**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYETZE**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Vayeitzei that after the twenty years Yaakov spent with his uncle, Lavan, during which time he married Lavan’s daughters and tended to his flocks, Yaakov took his family and possessions and left to return to his homeland. Lavan chased after Yaakov, and when he caught up to him, a tense exchange ensued, with Lavan protesting Yaakov’s leaving without informing him, and Yaakov responding by protesting the way he had been treated. Yaakov ended his monologue by saying, “If not that the God of my father…were with me, you would have now sent me away emptyhanded; God saw my torment and the toil of my hand, as proven last night” (31:42). The final phrase – “as proven last night” (“*va-yokhach amesh*”) – refers to the dream Lavan beheld the previous night, in which God warned him not to hurt Yaakov (31:24). Lavan himself, upon reaching Yaakov, indicated that he would have killed Yaakov if not for this prophetic dream (31:29).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 74:12) observes that Yaakov here speaks of God’s assistance in two respects – in saving him from poverty, and in saving him from harm. First, he mentions that he would have left Lavan penniless if not for “the God of my father,” which the Midrash understands as a reference to “*zekhut avot*” – the merits one receives from his parents and previous generations. Then, Yaakov says that God intervened to prevent Lavan from causing him physical harm, in the merit of “my torment and my toil” – referring to Yaakov’s dedication and tireless efforts as he worked shepherding Lavan’s flocks, which Yaakov describes in the previous verses (31:38-41). The Midrash thus establishes, “Work is more precious than the merit of one’s parents – for the merit of parents rescued money, while work rescued life.” Yaakov attributes his financial success to “the God of my father,” the merit of his forebears, and he attributes his protection from Lavan’s murderous scheme to his hard work – indicating that hard work is more precious than “*zekhut avot*.” Hard work saved Yaakov’s life, whereas his “*zekhut avot*” enabled him to earn money despite Lavan’s devious schemes.

The message conveyed by the Midrash, it would seem, is that accomplishments earned through hard work and effort are more precious than that which we receive without personal initiative. We are all the beneficiaries of “*zekhut avot*” – certain gifts, opportunities and advantages that we received by virtue of our background and upbringing, the conditions in which we entered this world and were raised. These benefits are all significant and should be exploited to their very fullest, but the Midrash reminds us that our success and achievement in life depend far more on our hard work. No “*zekhut avot*,” nothing we receive automatically from our parents or from the circumstances in which we were raised, obviates the need for the exertion of effort. Anything we hope to accomplish requires hard work, notwithstanding the blessings and good fortune granted to us through “*zekhut avot*.”

Sunday

In the beginning of Parashat Vayeitzei, we read of Yaakov’s famous dream that he dreamt as he slept during his journey to Charan. He saw a ladder extending to the heavens with angels ascending and descending, and he heard God assure him that he would be protected, he would safely return to his homeland, and he would beget a large nation that would inhabit the land of Canaan. The Torah tells that Yaakov awoke and exclaimed, “Indeed, there is God in this place, and I did not know!” (28:16).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 69:7), commenting on the words, “*Va-yikatz Yaakov mi-shenato*” (“Yaakov awoke from his sleep”), suggests reading the word “*mi-shenato*” (“from his sleep”) as “*mi-mishnato*” – “from his learning.” Numerous writers struggled to explain this ambiguous remark, what it means that Yaakov awoke that morning from learning Torah.

An especially bold and creative explanation is offered by Rav Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, in his *Ma’or Va-shemesh*, based on a more famous Midrashic passage, cited by Rashi (to 28:11), that Yaakov spent fourteen years engrossed in Torah learning before his journey to Charan. Although Yaakov invested himself tirelessly in study – in fact, Rashi cites the Midrash as stating that Yaakov did not enjoy a single night’s sleep during those fourteen years – he did not experience a prophetic vision throughout that period of intensive learning. He received prophecy only now, as he made his way to Charan, after he offered a heartfelt prayer (“*va-yifga ba-makom*” – 28:11, as explained by Rashi, based on Berakhot 26b). The *Ma’or Va-shemesh* thus suggests that when the Midrash speaks of Yaakov “awakening” from his learning, it means that he was “awakened” to – that is, made aware of – the importance and power of prayer. Until then, he was keenly aware of the great importance of study, but it was only now that he fully appreciated the importance of prayer, that spiritual greatness cannot be attained through study alone. He was “awakened” from his excessive focus on learning, as his eyes were opened to the power of prayer.

The *Ma’or Va-shemesh* here points to the tendency we sometimes have to emphasize one aspect of religious life too strongly, at the expense of others. Sometimes, our commitment to one religious value can cause us to “sleep” with respect to other important values. Single-minded focus on just one *mitzva* is conveniently simplistic, obviating the need for complexity, balance, proportion and nuance. It allows us to go through life “asleep,” mindlessly pursuing just a single goal without balancing it with other, equally important objectives. The *Ma’or Va-shemesh*’s creative insight reminds us to appreciate the importance of the full range of the Torah’s obligations and values, and to avoid the mistake of limiting ourselves to just a single religious ideal.

