

VAYEISHEV

RAISING THE HOLY SPARKS

A

Yaakov, to Be Continued...

The story of Yosef is one of the most gripping stories in the Torah. Yosef and his brothers stand out prominently as they overtake Yaakov's role as the main characters in the narrative of the Torah. The Torah introduces this transition in a peculiar way. "*Vayeishev Yaakov b'eretz megurei aviv b'eretz C'na'an. Eileh toldos Yaakov Yosef... Yaakov lived in the land of his father in the land of Canaan. This is the story of Yaakov, Yosef*" (Bereishis 37:1-2).

The Torah begins the story of Yosef by telling us that Yaakov was living in the Land of Canaan. Then the Torah abruptly jumps into the story of Yosef. Many years had passed since Yaakov had settled in Canaan, well before the story of Yosef began. Why mention it now?

Rashi, responding to this question, comments, "Yaakov desired to live in tranquility and peace. The disturbance of Yosef, though, jumped upon him." Rashi continues, "*Tzaddikim* wish to live in peace in this world. But Hashem says, 'Is what I have prepared for them in the World to Come insufficient for *tzaddikim* that they want to have tranquility in this world as well?'" This comment seems to be a criticism of Yaakov, who indeed desired to have a tranquil life.

But what is wrong with leading a tranquil life? Why do Chazal criticize Yaakov? Could we think even for a moment that Yaakov wanted to retire and go fishing in these quiet years? We know that *tzaddikim* desire quiet so that they can learn more Torah and do more *mitzvos*. The Rambam poignantly mentions this point twice in his *magnum opus*, Hilchos Teshuva (9:4). He explains that all of the rewards of the Torah—such as rain, prosperity, and peace—assured to us in *krias shema* are not really rewards. They are the results of doing *mitzvos* because Hashem wants us to be able to accomplish more *mitzvos* more easily. In this world, though, there is no actual reward. This world is one of challenges. The true reward awaits us in the next world. All of the blessings that we receive in this world—be it peace and quiet, good health, income, or good children—all are there to help us live fuller and spiritually better Jewish lives. “*Schar mitzva b’hai alma leka*, there is no reward for *mitzvos* in this world” (Kiddushin 39b). Hashem gives us all of these wonderful outcomes in order to enable us to lead even better lives, to do even more *mitzvos*—but not as reward.

The *mishna* (Avos 4:17) says that one moment of *koras ruach*, the pleasure of *olam haba*, is better than a lifetime of pleasure in this world. Hashem knows what true pleasure is, and He truly wants to give it to us—and we will experience it in the next world. We don’t necessarily seek pleasures in this world. We seek to do good things and to make the world a better place to live in. For this, we need a supportive environment, including financial, psychological, and sociological well-being, so that we have the wherewithal to accomplish these goals.

At the end of Hilchos Melachim (12:4), the Rambam poses a question: Why do *tzaddikim* want Mashiach to come? The answer, he writes, is because when he comes we will have these ideal conditions. People will be healthy and live good lives without competing with others for scarce resources. There will be no need to fear. There will be no enemies to threaten one another. We will

be able to live according to the Torah and to easily do the *mitzvos* properly.

So, what was wrong with Yaakov's desire for tranquility? Isn't this the dream of every righteous Jew? Doesn't Hashem assure us of peace and quiet as a response to our good deeds? Why was Yaakov criticized and punished?

B

Raising the Holy Sparks

The Shem Mishmuel introduces here an important Chassidic concept called the holy sparks, *nitzotzos hakedusha* (see above Parshas Bereishis, where this concept is developed in a different way). When God created the world, Chassidus teaches, Hashem scattered many sparks of holiness throughout the world. Hashem charged humankind with the mission to search for them, dig them up, and separate them. Then, we must raise them to higher spiritual levels.

For example, consider the food chain. There are four levels of God's creation: *domeim*—inanimate objects such as the earth and chemicals; *tzomei'ach*—vegetation; *chai*—animal life, things that live and move around; and *medabeir*—the highest level of life, humanity. The inanimate objects exist by the will of God, but they do not have life. Vegetation is higher, since it is alive. It has an element of soul that gives it vitality. Animal life has an even higher and more complex soul, thus making it higher spiritually. Humans have the most advanced soul, in some ways resembling God Himself. Our uniquely holy human soul grants us the ability to think, speak, and make moral choices.

