From Whence, Strength

by

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There are a couple of powerful motifs in Torah, motifs which offer us many insights into the human condition, our heritage, and our unique relationship with God. One is the barren matriarch – the challenge of pregnancy and birth in the context of the promise of a great people. There is also the deeply human need to find a mate. Not only do we desire connection in our lives, but as we understand the world around us, we begin to appreciate the value and importance of how our personal relationship impact our families, our communities and our world.

Few human tasks are as fraught with emotional uncertainty as finding the *right* mate, one who will not only fulfill individual needs but also the challenges and responsibilities of our community and the promise of the future ahead.

In our Torah narrative, we have only just finished learning of Eliezer’s task of finding a wife for Yitzchak and discovering Rivkah at the well and now we see Yaakov about to discover his own mate, Rachel. Unlike Yitzchak, for whom Eliezer was an emissary, Yaakov was the one who came face to face with his future bride.

When Rachel first appears at the well, Yaakov demonstrated what we can only call “superhuman” strength in rolling the stone from the mouth of the well so that Rachel could water the sheep of Lavan, his mother’s brother. While we may find ourselves enamored by this image of Yaakov, powerful and strong, displaying such strength upon meeting Rachel, we are better to ask, “What strength is the text referring to?” After all, Yaakov had just completed a long and exhausting journey, both emotionally and physically. My goodness, just taking a red-eye flight is enough to knock most of us out for two days and here, immediately after his long journey, Yaakov is able to roll away this massive boulder *single-handedly*!

Where does he get the strength to accomplish a feat that at all other times demands the concerted effort of *all* the shepherds working in unison? Since when do we associate such strength with Yaakov?

“We will be unable to, until all the flocks will have been gathered and they will roll the stone off the mouth of the well; we will then water the flock.” (Bereishit 29:8)

It is fair to ask, what society covers the well with such a massive stone that every shepherd working together as one is required to move it? To answer that question, we must understand Lavan’s society and its mindset, the Aramean mindset. As Rav Hirsch explains, in that society, no one trusted the other and as a consequence no one would allow another any possible advantage. In the case of the well, there was always the fear that one would take more than his allowed share. Life was, for them, a zero-sum game – you win, I lose. Distrust defined their interactions. Therefore, they ensured that *no one* would get any water unless *everyone* was able to get water. At the same time.

This was the Lavan’s world.

Into this culture stepped Yaakov. “Yaakov came forward and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well and watered the sheep of Lavan...”  (29:10)

Easy.

That very same boulder that required an army of shepherd’s to move was rolled aside by a single man, Yaakov. How easy was it for Yaakov to move the stone? “Like a man who is removing a lid from a bottle,” Rashi tells us. “[This is to show] that he had great strength.”

As Rachel looked on in wonder, Yaakov did the impossible as if there was nothing to it! Imagine how impressed Rachel must have been with this “muscle man”! She must have swooned… but wait! Since when does Torah glorify muscles? Why would the future mother of Yosef value brawn? And since when is Yaakov such a strong guy?

No way is Torah focused on physical strength!

Torah does not relate these narratives solely to tell us tales about our patriarchs; these stories are to teach us about our own lives and how we are to live. Understanding that makes it doubly clear that Torah is not focusing on physical strength. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz teaches that Yaakov’s great strength was not even known to him until he focused; and in focusing revealing powers he did not even know he possessed. In other words, the truth of Yaakov’s experience is the truth of our own – we all possess latent strengths that we are unaware of until we focus on them.

Most of us have *no idea* of the strength we possess! We are clueless of what we can accomplish if only we set our minds to it – our *minds* not our muscles! We are each born with a vast reservoir of strength at our disposal, a reservoir of strength that enables us to overcome great obstacles *if only we focus*. Move boulders? We can move *mountains* if we are driven by a pure goal. We need only have the pure desire Yaakov had for Rachel and we can change the world.

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz looks to the *Tefilat Geshem (*Prayer for Rain) which we recite on Shemini Atzeret to find support for this idea that we have a near infinite store of potential strength.  In our prayer, we beseech God to *Zechor* – to bless us with rain in merit of our righteous ancestors and their worthy actions. “Remember Abraham who followed You as to the sea flows water.” “Remember one [Isaac] whose heralds three beneath the tree had water...” We ask God to remember Moshe who, “was drawn from the water...”  and Aaron, “who immersed five times”, and the twelve tribes, “You brought across the divided water”

And what about Yaakov?  What do we ask God to remember of Yaakov?  *Yichad lev v’gal even m’pi be’er mayim* – “He dedicated his heart and rolled a stone from the mouth of a well of water.”

R’ Chaim dismisses any thought of Yaakov’s actual physical prowess. If we are speaking of Yaakov’s physical strength, he wants to know, what merit do we ask God to remember? His muscle power is a *zechus* for God to *zechor* and remember? The very idea is laughable. We are not talking about biceps; we are talking about spiritual focus; about an inner strength that results from absolute dedication and devotion. Yaakov’s resolve to assist Rachel in watering her suffering sheep enabled him to accomplish the impossible, to “roll the stone from the mouth of the well.”

Just like that he was able to do what was for others incredible and superhuman. How was he able to accomplish this great task? Because his motivation was genuine love not distrust and jealousy; he dedicated his heart – and such dedication is a merit for all of us. His dedication is a lesson for us for all time. Look what we can accomplish when we devote our hearts to the task – *yichad lev*.

Rabbi Philip Moskowitz, in a May 27th, 2020 *Aish.com* article, writes about preparing to run the Boston Marathon. “…People would often ask me what was the most difficult part of the training. And for me, the most difficult part of training was simply finding the motivation to get out the front door.

“I didn’t always feel like running. Each time I’d get ready for a run, my mind would become flooded with a slew of reasons why not to run: I was too tired, I was didn’t feel great, I had a sore toe…”

We don’t need to run the marathon to relate to Rabbi Moskowitz’s experience. There are *always* reasons to not do something. It takes dedication and devotion to accomplish our goals. It takes dedication and devotion to muster the *strength* to get ourselves over the line. It’s hard. There are always more reasons not to press forward than to press forward.

In Torah, it is clear that the shepherds of Lavan’s society couldn’t muster the dedication. To them, it wasn’t all that important to rise above their negativity and distrust. But to Yaakov, who so desired to help Rachel, there could be nothing – no boulder, no voice whispering in his ear – *nothing* that could stand in his way. He summoned the fullness of his potential; he called up those same hidden powers we all have been born with and he *rolled away the stone* that bedeviled all but a full number of shepherds. Not only did he accomplish this great feat, but he did it as easily as taking a cork from a bottle.

Rav Shmulevitz is clear. Each and every Jew possesses a wealth of powers, talents, and abilities. The key to unlocking that wealth is devotion and dedication, releasing ourselves from distrust and envy, from a zero-sum mindset. We need only have a pure and true aim and the focus to know God will support our efforts. With determination to succeed, we can reach heights we never dreamed possible.

Our Torah teaches us that it is not the stone that is the impediment, it is our own lack of trust in ourselves and in the gifts, God has given us.