

VAYEITZEI

THE MISSION OF HOLINESS—
A HOLY NATION

A

Blessings before Success

“Yaakov left Be’er Sheva and went to Charan” (Bereishis 28:10).

At the beginning of the *parsha*, Yaakov is about to embark on a long and difficult journey. On this journey, over the course of twenty-two years, he will encounter many difficulties. He will struggle to find a wife and build a family, struggle with Lavan, and struggle to avoid entanglements with Eisav. After encountering Eisav, Yaakov will have more troubles with his children Dina and Yosef.

Avraham and Yitzchak endured various struggles and challenges in their lives. Only after they succeeded did Hashem give them blessings. With Yaakov, though, the order was reversed. He received blessings from Yitzchak of *olam hazeh* and *olam haba*, Eretz Yisrael, children, nationhood, and holiness. He received a wonderful blessing at the beginning of his personal exile from Israel, in his vision of the angels on the ladder that stretched from heaven to earth. Hashem promised to protect him and return him to the holy Land of Israel. Yaakov then embarked on his life’s

journey, eventually becoming Yisrael, the final founding father of the nation of Israel.

Why did the blessings of Yaakov come before the major challenges in his life?

B

Two Styles of Leadership

In its discussion of this *parsha*, the Zohar opens with the *pasuk*, “*Ashrei shomrei mishpat osei tzedaka b’chol eis*. Praised are those who protect justice and do charity at all times” (Tehillim 106:3). What does the Zohar mean by citing this *pasuk* here? It wants to tell us that Yaakov was a protector of justice and a giver of charity. In Chassidic and Kabbalistic terms, these two great values are called *gevura* and *chesed*. What are these two poles?

When the Jews lived in Eretz Yisrael, they employed two different styles of leadership during different stages of their history. During the first stage of Jewish settlement of the Land of Israel, they were led by judges, *shoftim*, such as Boaz and Shmuel. They did not have a king. This situation continued for centuries. Only after many hundreds of years came the transition to monarchy. The people asked Shmuel for a king. Shaul was the first king, followed by Dovid and his dynasty. What is the nature of each of these two systems of government, the *shofeit* (judge) and the *melech* (king)?

C

The *Shofeit’s* Role

The Shem Mishmuel teaches an important distinction between these two types of leaders. The *shoftim* were the leaders of the country for the first few hundred years. What happened during

these years? The Jews settled the land and defeated their local enemies. The *shoftim*, though, did not lead the Jews in battles outside of the Holy Land. They led the Jews only inside Israel itself. By contrast, Dovid Hamelech was involved in wars outside of Israel. He expanded the borders of Israel into Syria and across the Jordan River, beyond the boundaries delineated in the Torah.

The job of the *shoftim* was to preserve the Jewish character of the people within the land. The *shofeit* was responsible for making sure that the people upheld justice. He had to determine right and wrong. The Jewish people lived in the Land of Israel, the God-given land. The *shofeit* oversaw an internal system, focused within Israel, to make Israel operate properly. Therefore, the *shofeit* and the people then had no interest in the outside world. There were no ambassadors to outside countries, and no foreign ambassadors were coming to Israel. The Jewish People lived in a cocoon within their own land. The *shofeit* kept the “House of Israel” in order.

D

The Role of the King

What about the king? The king leads Israel beyond itself. The king of Israel interacted with other nations. He sent ambassadors to them and they sent ambassadors to him. The best example of this is King Shlomo. Foreign delegations would come to talk to him daily, among them the famous delegation of the Queen of Sheva. She came from Africa to meet Shlomo and according to some opinions even married him. Shlomo had a tremendous impact on the world outside Israel. Dignitaries and princes, kings and queens from all over the world, came to speak to him.

The nation of Israel had changed from an insular people with an internal focus to a nation-state that influenced others and spread Torah to the whole world. The reason Shlomo married princesses from other countries was because he felt that by

doing so, he could spread Torah and the word of Hashem to their monarchies. Shlomo had the spirit of Mashiach in him. For him, Israel was supposed to be a land and a people with a special Godly message for humanity.

E

Mamleches Kohanim

At Har Sinai, Hashem told us that He wanted us to be a *mamleches Kohanim* and a *goy kadosh* (Shemos 19:6). Kohanim are part of a larger group. They are supposed to teach and inspire other people. If all of the people of Israel are called *mamleches Kohanim*, we must ask: for whom are they Kohanim? The answer is that they are Kohanim for the whole world, charged with inspiring and teaching the world about Hashem and the *mitzvos bnei Noach*. The Rambam says that if a non-Jew keeps the *mitzvos bnei Noach* without ascribing them to the Torah, he is not called a *chassid*. He has to know that the idea of charity, or being a loyal husband or wife comes from Hashem. These values come from the Torah that Hashem gave to Bnei Yisrael. Thus, we are a *mamleches Kohanim* regarding this mission in the world.

