**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYEITZE**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Vayeitzei begins with the story of Yaakov’s departure from Canaan to flee from his brother, Esav, and the famous prophetic vision he beheld as he slept along his journey to Charan. The Torah relates that Yaakov slept on the roadside after “*va-yifga ba-makom*” – “he encountered a certain place” (28:11).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 68:10) explains this to mean that Yaakov needed to stop and sleep at that location because he was prevented from advancing in his journey: “He wanted to pass, but the entire world became for him like a wall in front of him.” Somehow, he could not move any further, and was forced to stop there for the night. The Midrash continues by telling that God made the sun set early so that Yaakov would be forced to sleep at this location and behold his vision. The “wall” that Yaakov confronted was the sudden darkness that descended. God wished to commune with Yaakov in private, the Midrash explains, like a host who dims the lights when his dear friend arrives in order to create an aura of intimacy. In order to appear to Yaakov in a prophetic vision, God “dimmed the lights,” so-to-speak, bringing darkness so that Yaakov would stop and go to sleep.

Like Yaakov fleeing Canaan, we are all on a “journey” of one type of another. We all have goals, ambitions and aspirations that we pursue. At times, however, it seems as though “the entire world became…like a wall,” that our course is blocked. We know what we have to do and how to do it, but circumstances obstruct our path and do not allow us to move ahead with the pursuit of our goals. Like the sun setting midday, we feel as though we should be able to proceed along our journey, that it is not yet time for us to break from our frantic efforts to realize our aspirations, but we are compelled by external factors to stop, and not allowed to progress. The Midrash here teaches us that rather than feel frustrated by these obstructions, we should, instead, regard them as opportunities. Yaakov’s journey was blocked so that he could experience a prophetic vision and receive a message from God – showing us that even the barriers we encounter along the journey towards the realization of our goals are precious opportunities. They offer us a chance to reflect, to contemplate, to take stock and, perhaps most importantly, to focus on our relationship with the Almighty. We often tend to assume that if we are not making tangible progress in the pursuit of our objectives, then our time is being wasted, and we are not accomplishing anything. The Midrash here teaches us to appreciate and seize the opportunities offered by the “walls” we so frequently confront over the course of our journey through life, to recognize the value in stopping and reflecting, and to gain encouragement from the story of Yaakov, whose “barrier” led him to experience an intimate encounter with God.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeitzei tells of Yaakov’s famous dream that he dreamt as he slept one night during his journey from Canaan to Charan, where he would spend the next twenty years. Yaakov dreamt of a ladder extending from the ground to the heavens, and of angels were ascending and descending that ladder (28:12).

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, discusses the significance of the vision of a ladder as Yaakov traveled, and notes the fact that the ladder is described as extending upwards, not downwards. Although the ladder was traveled in both directions, its primary direction was clearly from the ground to the heavens, as the Torah explicitly states: “…there was a ladder set on the ground, and its top reached the heavens.” On this basis, Rav Hirsch suggests an explanation for the significance of this vision:

Such was the first trend of thought which was shown to him [Yaakov] so that, first of all, in general, that the whole life on earth, including accordingly, human life, his own life also, has its goal, not in the plains – not from Beer-Sheba to Haran – but in the heights…that everything earthly is invited from above to work itself upwards to a heavenly high goal…

Yaakov was shown that although he was now journeying from Be’er Sheva to Charan, he was to see himself as journeying from the earth to the heavens. In whatever we are doing and wherever we are going, we are to set before us the sublime goal of reaching the heavens. Over the course of any given day, we involve ourselves in many different activities, most of which are not directly associated with the “heavens,” with spiritual achievement. According to Rav Hirsch, the vision of the ladder shown to Yaakov is intended to teach us to strive towards “heavenly,” spiritual aspirations during any “journey” we travel at any point in our lives.

