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The Power of Determination

Yonatan Chudnoff ('19)

One of the most illustrious stories in all of Tanach is mentioned in this week's *sedrah*. Yaakov is running away after "stealing" the firstborn blessing from his brother Eisav. Rivka, Yaakov mother, told him to go to her brother Lavan's house where Yaakov will be safe from Eisav's wrath. Yaakov eventually gets to a field where there are three shepherds with their livestock. They mention to Yaakov that the only way to get water for their livestock is to push off the enormous rock on top of the well and these shepherds are unable to due to the unimaginable size of this rock. The *passuk* then tells us:

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאָה יַעֲקֹב אֶת רָחֵל בַּת לָבָן אֲחִי אִמּוֹ וְאֶת צֹאן לָבָן אֲחִי אִמּוֹ וַיִּגַּשׁ יַעֲקֹב וַיָּגֶל אֶת הָאֶבֶן מֵעַל פִּי הַבְּאֵר וַיַּשְׁקְ אֶת צֹאן לָבָן אֲחִי אִמּוֹ.

"And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Laban, his mother's brother and the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother, that Jacob drew near and rolled the rock off the mouth of the well, and he watered the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother (Bereishit 29:10)."

The Midrash Rabbah describes that Yaakov was surged with so much physical strength that he was able to push off the enormous rock effortlessly. The Midrash gives the analogy that it was like a person removing the cap from a bottle; that's how unchallenging this was for Yaakov (Bereishis Rabbah 70:10). But the question arises: how did Yaakov all of a sudden possess so much incredible strength? Where did he suddenly acquire strength that was greater than many men combined?

The Alter of Slabodka finds an answer in the prayer for rainfall in Shemoneh Esrei of Shemini Atzeret. We mention:

יחד לב וגל אבן מפי באר מים, כנאבק, לו שר בלול מאש וממים

"[Yaakov] dedicated his heart and rolled a stone off the mouth of a well of water, as when he was wrestled by an angel composed of fire and water." The Alter of Slabodka concludes that dedication of the heart is what allowed Yaakov to perform these miracles. In Yaakov's fight with the angel, physical power would not have any effect, but dedication and determination would. Similarly, Yaakov's dedication to imitate Hashem in the ways of *chesed* was the source of his power by the well. His wanting to be able to help out these shepherds knowing there would be no reward at all is what allowed Yaakov to perform such a miraculous action.

David Hamelech mentions in Tehillim "*Sas anochi al imratecha kemotzei shalal rav*, I rejoice over your word like one who finds abundant spoils (119:162)." The Chafetz Chaim explains that if someone knew that underneath him was buried treasure and he only had limited time to dig it up, he would waste no time at all in quickly digging up the valuable items. This is how David viewed what Hashem's utterances. His heart was so aligned to wanting to learn Torah and his enthusiasm for it was so great that he wasted no time in learning Torah. David understood that the Torah is a precious gem much more than anything in the entire world. His dedication to crack open the rocks of Torah to obtain the gems was a goal he was able to accomplish with his determination.

The Zohar says:

כל מילין דעלמא לא תליין אלא ברעותא

"All matters of the world depend on nothing other than will (262)." The Zohar is saying that in order for people to accomplish their desires they need to want it, to have dedication and determination. Every person has the ability to perform amazing things and by focusing one's willpower a person is able to tap into their personal spiritual reservoir, becoming able to accomplish things beyond our wildest dreams.

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May we all be blessed to possess these powerful traits of determination and dedication just like Yaakov, and be able to utilize them to accomplish unfathomable goals in learning, *chesed*, and Yirat Hashem, and *be'ezrat Hashem* merit to see the building of the third Beit Hamikdash *bim'heirah beyameinu*, *amein*.

Parshas Vayetzei: Who Needs Battle Plans?

DJ Wartelsky ('20)

In the beginning of this week's *parsha*, Yaakov dreams his famous dream about the ladder that went up to heaven. There are lots of famous *midrashim* and comments about that dream and its aftermath. But something particularly confusing is Yaakov's vow to Hashem:

וַיִּדַּר יַעֲקֹב נֶדֶר לֵאמֹר אִם יִהְיֶה אֱלֹקִים עִמָּדִי וּשְׁמָרַנִי בַּדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ וְנָתַן לִי לֶחֶם לֶאֱכֹל וּבֶגֶד לִלְבֹּשׁ: וְשַׁבְתִּי בְשָׁלוֹם אֶל בֵּית אָבִי וְהָיָה ה' לִי לֵאלֹקִים: וְהָאֶבֶן הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר שַׂמְתִּי מַצֵּבָה יִהְיֶה בֵּית אֱלֹקִים וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּתֶּן לִי עַשֵּׂר אֲעַשְּׂרֶנּוּ לָךְ:

"Jacob then made a vow, saying, 'If G-d remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the L-rd shall be my G-d. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be G-d's abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You.' (Bereishis 28:20-22)"

There are two things which sound strange about this vow. From what Yaakov is saying, it sounds like he was lacking *emunah*, especially when he says, in *passuk* 21, that when all the things he delineated happen, *only then* will Hashem be his G-d. It also sounds like he was testing Hashem, which is *assur*, as the *passuk* in Devarim 6:16 says "*Lo senasu es Hashem Elokeichem ka'asher nisisem bamassah*, Do not test the L-rd your G-d, as you did at Massah." What is going on here?

To start off, Rashi says that the words "*Vehayah Hashem li leilokim*" are not a condition for Yaakov, but for the wives and children he will have in Charan. After all, that is one of the purposes of his flight. The Kli Yakar, on the other hand, says that this clause of the *neder* is a statement that Yaakov would serve Hashem out of love, not fear. Radak states that Yaakov's intention was that once he returned, he would be able to live out the rest of his life dedicated to Hashem and his service. The Chizkuni, though, states that Hashem will be the judge and avenger of Yaakov, and Rav Saadiah Gaon adds that he will be his "Mashgiach" as well. Alternatively, maybe Yaakov's intention was with regard to Hashem's treatment of Eisav. When he was still in the land, Eisav was treated with the attribute of Hashem (Mercy), but Yaakov davened that when he returned, Eisav would be handled with the attribute of Elokim (Justice), and he would not be able to kill Yaakov.

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On the other side of the coin, we have the question of Yaakov's test of Hashem. It seems that Yaakov was challenging Hashem, in the sense that he told Him that if he would return, he'd give a tenth of his profits to Hashem. The answer can be found in Maseches Ta'anis Daf 9a, where Rabbi Yochanan makes his famous *derasha* of "*Aseir bishvil she'te'aseir*". Maybe Yaakov was asking for Hashem to give him the spiritual and physical strength to survive Charan and Eisav's attack at his return, with his merit being the giving of *tzedakah*, to which he knew Hashem wouldn't refuse, because of *Aseir bishvil she'te'aseir*.

When Yaakov made this peculiar statement, we see that it's not because he was lacking *emunah* or because he was testing Hashem in a prohibited fashion; rather, he was just trying to preserve his life through *nedarim* which he knew Hashem wouldn't refuse. Next week, though, we see that Yaakov starts with a three-fold *hishtadlus* strategy and then switches over to an *emunah*-based plan. So what changed? To be continued…

שבת שלום!