

Toronto Torah

Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

Parshat Vayechi

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This issue of Toronto Torah is dedicated by Mimi and Byron Shore in memory of Mimi's mother, Chaya Dabrusa bat Shneur Zalman z"l, whose yahrtzeit is 21 Tevet. May her neshamah have an aliyah.

This issue of Toronto Torah is dedicated by Yocheved and Joe Zeifman in memory of their beloved son Moshe Boaz z"l, whose yahrtzeit is 15 Tevet. May his neshamah have an aliyah.

Yaakov the Ophidiophobe?

Ezer Diana

In Bereishit 49:16-17, Yaakov blesses his son Dan to become a judge of his nation, and to be like a snake which bites the heel of a horse, causing its rider to fall off. He then cries out, "For your salvation, I have hoped [or: prayed to], Hashem." (Bereishit 49:18) This exclamation seems out of place in the middle of Yaakov's blessings to his children; what role does it play?

1: Protecting Shimshon

Various commentators, including Rashi (ad loc.), connect Yaakov's blessing to Dan with the story of Shimshon, a *shofeit* (leader, or judge) from the tribe of Dan. Shimshon defended the Jewish People from the Philistines, as recorded in Shoftim 13-16. According to Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam (ad loc.), Yaakov foresaw some of the challenging situations Shimshon would face and prayed for his success, expressing the hope that G-d would save Shimshon, and by extension, the Jewish People.

2: Transcending Shimshon

Other commentators, such as Ramban (ad loc.), interpret this line as Yaakov's realization that Shimshon would eventually be captured by the Philistines, and would die in their hands. He therefore exclaimed that he looked to Hashem's salvation only, and not to the salvation achieved by human beings.

3: Protecting Dan

Since Yaakov likened Dan to a snake

who causes a rider to fall off his horse, it would be realistic for Yaakov to expect that the rider might come after the snake to kill it. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (ad loc.) suggests that the verse should therefore be interpreted as, "For your (i.e. Dan's) salvation, I have hoped (or prayed to) Hashem."

Rashbam, as interpreted by Tur (ad loc.), also reads this line as a prayer on behalf of the tribe of Dan, although regarding a different hazard. He explains that the tribe of Dan camped in the rear of the other tribes in the desert, and thus required extra salvation from Hashem.

4: Scared by the Prophecy?

Ibn Ezra (ad loc.) also cites a "Rabbi Yitzchak", who claimed that Yaakov was frightened by the snake he had seen as part of Dan's prophecy, and so he called out something along the lines of "G-d, save me!" Similarly, various Enlightenment-era writers suggested that Yaakov suddenly felt weak, and prayed to Hashem to give him the strength to finish these blessings before passing. This view is heavily criticized by Shadal, and by Rabbi Yaakov Mecklenburg in HaKtav V'HaKabbalah. Indeed, the view of Rabbi Yitzchak sounds somewhat derogatory towards Yaakov; is it really appropriate to suggest that Yaakov was scared of an envisioned snake and so interrupted these blessings? However, this view is cited approvingly by Ibn Ezra and the Tur!

The words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (ad loc.), although not discussing the view of Rabbi Yitzchak per se, may offer a solution to this problem. Rabbi Hirsch writes that Yaakov feared that Dan – in the person of Shimshon, or in the tribal role of defenders of the border with the Philistines - would need to act like a snake in order to accomplish his Divine mission. The snake's method of attack is to sneak up and suddenly bite, and to do so in a stealthy manner. This translates to dealing in trickery and deceit with others. Even if it would be for the right purpose, Yaakov was worried about the effect that this might have on his descendants. Would they be able to follow these instructions, and also emerge unscathed? What kind of impact would these tactics have on their morals?

Yaakov himself had to engage in trickery with Esav and Lavan, and experienced firsthand the types of challenges that came with it. Perhaps Rabbi Yitzchak meant that Yaakov was fearful of what might happen to Dan, and so he prayed, right then and there, for his child to remain pure despite whatever tactics he might have to use.

We are often presented with choices, and sometimes we might make snake-like decisions for the right causes. However, we must always try to fulfill Yaakov's hope and prayer that we don't turn into snakes as a result of our actions.

