

Vayishlach: A Little Less Confidence

Moshe Taragin

Ya'akov endures a lifetime of confrontation and chaos. He grappled with his father-in-law, warred with the local rapists of Shechem, and, toward the end of his life, emigrated to a foreign country – never to return to his homeland. Amidst all this drama, his tense face-off with his armed brother-flush with four hundred warriors-is the most perilous day of his life. Having been assured of Divine protection, Ya'akov should, logically, feel confident about his prospects. In addition to that divine guarantee, Ya'akov enjoys the support and protection of a vast entourage of family, slaves and cattle. No longer a penniless and lonely man barely escaping Esav's clutches, he is now the leader of an impressive clan. Finally, he should take reasonable confidence in his past struggles, having survived twenty years of a devious father-in-law. As he faces off against Esav, Ya'akov has every reason for supreme confidence in his ultimate victory.

Yet surprisingly, he is agitated with worry. Nervous of the outcome, he adopts numerous strategies to assure victory, or, at least, to limit the casualties. After dividing his camp into two factions and presenting gifts and tributes to his furious brother, Ya'akov desperately prays for Divine assistance. Conceding his fears to Hashem, he famously acknowledges: "Katonti" (literally "I am small")- an iconic phrase which perfectly captures his shrunken confidence. It seems odd that a person of such colossal faith and of such mighty religious achievement should feel so tiny.

Apparently, despite his past successes, Ya'akov has numerous reasons to doubt his future. Looking back, he has benefitted from two decades of extraordinary divine intervention. Not only did he survive "against all odds", but he returned as the wealthy head of an impressive family. Having received such profuse abundance perhaps the "divine well" now runs dry, and he can no longer expect future generosity. He doesn't take the past twenty years for granted.

Additionally, he was concerned with conspicuous shortcomings in his religious behavior. Absent for two decades, he wasn't available to tend to his aging parents – who incidentally, continued to be supported by his brother. Furthermore, Ya'akov had been missing from the land of Hashem for longer than either of his predecessors. Perhaps he can't just "parachute in" to the promised land after

such a long absence and lay claim against a rival brother, who had "labored on" for two decades. Through no fault of his own, Ya'akov had lapsed in two crucial mitzvot and perhaps the "bill was due". Hashem doesn't round off our religious performance. Sins of the righteous are accounted for, just as merits of the wicked are considered. Despite his overall religious accomplishments, Ya'akov was concerned "shema yigrom hachet"- even minor sins would compromise his future. He remains vexed with uncertainty.

He was not alone. While he was momentarily worried by the uncertainty of "katonti", Dovid Hamelech is continuously haunted by lack of religious confidence. Facing seemingly endless enemies, he feels lost, taking no solace in any assured outcome. Utterly unconvinced of future security, he desperately clings to Hashem for hope and survival. The sins of his past gnaw at his conscience, thwarting any future optimism. Ya'akov experiences a flash of uncertainty but in the book of Tehillim, Dovid is unceasingly immersed in religious insecurity.

Ya'akov in parshat Vayishlach and Dovid Hamelech in the course of Tehillim, showcase the important balance between religious confidence and doubt. Proper calibration of the two is vital for personal achievement, emotional health and, even more so, for religious success. It is obvious that healthy confidence in our abilities and talents is crucial to our general successes. It generally improves our self-esteem, leads to better decision making and motivates hard work.

Confidence is even more crucial for healthy and lasting religious growth. The very concept of religious duty and mitzvah observance, exerts formidable pressure upon us. Religious shoulders carry great weight and heavy expectations. Too much pressure can quickly spiral into religious despondency, emotional anxiety and obsessive behavior. Too much failure and guilt can create a perpetual sense of religious disappointment. Religious observance isn't meant to suffocate our emotional happiness nor to cause excess religious nervousness. Serving Hashem is meant to transform us into better and happier versions of ourselves, endowed with the quiet confidence which only faith and belief can supply. Religion and emotional anxiety are a volatile mix- and one which rarely lasts. Ultimately, too much stress and too much emotional disquiet is unsustainable, and persistent nervousness or guilt often "eject" someone from orbit of religion. For religious life

to be successful and sustainable it must be anchored in the calm confidence of religious success.

As important as confidence is, it is also crucial to sense "under confidence" and to feel uncertainty. Healthy self-doubt is a gateway to personal growth. Supreme confidence blinds us to ideas beyond our own imagination, whereas intellectual humility compels us to probe for the truths we don't yet possess. Doubt for the layman is integrity for the scholar. Healthy self-doubt invites self-critique, opening our hearts to the input and corrective wisdoms of others. Our culture imbues the value of strong confidence, sometimes to the detriment both of intellectual flexibility and attentiveness to differing views.

Self-doubt is even more valuable in our religious practice and experiences. Religion can be defined as an endless pursuit of the Unreachable. Often, moderate religious success breeds contentment and religious stagnation. The final section of masechet Berachot comments that righteous people have no respite either in this world nor in the next. Constantly striving for greater spirituality, religious people should always be stretching their religious horizons. Confident in their religious practice they, none the less, should not be content with their current religious level. We are searching for the infinite. In that search there is little room for contentment.

Secondly doubt and insecurity helps us retain our humility. Self-introspection and self-scrutiny evoke our fragility and our dependence upon a Higher Being. There is a thin line between confidence and swagger and healthy self-doubt prevents us from crossing it.

Proper "confidence calibration" yields a life of "poise". People of poise are fully aware of their talents just as they admit their limitations. Religiously "poised" people innately feel confident in their relationship with Hashem. This security provides inner equilibrium and composed religious practice. However, they always doubt their accomplishments, seeking new vistas for religious opportunity, rather than resting upon past laurels and prior accomplishments. They feel at once, large and small.

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