matriarch was unrelated to Rachel's selfless act of sharing the code words, but rather it was only the Will of Hashem. If Rachel had not chosen to share the secret words and had not been the intermediary, Leah would have become the matriarch anyway – because it was the Will of G'd. To Leah, the confirmation of this reality was that she bore four sons for Yaakov, consecutively.

Her status as Matriarch was an issue of destiny. She was granted her role despite her sister's involvement. Leah mothered more than her share of Yaakov's children. If the 12 tribes had been split between the four women, each would have had three sons. Leah however mothered a fourth son – indicating that she was the true wife of Yaakov. With this we can understand Leah's response to Rachel when she had said, "...**was your taking my husband insignificant...**"

It is true that Yaakov was attracted to Rachel, and could have married her had it not been for the deception perpetrated by Lavan. However, since it had been revealed that Leah was the destined Matriarch (evidenced by the fact that she had born sons for Yaakov and Rachel did not), it would be a breach of her role as Matriarch to give the dudaim to Rachel. It was not an issue of lacking gratitude. Leah's responsibility was to be the Matriarch and to not allow anything to interfere with that responsibility.

Although being beholden and appreciative is important when one has a debt of gratitude, one should not allow these feelings to interfere with the objective and purpose for his existence.

4. G'd's Recognition of One's Plight

The Torah states, "**Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuven, as she had declared, "Because Hashem has recognized my humiliation/affliction (*b'aanyee*), for now my husband will love me."** The Torah is telling us that because Hashem saw the humiliation/affliction of Leah He allowed her to conceive and give birth to a son for Yaakov. Did G'd perform the miracle for Leah because He saw her humiliation/affliction and pain? Did He thus

take pity on her? Did the miracle emanate from His Attribute of Kindness and Mercy? Or is it something more than that?

On Yom Kippur the Torah tells us that there is a Positive Commandment for every Jew to “afflict” oneself. This state of affliction manifests itself in five areas that we *avoid*: to eat/drink, to cohabit, to wear leather shoes, to wash or anoint oneself. What is the value of being in this state of “affliction?” Is it something more than just being in a deprived state? Is it that when one is in a deprived state, it evokes a greater level of Hashem’s Mercy? Or is there more to it than that?

After Moshe Rabbeinu had presented himself before Pharaoh as G’d’s emissary, the Torah states, **“Moshe and Aaron came to Pharaoh and said to him, ‘So said Hashem, G’d of the Hebrews, Until when will you refuse to be humbled (*lei’anos*) before Me?’”** Rashi explains that the word “*lei’anos*” to mean “subordinated/humbled.” The word “*lei’anos*” is derived from the word “*aanee* – needy person.” One who is poor and needy is classified as “*aanee*”; in an impoverished state one is “humbled.” Thus, Moshe’s rhetorically asked Pharaoh “Until when will you refuse to humble yourself before G’d...” Since Pharaoh had already witnessed eight plagues, which were revealed miracles, he should have recognized the Hand of G’d. However because he was not willing to humble himself before G’d, he did not appreciate all that had transpired. The purpose of the plagues was not only to give Pharaoh and the Egyptian people the understanding that there is an Omnipotent Being, but also through the devastation of Egypt they would be humbled and thus gain the capacity to understand the cause.

The Gemara in Tractate Niddah tells us that one type of the individual that is despised by G’d is a needy individual who is haughty and arrogant. A person who is in an impoverished state has no basis to behave arrogantly. One of the consequences of poverty is to humble and subdue an individual. If one does not respond and appreciate his needy status and acts arrogantly, he will be despised by G’d because he is denying his personal state of affairs.

When Leah named her son Reuven and said, **“...Because Hashem has recognized my humiliation/affliction (*b’aanyee*)...”** she was acknowledging the personal value of her affliction. She understood that the reason Hashem initially caused her to be anguished and afflicted (by not being able to conceive) was to humble her and thus make her deserving of a miracle. It is not that her pitiful/afflicted state evoked Hashem’s Kindness and Mercy; but rather, Hashem recognized that Leah had responded properly to her afflicted state.

It is when one is humbled that one gains clarity. On Yom Kippur, when one is in an afflicted state/ deprived in the five areas, one is able to introspect with greater clarity. The state of affliction is a necessary element in the atonement process.

When one experiences difficulties in life, he should not become angered and distressed; rather, he should realize that difficult situations that come upon a person are only a mechanism through which one can gain clarity. The only way to overcome and benefit from adversity is to recognize the purpose and meaning of that adversity. Hashem places us in situations and contexts to give us the opportunity to utilize those moments. It

is only through this recognition of what needs to be addressed that one merits Hashem's blessing.