Monday

We read in Parashat Vayeitzei of Yaakov’s decision to leave Lavan’s home with his wives, children and herds. As the family left, the Torah relates (31:19), Rachel took with her Lavan’s “*terafim*,” a term referring either to idols (Rashi, Rav Saadia Gaon) or oracles (Radak). Later (31:34-5), we read that Rachel hid the *terafim* and Lavan was unable to find them when he caught up to Yaakov.

Chida, in his *Midbar Kedeimot* (*Ma’arekhet Khaf*, 4) and in *Devash Le-fi* (*Ma’arekhet Alef*, 39), cites the *Zohar* (vol. 1, 164) as condemning Rachel for causing her father grief by stealing his possessions, going so far as to attribute Rachel’s tragic, untimely death to this sin. Chida notes the implication that although Lavan was a habitual sinner, who worshipped idols and routinely lied and deceived, Rachel was nevertheless expected to show him respect, and she was thus punished for causing him distress by stealing his *terafim*. If so, then the *Zohar*’s condemnation of Rachel’s act would perhaps lend support to the Rambam’s ruling in *Hilkhot Mamrim* (6:11) that the obligation to respect parents requires one to respect even a sinful parent.

By contrast, the Mishna in Masekhet Pesachim (4:9) tells that after the death of the cruel, iniquitous King Achaz, his son and successor, Chizkiyahu, publicly disgraced his father by having his bones dragged by ropes, instead of arranging a respectful funeral. The Mishna states that this was done with the approval of the Torah sages. This would certainly appear to indicate that one has no obligation to respect a sinful parent. This conclusion also seems to emerge from the Gemara’s discussion in Masekhet Bava Kama (94b) concerning the case of stolen goods that are still intact after the thief’s death. The Gemara rules that the children must return the stolen goods to preserve the honor of their deceased father – but only if the father had repented and then died before returning the goods. As many have noted, the Gemara’s ruling appears to directly contradict the Rambam’s position requiring giving respect to even a wicked parent.

To resolve these seemingly conflicting sources, Chida suggests a distinction between the respect owed to a living parent, and the respect required after a parent’s passing. *Halakha* requires respecting a deceased parent’s memory (*Shulchan Arukh*, Y.D. 240:9), but the parameters of this obligation do not necessarily correspond to those of the obligation to respect a living parent. Chida thus postulates that one is required to show respect to a sinful parent only during the parent’s lifetime. Hence, Rachel was punished for disrespecting her father, who was still alive, whereas Chizkiyahu was justified in disgracing his deceased father, and the Gemara does not require children to return items stolen by their deceased father to preserve his honor unless he repented. This answer was also advanced by the *Lechem Mishneh* commentary to the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*.

In any event, other *Rishonim*, including *Hagahot Maimoniyot*, dispute the Rambam’s ruling, and maintain that one is not required to show honor to a sinful parent, and this is the view accepted by the *Tur* (Y.D. 240) and the Rama (Y.D. 240:18), whereas the *Shulchan Arukh* follows the Rambam’s position. The *Arukh Ha-shulchan* (240:39) sides with the lenient ruling of the Rama. This is also the conclusion of Rav Yaakov Ettlinger, in his *Binyan Tziyon Ha-chadashot* (112).

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted Chida’a discussion (in his *Midbar Kedeimot*, *Ma’arekhet Khaf*, 4; and elsewhere) regarding Rachel’s theft of her father’s “*terafim*” (either idols or oracles), as related in Parashat Vayeitzei (31:19). Chida cites the *Zohar* as commenting that Rachel was severely punished for causing her father anguish, and many inferred from the *Zohar*’s remarks that one is obligated to respect his parent even if the parent is a corrupt evildoer, like Lavan. The *Zohar*’s comment would thus seem to stand in opposition to the Mishna’s description (Pesachim 4:9) of Chizkiyahu disgracing his wicked father, Achaz, after his death, with the sages’ approval. Chida suggests reconciling these different sources by distinguishing between the obligation to respect a living parent, which perhaps applies regardless of the parent’s conduct, and the obligation to respect a deceased parent, which does not apply if the parent was sinful.

