

Parsha Vayishlach

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1. Our Capability of Surviving the Adversity of Exile

The parsha begins with, “**Then Yaakov sent angels (*malachim*) ahead of him to Esav his brother to the land of Seir, the field of Edom**”. Yaakov was returning home after working for Lavan for 20 years and he was concerned that Esav’s anger and hatred towards him had not subsided. Yaakov therefore sent *malachim* ahead of him in order to evaluate Esav and relay a message to him. Rashi cites the Chazal explaining that the word *malachim* has two possible meanings. One meaning of *malachim* is “angels” which are spiritual beings, while the other meaning of *malachim* could be “agents/representatives” or *shluchim* who are human beings acting on Yaakov’s behalf.

The question is – if the Torah wished to communicate that Yaakov sent angels ahead of him then the word *malachim* is clear; however, if the Torah wished to say that Yaakov sent human agents why did it not use the word *shluchim*? We know that *malachim* are G-d’s agents; why would the Torah use the same word to refer to Yaakov’s agents? Although we see in a passage in the Haggadah of Pesach that the words *shaliach* and *malach* are used interchangeably when Hashem says that He brought the tenth plague upon Egypt Himself rather than through an agent, the two words are not commonly interchangeable.

The agent of Hashem is called a *malach* because it is an indication of the level of the entity assigning the agency. When an agent represents a being of the magnitude of Hashem, the agent is called *malach*. Because of the level of relationship between the *malach* and Hashem, the *malach*’s entire existence is purely to execute the agency appointed by Hashem. Since the Torah uses the word *malach* regarding Yaakov’s agents it must be that he has the ability to summon and appoint angels in a similar manner as Hashem. This indicates that Yaakov was not a mere mortal being. Yaakov’s ability to appoint angels reflects that he was Hashem’s representative in this world.

However, if we consider the other meaning of the word *malachim* to mean human agents then why not use the word *shluchim*? The answer is that Yaakov was at such a high level of spirituality that even if he sent mortal agents they would be referred to as *malachim* as an indication of Yaakov’s spiritual dimension. The agents of a spiritual being are referred to as *malachim* and Yaakov was a uniquely spiritual being therefore his agents are referred to as *malachim* rather than *shluchim*.

What was the mission of Yaakov’s agents? They were to go to Esav and deliver a message, “**I have sojourned with Lavan and lingered until now...**” in Hebrew “*im Lavan garti*” Yaakov was communicating through this that even though he was with Lavan for 20 years his mitzvah observance was unaffected by Lavan’s evil ways. We see that the letters *garti* and *tariag* in Hebrew are the same and their numerical value is equal to 613, which is equivalent to the number of Mitzvos. By this Yaakov was saying to Esav that he was coming home completely unscathed spiritually from living with this evil person and that his strength was not diminished. The fact that Yaakov was able to be unscathed from his contact with Lavan is more than an accomplishment. This is an indication that Yaakov was like a living angel. He was able to grow spiritually under conditions that no other human being could have even survived spiritually. The pasuk “*im Lavan garti*” is telling us that Yaakov is returning home at an even greater dimension than when he left. This, therefore, also describes Yaakov’s level of agency. Yaakov’s agents are in fact the level of *malachim* because Yaakov himself is a spiritual being unlike any other human being. Why are these qualities important for us to know?

We learned previously that Yaakov is the patriarch that represents the exile – *golus*. Yaakov established through his actions the capabilities and the potential for his descendants (*Am Yisroel*) to

be able to survive and even thrive under the worst physical and spiritual conditions in exile. Despite the extreme circumstances of any exile, we are able to remain unscathed as a direct result of Yaakov's spiritual accomplishments. The Torah is explicitly telling us the despite Yaakov's 20 year exposure to Lavan's extremely evil ways, he observed all 613 Mitzvos and grew spiritually. This is an indication of our own capability and potential.

Despite the conditions of our exile and the many spiritual pitfalls and obstacles, we are able to thrive and remain spiritually unscathed. We must tap into this potential and capability in order to survive as spiritual beings. The Torah tells us that Yaakov's agents were *malachim* in order to reveal to us the special, spiritual, nature of Yaakov. It is through our understanding of who Yaakov was that we are able to comprehend who we are.

2. Protecting our spirituality

The Torah tells us that when Yaakov's agents returned from completing their mission with Esav, they informed him that Esav was heading towards Yaakov with many men intending to do battle. The Torah says, **“And Yaakov became very frightened (*vayeirah*), and it anguished him (*vayeitzar lo*). So he divided his people, the flocks, the cattle, and the camels into two camps”**. Rashi says, “Yaakov became very frightened” means that he was afraid to be killed; “and it anguished him...” means Yaakov was anguished that he would kill others. We find that after Avraham defeated the four kings (in parsha Lech Lecha) he was concerned that since this victory was only possible through miracles that perhaps he had depleted his merits and had been diminished. We do not see that Avraham was “anguished” or concerned that he needed to kill in battle because it was a necessary part of defeating the four kings. If one must kill because it is the will of Hashem then one should not be anguished because it is the correct course of action.