Tradition teaches that Yaakov had tirelessly devoted his younger years to intensive study. Now, he was on his way to Charan where he would marry, beget children, and work as a shepherd. He was at this stage embarking on a much different kind of “journey” than he had been traveling until this point in his life. The message conveyed to him – and to us – through the vision of the ladder is that even his new journey must be aimed heavenward, towards lofty and sublime goals. At every station in life, and under any circumstances we happen to find ourselves in at any given moment, we must find the “ladder” leading to the “heavens,” the opportunities presented to us to achieve something meaningful and to elevate ourselves. If we live with this mindset and perspective, then we will be rising to the “heavens” at all times, no matter what we are involved in, and will be leading a meaningful, “heavenly” life even amid the mundane realities and constraints of our world.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeitzei tells of the birth of Yaakov’s children, and the reasons for the names they received. His first six sons were born from Leah, whom he loved less than his second wife, Rachel, and the names Leah chose for her first three sons express her longing for Yaakov’s love. Leah named her first son “Reuven” because “*ra’a Hashem be-onyi*” – “The Lord has seen my torment” and thus gave her a son so that Yaakov would love her (29:32). The name of her second son, “Shimon,” signifies that “*shama Hashem ki senu’a anokhi*” – “…the Lord heard that I am despised” (29:33). And the name of her third son, “Levi,” expresses that with the birth of a third child “*yilaveh ishi eliai*” – “my husband will attach himself to me” (29:34).

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch observes that unlike these three names, the name of Leah’s fourth son, Yehuda, is not associated with Leah’s relationship with Yaakov. The name “Yehuda” is simply an expression of gratitude – “*Ha-pa’am odeh et Hashem*” (“This time, I shall thank the Lord” – 29:35), without any reference to Leah’s desire to earn Yaakov’s love. On this basis, Rav Hirsch asserts that after the birth of Leah’s third son, Levi, she felt that her relationship with Yaakov had finally reached the level of closeness that should characterize a marriage. After each of the first two births, although Leah noticed a marked improvement in Yaakov’s attitude towards her after, and a less pronounced difference between his relationship to her and his relationship to Rachel, but only after Levi’s birth did Leah sense that, in Rav Hirsch’s words, “the difference had quite disappeared,” and that “the purest, truest loving relationship between husband and wife was established.” Therefore, when Leah’s fourth child was born, she no longer needed to celebrate any enhancement of Yaakov’s affection towards her, and so she simply expressed her general feelings of gratitude to the Almighty. (It should be noted, though, that after the birth of Leah’s sixth Zevulun, she again spoke of her relationship to Yaakov, exclaiming, “*Ha-pa’am yizbeleini ishi*” (30:20). This would certainly appear to indicate that this issue continued weighing on Leah’s mind even later.)

In light of this, Rav Hirsch asserts that the name “Levi” – more specifically, Leah’s response to Levi’s birth which formed the basis of his name – encapsulates the “purest, truest loving relationship between husband and wife.” The name “Levi” stems from the term “*yilaveh*,” Leah’s anticipation of Yaakov “attaching” himself to her. Rav Hirsch suggests a link between the root “*l.v.h.*” used in reference to “attachment” (as in the common word “*leviya*,” which means “escort”), and the use of this root to mean “borrow.” The relationship signified by this term, Rav Hirsch explains, is the “attachment of two persons where each one of them feels themselves the *loveh*, the debtor of the other…that they owe their happiness and whole life to the other.” The highest-level relationship is achieved when the parties see themselves as indebted to one another, as opposed to feeling owed by one another. When the two parties focus on their perceived entitlements, on what they can and should be receiving from the other, disappointment and tension are all but inevitable. A successful relationship is one signified by the name “Levi,” characterized by a mutual sense of indebtedness, with each party seeking to please the other. This is thus the name given to Levi, whose birth heralded, in Leah’s mind, the attainment of the complete marital bond that she sought to build with Yaakov.

Tuesday

Parashat Vayeitzei begins with the story of Yaakov’s experiences as he left Canaan to flee from his brother, and it tells that he “chanced upon a place” (“*va-yifga ba-makom*” – 28:11) when night fell, and he slept and beheld a prophetic dream. The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (26b) famously comments that Yaakov prayed the nighttime *arvit* prayer at that time, and it was he who instituted this daily prayer. Avraham and Yitzchak had instituted the morning *shacharit* prayer and the afternoon *mincha* prayer, respectively, and now, as Yaakov journeyed from Canaan, he instituted the evening *arvit* prayer.

