

Vayeishev Raising the Holy Sparks

A. Yaakov, to be continued...

The story of Yosef is one of the most gripping stories in the Torah. Yosef and his brothers stand out prominently as they overtake Yaakov's role as the main characters in the narrative of the Torah. The Torah introduces this transition in a peculiar way. "*Vayesheve Yaakov b'erezt m'gurei aviv b'erezt c'naan. Eileh toldos Yaakov Yosef.*" "Yaakov lived in the land of his father in the land of Canaan. This is the story of Yaakov – Yosef...."

The Torah begins the story of Yosef by telling us that Yaakov was living in the Land of Canaan. Then the Torah abruptly jumps into the story of Yosef. Many years had passed since Yaakov had settled in Canaan, way before the story of Yosef began. Why mention it now?

Rashi comments on the connection of the verses. He writes, "Yaakov desired to live in tranquility and peace. The disturbance of Yosef, though, jumped upon him." Rashi continues. "*Tzadikim* wish to live in peace in this world. Hashem says, is it not enough for *tzadikim* what I have prepared for them in the World to Come? They want to have tranquility in this world!" This comment seems to be a criticism of Yaakov, who indeed desired to have a tranquil life.

But what is wrong with leading a tranquil life? Why do Chazal criticize Yaakov? Could we think even for a moment that Yaakov was going to retire and go fishing in these quiet years? We know *tzadikim* desire quiet so that they can learn more Torah and do more *mitzvos*. The Rambam poignantly mentions this point twice in *Yad Hachazaka*. In *Hilchos Tshuva*, the Rambam explains that all of the rewards of the Torah, such as rain, prosperity and peace assured to us in *Kriyas Shema*, are not really rewards. They are the results of doing *mitzvos*, because Hashem wants us to be able accomplish more *mitzvos* more easily. In this world, though, there is no actual reward. This world is a world of challenges. The true reward awaits us in the next world. All of the blessings that we receive in this world, of peace and quiet, good health, income, and good children, are all there to help us live fuller and better spiritual Jewish lives. "*S'char mitzva b'hai alma leka.*" There is no reward for *mitzvos* in this world." Hashem gives us all of these wonderful outcomes in order to enable us to lead even better lives, and to do even more *mitzvos* – but not as *s'char*, reward.

The *mishna* in *Pirkei Avos* says that one moment of *koras ruach*, the pleasure of *Olam Haba*, is better than a lifetime of pleasure in this world. Hashem knows what true pleasure is, and He truly wants to give it to us. We will therefore experience it in the next world. We don't necessarily seek pleasures in this world. We seek to do good things and to make the world a better place to live in. For this we need a supportive environment, with peace and quiet, together with the wherewithal to do it, including financial, psychological and sociological well being. We need peace and quiet in order to enable us to do the right thing, but not for *schar*, for reward.

At end of *Hilchos Melachim*, the Rambam poses a question, why do *tzadikim* want *Mashiach* to come? Because then we will have these ideal conditions. People will be healthy and live good lives without the competition of other people competing for scarce resources. There will be no need to fear. There will be no enemies to threaten one another. We will be able to live according to the Torah and to do the

mitzvos properly with ease.

So what was wrong with Yaakov's desire for tranquility? Isn't this the dream of every righteous Jew? Doesn't Hashem assure us of peace and quiet as a response to our good deeds? This will only help give us the wherewithal to do more. Why then was Yaakov criticized and punished?

B. Raising the Holy Sparks

Shem Mishmuel introduces here an important *chassidic* concept, called the holy sparks, *nitzotzos hakedusha*. When God created the world, Chassidus teaches, Hashem scattered many sparks of holiness throughout the world. Hashem charged humankind with the mission to search for them, dig them up and separate them. Then we must raise them to higher spiritual levels.

For example, Consider the food chain. There are four levels of God's creation: *Domem*, inanimate objects such as the earth and chemicals; *Tzomeach*, things that grow, vegetation; *Chai*, animal life, things that live and move around; and *Medaber*, the highest level of life, humanity. The inanimate objects exist by the will of God, but they do not have life. Vegetation is higher, since it is alive. It has an element of soul, which gives it vitality. Animal life has an even higher and more complex soul, thus making it higher spiritually. Humans have the most advanced soul, resembling in some ways God Himself. Our uniquely holy human soul grants us the ability to think, speak and to make moral choices.