5. Yaakov - the Most Special of the Patriarchs (from Toldos)

The Torah tells us that Rivka had given birth to twin sons – Yaakov and Esav. Esav was born first, followed by Yaakov, who was holding onto the heel of his brother. Because the birth was so unusual and never seen before – one sibling holding onto the heel of the other at the time of birth – Yaakov was named “Yaakov,” which is derived from the word “Akev – heel.” Rashi cites another interpretation from Chazal who explain that when the Torah states, “...He was called Yaakov...” it is not referring to the unusual circumstance of his birth but rather that G'd Himself named him Yaakov.

The Daas Zikeinim Baali Tosafos (earlier commentators) cite a Midrash which states, “There are four letters in the name “Yaakov” – “Yud, Ayin, Kuf, Bais.” The four letters in his name correspond to the four crowns through which the Jewish people will coronate and glorify G'd. The letter “Yud,” which has the numerical value of ten, corresponds to the Ten Commandments. The letter “Ayin,” which has the numerical value of 70, corresponds to the 70 elders of Israel. The letter “Kuf,” which has the numerical value of 100, corresponds to the covered sanctuary in the Mishkan which was 100 cubits in length. The letter “Bais,” which has the numerical value of two, corresponds to the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments. And in the merit of Yaakov, the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt... The covenant with the Jewish people was through Yaakov.”

The Torah describes Yaakov as “the man who dwelled in the tent (of Torah.) Chazal tell us that he was the most special Patriarch. The Midrash cited by the Daas Zikeinim Baali Tosafos conveys to us that the essence of Yaakov was so special that he embodied the equivalent of the Ten Commandments, the 70 elders of Israel, the covered sanctuary of the Mishkan, and the Two Tablets of the Commandments. Every aspect of Yaakov has relevance to the Shechinah (Divine Presence). The Ten Commandments encompass the entire Torah. The 70 elders were those who assumed, together with Moshe, the responsibility for the spirituality of the Jewish people – and later were the conduit through which Torah was communicated to them. The covered sanctuary was the resting place of the Shechinah. As it is stated in the verse, “Make for Me a Sanctuary so that I may dwell in your midst.” The sanctuary contained the Menorah, the golden altar, and the golden table (shulchan). The Menorah symbolizes the Oral Law, thus the sanctuary is a representation of the spiritual essence of the Jewish people. Additionally, the two Tablets, which contained the Ten Commandments also encompass the entire Torah and represent the Shechinah. Every aspect of Yaakov is expressed through his name, which is rooted in the Divine Presence. Thus, it is understandable why the Jewish people were redeemed in his merit.

Yaakov was the Patriarch who was qualified to father the twelve tribes of Israel. Each of his sons headed a tribe and is referred to in the verse as, “*Shivtei Ka* - the Tribes of G'd...” He had a capacity to bring about within himself a level of perfection and purity that was one of a kind – as it is alluded to through his name. Avraham our Patriarch fathered Yitzchak – however he also fathered Yishmael. Yitzchak fathered Yaakov - however, he also fathered Esav. Each of the Patriarchs who preceded Yaakov produced an offspring that was a representation of evil. The

Jerusalem Talmud tells us that this reflected a spiritual deficiency that they had not perfected and purged. Yaakov on the other hand was fully, spiritually cleansed of any imperfection because every aspect of his being was permeated with Torah at the most advanced level. This is why he merited fathering the "*Shivtei Ka* - Tribes of G'd."

The Torah states, "**...And Yitzchak loved Esav...Rivka loved Yaakov...**" The Torah could have simply stated "Yitzchak loved Esav" as it states "Rivka loved Yaakov." What is the significance of the seemingly superfluous "And..."? According to Sforno it means that in addition to loving Yaakov, Yitzchak also loved Esav. The "And" is coming to include Esav. It is obvious that Yitzchak loved Yaakov because of who he was - the ultimate Torah personality. It was impossible for him not to love him. However, the Torah needs to tell us that despite Esav's involvement with earthly pursuits (such as hunting and other similar things) - he was nevertheless loved by his father. However Yitzchak's primary love was for Yaakov because he was an embodiment of holiness. He was named by G'd Himself. Conversely, Rivka did not love Esav at all. She only loved Yaakov because she fully appreciated and recognized the evil of her son Esav.

It is incorrect to interpret the verse, "And Yitzchak loved Esav..." to mean that he did not love Yaakov or that he did not recognize the unique spiritual dimension of Yaakov. G'd initially identified the essence of Yaakov's potential by choosing letters for his name which connote and correspond to everything that was connected to the Divine Presence. Yitzchak was well aware of this fact.