We can understand that Yaakov was “frightened” that he could be killed; however, why should he be “anguished” that he might kill others in battle? Also, consider that the people with whom Yaakov was going to do battle were evil in nature – why should he be “anguished”? The question is - was Yaakov anguished because of the people that would be killed or was he anguished because he would be the person committing the act of killing? Perhaps the act of taking a life does diminish a person's spirituality. What was Yaakov's concern? Was it the taking of a life or was it that he would be diminished because of taking a life?

The Torah tells us in parsha *Vayeitzei* that Yaakov removed a large boulder from a well when he saw Rachel. Rashi cites the Chazal and explains that through this act the Torah is telling us that Yaakov had great physical strength because he was able to remove the large boulder as one removes a cork from a bottle. Why do we need to know that Yaakov had great strength? If we did not know that Yaakov was strong would we view him differently? Evidently, it must be important to know.

The Chazal tell us that when Yaakov fled from his parent's home he had enormous wealth. Eliphaz the son of Esav was sent to kill Yaakov. Yaakov asked Eliphaz, “Did you not study from your grandfather Yitzchak that a poor person is like a dead person”? Therefore, Yaakov suggests to Eliphaz that he should take all of his wealth and he would have fulfilled his mission because a poor person is like a dead person. The question is why did Yaakov not kill Eliphaz? There is a principal in *halacha* that states that if someone is pursued by a killer he is obligated to kill his pursuer. Yaakov, however, chose only to give away his own wealth rather than kill his pursuer. Perhaps one may say that Yaakov did not possess the physical strength to kill Eliphaz. The Torah teaches that this is not the case – he was able to remove a large boulder from the well as if it were a cork in a bottle. He had the physical strength. So why did he not kill Eliphaz?

The answer is because performing an act of killing would have diminished Yaakov's spirituality and thereby has an adverse affect on his descendants' spiritual potential. The level of spirituality of Yaakov's children is dependent on his level of spirituality. This is why Yaakov chose to give

away his wealth rather than kill Eliphaz. This was worthwhile even though Yaakov spent 20 years in the service of Lavan under the worst conditions. Yaakov understood if he were to kill and be diminished in any way, that it would jeopardize the spirituality of *Klal Yisroel*. This is the meaning of Yaakov's "anguish".

3. Even Permitted Actions May Have Negative Consequences

We see in this week's parsha that when Yaakov instructed his agents to deliver the gifts to Esav in order to appease his anger, he also instructed them to communicate with Esav in a specific manner. Yaakov said to his agents, **"When my brother Esav meets you and asks you, saying, 'Who are you, where are you going, and to whom are these that are before you' - You shall say, 'Your servant Yaakov's. It is a tribute sent to my master, to Esav, and behold, he too is behind us'"**. It is interesting to note that when Yaakov instructed his agents he referred to himself in relation to Esav as the "servant" and Esav as "master".

The fact is Esav was not Yaakov's master; Yaakov carefully used these words to refer to himself and Esav. We also see in the parsha that when Yaakov meets Esav he prostrates himself before Esav seven times. Why does Yaakov refer to himself as "servant" and Esav as "master"? Perhaps Yaakov was saying these expressions in order to save his own life. If this is the case then why was Yaakov so careful, when instructing his agents, to refer to himself as "servant" and to Esav as "master"? Yaakov could have instructed them to refer to him as "servant" when they see Esav in an attempt to appease him through words of praise. However, we see that Yaakov refers to himself as "servant" even when he gave his instructions.

The answer is that a person is able to sense the reality of another person's feelings. This is especially true with Esav since he was a master of deceit and deception with the ability to sense false praise. Therefore, if Yaakov referred to Esav in the presence of his agents in a derogatory manner and then instructed them to address Esav as "master" the agents would clearly know that Yaakov was communicating false praise. If the agents believed that Yaakov's appellations were false when they communicated his message, Esav would be able to detect these disingenuous feelings. It was therefore critical that Yaakov refer to Esav and himself in a manner consistent with what he wanted Esav to detect. This is why Yaakov refers to himself as the "servant" and Esav as the "master".

The expression "Do as I say and not as I do" is meaningless because it is not supported by action. "Do as I do and not as I say" is the proper way to set an example. The Gemara tells us that Jews are not permitted to deprecate or scoff at anything unless it is idolatry. The reason for this is that if one were to engage in deprecation and scoffing one would eventually deprecate everything and everyone around him. It is in our nature to criticize and find fault. Therefore, the only thing that one is permitted to deprecate is idolatry. The question is why should we even be allowed to deprecate idolatry? Wouldn't we be engaging in an action that leads to the further development of negative character traits and behavior? How can we be allowed to do this?

