



TORAH ACADEMY
of Bergen County

קול תורה

Parashat VaYishlach

Kislev 16 5776

November 28, 2015

Vol. 25 No. 11

GRATITUDE for Gifts

by *Rabbi Joel Grossman*

In Parashat VaYishlach, Ya'akov and Eisav use different expressions to describe what they possess. Ya'akov Avinu states "I have everything (BeReishit 33:11)," whereas Eisav says "I have plenty" (33:9). Why did each choose the phrase he did? In his *Darash Moshe*, Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that each was illustrating his understanding of the world in which he lived.

Let us analyze the two different world views. Rav Moshe explains that a person who truly believes in Hashem and knows that everything which he has is from Hashem should realize that whatever he has is exactly what he needs. A rich person has no more money than he should have, a poor person has no more than he should have, and a poor person has no less of what is necessary to fill his needs. While it may appear to the rich person that he has much more than he needs to provide for his family, he must realize that this is not the case. If Hashem blessed him with wealth, than that money is accompanied with more obligations. Supporting the poor and helping spread Hashem's Torah through helping Yeshivot are not optional, but they are rather responsibilities which come with financial success. For this reason a Tzadik understands that he never has plenty, rather he has "everything," everything he needs to fulfill his many obligations.

The wicked look at things differently than do Tzadikim. They feel that their wealth came to them solely because of their own efforts. Therefore, they do not feel that wealth brings with it any obligations. When such a person sees that he has more than is required to provide his needs, he will think that he has "plenty" because he does not accept the fact that he has any obligations other than to himself.

This was the difference between how Ya'akov and Eisav viewed life. Ya'akov Avinu understood that he had everything. He had everything he required to do the things which Hashem wanted him to do. Eisav, on the other hand, thought that he had plenty. He felt that he was free to do as he wanted with all he had and that he had more than he needed have.

We must learn to see the world as Ya'akov Avinu did. We must realize that we who have been blessed with wealth and

prosperity have an obligation to build Torah in our communities and spread the word of Hashem to the best of our abilities.

This past Thursday we celebrated Thanksgiving, a holiday in which we Americans offer thanks to Hashem for the wonderful blessings He has bestowed upon us. In Parashat VaYeitzei, Ya'akov says to Hashem "If you give bread to eat and garments to wear... I will give you Ma'aseir from everything" (28:20-22). In his *Ma'ayanei Shel Torah*, Rav Alexander Friedman poses the following question: As we know, there are no extra words in the Torah. As such, why does Ya'akov refer to bread, whose only purpose is to be eaten, as "bread to eat?" Also, why are garments, which are used only as clothing, referred to as "garments to wear?" Rav Friedman answers that there are many people who own large amounts of food and clothing, but they are sick and therefore cannot benefit from their wealth. Therefore, Ya'akov Avinu told Hashem that if he is given bread and clothing and the ability to enjoy them, he will give Ma'aseir to Hashem.

May Hashem continue to bless us with materials things, may we learn from Ya'akov Avinu about our obligation to properly use our many material gifts, and may Hashem bring peace in Israel and the world so that we may enjoy the gifts we have.

THE SHIMON AND LEVI of OUR TIME

by *Eitan Leff ('18)*

In Parashat VaYishlach, Shechem rapes Dinah and asks his father to take Dinah for him as a wife (BeReishit 34:2-5). After Shechem tells Ya'akov Avinu and the Achim that he wants to marry Dinah (34:11-12), "VaYa'anu Benei Ya'akov Et Shechem VeEt Chamor Aviv BeMirmah," "And Ya'akov's sons answered Shechem and his father Chamor with cunning" (34:13). The brothers' sneaky plot was that they would circumcise all of the males of Shechem (34:15), and due to Shechem's tremendous love for Dinah, he would comply. On the third day after everybody's circumcision, when all the men of Shechem were in pain, Shimon and Levi killed them all (34:25).

There are two stories that can help us understand the mistake of Shimon and Levi. The first story is about a wealthy man who was asked to donate money towards a hospital-building fundraiser. Although at first the millionaire said he adamantly did not want to donate any money, eventually he agreed to donate \$1,000. The head of the fundraiser, realizing how insignificant the \$1,000 donation was for the millionaire, did not accept the small donation and kept asking for more. Ultimately, the millionaire gave a check for \$100,000. However, the millionaire was not actually being generous – he knew his check would bounce

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because his charity account had only \$90,000. Because the check bounced, the head of the fundraiser borrowed \$10,000 from a friend, put the money in the millionaire's bank account, and then withdrew the \$100,000.