We also have to be a *goy kadosh*, which connotes separation from the rest of the world. While maintaining our separate identity, we also are charged with being part of the world, spreading Torah values, and serving as a model of closeness to Hashem.

We are living in an age in which Hashem has forced us to play a double role. In today's economy, the Jew *is* part of the world. We don't live in ghettos anymore. We are part of a big and, at the same time, a small world. Through the internet and ease of travel, Jews are found in every corner of the world and involved in a multitude of occupations. Jewish merchants, programmers, doctors, businessmen, writers, and thinkers are involved in every aspect of

humanity and human existence. Hashem put us there by design. We are in the process of becoming a *mamleches Kohanim*.

F

Goy Kadosh

While thriving as members of the world, we must remember that the internal holiness of the Jewish People is sacrosanct. It is first and foremost. We must be spiritually strong within and then bring this strength to the world. Hashem is now telling us, “My Jewish children, you are ready to do this. I have taken you out of the ghetto and exposed you to everybody. You should strengthen yourselves internally through Torah, *mitzvos*, and Jewish education.” “*Al tira avdi Yaakov*” (Isaiah 44:2), don’t be afraid to go out into the world to bring the holy message of Hashem to everybody. It is very important that we serve as models for non-Jews as we participate in the world at large. We must be the shining example of business ethics. We must avoid cheating. We have to avoid any fighting and *chillul Hashem*. This has a tremendously positive impact on others. We are Kohanim. By keeping these principles, we demonstrate to the world the sanctity of Hashem and of His people.

“*Ve’ahavta eis Hashem Elokecha*. And you shall love Hashem, your God” (Devarim 6:5). Chazal say that this teaches us, “*sheyehei sheim shamayim misaheiv al yadecha*, that God should become beloved through your actions” (Yoma 86a). This applies to our dealings with both Jews and non-Jews. The rest of the world should say, “This is a nation of holy priests. They show through their behavior that we can *all* be better people.”

Thus, the Shem Mishmuel explains the respective missions of *shofeit* and *melech*. The *shofeit* is an internal authority to make sure people act as a *goy kadosh*. The *melech*, on the other hand, is supposed to represent the Jewish people to the outside world,

to create a *mamleches Kohanim* that brings God's message and holiness to the international community and radiates *kedusha* from the Land of Israel to the rest of the world. This is why Dovid and Shlomo Hamelech had so many interactions outside of the borders of Israel.

Our *parsha*, says the Zohar, illustrates *mishpat* and *tzedaka*. *Mishpat* refers to internal justice, proper relationships between man and his fellow, *bein adam lachaveiro*. *Tzedaka* means reaching out and showing what it means to serve Hashem. This is an act of *tzedaka*, of righteousness, in the broadest sense of the word. We are supposed to spread and share our most precious possession—our knowledge of Hashem.

G

The Dangers of Charan

While Yaakov lived in Be'er Sheva, he was an *ish tam yosheiv ohalim*, a simple Jew studying in the tent (Bereishis 25:27) in the *yeshivos* of Sheim and Eiver, of Avraham and Yitzchak. At that stage of his life, he was like a *shofeit*, developing himself internally.

When Yaakov left Be'er Sheva to go to Charan, he began a new era. Charan in Hebrew connotes anger, problems, and strife. The outside world was antithetical and inimical to Yaakov's values. The residents of Charan committed every possible sin: *avoda zara*, murder, licentiousness, and theft. Yaakov was going to live with the evil criminal number one, Lavan. Chazal say that Lavan had the spirit of Bilam within him; in fact, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 105a) says that Bilam *was* Lavan. Bilam was a great sorcerer and a proponent of everything evil. His philosophy promoted the crimes listed above. Lavan was not simply an evil person. He was a philosopher and architect of all that was evil in the world. He was the progenitor of Bilam. On Pesach, we say Lavan was worse than

Pharaoh, who wanted to kill only Jewish boys; Lavan “wanted to destroy everything.”