Rav Hutner zt'l asks this question. One would think that by deprecating idolatry we would be conditioning ourselves in a negative behavior. Rav Hutner explains that is not the case. When one deprecates idolatry, one is simultaneously praising Hashem and confirming His value. Usually when one engages in deprecation it a completely negative activity; however, with the case of idolatry, the deprecation itself is a confirmation that Hashem is the true G-d and there is no other – which is a positive affirmation of faith.

A person may think incorrectly that in certain halachic circumstances that it may be permissible to speak *loshon hora* about another person. However, this is a negative conditioning process. If a person speaks negatively about another person, he is affected negatively by his own behavior. Yaakov understood that the only way that the agents could speak effectively to Esav was to condition them in advance that Esav should be viewed as "master" and he as "servant". Even

though Yaakov did not believe these appellations, he knew that speaking negatively about Esav in the presence of his agents would have conditioned them negatively and made their words susceptible to detection by Esav.

These concepts touch upon what the *Mesillas Yesharim* says, namely, that external conditioning can affect us internally. Therefore even though certain actions may be permissible it is important for us to evaluate the action's impact on our internal conditioning. It says in *Perkei Avos* that a wise man is a person who sees the consequences of his actions. We should therefore examine all of our actions and understand the consequences that they have on our internal development – because in certain cases Halacha may permit the action but it still may have a negative internal consequence.

4. Torah is a Reality

We read in the parsha that before Yaakov went to meet Esav, **”He got up at night and took his two wives, his two handmaids, and his eleven sons and crossed the river Yabbok...And Yaakov was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn”**. The question is that in one pasuk we see that Yaakov crosses the river Yabbok with his family and his possessions and in the next pasuk the Torah tells us that Yaakov was left alone. Rashi cites the Chazal and explains that Yaakov went back to retrieve “small earthenware vessels” which he had forgotten and this is the reason why Yaakov was alone. Rashi also cites a Gemara in Chullin which states that tzaddikim value their property more than their own lives so that they should not come to be involved in theft. How are we to understand this?

The tzaddik understands that all of his possessions are gifts from Hashem and they all are allocated to serve a definite purpose. The tzaddik therefore will not take a chance to be wasteful because if he were to be put in a survival situation he may need the items that he might of wasted. In a survival situation most people would be able to justify stealing in order to make it through the ordeal; however, a tzaddik cannot justify stealing. A tzaddik will not resort to many of the same means of survival, which could be justified by others. As a result of this, the tzaddik understands that he must be prudent with his possessions because there is no way to predict if they may be needed in the future.

The tzaddik, who is at a special level, knows that Hashem gives all of his possessions to him. If one were to believe to any degree that his possessions were earned through his own efforts and takes credit for them, then this individual has no relevance to the level of a tzaddik. When a tzaddik values his possessions even more than his life, it is not an issue of the tzaddik being “a penny pincher”. It is a reality that a tzaddik needs to value his possessions in this manner because he cannot resort to survival methods justified by others in times of crisis.

The Gemara in Taanis states that a *talmid chacham* who is not as strong as iron is not a *talmid chacham*. A *talmid chacham* should not compromise or be swayed from his beliefs and values under any circumstances. The Gemara in Taanis also states that a *talmid chacham* becomes agitated and angry when he sees the Torah violated. This is because of the Torah he possesses – which is compared to fire. Since the *talmid chacham* is completely immersed in Torah and internalizes its values he becomes agitated and intolerant if he witnesses a violation of the Torah.

Rashi explains this Gemara by stating that the reason that a *talmid chacham* becomes more intolerant and upset than the average person is because the *talmid chacham* is immersed in study of Torah and has a deep appreciation for the *halacha* and understands clearly the dimension of the violation and its consequences. The average person does not have this understanding because he does not study. It can be likened to a person who, upon witnessing another about to ingest poison. G-d forbid, would immediately jump up to prevent such an action. A *talmid chacham* comprehends the world and the upholding of Torah in this clear manner.

Rashi's explanation of “Torah is fire” means that when one studies Torah it becomes a reality just as fire is a reality. Halacha and Torah values are not mere conceptual or ideological positions –

“Torah is fire”. The person who studies Torah *knows* that not following the ways of Torah is detrimental and destructive— it is not merely a conceptual or abstract *understanding*. Torah is reality.

The Gemara states that our monetary stipend is allocated to us from Rosh Hashanah to Rosh Hashanah. Hashem provides for us for an entire year and this amount is decided on Rosh Hashanah. This is a fact. Of course we can conceptually *understand* this concept - but is this reality for us? Do we internalize the fact that all of our possessions come directly from Hashem? - or do we believe that *We* earn our possessions through our own efforts?