We can look at the food chain from this new perspective of raising the holy sparks. From the lowest level, from the silent earth, grow fruits, vegetables and grains. The animals then eat the vegetation. Humanity, in turn, is sustained by the animals. This chain rises in spirituality higher and higher until it culminates in people. The elements and minerals that were originally contained within the earth gradually rise up the ladder of holiness as they are ingested and assimilated by successively higher spiritual beings.

This illustration is symbolic of the spiritual process. From the lowest levels of existence we can find wonderful things to raise to the human, holy level. This is an important part of the idea of holiness, raising sparks of holiness, *nitzotzos d'kedusha*.

C. Man is Uniquely Suited to Raise the Holy Sparks

Hashem gave the Torah to humans, not to angels. Why? Because angels cannot descend to the lowest level. Angels can't find those sparks. Angels neither fall nor rise. However, man can bend down to the earth, go to the lowest levels and find the sparks and then raise them up to his human level, and even higher to the angelic level. People have an amazing spiritual ability to lift things up from the lowest level to the highest.

Isn't this what people do all the time in the physical world? People go into forests full of trees. They clear away the brush and stones and build up the area. They make homes and playgrounds. People transform the wilderness and create beautiful civilizations.

What we see in the physical world is also true in the spiritual world. Wherever you see a spiritual wilderness, you should be aware that that very place contains the potential necessary for you to create a beautiful spiritual community. There are hidden secrets of *kedusha* in every place. *Chassidus* teaches us

that in the most barren and desolate places we can often find the greatest reservoirs of spirituality. When you dig for gold or diamonds you need to dig deep into the earth. At the surface you wouldn't see anything. You need to dig deep to find gold or diamonds. In the spiritual world as well, even in the most desolate of places we can find wonderful inspiring sparks of *kedusha*.

For example, the holy *gemara* was written in the barren spiritual desert of Babylonia, after Nevuchadnezzar had conquered Israel. The country of Babylonia was filled with idolatry and sorcery. Similarly, the Torah itself was not given in holy Yerushalayim, it was given in the desert of Sinai. The holiest moment in human history occurred in a barren, unholy and profane desert, naturally bereft of blessings and of life.

When Moshe went up to heaven to receive the Torah, he made this very argument against the protestations of the angels. They said, "Man is full of evil, how can the holy Torah be given to such lowly creatures?" Moshe responded, "That's exactly why we need it. We will take the holy Torah and clear away the spiritual wilderness that is in humanity, and we will replace it with a Garden of Eden." Moshe said we humans need the Torah and we can use it in the best way. We can make the lowest places into the holiest of places, like the barren mountain of Sinai, which blossomed with fragrant flowers when the Jews came to it to receive the Torah.

Chassidus and the Ramban say that the most desolate places have the most potential for *kedusha*. The Ramban made his famous trip to Israel and came to Yerushalayim. The holy city lay in ruins. He exclaimed, "The holiest place in the whole world is the most destroyed." Har Habayis was in ruins, the very place that once was home for the glorious *mikdash* Hashem, the Temple of God. When you see a place that is so destroyed, you must know that tremendous spiritual potential abounds there.

D. Why We Have So Many *Mitzvos*

Why do we have 613 mitzvos? Because we must find the sparks of *kedusha* in every aspect of existence. The Torah dictates how we should dress, eat, how we should conduct family life and business, how we should enjoy pleasures, how we should live and how we should die. Every aspect of human existence is governed by the Torah.

The Torah diametrically opposes other religions that say there are some elements of life that cannot be sanctified. For example, Christianity and some eastern religions reject relations between man and woman. They claim it is merely a physical pleasure that cannot be redeemed. It is defilement. However, they are wrong. The Torah says that to marry is a *mitzva*, to have and to raise children is a *mitzva*. It is God's will and a holy endeavor. The blessing recited under the *chupa* right before a couple is married proclaims that God has sanctified us with His *mitzvos*, specifically the *mitzva* of marriage. Marriage itself is called *kiddushin*, an act of holiness. We dare say that this is perhaps the holiest role of human beings.

According to Judaism and *chassidus*, what we might think is physical and mundane and bereft of the holy is really only a cover, a *klipa*. Inside that *klipa* is the holiest part of human existence. The Torah knows that the source of *kedushas yisrael*, the holiness of the Jewish people, lies within Jewish family life. This is why the Torah dwells on the stories of the marriages of the *avos* and *imahos*, to teach us about the inner holy workings of marriage, the source of the holiness of the Jewish people.