Many writers have explained that Yaakov is associated specifically with the *arvit* prayer because this prayer represents our petitioning God during times of darkness, in periods of fear, uncertainty and turmoil. Yaakov spent twenty years in exile, hiding from his brother who sought to kill him, and struggling against his wily uncle who repeatedly tried to swindle him. Later, upon Yaakov’s return to his homeland, he faced several difficult challenges, including the rape of his daughter, and later, one of his sons being brutally kidnapped by his brothers and then sold as a slave to a foreign country. Yaakov would eventually have to leave his home as an elderly man due to famine, and relocate in Egypt. Much of Yaakov’s life was spent in “darkness,” in exile, in fear, in pain and in anguish. He is therefore associated with the evening *arvit* service, the prayer that represents our turning to God in times of “darkness” and hardship.

However, Rav Aryeh Tzvi Frommer of Kozhiglov, in his *Eretz Tzvi*, suggests a different point of association between Yaakov and the nighttime prayer. The Gemara, in a famous passage (Megilla 17b), teaches that before Yaakov left Canaan, he spent fourteen years intensively engrossed in study, in the academy of Eiver. The precise formulation used by the Gemara is “*haya Yaakov be-veit Eiver* ***mutman***” – Yaakov was “hidden” in the academy. On one level, this description might simply refer to the fact that Yaakov was hiding from his brother, and thus he ensured that his whereabouts were kept secret. However, Rav Frommer suggests that the Gemara might also refer to one of Yaakov’s defining characteristics – that his piety was “*mutman*,” concealed from the public eye. Indeed, the Torah never mentions anything about Yaakov devoting himself to study before leaving Canaan. His devotion was “*mutman*” – hidden and concealed, kept totally private. In this vein, Rav Frommer writes, we should perhaps understand the specific connection between Yaakov and the nighttime prayer. The *arvit* service, which we recite during the period of darkness, signifies our serving God in “concealment,” in private, outside the public view. One of the themes of *arvit* is the theme of “*mutman*” – of serving the Almighty with pure sincerity, even in private, when there is nobody watching or observing, one of the defining features of Yaakov Avinu.

With this insight into Yaakov’s character, his struggles against his two primary antagonists – Esav and Lavan – become especially significant. Both Esav and Lavan are characterized by deceit and dishonesty. The Torah earlier in Sefer Bereishit (25:27) describes Esav as an “*ish yodei’a tzayid*” (“a man who knew hunting”), which Rashi, based on the Midrash, explains as a reference to Esav’s appearing pious to impress people – particularly his father – and thereby conceal his true sinful character. And Lavan, of course, repeatedly attempted to deceive Yaakov, yet always found a way to defend himself and portray himself as innocent and virtuous. Yaakov’s struggle against these two adversaries can thus be seen as representative of the struggle between pure sincerity and phony piety. Yaakov represents the ideal of *arvit*, of genuine piety in the “dark,” when nobody is watching, when we are not being observed or evaluated by anybody, whereas Esav and Lavan represent deceptive self-promotion, the false portrayal of oneself as righteous to conceal his true corrupt self.

We, the offspring and heirs of Yaakov, are called upon to follow his example and embody the concept underlying the nighttime *arvit* prayer, the ideal of true, honest and sincere religious devotion. A discrepancy between one’s public image and his true self reflects the character of Esav and Lavan, our greatest adversaries. We must strive to ensure that our inner core resembles the favorable image that we project, that we are truly as good and virtuous in private as we are in our public lives.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Vayeitzei of the famous dream that Yaakov beheld as he slept along his journey to Charan, a vision of a ladder extending to the heavens and of angels walking up and down the ladder (28:12).

The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (91b), commenting on this vision, teaches that Yaakov’s image is engraved upon God’s Heavenly Throne, and the angels Yaakov saw in his dream went back on forth between the Throne and the ground where Yaakov slept. The angels saw Yaakov’s image in the heavens, and then descended to the earth and saw that same image, observing Yaakov asleep on the ground.

A slightly more elaborate version of this tradition appears in the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 68:12), which relates that when the angels saw Yaakov sleeping, they ridiculed him. After seeing his image engraved under God’s Throne, a reflection of his lofty stature, the angels scorned Yaakov for sleeping. The Midrash draws an analogy to a king who was seen presiding over a case in his large ballroom, and was then later seen in a different room sleeping. The angels jeered at the sight of Yaakov, a man of unique prominence, lying on the ground sleeping.

It would seem that the Midrash here seeks to convey the message that “sleep” – lethargy, laziness and complacency – is inconsistent with the stature and role assigned to *Am Yisrael*. Yaakov, and his descendants, who have been given a cherished place near God’s Throne, chosen as His special nation, are held to a higher standard of achievement, and are thus not entitled to “sleep,” to take the easy route. We are called upon to work hard, to exert effort, to make sacrifices, to energetically pursue personal and collective greatness, without ever allowing ourselves the comfort of complacency.

Later (69:1), however, the Midrash tells us an additional aspect of Yaakov’s dream, one which perhaps sheds further light on the message conveyed by the depiction of the angels’ scorn. Yaakov dreamt that as the angels ascended and descended, God stood over him (28:13), and the Midrash explains this element of the vision by way of a striking analogy. The Midrash compares Yaakov in this scene to a young prince sleeping in his crib as flies hovered all around him, until his nanny came along and covered him, whereupon the flies quickly scattered. Similarly, the Midrash explains, Yaakov was surrounded by a “swarm” of angels that quickly disappeared once God Himself came to protect him. Approaching this account in light of the previous description of the angels’ hostility towards Yaakov, we might explain that whereas the angels viewed Yaakov’s sleeping with scorn and contempt, the Almighty came to his defense. The angels, who have no physical needs, could not imagine how a being so exalted as to earn a permanent place by the Heavenly Throne could lie practically lifeless on the ground. But God, who created human beings, and knows even better than people themselves just how frail and fragile they are, fully understands. While ideally, the angels are certainly correct in criticizing and censuring *Am Yisrael* for its “slumber,” God defends us, as it were, from their condemnation. He understands our limitations, and mercifully acknowledges that while we must, of course, extend ourselves to our maximum potential, we will, invariably, require periods of “sleep” and inactivity.

These two Midrashic passages, then, depict the ever-present tension between ambition and realism, between the need to push ourselves to our limits and the humble recognition of those limits. We must try, as much as possible, to maximize our full potential without compromising our standards, while also accepting our human limitations and avoiding the futile attempt to extend beyond them.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Vayeitzei of Rachel’s infertility after marrying Yaakov, how she remained childless for several years while her sister, Leah, who was also married to Yaakov, bore children in quick succession. Rachel approached Yaakov in anguish and exclaimed, “Give me children, and if not, I will die!” (30:1).

Yaakov angrily replied, “Am I in place of God, who has withheld from you fruit of the belly?!” (30:2) – correctly noting the absurdity of Rachel’s demand that he “give” her children, when God had made her infertile.

The Midrash, in *Bereishit Rabba* (71), famously criticizes Yaakov for his sharp response to Rachel, relating that God said to Yaakov, “*Kakh onim et ha-me’ikot*?” –“Is this the way to respond to women in distress?!” According to the Midrash, God told Yaakov that because he spoke to Rachel this way, “your sons will stand before her son.” This refers to the story of Yosef – Rachel’s son – whose brothers sold him as a slave and later ashamedly came before him to beg for compassion. Somehow, the Midrash found a link between that tense exchange between Yosef and his brothers and Yaakov’s tense exchange with Rachel here in Parashat Vayeitzei. This connection is developed more fully by *Tanchuma Yashan* (Vayeitzei 19), which notes a textual parallel between the two contexts. Just as Yaakov responded to Rachel, “Am I in God’s place?” Yosef similarly responded to his brothers after they begged him not to avenge their crimes against him, “Do not fear, for am I in God’s place?!” (Bereishit 50:19). According to this Midrashic passage, God told Yaakov that because of the way he spoke to Rachel, her son would speak to his sons with the same expression – “Am I in God’s place” – that he used in speaking to her.