We can look at the food chain from this new perspective of raising the holy sparks. From the lowest level, from the silent earth, grow fruits, vegetables, and grains. The animals then eat the vegetation. Humanity, in turn, is sustained by the animals.

This chain rises higher and higher in spirituality, culminating with people. The elements and minerals that were originally contained within the earth gradually ascend the ladder of holiness as they are ingested and assimilated by successively higher spiritual beings.

This illustration is symbolic of the spiritual process. From the lowest levels of existence, we can find wonderful things to raise to the human, holy level. Raising sparks of holiness is an important aspect of the general idea of holiness.

C

Man Is Uniquely Suited to Raise the Holy Sparks

Hashem gave the Torah to humans, not angels. Why? Because angels cannot descend to the lowest level. Angels can't find those sparks. Angels neither fall nor rise. Man, however, can bend down to the earth, descending to the lowest levels to find the sparks and then raise them up to the highest, human level.

Isn't this what people do all the time in the physical world? People go into forests full of trees. They clear away the brush and stones and build up the area. They make homes and playgrounds. People transform the wilderness into beautiful bastions of civilizations.

What we see in the physical world is true in the spiritual world as well. Wherever you see a spiritual wilderness, you should be aware that that very place contains the potential necessary to create a beautiful spiritual community. There are hidden secrets of *kedusha* in every place. Chassidus teaches that in the most barren and desolate places, we can find the greatest reservoirs of spirituality. When you dig for gold or diamonds, at the surface, you don't see anything. You need to dig deep to find these precious items. In the spiritual world as well, even in the most desolate of places we can find wonderful, inspiring sparks of *kedusha*.

For example, the holy Gemara was written in the barren spiritual desert of Babylonia, which was filled with idolatry and sorcery. Similarly, the Torah itself was not given in holy Yerushalayim; it was given in the desert of Sinai. The holiest moment in human history occurred in a barren, unholy, and profane desert, naturally bereft of blessings and of life.

When Moshe went up to heaven to receive the Torah, he made this very argument against the protestations of the angels. They said, “Man is full of evil. How can the holy Torah be given to such lowly creatures?” Moshe responded, “That is exactly why we need it. We will take the holy Torah and clear away the spiritual wilderness that is in humanity and replace it with a Garden of Eden.” Moshe said that humans need the Torah and we can use it in the best way. We can make the lowest places into the holiest places, like the barren mountain of Sinai that blossomed with fragrant flowers when the Jews came to it to receive the Torah.

The Ramban also writes that the most desolate places have the most potential for *kedusha*. When the Ramban famously immigrated to Israel and came to Yerushalayim, the holy city lay in ruins. He exclaimed, “The holier the place, the more desolate it is.” Har Habayis, the very place that once was home for the glorious Beis Hamikdash, was completely destroyed. When you see a place that is so destroyed, you must know that tremendous spiritual potential abounds there.

D

Why We Have So Many *Mitzvos*

Why do we have 613 *mitzvos*? Because we must find the sparks of *kedusha* in every aspect of existence. The Torah dictates how we should dress, eat, conduct family life and business, enjoy pleasures, how we should live, and how we should die. Every aspect of human existence is governed by the Torah.

The Torah is diametrically opposed to other religions that say there are some elements of life that cannot be sanctified. For example, Christianity and some eastern religions reject relations between man and woman. They claim that they merely are a physical pleasure that cannot be redeemed. It is defilement. But they are wrong. The Torah says that to marry is a *mitzva*, to have children and raise them is a *mitzva*. It is God's will and a holy endeavor. The blessing recited under the *chuppa* right before a couple is married proclaims that God has sanctified us with His *mitzvos*, specifically the *mitzva* of marriage. Marriage itself is called *kiddushin*, an act of sanctification. We dare say that this is perhaps the holiest role of human beings.

According to Chassidus, what we might think is physical and mundane and bereft of holiness is just a cover, a *klipa*. Inside that *klipa* is the holiest part of human existence. The Torah knows that the source of *kedushas Yisrael*, the holiness of the Jewish People, lies in Jewish family life. This is why the Torah dwells on the stories of the marriages of the *avos* and *imahos*: to teach us about the holy inner workings of marriage, the source of the holiness of the Jewish People.