E. Holy Wandering

Based on this idea that the most holy is often found in the most physical, we can understand a core idea. Long ago, the Jewish people left its home and went into *galus*. We were called the Wandering Jew. However, we carried this title with pride. The *goyim*, especially those who hated us, said this term as a derisive epithet. They considered us rootless and superficial. They didn't understand that the wanderings of the Jew were a blessing in disguise. The Jewish nation has a mission: to find holiness wherever it is to be found, anywhere in the world. God put holiness everywhere in the world, in Africa, Asia, Europe, America, from the north to the south pole. It is covered up and our mission is to find it. Chassidus teaches that once all the holiness is found then Mashiach will come. We are mining for *kedusha* like other nations mine for gold or oil.

This idea of finding holy sparks in *galus* while being the wandering Jew has amazing meaning for us. We, who are still wanderers, are still in *galus*. The majority of our people still live outside the land of Israel. The land of Israel, thank God, has come back to life and Jews are returning. The majority of the Jews, however, are still living in *galus*.

Consider the United States of America. Did the Jew achieve his mission there? Has he raised all the holy sparks of the United States? Has he developed *kedusha* there? Yes he has! Look at who has been at the forefront of the human rights movement in the U.S. for over a century? The Jewish people. We were at the forefront of the labor unions of America. When Jews came to the U.S. at the turn of century there were no labor unions, people worked seven days a week in sweatshops, and child labor was rampant. The Jewish workers created labor unions and guaranteed fair salaries for everyone. They lobbied successfully for the government to outlaw child labor, and eventually achieved legislation for equal pay for women as well.

Jews led the civil rights movements. They marched together with Blacks in Atlanta, Georgia together with Martin Luther King, Jr. Jewish students were killed on trains in Mississippi fighting for black rights. Today, those rights are enshrined in American society and law. Jews stood up not for their own rights, but for others' rights. The Jews today are the driving force behind what are called voluntary hospitals. There are many such hospitals, with names like Mt. Sinai and Maimonides. Jewish scientists are at the forefront of scientific research. The Jewish minority in the U.S. gives more charity per capita than any other ethnicity. And Jewish charities distribute their funds to many different groups, not just to Jewish ones. The Jewish people has made a tremendous contribution to the holiness of American life. This is true of every country that the Jew has been in, whether Russia, England, France, Poland or the Arab countries. You should do more research and you will find that this is true.

There is another *kedusha* in Jewish wandering. Just as the holy people brings out holiness from the land in which it lives, it also learns holiness from the lands in which it lives. Our sages say that Hashem sent us into *galus* because Hashem wants us to bring "converts" into the Jewish people. Of course this refers to real converts who join us and give us great strength. We also want the "idea" converts, principles that enhance our level of holiness. The United States is known for its tolerance. Jews are at the forefront of the tolerance movement. American Jews are very tolerant. We learned that tolerance has tremendous value and now we bring it into the *kedusha* of the Torah. Freedom of speech is one of the great fundamental values of the US. Jews, too, have learned this value of freedom of speech.

The Jew brings *kedusha* to the gentile world, and there is *kedusha* that the Jew learns from the gentile.

I have a theory about the end of this long *galus*, which is approaching 2000 years, and which has spanned hundreds of cultures and locales. Each culture had good and holy things that the Jew elicited from that country. As we are now returning to Eretz Yisrael we should bring back these holy concepts and practices, the holy sparks of the foreign countries that we visited. We should bring back the tolerance of the U.S., the courage and steadfastness of Russia, the dignity of the English. All of these *midos* should become part of the Torah community of Israel. In Israel we are gathering all the sparks of *kedusha* into one place. Hashem put us into all of these places for us to gather sparks of holiness and bring them back.

Being in *galus* has brought another wonderful blessing for the Jew in his mission to find spirituality and develop it in this world. *Galus* means we are physically away from the land of Israel. We are distant from our holy sites. We are distant from Hashem in a physical way. There is a spiritual dimension to this too. People in *galus* feel alienated from Hashem. This distance causes a tremendous yearning to get closer to Hashem, to find Him and to speak to Him. We don't have a Beis Hamikdash where we know Hashem's *shechina* rests. We have to search for Hashem and find Him in this world. We are wandering. The more difficult it is the more we want to find him. The difficulty creates a powerful force to motivate us to discover *kedusha*. The Chumash says, "If you would seek Him with all of your heart and all of your soul, you will find Him!" *U'vikashtem, U'metzasem*. What gives rise to this motivation to search? *Galus*.