The millionaire heard what happened and demanded his money back. However, the head of the fundraiser argued that there is no law that prohibits depositing money into someone else's bank account. Because of this, the donation remained valid.

If this case was given to a Beit Din, the outcome may have been different. As presented in *Veha'arev Na*, Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein rules that in this case, the money should have been returned, for the Shulchan Aruch (Choshen Mishpat 242:1) states that if a person is forced to give a gift, he can take back the gift. The Sefer *Me'irat Einayim*, a commentary on the Shulchan Aruch written by Rav Yehoshua Falk HaKohein, a student of Rav Moshe Isserles, states that if a person is pressured to give a gift, he can retract the gift (ad. loc s.v. SheAnshu Littein Einah Matanah).

The second story is about a sneaky person's attempt to promote charity. There was once a head of a fundraiser who collected \$10,000 in one town from many different people. He then went to the mayor of the town to ask to trade the many small checks that summed to \$10,000 for one check worth \$10,000. The mayor had no problem with the deal and accepted it.

The fundraiser then took the check to the next town and asked for a similar donation, based on the fact that the mayor of the previous town gave \$10,000 to his cause. The mayor donated \$10,000 as well, but when he heard what had happened, he was very upset and asked for his money back.

According to the Gemara (Bava Metzia 96a), a person is allowed to borrow an expensive cow for the sole purpose of appearing to be rich. Because this is what the head of the fundraiser did, his actions are seemingly justifiable. However, Rav Zilberstein argues that the cases cannot be compared, because the Gemara's case is about a person who did not announce that he owned the cow despite the fact that it was borrowed. Therefore, the head of the fundraiser's actions are unjustified.

In Parashat VaYechi, Ya'akov bestows Berachot upon his children before he dies. When giving Shimon and Levi their Berachot, Ya'akov states, "*Shimon VeLevi Achim Kelei Chamas Mecheiroteihem*" "Shimon and Levi are brothers; stolen instruments are their weapons" (BeReishit 49:5). Rashi (ad. loc s.v. Shimon VeLevi Achim) explains that Shimon and Levi were one mind because they thought alike in Shechem. We must be careful and remember to not act cunningly, even if it might seem that doing so is the right thing, for deception is a slippery slope – before we

know it, our well-intended deception will turn into ill-intended deception.

Why Wait? by Avi Roth ('18)

In Parashat VaYishlach, Ya'akov finally reunites with his older brother Eisav. In preparation for this encounter, Ya'akov does three things, including, "*VaYachatz Et HaAm Asher Ito VeEt HaTzon VeEt HaBakar VeHaGemalim LiShenei Machanot*," "And Ya'akov divided the people that were with him, and the flocks, and the herds, and the camels, into two camps" (BeReishit 32:8). Ya'akov Avinu was worried about his family and possessions; therefore, he made sure that he would be able to preserve at least half of his family and possessions. After Ya'akov Avinu reunites with Eisav, Eisav wants he and Ya'akov to begin traveling together. However, Ya'akov declines because, "*Adoni Yodei'a Ki HaYeladim Rakim VeHaTzon VeHaBakar Alot Alay UDefakum Yom Echad VaMeitu Kol HaTzon*," "My master knows that the children are tender, and the flocks and the cattle, which are raising their young, depend upon me, and if they overdrive them one day, all the flocks will die" (33:13). Ya'akov Avinu had just risked his animals, his family, and himself to reunite with his brother. Eisav subsequently forgives him and wants Ya'akov to stay with him. Why was Ya'akov so worried about his sheep that he would give up the opportunity to stay with his brother?

Ya'akov Avinu learned to meticulously take care of his possessions from his grandfather, Avraham Avinu. After helping the five kings defeat the four kings (14:15), the King of Sedom wanted to give Avraham possessions (14:21). Surprisingly, Avraham turned the offer down, not even willing to accept a shoelace (14:23). Rashi (ad. loc s.v. VeLo Tomar Ani He'esharti Et Avram) explains that Avraham Avinu did not want to give the evil King of Sedom any credit for his wealth, but rather wanted to make sure that everyone understood that everything he had was from Hashem.

There is a story of Rebbe Avraham, the son of Rebbe Dov Ber. Rebbe Avraham was a great man, but he was very poor. Whenever his wife would weep about their sorrows, he would remind her that what happened in the past does not matter, because Hashem will help them survive upcoming challenges. Concerning the future, Rebbe Avraham always had complete faith that Hashem would protect them and take care of them. This leaves the present as the only time frame when Rebbe Avraham did not seem to be fully faithful to Hashem. Why waste time worrying about the present, something that lasts only an instant?