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Summary

Our chapter begins with Achitofel's request to Avshalom to allow him to organize an army of twelve thousand men to fight King David and his loyalists. Achitofel tells Avshalom that he will arrange a surprise attack against the king, in which "I [Achitofel] will come upon him while he is exhausted and weak handed; I will frighten him so that all the people who are with him will flee, and I will strike down only the king... When everyone will have returned, the man whom you are seeking [will be dead] and all the people will be at peace." (Shemuel II 17:3-4, ArtScroll tr.)

Despite the attractiveness of this proposal, Avshalom consults Chushai – an ally of King David posing as a supporter of Avshalom – for a second opinion. Chushai reminds Avshalom

that David is a skilled warrior who will likely be hiding away from his people, thereby making it difficult to target him. Therefore, Chushai advises Avshalom (ibid. 17:11), "I would suggest that all of Israel should be gathered unto you, from Dan to Be'er Sheva...and that you should personally lead the battle." (17:5-13)

Avshalom and his advisors are convinced by Chushai's argument over Achitofel's. Achitofel kills himself over his disappointment that Avshalom dismissed his counsel. (17:14-23)

Meanwhile, Chushai informs King David's loyalists of Achitofel's treacherous advice to Avshalom, so that they can prepare for battle. Our chapter ends with Avshalom and David's troops preparing to battle at Machanayim. (17:24-29)

Insight

Perhaps Achitofel could have avoided his own downfall, had he followed one of his own teachings.

Per Pirkei Avot (6:3), one must accord honour to anyone from whom one has learned Torah, even if it is only one chapter, one law, or even one letter. Avot supports this by saying that David called Achitofel his "master," even though he had only learned two things from him. A midrash (Kallah Rabi 5:4) says one of the lessons was that one should not learn Torah alone if one could learn with others, lest one misunderstand for lack of a second opinion. Perhaps Achitofel, who is described as giving advice which was "like the word of G-d", would have benefited from a second opinion regarding joining Avshalom.

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Clickable Zoom links also available at www.torontorah.com/letslearn

SPECIAL PROGRAMMING

9:30 AM—11:30 AM Sunday Jan. 3: Advanced Yarchei Kallah on Shemithah! Otzar Beit Din: Shemithah Solution, or More Trouble Than It's Worth?

9:30 AM Chavruta Preparation of Sources, 10:30 AM Shiur with Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner
Registration (not required) at torontorah.com/yk; ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/yarchei>

10:00 AM Wed. Jan. 6: Medieval Provence: Creativity and Chaos, a 3-part series
Rabbi Sammy Bergman, Week 1: Rabbi Moshe haDarshan, Father of the Sermon
Register at <https://torontorah.com/provence>

DAILY

Mon-Thu 10 AM to Noon, with Rabbi Moshe Yeres, via ZOOM (men)
Monday/Wednesday: Gemara Succah, Orot haTeshuvah
Tuesday/Thursday: Parshah, Tanach: Shemuel

WEEKLY

Shabbat Jan. 1-2
After minchah, Shaarei Shomayim, R' S. Bergman, Parshah

Sunday Jan. 3
9:20 AM Contemp. Halachah, Netanel Klein (not this week)
10:00 AM Gemara Shabbat, R' Aaron Greenberg (University)

7:30 PM Gemara Ketuvot, R' Mordechai Torczyner (men)
8:15 PM Uncovering Midrash with Rabbi Chaim Metzger

Monday Jan. 4
8:30 PM Gemara Shabbat, Chap. 15, with Rabbi Moshe Yeres

Tuesday Jan. 5
1:30 PM Megilat Esther, with Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner
7:30 PM Shoftim, with Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner (men)

Wednesday, Jan. 6
6:15 AM Talmud Ketuvot, with Rabbi Sammy Bergman

Wednesday Jan. 6 (continued)
7:30 PM Genesis Journeys, with Rabbi Sammy Bergman

7:30 PM Greatest (Halachic) Hits of COVID: The Vaccine!, with Rabbi Alex Hecht

Thursday Jan. 7
8:30 AM Daniel, Rabbi Chaim Metzger (University)
1:30 PM Shemuel, with Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner (women)

8:00 PM Gem. Beitzah, Ezer Dena (men) (not this week)
8:15 PM Gem. Bava Metzia, R' Bergman (University women)

Friday Jan. 8
8:30 AM Parshah, Rabbi Sammy Bergman (University)

10:30 AM Shemithah!
with Rabbi Sammy Bergman and Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner