S.A.L.T – Parashat Vayetze

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Motzaei

We read in Parashat Vayetze of Yaakov’s dream which he beheld as he made his way from Canaan to his uncle’s home in Charan. The famous dream featured a ladder extending from the ground where he slept to the sky, with angels ascending and descending the ladder (28:12). Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 68:12), explains that the angels that had accompanied Yaakov in *Eretz Yisrael* now returned to the heavens, and new angels – who would accompany him abroad – descended to assume their role of protecting Yaakov.

Symbolically, Rashi’s description expresses the fact that we require different “angels” in different places and circumstances. The “angels” that accompanied Yaakov in Canaan, the strategies and techniques he needed to overcome his challenges and achieve his goals, would now have to give way to a new set of “angels.” His departure from *Eretz Yisrael* thrust him into an entirely different set of circumstances and problems he would need to address, and he would thus need a different group of “angels” to succeed.

The Torah writes that in Yaakov’s dream, in addition to the vision of the ladder, Yaakov also beheld God “standing over him” (“*Ve-hinei Hashem nitzav alav*” – 28:13). Rashi briefly comments that God “stood” there near Yaakov “*le-shomro*” – to protect him. Rav Heschel of Cracow, in his [*Chanukat Ha-Torah*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14078&st=&pgnum=27&hilite=), offers a clever reading of Rashi’s remark. At that moment, when the angels of *Eretz Yisrael* ascended to the heavens and the new angels made their way down the ladder, Yaakov found himself in a state of vulnerability. The angels of *Eretz Yisrael* were already on their way heavenward, and the angels of *chutz la-aretz* were still making their way down to Earth. During these interim moments, Yaakov was left without protection, and so God came to stand by him and protect him.

There are times in life when we find ourselves without “angels,” without the resources or knowledge that we need to care for ourselves and succeed. The “angels” we have relied upon in the past are no longer relevant, and we have yet to receive the means or skills we need to confront our new challenges. In such moments, we need to trust that “*ve-hinei Hashem nitzav alav*” – God extends to us His assistance and protection. When we feel helpless and forlorn, without our familiar “angels” to guide and care for us, we can find comfort and security in the knowledge that the Almighty is by our side and helping us at every step of the way.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Vayetze of Yaakov’s arrangement with his uncle, Lavan, that he would work for seven years shepherding Lavan’s flocks, after which Lavan would give him his daughter, Rachel, as a wife.

Chizkuni raises the question of why Yaakov made such a high initial offer – seven full years of work. Seemingly, he should have at least begun by proposing a “cheaper” price for Rachel’s hand in marriage, perhaps just a year or two of service. Yet, Yaakov made no such offer, and from the outset expressed his willingness to work for seven years. Chizkuni answers, “Yaakov did not imagine that he would be given a woman as beautiful as Rachel for a short period of work, and so he said seven years.” Yaakov highly valued the privilege of marrying Rachel, and so he did not consider seven years of work a high price to pay.

Chizkuni’s comments perhaps reflect one of the Yaakov’s important traits – an ethic of hard work and responsibility. Yaakov did not feel entitled to anything. He understood that life’s blessings – such as marrying the woman he wanted as a wife – require time, work and sacrifice. Rather than try to fulfill his wishes with the least possible effort, he recognized the need to put in a great deal of time and work.

The Rambam, in the final passage of Hilkhot Sekhirut, points to Yaakov as the model of an employee’s responsibilities, citing Yaakov’s own description toward the end of Parashat Vayetzei (31:36-40) of his dedication to Lavan’s flocks. Even though his employer tried to deceive and manipulate him, Yaakov felt responsible to invest maximum effort in caring for the sheep, braving harsh weather and staying awake at night devotedly looking after the cattle under his charge. Rather than lowering his standards for the sake of convenience, he rose to every challenge that arose out of a keen sense of duty and obligation. We learn from Yaakov the value of responsibility, not to take anything for granted, to recognize that we are not naturally entitled to anything, and to be prepared to work hard to obtain what we need and want.

Monday

We read in the beginning of Parashat Vayetze of how Yaakov slept along the road as he made his way to Charan, and beheld his famous dream of the ladder. The Torah tells that when night fell, “*va-yishkav ba-makom ha-hu*” – “he slept at that place” (28:11). Rashi comments that the phrase “at that place” should be interpreted as implying a point of contrast: Yaakov slept there, but had not slept during the fourteen previous years, which he spent engrossed in study at the academy of Shem and Eiver.

The origin of this comment is the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 68:11), which cites Rabbi Yehuda as advancing this reading of the verse. Rabbi Nechemya, however, as the Midrash proceeds to cite, offers a slightly different reading: “Here he slept, but throughout the twenty years he spent in Lavan’s home, he did not sleep.” According to Rabbi Nechemya, the phrase “*ba-makom ha-hu*” excludes not the previous years, but the coming years, which Yaakov spent with Lavan, and during which he did not sleep. Rabbi Nechemya likely bases this reading on Yaakov’s own testament later in Parashat Vayetze (31:40), “*va-tidad shenati mei-einai*” – that he barely slept during the twenty years spent shepherding Lavan’s flocks, uncompromisingly committed as he was to the safety and wellbeing of the sheep. And thus the contrast implied by “*ha-makom ha-hu*,” in Rabbi Nechemya’s view, is between Yaakov’s sleep on the road and the subsequent years of tireless labor for Lavan.

As is the case regarding many “debates” we encounter in Midrash, these two readings do not necessarily reflect an actual disagreement between two *Tanna’im*. Rather, they may be seen as complementary, which, taken together, convey a meaningful message. In this instance, the Midrash points to the fact that Yaakov exerted maximum effort in two very different periods of his life – the time spent with Shem and Ever, and the time spent with Lavan. During these two periods, Yaakov had two very different responsibilities – in the first, his job was to study, and in the second, his job was to loyally serve his employer. And in both contexts, Yaakov exerted himself to the utmost to do the very best he could. We need not understand the phase “he did not sleep” literally, as suggesting that Yaakov did not sleep at all. Rather, this description likely refers to tireless effort and maximum exertion. Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nechemya convey the message that regardless of what stage we are in life, and of what our commitments currently are, we must give them all our energy and effort. Whether it’s the fourteen years with Shem Ever or the twenty years with Lavan, no matter what responsibilities we currently have, we are to be fully invested in them and try to meet them at the very highest standard we can.

Tuesday

The Torah tells in Parashat Vayetze of Yaakov’s vow which he made as he left Canaan to flee from his brother, promising to tithe all the material assets with which God blesses him, upon his return to his homeland – “*ve-khol asher titen li aser a’aserenu lakh*” (28:22). The Gemara, in Masekhet Ketubot, understands the poetic form “*aser a’aserenu*” as indicating that Yaakov refers here not to one-tenth of his assets, but rather to one-fifth (two-tenths). On this basis, the Gemara views this verse as a Biblical allusion to the law enacted by the Sages in Usha, “*Ha-mebazbez al yebazbez yoter mi-chomesh*” – one should not donate more than one-fifth of his assets to charity. Although this provision was enacted by *Chazal*, Yaakov’s vow is seen as an ancient source for this law.

A number of *Acharonim* raised the question of how the Sages could enact such a law, which seems to override an explicit prohibition in Sefer Devarim (15:7) against withholding charity from those in need: “Do not harden your heart or shut your hands from your brother, the pauper.” It is generally assumed that one must spend any amount of money necessary to avoid committing a Torah violation (as opposed to fulfilling *mitzvot*, for which one is not required to spend a significant percentage of his assets), and this is indeed the explicit ruling of the Rama (O.C. 656:, Y.D. 157:1). Seemingly, then, it should be obligatory to spend any amount of money needed to support (at least at the standard of minimum subsistence) a pauper in dire need of charity, to avoid violating this Torah prohibition.

[Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/?p=5855) cites various different answers to this question. First, he notes that several halakhic authorities – including Rav Yaakov Emden, in *She’eilat Ya’abetz* (1:3) – imposed a surprising limitation on the rule of “*ha-mebazbez al yebazbez yoter mi-chomesh*.” In their view, this means that one should not allocate more than 20 percent of his assets to charity. If, however, we are approached by a destitute pauper in desperate need of help, then we must pay any amount of money needed to assist him, even if this exceeds 20 percent of our possessions. According to this opinion, the 20-percent limit clearly does not conflict with the Torah prohibition against withholding money from the poor, as the Torah prohibition applies only when we have a needy individual in front of us who needs help. Rav Weiss notes, however, that the Rambam, in Hilkhot Matenot Aniyim (7:1), strongly indicates that the rule of “*al yebazbez yoter mei-chomesh*” applies under all circumstances.