This helps us understand Ya'akov Avinu's thought process. He knew that his sheep survived the past, thanks to Hashem. Ya'akov also had complete faith that they would survive the future. He could only worry about the immediate threat, which would not last long. But didn't he have faith that Hashem would protect his camp?

Had Ya'akov not split his camp, Eisav would have had a greater chance of destroying everything which belonged to Ya'akov. Normally, Ya'akov Avinu would have had complete Emunah in Hashem, but in this specific instance, Ya'akov did not want to risk the chance that Eisav would have the opportunity to claim that he was responsible for Ya'akov's prosperity. Just like his grandfather, Ya'akov could not let someone other than Hashem claim any credit for his wealth. This is why Ya'akov took the extra precaution to split his camp into two and used his sheep as an excuse to not travel alongside Eisav. As soon as he reconciled with his brother, Ya'akov wanted to stay far away from Eisav and not give Eisav any chance to ruin his life.

We must learn from Ya'akov to distance ourselves from toxic influences. Once we accomplish what is necessary, we must place a great deal of distance between ourselves and the opposition. We should all have the Zechut to follow in the ways of Avraham Avinu and Ya'akov Avinu.

SARAH'S MIRACULOUS CHILDBIRTH AT AGE 90

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

A Challenging Question

A beloved congregant related to me that he was challenged by a co-worker with the following question: "Do you truly believe that the Biblical Sarah gave birth at the age of ninety?" The congregant asked me how to respond.

The question is indeed a valid one. Why should or how could a reasonable individual believe that a post-menopausal woman gave birth at age ninety? A proper response requires us to delve deeply into the story of Sarah's laughter at the report by the angels visiting her home, as recorded in BeReishit Perek 18.

Sarah's Puzzling Laughter

It is quite shocking that Sarah Imeinu laughed at the angel's report that Hashem will send her a child within short time. The response to Sarah Imeinu's laughter – "Is anything beyond Hashem's capabilities?" (18:14) – is something that should have been very apparent to Sarah. It seems quite apparent from Sefer BeReishit that Sarah Imeinu is a full partner in Avraham Avinu's spiritual quest and wholeheartedly shares Avraham Avinu's Emunah. Our question is all the more troubling in light of Rashi's observation (21:12 s.v. Shema BeKoloh) that Sarah's Nevi'ut (stature as a Navi) was superior to that of Avraham Avinu. How could someone who was on a higher spiritual level than Avraham Avinu have doubted the capabilities of Hashem?

Neis Nistar is Preferred over a Neis Nigleh

An answer to our dilemma lies in Hashem's preference of a Neis Nistar, a "hidden" miracle in which Hashem acts in a subtle manner and does not override the laws of nature, over a Neis Nigleh, an overt miracle such as Keri'at Yam Suf (splitting of the Red Sea) that involves a violation of the laws of nature. A Neis Nistar is preferred by Hashem since people must make an effort to

discover Hashem, for doing so allows a legitimate relationship to develop between humans and Hashem.

The following story, recorded in Shabbat 53b, illustrates this principle:

"There once was a man whose wife died and left him with an infant to nurse, and he could not afford to pay a woman to nurse the baby. A miracle occurred, and the man grew breasts like a woman, and he nursed his child. Rav Yosef said: 'Come and see just how great this man must be that such a miracle was performed for him!' Abbaye'i countered: 'On the contrary. How bad this man must be that the order of nature was changed for him.'"

The fact that Abbaye'i is given the last word in this passage demonstrates that his opinion is accepted.

The Gemara elsewhere (Ta'anit 23b) relates a similar story:

"Rav Mani was a student of Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv. Once, he came crying to his Rebbe, saying, 'The rich members of my father-in-law's house trouble and afflict me.' 'May they become poor,' Rav Yitzchak told him. Some time later, he again came to complain before Rav Yitzchak, saying, 'Now, they are pressuring me to support them. They tell me they have nothing to eat.' 'May they become rich,' Rav Yitzchak prayed, and so it was. A different time, Rav Mani came before Rav Yitzchak and complained, 'My wife is unattractive and I find it difficult to look at her.' 'What is her name?' R' Yitzchak asked. 'Chanah.' 'May Chanah become beautiful,' Rav Yitzchak prayed, and so it was. A short while later, Rav Mani again came with the complaint. 'She is beautiful now,' he cried, 'and treats me in an arrogant way.' 'If so,' R' Yitzchak said, 'May she again be plain.' And so it was. Two students of Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv once asked him, 'Rebbe, pray for us that we should become Torah scholars.' 'Once, I could do this,' he answered them, 'whatever I would pray for, the heavens would grant me. Now, I have returned this gift to heaven.'