E

Holy Wandering

Based on this idea that the most holy often is found in the most physical, we can understand a basic idea. Long ago, the Jewish People left Israel and went into *galus*. We were called the Wandering Jew. However, we carried this title with pride. The *goyim*, especially those who hated us, used this term as a derisive epithet. They considered us rootless and superficial. They didn't understand that the wanderings of the Jew were a blessing in disguise. The Jewish nation has a mission: to find holiness wherever it is to be found, anywhere in the world. God put holiness everywhere in

the world: Africa, Asia, Europe, America, from the North to the South Pole. This holiness is covered up, and our mission is to find it. Chassidus teaches that once all the holiness is found, Mashiach will come. We are mining for *kedusha* like other nations mine for gold or oil.

This idea has amazing meaning for us. Many of our people still live outside of Israel. The Land of Israel, thank God, has come back to life and Jews are returning, but many Jews still live in *galus*.

Consider the United States of America. Have we Jews achieved our mission to develop *kedusha* here? Have we raised the holy sparks of the United States? Yes, we have! Who has been at the forefront of the human rights movement in the United States for over a century? The Jewish People. We were at the forefront of the labor unions of America. When Jews came to the United States at the turn of century, there were no labor unions. People worked seven days a week in sweatshops, and child labor was rampant. The Jewish workers created labor unions and guaranteed fair salaries for everyone. They lobbied successfully for the government to outlaw child labor and eventually achieved legislation for equal pay for women as well.

Jews led the civil rights movements. They marched together with African-Americans in Atlanta, Georgia together with Martin Luther King Jr. Jewish students were killed on trains in Mississippi fighting for black rights. Today, those rights are enshrined in American law and society. Jews stood up not only for their own rights, but for others' rights. The Jews today are the driving force behind what are called voluntary hospitals. There are many such hospitals, with names like Mt. Sinai and Maimonides. Jewish scientists are at the forefront of scientific research. The Jewish minority in the United States gives far more charity per capita than any other ethnicity. And Jewish charities distribute their funds to many different groups, not just to Jewish ones. The Jewish People has made a tremendous contribution to the holiness of American life. This is true of every country that the Jew has been in, be it

Russia, England, France, Poland, or the Arab countries. Do more research and you will find this to be true.

There is another *kedusha* in Jewish wandering. Just as we bring out holiness in the land in which we live, we also learn holiness from the land in which we live. Chazal say that Hashem sent us into *galus* because Hashem wants us to bring “converts” into the Jewish People. Of course, this refers to real converts who join us and give us great strength. But we also receive “idea” converts, principles that enhance our level of holiness. The United States is known for its tolerance. Jews are at the forefront of the tolerance movement. American Jews are very tolerant. We learned that tolerance has tremendous value, and now we bring it into the *kedusha* of the Torah. Freedom of speech is one of the great fundamental values of the United States. Jews, too, have learned this value of freedom of speech.

The Jew brings *kedusha* to the gentile world, and there is *kedusha* that the Jew learns from the gentile.

I have a theory about the end of this long *galus*, which is approaching 2000 years and has spanned hundreds of cultures and locales. Each culture had good and holy things that the Jew elicited from that country. As we now are returning to Eretz Yisrael, we should bring back these holy concepts and practices, the holy sparks of the foreign countries that we visited. We should bring back the tolerance of the United States, the courage and steadfastness of Russia, the dignity of England. All of these *middos* should become part of the Torah community of Israel. In Israel, we are gathering all the sparks of *kedusha* into one place. Hashem put us into all of these foreign places for us to gather sparks of holiness and bring them back.

Being in *galus* has brought another wonderful blessing for the Jew in his mission to find spirituality and develop it in this world. *Galus* means we are physically away from the Land of Israel. We are distant from our holy sites. We are distant from Hashem in a physical way. There is a spiritual dimension to this as well. People

in *galus* feel alienated from Hashem. This distance causes a tremendous yearning to get closer to Hashem, to find Him and to speak to Him. We don't have a Beis Hamikdash where we know Hashem's Shechinah rests. We have to search for Hashem and find Him in this world. We are wandering. The more difficult it is, the more we want to find Him. The difficulty creates a powerful force to motivate us to discover *kedusha*. The Torah says, "You will seek for Hashem, your God, and you will find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Devarim 4:29). What gives rise to this motivation to seek God? *Galus*.