Another approach that can be taken is based upon the position taken by several halakhic authorities, including the *Chatam Sofer* (notes to *Shulchan Arukh*, O.C. 656) and the *Peri Megadim* (O.C. 656), that one must pay all his money to avoid only actively violating a Torah prohibition. If a Torah prohibition forbids an inaction, however, then one is not required to sacrifice a large portion of his assets to comply with the prohibition and perform the required action. Therefore, although one must pay any amount of money necessary to avoid committing a forbidden act, one is not obligated to pay all his money to support a needy pauper. Rav Weiss notes, however, that this position is not universally accepted, as the Rivash (387) maintains that one must pay all his money to avoid any prohibition, even a prohibition which forbids refraining from a given act.

A fairly simple answer is suggested by the Maharil Diskin (1:24), who claims that the prohibition against withholding charity is linked to, and dependent upon, the affirmative command to give charity. Hence, the prohibition applies only to the extent to which the affirmative command applies, and thus if *Chazal* limited the affirmative command to 20 percent of one assets, then one does not violate the prohibition by not exceeding this amount.

Rav Weiss also offers his own answer, claiming, quite simply, that one who does not exceed the amount of 20 percent is not considered as “hardening his heart” or “shutting his hands.” Since he gives the amount which *Chazal* established as the maximum sum of charity one should give, he does not show any apathy or indifference towards the poor person by not giving more, and therefore he does not violate the prohibition against withholding charity.

Wednesday

Toward the end of Parashat Vayetze, we read of the tense confrontation between Yaakov and Lavan, after Yaakov had escaped from Lavan’s home with his family and Lavan then caught up to him. During this exchange, Yaakov described to Lavan the boundless efforts he invested while tending to his sheep for twenty years, during which time, he said, he was “consumed by heat in the day and by frost by night” (31:40). Yaakov says he subjected himself to the harsh elements while shepherding Lavan’s flocks, suffering from the heat during the day and from cold exposure at night.

The *Ba’al Ha-Tanya* cites this verse in his classic halakhic work, *Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav*, in the section dealing with the obligation to maintain one’s physical wellbeing (*Hilkhot Nizkei Ha-guf Va-nefesh*, 4, *Kuntras Acharon*). He notes that the Maharshal, in *Yam Shel Shelomo* (Bava Kama 8:59), applies the halakhic prohibition against causing oneself physical pain to situations where this is necessary to earn a living. Even for financially gainful pursuits, the Maharshal ruled, one is forbidden to cause himself pain. The *Ba’al Ha-Tanya* questioned this claim in light of Yaakov’s description of the suffering he endured tending to Lavan’s flocks. Yaakov explicitly testified to having subjected himself to searing heat and brutal cold for the sake of his job. Does this not prove that causing oneself pain is permissible when this is necessary for one’s profession?

Rav Nosson Gestetner, in his [*Le-horot Natan* (vol. 10, Y.D. 68)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14694&st=&pgnum=105&hilite=), defends the Maharshal’s contention by suggesting a simple and sensible distinction between ordinary, common forms of discomfort, and unusual exposure to pain. Any practitioner is permitted to subject himself to the forms of discomfort that normally result from his line of work. Indeed, when the Torah commands employers to pay their workers in a timely fashion, it emphasizes, “*eilav hu nosei et nafsho*” (Devarim 24:15), which Rashi explains to mean that a worker sometimes exposes himself to danger, such as when harvesters climb trees to pluck fruit. Clearly, the Torah acknowledged that sometimes a degree of personal danger is involved when working. By the same token, Rav Gestetner writes, some professions, by nature, entail some physical pain. Shepherds are required to tend to their flocks even under harsh weather conditions, and thus it is perfectly acceptable for shepherds to subject themselves to this discomfort for the sake of their work. This in no way disproves the Maharshal’s ruling, which pertains to unusually excessive pain which one endures for the sake of financial gain.

Thursday

Parashat Vayetze begins with the famous story of Yaakov’s prophetic dream which he beheld as he slept while making his way from Canaan to Charan. The Torah tells that Yaakov named the location where he slept “Beit-El,” and that the town used to be named “Luz” (28:19). It seems that the Torah refers here to the city of Beit-El which is mentioned many times throughout *Tanakh*, and which is situated north of Jerusalem, at what would later become the border between the territory of Efrayim and the territory of Binyamin.