This terrible punishment has had a tremendous blessing hidden within it. We know how wonderful the *mitzvos* and prayers of *galus* have been in these 2000 years, the *halachic* literature that flowered, the *chesed* that we pursued, and the charity that we gave for years, because we have been away from our holy land. We knew we had to struggle to find Hashem. That struggle has made us strong, and thank God we were successful.

F. The Magnetic *Kedusha* of Eretz Yisrael

The holy Ari, the father of modern kabbala and precursor of *chassidus*, asked an important question. *Galus* has such a powerful impact. It is the way to find holiness in the world and makes us see and learn from the good and beautiful in the world. If the Jews never would have sinned, they would have stayed in Eretz Yisrael as promised in the Torah. How then would we have found all the *kedusha* in the world and joined it with ourselves? If we would have stayed in the land of Israel, how would we pursue our mission to find the hidden *kedusha*? The Ari answered in an amazing way, by comparing us to a magnet. A magnet attracts metal to it. If the Jewish people would have stayed in Israel without sinning, the *kedusha* of the world would have come streaming to Israel like metal is drawn to a magnet. Israel would have drawn the holiness of the world towards it!

Think of the time of Shlomo Hamelech. In his time he never left the palace nor the city of Yerushalayim. Still, the whole world came to him. Kings, queens, princes and princesses came from all over the world to Yerushalayim to see Shlomo. They heard of his wisdom, his holiness and the holiness of Israel. They came to see it. Jewish influence at that time was amazing. People throughout the world quoted Shlomo. When these people came to him, Shlomo learned from them about the rest of the world. He was mining the *kedusha* from the rest of the world. He achieved a magnetic affect and mined the *kedusha* just staying in his own throne room!

This explains why Shlomo married so many princesses. He had over a thousand wives. Shlomo wanted the influence of Israel to affect every country in the world. Each princess would be the conduit to her land. She would bring Shlomo's holiness back to her country and bring her country's holiness to Israel.

We see that the whole world now focuses on Yerushalayim. This is because they feel subconsciously *ki mitziyon tetze Torah udvar Hashem miyerushalayim*, that God's voice emanates from Yerushalayim. However, the evil side hides this. The world today focuses on Yerushalayim in a bad way. However, this is symbolic of what the world will be like when the world will be fixed in the time of Moshiach. On the contrary, then there will be a good focus on Yerushalayim. *Ki mitziyon tetze Torah*. The magnetic affect will happen. The center of *kedusha*, the *kedusha* of the world will go to and come forth from Yerushalayim.

G. The Humility Imposed by Galus

Shem Mishmuel adds an important point. *Galus* contains the tremendous blessing of developing what is holy, good and right throughout the world, like civil rights in America and social rights in Europe and Russia. However, *galus* has a heavy price. It is a difficult punishment. It comes with pogroms and had a Holocaust. When men dig a mine for diamonds, some people unfortunately die. The mines are deep and dangerous. If it is so difficult to dig for diamonds, gold, and coal, it is certainly difficult to dig for the diamonds of *kedusha*. This pain of *galus* creates a psychological holy state in the Jew. It is the important state of humility, of feeling humble before Hashem.

If one digs for gold or *kedusha* and finds them, one could become haughty, thinking that he is great. But Hashem wants people to do what is right for its own sake, not because of our ego. Because we are a holy people, we could come to think that we are a great nation in our own right, and become haughty. Unfortunately, this did happen with several kings in Yerushalayim who became full of pride and left the path of *kedusha*, like Kings Yehoash and Menashe. *Galus* brings us difficulties that keep our egos in check and make us humble.

If all the Jewish people would be in Eretz Yisrael and there would be no *galus*, the Ari said we would magnetically attract *kedusha* from around the world to Israel. What about the danger of becoming haughty and egocentric? What if we develop a sense of false superiority? Shem Mishmuel says therefore, that the magnetism of Israel will be accompanied by God given humility.