This terrible punishment has had a tremendous blessing hidden within it. We know how wonderful the *mitzvos* and prayers of *galus* have been in these 2000 years, the *halachic* literature that flowered, the *chesed* that we pursued, and the charity that we gave for years because we have been away from our Holy Land. We knew we had to struggle to find Hashem. That struggle has made us strong, and thank God, we were successful.

F

The Magnetic *Kedusha* of Eretz Yisrael

The holy Arizal, the father of modern Kabbala and precursor of Chassidus, asked an important question. *Galus* has such a powerful impact. It is the way to find holiness in the world and makes us see and learn from the good and beautiful in the world. If the Jews never would have sinned, they would have stayed in Eretz Yisrael, as promised in the Torah. How, then, would we have found all the *kedusha* in the world and joined it with ourselves? The Arizal answered by comparing us to a magnet. A magnet attracts metal to it. If the Jewish People would have stayed in Israel without sinning, the *kedusha* of the world would have come streaming to Israel like metal drawn to a magnet. Israel would have drawn the holiness of the world towards it!

Think of the time of Shlomo Hamelech. In his time, he never left the palace or the city of Yerushalayim. Still, the whole world came to him. Kings, queens, princes, and princesses came to Yerushalayim from all over the world to see Shlomo. They heard of his wisdom, his holiness, and the holiness of Israel, and they came to see it. Jewish influence at that time was amazing. People throughout the world quoted Shlomo. When these people came to him, Shlomo learned from them about the rest of the world, thereby mining its *kedusha* even as he stayed in his own throne room!

This explains why Shlomo married so many princesses (he had over 1000 wives). Shlomo wanted the influence of Israel to affect every country in the world. Each princess would be the conduit to her land. She would bring Shlomo's holiness back to her country and bring her country's holiness to Israel.

We see that the whole world now focuses on Yerushalayim. They feel subconsciously that "*Ki mi'Tziyon teitzei Sorah u'dvar Hashem mi'rushalayim*" (Yeshayahu 2:3), God's voice emanates from Yerushalayim. However, the evil side hides this reality. The world today focuses on Yerushalayim in a bad way. But it is symbolic of what the world will be like when it is fixed in the time of Mashiach. At that time, there will be a good focus on Yerushalayim. *Ki mi'Tziyon teitzei Sorah*. The magnetic effect will happen. The *kedusha* of the world will flow to and come forth from Yerushalayim.

G

The Humility Imposed by *Galus*

The Shem Mishmuel adds an important point. *Galus* contains the tremendous blessing of developing what is holy, good, and right throughout the world, like civil rights in America and good welfare programs in Europe and Russia. But *galus* has a heavy price. It

is a difficult punishment. It comes with pogroms and a Holocaust. When men dig a mine for diamonds, some people unfortunately die. The mines are deep and dangerous. If it is so difficult to dig for diamonds, gold, and coal, it certainly is difficult to dig for the diamonds of *kedusha*. This pain of *galus* creates a psychologically holy state in the Jew. It is the important state of humility, of feeling humble before Hashem.

If one digs for gold or *kedusha* and finds it, he could become haughty, thinking that he is great. But Hashem wants people to do what is right for its own sake, not because of their ego. Because we are a holy people, we could come to think that we are a great nation in our own right and become haughty. Unfortunately, this did happen with several kings in Yerushalayim, such as Yehoash and Menashe, who became full of pride and left the path of *kedusha*. *Galus* brings us difficulties that keep our egos in check and make us humble.

If all of the Jewish People would be in Eretz Yisrael and there would be no *galus*, the Arizal noted that we would magnetically attract *kedusha* from around the world to Israel. But what about the danger of becoming haughty and egocentric? What if we develop a false sense of superiority? The Shem Mishmuel says that the magnetism of Israel would be accompanied by God-given humility.