The tzaddik lives a life completely consistent with the Torah without deviation. The tzaddik does not justify actions, which are not exactly in line with the Torah because he has internalized halacha as fact and not mere concepts. When we say that our monetary stipend is allocated to us from Rosh Hashanah to Rosh Hashanah and we *know* this to be a fact then we can understand why Yaakov returned to retrieve the “small earthenware vessels”. Hashem gives us our possessions and they have a definite purpose.

The *Mesillas Yesharim* explains that even when a tzaddik performs a mitzvah he is afraid that he may not have performed the mitzvah in the most perfect manner. The tzaddik is concerned that a situation may arise that would prevent him and others from performing the mitzvah in an ideal manner. Is this mere paranoia? The tzaddik sees the reality of the world through his eyes, which are directed by Torah. He is able to see that the world is like a minefield. The tzaddik sees potential spiritual pitfalls as reality. This is the level of internalization demonstrated by a tzaddik. This is why the Torah tells us that Yaakov went back to retrieve the “small earthenware vessels” - to help us understand the dimension of Yaakov. He saw the principles of Torah as reality and not just conceptual.

5. The Value of Incentive

In this week’s parsha, Yaakov sends many gifts to Esav in advance of his arrival in order to defuse Esav’s anger and hatred towards him. The Torah tells, “You shall not take bribery (*shochad*), because it blinds the eyes of the wise and corrupts the tzaddikim”. Therefore the halacha dictates that a judge is not allowed to accept bribery. The Midrash asks – if even a tzaddik can be corrupted by accepting a bribe then how will Esav, who is a *rasha*, be affected? Seemingly bribery is innately negative and it has the ability to corrupt – it may appear that Yaakov is resorting to an action that is negative. How can we understand this?

We can answer these questions by understanding how bribery (*shochad*) can be seen in a positive way within a specific context. The Gemara at the end of Kesubos explains the reason why a judge is disqualified if he accepts a bribe from a defendant. The Gemara says that the word *chad* in Aramaic means “one” and when a judge accepts bribery (*shochad*) from a defendant he becomes “one” with the defendant (in Hebrew *shechad*). The judge therefore loses his objectivity and becomes partial and single minded with the defendant as a result of accepting *shochad*.

What was the basis of Esav’s hatred for Yaakov? Esav did not appreciate or understand the dimension and value of Yaakov. If Esav had understood and appreciated the spirituality of Yaakov, he would have supported and assisted him in any way possible. What is bribery (*shochad*)? Bribery is a mechanism that persuades the receiver to become “one” with the giver. The person who receives the bribe is made to see the world in a similar manner as the giver. From this, we can understand why Yaakov sent the bribe to Esav.

Yaakov wanted Esav to understand his spiritual dimension and to be able to appreciate him as a uniquely spiritual being. Therefore by giving the bribe to Esav, Yaakov wanted him to at least have a moment of clarity in which he would appreciate him and thus not kill him.

Normally bribery is corruption because a judge needs to be impartial; however, in the case with Esav, it is actually very positive. For example, if one wishes to motivate a child to engage in a

particular activity the parent needs to provide the child with some incentive. If the incentive is something the child desires, then the child can begin to appreciate the value of the task which the parent wants him to understand. If a person understands the value of a task in which he is engaged he would not require any incentive.

The Rambam says in *Shemona Prakim* that if one wishes to motivate a young child to study Torah he should give the child a sweet date since young children desire sweets. When the child grows a bit older and sweets are no longer as desirable, one could motivate the child by promising a pair of leather shoes. When the child enters adolescence, the incentive also needs to evolve, perhaps, into a new suit. As the child grows beyond adolescence, gold coins may be required to motivate the young man to study. When the child matures, hopefully he would come to realize the innate value of studying Torah and would not require any incentive. However the Rambam explains that until that point, the child needs to receive an incentive in order to build an appreciation for studying Torah. Giving the child incentives in this manner is a positive form of bribery. Through these incentives the child is able to come to understand the value of the parents' views.

One could take this a step further. The Chazal tell us that a person should perform Torah and Mitzvos even if they are performed without the proper level of intent or ulterior motives. The reason for this, as the Chazal teach us, is that a person who performs Mitzvos without the proper intent will come to perform them with intent over time. For example, if a person performs Mitzvos for the sake of reward then the case is similar to the child receiving an incentive for Torah study. Eventually the person will come to appreciate the value of the Mitzvah itself because they become "one" with the Mitzvah through their pursuit of reward. Since the person has self-interest in the Mitzvah he values its repetition. Hopefully we can all evolve from performing Mitzvos without the proper level of intent to performing them with the highest level of intent.