If we are now building a beautiful, holy place in Israel, we must realize that it is not our own achievement. Hashem gives us the blessing to achieve all of this. He gives us the ability to become holy. As the Torah says in Parshas Kdoshim, “*V'hiyisem kdoshim ki kadosh ani*. You shall be holy, because I am holy.” God shares His holiness with us, and through us with the rest of the world. We are messengers of Hashem. The *kedusha* is not ours, nor to our credit. It is His. Maintaining our humility is the key to creating a holy, successful and pure Torah society in Eretz Yisrael, which will magnetically attract *kedusha* from the rest of the world. Moshe Rabbeinu was humble, because he knew that he was only a conduit for Hashem. If there's even a trace of *gaava*, false pride and superiority, then we know we are not acting properly.

My rebbe, Rav Yosef Dov Halevy Soloveitchik *zt"l* used to say that if you achieve something in holiness, then pray to Hashem to give you the power to do something else. This is because you must remember that the power is not yours, but only His.

H. Yaakov was Ready for Olam Haba

Yaakov had lived a difficult life for more than twenty years. He had suffered. He had contended with Lavan and Eisav. He succeeded in finding and converting many holy sparks. He had completed a certain level of fixing of the world and finally had returned to Eretz Yisrael. Yaakov wanted to leap ahead to the time of the messiah. He thought Mashiach was supposed to arrive at that time.

In the messianic era, we won't be involved in fixing the world anymore. All of the holiness will have already been gathered. People will not have to suffer anymore in order to control the evil *gaava* urge to haughtiness and superiority. People will be able to be naturally holy and humble without challenges. It will be like Shabbos. On Shabbos we have *kedusha* but we don't have to worry about the evil side of haughtiness. It is a natural *kedusha*. It is a natural closeness to Hashem, like we will then experience, God willing, in the days of Mashiach.

Yaakov thought, "I've suffered enough through the ordeal of finding and purifying sparks found in the more base parts of the world. Now I want to focus on the good and pure. I don't want to think of the problems of the world. I don't want to worry about being humble. I want now to be in a state of Shabbos."

Maybe Yaakov thought that as the third of the *avos* he would bring Mashiach. But there was a new generation of Yosef and his brothers. Hashem's plan was that Mashiach would not come due to the efforts of the *avos* alone. He would come as a result of the deeds of the twelve *shvatim*. Granted, the *shvatim* were not at the level of the *avos*, they didn't match the holiness of their fathers. But Hashem wants the world to be fixed by masses of simple Jews.

I. Hashem Wants the Masses

He wants us, the Jewish *people*, to be a holy *people*. He wants us to elicit *kedusha* from the world. He didn't create this wide world for just a few *tzadikim*. He wants masses of people, many people to fix the world, each person in his family, in his school and in his *shul*, on his block and in his home. It is not enough that the *avos* did this. Yaakov thought it was enough but, Chazal say, he was wrong.

We have to help our children face their challenges in their lifetimes. We have to have another, larger generation of Jewish children and a larger generation. We need more people to adopt this mission of fixing the world and developing *kedusha*. There must be many people working to develop *kedusha*, not just a few *tzadikim*.

Eretz Yisrael was not given to the *avos*, it was only a theoretical gift to them. The gift is for an entire nation. This is the great lesson of the story of Yosef that follows *bikesh Yaakov leshev b'shalva*. The job of bringing the Mashiach was passed down to Yosef, "*Eileh toldos Yaakov - Yosef*." The story continues with Yosef. In order to tell whether Yaakov was successful or not, we have to look at Yosef and his brothers.

As a nation today, we have not yet achieved the *tikun* of the world, to develop all of the *kedusha* that we can. Especially now that we have resettled the Land of Israel, we have a special responsibility to develop the land and the State as a holy place, while avoiding the feelings of *gaava* and superiority.

Together, the many millions of us must make a holy country, a holy people, and a holy world.

Let us hope that we learn and implement the lessons of this *parsha*, of *eileh toldos Yaakov Yosef*. May we live our lives as parents, friends and neighbors, simply and humbly, good and pure, close to Hashem, full of *ahavas Hashem* and *ahavas Yisrael*, surrounded by holy sparks.

Questions:

1. What is the theory of the holy sparks?
2. How does this theory explain the *galus*?
3. Without *galus*, what would happen to the holy sparks in the world?
4. Give three examples of Jews in exile and the holy sparks.
5. What should Jews bring back to Israel from *galus*?
6. What is the role of a *tzadik* and the Jewish masses in fixing the world?

Exercises:

1. Keep a log for a week of how you personally encountered holy sparks and what you did with them.