Pharaoh wanted to destroy the Jewish people physically. He enslaved the Jews, but he did not attack their religion. He even allowed us to have our own Kohanim and Levi'im. He allowed the people to pray. At some point, he even allowed Bnei Yisrael to have Shabbos. He was opposed to Jewish physical freedom. He was certainly evil. But not as evil as Lavan.

H

Lavan's Opposition

Lavan wanted to destroy everything. He was the archenemy of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. He philosophically believed in evil, that to curse and destroy was good as long as he got his way and succeeded. Lavan maintained an evil ideology of cruelty. Unbelievably, Lavan became Yaakov's father-in-law! Two of his daughters and another two girls from his house became wives of Yaakov.

At the end of the *parsha*, Lavan says, “These girls are mine and these boys are mine” (Bereishis 31:43). He didn't just mean that they physically were his—he meant that they *spiritually* were his. He wanted to destroy the children's faith. “How dare you take them away from my philosophy? How dare you change their beliefs? How dare you make them weak when I made them strong?” he ranted. Hitler and the Romans also claimed that the Jewish belief in Torah and *mitzvos* created weakness. Jews strongly believe in charity. In these wicked ideologies, however, charity is weakness. They claim that only the strong win the race and only the strong can be successful. “These are *my* children,” said Lavan. He wanted to uproot everything that Yaakov had built.

Yaakov, on his way to Charan, was embarking upon a long

and treacherous road to bring Torah and *mitzvos* to the rest of the world, which was diametrically opposed to them.

Avraham had to flee that world. He tried to teach there and had some success, but Hashem commanded him to leave: “*Lech lecha mei’artzecha*” (Bereishis 12:1). Thus, Avraham’s nemesis, Nimrod, had the final victory in their battle. Hashem told Avraham, “You will succeed in Eretz Canaan.” Now, two generations later, Hashem told Yaakov to go back to Charan. He would succeed where Avraham had not. Yaakov went with his own strength, and the strength of his father and grandfather. He was like a three-legged stool that would not wobble or fall (Brachos 32a). Yaakov would succeed. He would bring Torah and *mitzvos* into Charan itself!

This is why Hashem blessed Yaakov before the trip. Yaakov needed the blessings to survive the test of Charan. And he deserved the blessings because Hashem knew that he would succeed.

I

Jews after the Holocaust

Isn’t this the story of the Jewish people after the Holocaust? The Holocaust wiped out Jewish life from the cities, villages, and ghettos of Europe, where many Jews led beautiful Jewish lives. The Holocaust destroyed that world and scattered the survivors, and we Jews became like tiny grains of sand on the beaches of a wide new world. We found ourselves in an environment that was hostile to our values. When Jews came to the United States, many of them could not find a job if they were not going to work on Shabbos. Jews who came in the first half of the 20th century were faced with an incredible challenge. “If you won’t work on Saturday don’t bother coming back on Monday!”

After World War II, when the poor, broken refugees came to America, they had to build Jewish schools and *yeshivos* for their children to become Torah Jews. As great as the opportunities are

in the United States, tax dollars are spent on public schools, not on *yeshivos*. Jewish families are large. A Jew must pay for Torah education by himself. Some families have many children, and the tuition bill is prohibitively expensive. The challenge we faced then and now has been to live in this new world despite the many things that oppose our values.

But we came with a new mission: to remain loyal and to bring the message of Torah to this strange new world—to wear a *kippa* as a doctor in hospital, to wear *tzitzis* as a lawyer in the courtroom, to spend money on children’s education rather than on a fancy car or vacation. This is our “*Vayeitzei Yaakov... to Charan.*” Yaakov left the protective cocoon of Yitzchak and Rivka. He went back to the furnace that nearly consumed Avraham. And nowadays, we also do the same.

Hashem told Yaakov to go, for He had confidence that Yaakov would become so spiritually great that he would be able to defeat the angel of Eisav. When Yaakov ran away from home, he couldn’t even stand up to Eisav himself, much less to his angel. While Yaakov was away, Eisav built an empire. He established Edom, which later became Rome, and Eisav’s descendants founded the Roman Empire. What a builder he was! After twenty years in Charan, however, Yaakov defeated all of Eisav’s spiritual might in hand-to-hand combat. Yaakov defeated Eisav’s angel, the Satan. Yaakov derived this incredible strength through his two decades of struggle with Lavan, the great ideologue of evil.

J

Today’s Charan

This is exactly our situation today. Even Jews who live in Israel are on the spiritual front line. Israel is now exposed to everything in the world culture through television, movies, and the internet. Our physical enemies, the terrorists, may be on Israel’s borders.