Maharsha explains that Rav Yitzchak ben Eliashiv realized¹ that Hashem prefers to work through natural means instead of through miracles.

Understanding Sarah Imeinu's Laughter

Sarah Imeinu realized this point as well. This became obvious to her from the fact that Hashem did not intervene on her behalf or Avraham Avinu's behalf with a violation of the laws of nature unless it was absolutely necessary². For example, Hashem did not overtly appear to Avraham and Sarah when they arrived at their complete realization of Hashem's existence.

Accordingly, Sarah Imeinu found it difficult to believe that Hashem would send her a child in her post-menopausal state at age ninety. Sarah Imeinu reasoned that if Hashem wanted her to have a child, He would have sent her a child before she reached menopause, since He almost always acts in a natural manner.

Thus, Sarah Imeinu reasoned that the three men who visited her family could not be angels (as stated by Ramban in his commentary to BeReishit 18:12), since their report did not make sense. The response to Sarah Imeinu then was, appropriately, "Is anything beyond Hashem's capabilities," meaning that Hashem deems it necessary for her to have a child in a miraculous manner and that the three visitors were indeed angels.

The Necessity of Sarah Having a Child at Age Ninety

While we have explained Sarah Imeinu's laughter, we must still explain why Hashem felt it necessary for Sarah to have a child in a miraculous manner. We can answer based on the principle of "Ma'aseh Avot Siman LeBanim", that the actions of our Avot and Imahot (founding fathers and mothers) serve as a blueprint for the history of their descendants, the Jewish People³.

Seforno (BeReishit 18:12) observes that Hashem performed a sort of Techiyat HaMeitim (revival from death) of Sarah's uterus. Hashem felt this was necessary in order to embed the phenomenon of Techiyat HaMeitim into the basic fabric and makeup of the Jewish People. The Jewish People have repeatedly rebounded from situations during which, given the usual course of history, their demise should have ensued. We emerged intact from slavery in Egypt, the Egyptian attack at the Yam Suf (Red Sea), the Babylonian Exile, Haman's decree, the Hellenistic persecutions in the Hasmonean era, the Roman destruction, and Spanish Inquisitions, to name only the major situations where the Jewish People were close to extinction.

In more recent times, the incredible change in tide from the Holocaust ending in 1945 to the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz Yisrael in 1947 is a prime example of how the Jewish People have been "revived from the dead." Another modern day example is how Orthodox Judaism was heading in the direction of elimination in the mid-twentieth century. Sociologists in the 1950's

and even 1960's predicted the demise of Orthodox Judaism. In the meantime, Orthodox Judaism has been revitalized and is growing exponentially while all other Jewish denominations are disintegrating.

Shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel, David Ben Gurion was willing to grant dispensation to Yeshiva students from army service since he deemed Yeshiva students to be a relic that would soon die out. He hardly imagined a scenario where a burgeoning population of many hundreds of thousands of scrupulously observant Orthodox Jews would be clamoring for exemptions from army service in order to devote themselves to full time Torah study.

The Jewish Nation was created in a manner of Techiyat HaMeitim with the revival of Sarah Imeinu's body so that the Jewish People would bear the characteristic ability of renewal when all seems hopeless and foregone.

A Response to the Skeptic

Armed with this analysis, we may respond to the skeptic who argues that a reasonable person should not believe that Sarah Imeinu gave birth to Yitzchak Avinu at age ninety. One need only to observe the recurring pattern in Jewish History of frequent revivals of the Jewish People that run counter to normal historical and sociological patterns to believe that such a people began in a miraculous manner. One needs only to observe the miraculous revival of Eretz Yisrael and the Jewish People in Eretz Yisrael over the past one hundred plus years in order to believe that Sarah Imeinu had a child at age ninety.

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Questions, comments? Contact us at:

Kol Torah
c/o Torah Academy of Bergen County
1600 Queen Anne Road
Teaneck, NJ 07666
Phone: (201) 837-7696
koltorah@koltorah.org

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¹ Rav Yitzchak ben Eliashiv seems to have arrived at this conclusion from the lack of success of the violations of nature brought about through his prayers.

² Such as when Hashem saved Avraham Avinu from Nimrod's Kivshan HaEish (fiery furnace; BeReishit Rabbah 38:13).

³ Ramban develops this point at length in his commentary to Sefer Bereishit, beginning with his comments to Bereishit 12:6.