A number of writers raised the question of how to explain the Midrash’s intent in connecting these two responses. Yaakov’s response of “Am I in God’s place?” was made – according to the Midrash – insensitively, criticizing Rachel for her complaints instead of compassionately empathizing with her plight. Yosef, on the other hand, gave this response in compassionately assuring his brothers that he did not seek revenge, that since his sale as a slave proved to be part of God’s plan to save the family and the region from hunger, he did not plan on punishing them for what they did. The Midrash, however, appears to view Yosef’s forgiving response to his brothers as paralleling Yaakov’s insensitive response to Rachel.

Apparently (as noted by Rav Chaim Elazary, in his *Darkhei Chayim*), the Midrash here understood Yosef’s response to his brothers differently. Rabbeinu Bechayei, in his commentary to Parashat Vayechi (see also *Or Ha-chayim*), controversially asserts that Yosef did not actually forgive his brothers. In this exchange, he informed them that he was incapable of exacting revenge because their crime ended up benefiting him and the entire region – indicating that Yosef did not forgive them, but felt barred from acting on his feelings. It appears that the Midrash explained along similar lines, interpreting Yosef’s response as cold and unsupportive – like Yaakov’s response to Rachel. Rather than graciously granting his brothers forgiveness and assuring them he no longer harbored hard feelings towards them, Yosef instead told them only that he could not harm them – without trying to ease the burden of conscience that weighed heavily upon their hearts. And in this sense, it seems, the Midrash detected a parallel between Yaakov’s response to Rachel and Yosef’s response to his brothers. In both instances, the person responded with the cold, hard truth, instead of with the warm compassion that was needed. Yaakov told Rachel plainly that he could not help her conceive, and Yosef told his brothers that he felt incapable of harming them, implying that otherwise this would be considered. The Midrash finds fault in both Yaakov and Yosef, because when dealing with “*me’ikot*” – people in distress, special sensitivity is required. Yaakov was expected to offer words of consolation to Rachel, despite her unwarranted complaints, and Yosef was expected to speak reassuringly to his contrite brothers, despite the crime they had committed against him many years earlier – because when people are distressed or anguished, we must treat them in an especially forgiving manner and in a way that eases, not exacerbates, their emotional pain.

Friday

The *Midrash Tanchuma*, in its opening comments to Parashat Vayeitzei, draws a seemingly peculiar comparison between Yaakov’s escaping from his brother, and the exile which the Torah imposes upon inadvertent killers. One who kills somebody accidentally, due to negligence, is required to relocate in an *ir miklat* (city of refuge) to protect himself from the victim’s vengeful relatives, and the *Tanchuma* comments, “One who kills a person accidentally is exiled to a city of refuge – and our patriarch Yaakov was exiled to Charan.” Somehow, Yaakov’s exile in Charan resembles the exile of an inadvertent killer.

The *Sefat Emet*, in a startling passage (Vayeitzei, 5634), explains that Yaakov was considered an accidental “sinner” in regard to his relationship with Esav. Yaakov felt himself incapable of influencing Esav and drawing him closer to God and to a proper lifestyle, whereas in truth he had this capability. He was punished with exile, the *Sefat Emet* asserts, for this accidental “offense” of failing to make any attempt to inspire Esav, like a person is sent into exile for accidentally causing somebody’s death.

While the specific application of this notion to Yaakov and Esav might be difficult to understand, the *Sefat Emet* here establishes a parallel between the neglect of other people’s physical wellbeing and the neglect of their moral and spiritual wellbeing. The exile imposed upon an accidental killer reflects our responsibility to foresee how our actions might impact upon other people, to ensure that we conduct ourselves in a manner that does not threaten the safety of other people. According to the *Sefat Emet*, the same applies to the less tangible effects that our conduct has upon other people – specifically, upon their minds, their characters and their souls. We are expected to recognize that we can influence other people, that the way we speak to and act towards them, and even the way we speak and act in their presence, can profoundly affect them, either positively or negatively. Therefore, just as a person who acts negligently is held accountable for the physical harm his conduct causes other people, similarly, we are held accountable for the negative influence we exert – however unintentionally – upon other people. We must never think we are not important enough for our behavior to impact other people, because it does. We are therefore obliged to act responsibly to both ensure the physical safety of the people around us, and exert a positive influence upon them.

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)