However, Israel today also is Charan. It is not the simple place that Eretz Yisrael and Be'er Sheva were for Yaakov. It is Charan: full of strife, challenges, and difficulties that force us into existential, spiritual battles.

Yaakov succeeded in his expedition to Charan and built a Jewish family of twelve children, a family of *tzaddikim*. Yaakov showed us that we can build a *goy kadosh* and *mamleches Kohanim* wherever we are.

This is the power of a *melech*. The king brings the holiness of Am Yisrael out into the world. The *melech* represents *tzedaka*, kindness, and influence. During the first few centuries of Am Yisrael's sojourn in Israel, they were led by a *shofeit*, who strengthened them internally, training them to become a *goy kadosh*. When the Jewish people were strong enough to bring the message of Torah and *mitzvos* to the rest of the world, the second stage of leadership began—the era of the kings. The Torah describes our nation as *mamleches Kohanim* because the king also is a Kohen. He is the teacher and leader of the Jewish nation on the world stage.

K

The Two Names: Yaakov and Yisrael

The name Yaakov implies narrowness. The root of the name Yaakov is *eikev*, meaning heel. The heel is narrow. The personality of Yaakov has a narrow focus, concentrating only on his internal growth. The name Yisrael, however, comes from the word *sar*, an aristocrat, and connotes the openness of a king or ruler.

As Jews, sometimes we need a narrow focus, and sometimes we need a broad, universal one. There are two instruments that are very important for a Jew: the microscope and the telescope. We need to have a detailed focus on *halacha*, to follow every *din* precisely. We must start Shabbos on time; we must say *krias she-ma* on time in the morning and evening; we must be very careful

to eat only kosher food; we must be very careful within our families not to insult others, and if we do so, we must beg forgiveness. We have to make sure that everything we do is proper. This is part of the microscopic focus of Yaakov.

But a Jew must also have a telescope. We are part of a big world. People are looking at us. We have a responsibility to make the world a better place. We have a *mitzva* “*lavda u'lshamra*” (Bereishis 2:15), the mission given to Adam. We must work in the world and help develop it. Chassidus teaches an interesting lesson. In Parshas Bereishis, the Torah says that Hashem created the world *la'asos*, to do (Bereishis 2:3). *La'asos* means that people must develop the world further. We have to conquer disease and eliminate poverty. We must eradicate injustice. We therefore must be more involved than any other group. We are kings and priests, *melachim* and Kohanim. Hashem has charged us with responsibility for the rest of humanity.

These are the two names of Yaakov and Yisrael. They come from two places, Be'er Sheva and Charan. They connote two different emphases—the internal and the external. They are the expressions of the two missions Hashem gave us, to be a *goy kadosh* and a *mamleches Kohanim*.

Chazal say that these two names must always be used. At the time the Torah was given on Har Sinai, the name Yisrael is used much more often. Only once is the name Yaakov used, referring to the women of the nation, who always are supposed to be focused internally. When speaking to Bnei Yisrael, however, the Torah uses the name Yisrael exclusively, because we are supposed to influence the whole world through our actions. The Torah message is for the whole world. Let us pray for success in this mission so that the whole world truly will know Hashem.

May Hashem bless us and the whole world with His blessing: “From Tzion Torah will come forth, and Hashem’s word from Yerushalayim” (Yeshayahu 2:3).

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is unique about the timing of Yaakov's *brachos*?
2. What are the two forms of leadership that the Jews had in Eretz Yisrael? Explain them.
3. How is a Jew supposed to fulfill the mission of being a *mamleches Kohanim*?
4. How is a Jew supposed to fulfill the mission of being a *goy kadosh*?
5. How do these two missions relate to the two styles of Jewish leadership?
6. What was dangerous about Charan?
7. Who was worse, Lavan or Pharaoh? Explain your answer.
8. Compare and contrast the names Yaakov and Yisrael.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Which is more comfortable for you: acting as a *mamleches Kohanim* or as a *goy kadosh*?
2. Describe a situation in which you acted according to the mission of *mamleches Kohanim*. In what way did you fulfill the mission? Could you have done better?
3. Yaakov had Be'er Sheva. Do you have a place where you feel you are free to enhance your Jewish identity?

EXERCISES

1. What can you do to make yourself more of a member of our *goy kadosh*?
2. In what ways do you plan to bring the message of Hashem to the world?
3. For a week, write down actions that you have done to enhance your inner identity as a Jew.
4. For a week, write down actions you have done to bring Torah values and ideals into the outside world.