If we are now building a beautiful, holy place in Israel, we must realize that it is not our own achievement. Hashem gives us the blessings necessary to achieve all of this. He gives us the ability to become holy. As the Torah says, “*V’hiyisem kedoshim ki kadosh ani*. You shall be holy because I am holy” (Vayikra 11:45). God shares His holiness with us, and through us with the rest of the world. We are messengers of Hashem. The *kedusha* is not ours nor to our credit. It is His. Maintaining our humility is the key to creating a holy, successful, and pure Torah society in Eretz Yisrael, which will magnetically attract *kedusha* from the rest of the world. Moshe Rabbeinu was humble, because he knew that he was

a mere conduit for Hashem. If there is even a trace of *ga'ava*, false pride and superiority, then we know we are not acting properly.

My Rebbe, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik *zt"l*, used to say that if you achieve something in holiness, then pray to Hashem to give you the power to do something else. You must remember that the power is not yours, but His.

H

Yaakov Was Ready for *Olam Haba*

Yaakov lived a difficult life for more than twenty years. He suffered; he contended with Lavan and Eisav. He succeeded in finding and converting many holy sparks. He completed a certain level of fixing of the world and finally returned to Eretz Yisrael. Yaakov wanted to leap ahead to the time of Mashiach. He thought Mashiach was supposed to arrive at that time.

In the messianic era, we won't be involved in fixing the world anymore. All of the holiness will already be gathered. People will not have to suffer any more in order to control the evil urge of *ga'ava*. People will be able to be naturally holy and humble without challenges. It will be like Shabbos. On Shabbos, we have *kedusha* but don't have to worry about the evil side of haughtiness. It is a natural *kedusha*, a natural closeness to Hashem. This will be our experience in the days of Mashiach.

Yaakov thought, "I've suffered enough through the ordeal of finding and purifying the sparks found in the baser parts of the world. Now, I want to focus on the good and pure. I don't want to think of the problems of the world. I don't want to worry about being humble. I want to be in a state of Shabbos."

Maybe Yaakov thought that, as the third of the *avos*, he would bring Mashiach. But there was a new generation of Yosef and his brothers. Hashem's plan was that Mashiach would not come due to the efforts of the *avos* alone. Mashiach would come as a result

of the deeds of the twelve *shevatim*. Granted, the *shevatim* were not at the level of the *avos* and didn't match the holiness of their fathers. But Hashem wants the world to be fixed by masses of simple Jews.

I

Hashem Wants the Masses

Hashem wants us, the Jewish People, to be a holy *people*. He wants us to elicit *kedusha* from the world. He didn't create this wide world for just a few *tzaddikim*. He wants masses of people to fix the world, each person in his family, school, and *shul*, on his block, and in his home. It is not enough that the *avos* did this. Yaakov thought it was enough but, Chazal say, he was wrong.

We have to help our children face their challenges in their lifetimes. We have to foster another, larger generation of Jewish children. We need more people to adopt this mission of fixing the world and developing *kedusha*. There must be many people working to develop *kedusha*, not just a few *tzaddikim*.

Eretz Yisrael was not actually given to the *avos*; it was only a theoretical gift. The gift is for an entire nation. This is the great lesson of the story of Yosef that follows *bikeish Yaakov leishev b'shalva*. The job of bringing the Mashiach was passed down to Yosef, "*Eileh toldos Yaakov: Yosef...*" The story continues with Yosef. In order to tell whether Yaakov was successful or not, we have to look at Yosef and his brothers.

As a nation today, we have not yet achieved the *tikkun* of the world, to develop all of the *kedusha* that we can. Especially now that we have resettled the Land of Israel, we have a special responsibility to develop the land and the State as a holy place, while avoiding the feelings of *ga'ava* and superiority.

Together, the many millions of us must make a holy country, a holy people, and a holy world.

Let us hope that we learn and implement the lessons of this *parsha*, of *eileh toldos Yaakov Yosef*. May we live our lives as parents, friends, and neighbors simply and humbly, close to Hashem, full of *ahavas Hashem* and *ahavas Yisrael*, surrounded by holy sparks.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the theory of the holy sparks?
2. How does this theory explain the *galus*?
3. Without *galus*, what would happen to the holy sparks in the world?
4. Give three examples of Jews in exile and the holy sparks.
5. What should Jews bring back to Israel from *galus*?
6. What is the role of a *tzaddik* and the Jewish masses in fixing the world?

EXERCISE

1. Keep a log for a week of how you personally encountered holy sparks and what you did with them.

Answers and Exercises