*Chazal*, however, in Masekhet Chulin (91b), comment that the vision actually took place in Jerusalem, at the site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. They explain that Yaakov traveled to Charan and then regretted that he had not prayed on the Temple Mount, as his father and grandfather had. He therefore made his way back to Jerusalem, and it is there, at the future site of the Temple, that he beheld his famous dream.

We can perhaps understand more clearly the significance of this Midrashic tradition in light of a passage in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (35). Commenting on the Torah’s description of Yaakov taking stones upon which to sleep that night, *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* says that these stones were from the altar of *akeidat Yitzchak*. Yaakov took them from the altar upon which his grandfather, Avraham, placed his father, Yitzchak, preparing to slaughter him as a sacrifice. *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* associates the event of Yaakov’s dream not generally with the site of the *Mikdash*, but specifically with the incident of *akeidat Yitzchak*, and this might be why the Gemara insisted that Yaakov’s dream occurred not in what we call Beit-El, but rather in Jerusalem – to link this dream with *akeidat Yitzchak*.

The question then arises, why did *Chazal* seek to draw this association between Yaakov’s dream and the *akeida*?

The answer, it would seem, is that *Chazal* viewed this experience – Yaakov’s being banished from his home and his homeland, and driven into a dangerous exile – as his “*akeida*.” He lay down on the same stones upon which his father was placed as a sacrifice – because now he was being “sacrificed.” Like Yitzchak, his life was now threatened, and his status as bearer of Avraham’s legacy and divine blessing was in jeopardy. But as in the case of the *akeida*, angels appeared and he was reassured that his life would be protected and God’s special nation would descend from him. It is perhaps for this reason that *Chazal* insisted that the vision took place in Jerusalem – in order to underscore the fact that this experience served as Yaakov’s “*akeida*.”

The practical lesson, perhaps, is that “sacrifice” takes on many different forms. One does not have to actually be “slaughtered” to sacrifice on behalf of the Almighty. As in Yaakov’s case, the hardships and travails that we endure over the course of life serve as our individual “*akeidot*.” Although we do not and will likely never know why we need to undergo these difficult experiences, we can rest assured that even as we find ourselves “on the altar,” facing life’s trials and ordeals, God is with us and protecting us, and our status as His beloved children is secure and eternal, even when it seems to be under threat.

Friday

The final section of Parashat Vayetze tells of the pact made by Yaakov and Lavan as they parted ways, when Yaakov made his way back to his homeland in Canaan. Twice in this narrative we find Yaakov turning to “*echav*” – “his brethren,” or “his comrades” – and inviting them to join him. The first is when he instructed “*echav*” to collect stones and form a monument, which would serve as a symbol and testament of the pact made with Lavan (31:46). Later (31:54), Yaakov hosts a feast at the site of the pact, and invites “*echav*” to join him.

Interestingly, Rashi interprets the word “*echav*” differently in these two contexts. In the first context, regarding the collection of stones for the monument, Rashi explains “*echav*” as a reference to Yaakov’s children, “who were ‘brothers’ for him, joining him in distress and war.” In the context of Yaakov’s feast, however, Rashi writes that “*echav*” refers to Yaakov’s friends among Lavan’s men. Apparently, Yaakov had befriended some of Lavan’s servants and family members who had joined Lavan as he pursued Yaakov, and Yaakov invited these men to his feast.

The Tolna Rebbe noted the significance of the different meanings of “*echav*” in these two contexts. There are “brethren” who are prepared to join one another during times of “feasting,” in periods of success, joy and celebration, but not in times of crisis and distress. In the context of the creation of the monument, Rashi emphasizes that Yaakov’s sons “were ‘brothers’ for him, joining him in distress and war.” The process of collecting stones symbolizes the difficult, tedious work entailed in creating and defending boundaries to protect ourselves. When it comes to hard work, one can expect the cooperation and assistance only of his “brothers” who “join him in distress and war.” The “fair weather friends” are happy to join for “feasting,” but not in times of crisis when hard work and effort are urgently needed.

Rashi’s two comments thus remind us of the importance of being “brothers joining him in distress and war” – committed friends and family members who are available for one another through thick and thin, in times of happiness and in times of distress. We need to come to one another’s side not only for “feasts,” but also for the difficult, laborious tasks that are needed.