As mentioned yesterday, this distinction is proposed also by the *Lechem Mishneh* commentary to the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*, in reference to the Rambam’s explicit ruling requiring one to respect an iniquitous parent (*Hilkhot Mamrim* 6:11). Numerous writers, as we saw, challenged the Rambam’s view in light of the Gemara’s discussion in Masekhet Bava Kama (94b) concerning the case of a deceased thief. The Gemara rules that if the thief had repented before his passing, then the children must return stolen goods which were part of his estate, to preserve his honor, but if he had not repented, then they need not honor his memory. To defend the Rambam’s position, the *Lechem Mishneh* suggests that the Rambam refers only to the requirement to respect a living parent, whereas a deceased parent need not be respected if he was sinful.

This distinction is suggested also by the Radbaz, who adds an explanation for the difference between the case of a living sinful parent and a deceased sinful parent. He writes that while a parent is still alive, there remains a chance that he will correct his wayward behavior. Even if a parent is sinful, the prospect of repentance and change cannot be ignored, and so the obligation of *kibbud av va-eim* (respecting parents) remains in force. Fundamentally, according to the Radbaz, there is no requirement to respect an evil parent, but in practice, this provision is inapplicable until the parent passes on, because until then, the parent cannot be definitively labelled as “evil.”

Different explanations have been offered as to why, according to the Radbaz, the prospect of future repentance prevents us from considering the father “evil” in the present, when he acts in a corrupt, debased manner. Some explain based on the famous notion (Yoma 86b) that repentance driven by love for God (as opposed to the fear of punishment) retroactively transforms one’s sins into sources of merit. Accordingly, a sinner’s status could always be retroactively changed, such that the status of “*rasha*” (“evil person”) cannot be definitively assigned until after death. Others understand the Radbaz to mean that a child’s disrespect for a parent causes the parent anguish even many years later, and so if a wicked parent repents, the child will then be held accountable for the anguish experienced by the parent from that point onward.

Rav Shraga Feivel Paretsky (*Ner La’ma’or*, p. 149) offers a different explanation, boldly suggesting that perhaps the Radbaz understood the *kibbud av va-eim* obligation as including a requirement to anticipate a sinful parent’s repentance. Part of the respect owed to the parents is the belief in their capacity for good even if they are currently sinful. Children of wayward parents are not to dismiss them as evil, but must rather continue hoping and trusting that they are capable of changing. And thus it is only after a sinful parent’s death that the child is absolved of the requirement to respect the parent.

(It should be emphasized that in a case where a parent mistreats the child himself, other factors likely absolve the child from the obligation of *kibbud av va-eim*, irrespective of the question of whether this obligation applies to a parent who can be considered a “*rasha*.”)

Wednesday

In our last two installments, we discussed a number of sources relevant to the question as to whether the obligation of *kibbud av va-eim* – respecting parents – applies in the case of an evil parent. As we saw, the *Zohar*, cited by Chida in several places in his writings, strongly condemns Rachel for causing her corrupt father, Lavan, anguish by taking his *terafim* (idols, or oracles), whereas the Mishna (Pesachim 56a) tells that Chizkiyahu dishonored the remains of his sinful father, Achaz, with the rabbis’ approval. Other writers addressed this question in reference to the Rambam’s explicit ruling (*Hilkhot Mamrim* 6:11) requiring respecting a sinful father, which appears to be contradicted by the Gemara’s ruling that a deceased thief’s children must return goods he stole to preserve his honor only if he had repented before his passing. Chida, as we saw, resolved the conflicting sources by distinguishing between the obligation to respect a living parent, which does not depend on a parent’s conduct, and the obligation to respect a deceased parent’s memory, which might not apply in the case of an evildoer.

A different theory was advanced by Rav Yehonatan Eibshutz, in his *Ya’arot Devash* (vol. 2, 18), where he invokes the concept of *mar’it ha-ayin* – the concern to avoid appearing to violate the Torah. Fundamentally, Rav Eibshutz suggests, even the Rambam agrees that an evildoer’s children have no obligation to respect him, but in practice, this is required, because other people might be unaware of the parent’s iniquitous nature. Failing to respect a wicked parent could easily give the impression of disregarding the *mitzva* of *kibbud av va-eim*, and so, in the Rambam’s view, one must respect a sinful parent. In Chizkiyahu’s case, though, the entire kingdom was well aware of the sinful conduct of his father, a cruel, idol-worshipping king, and so Chizkiyahu had no obligation to respect him. Perhaps this could also explain why the Gemara does not require a thief’s children to return the stolen goods after his passing. The Rambam may have understood the Gemara as referring specifically to a case where the victims know who stole the items, and so there is not concern of “*mar’it ha-ayin*” if the children fail to give their father the honor of returning the goods.

In his *Devash Le-fi* (*Ma’arekhet Alef*, 39), Chida brings a different theory in the name of earlier writers, suggesting that according to the Rambam, one must respect a wicked father except in the rare case when the father had sought to kill him. Thus, for example, Chida cites from a work entitled *Bigdei Aharon* that Avraham was under no obligation to show respect to his father, Terach, who, according to a famous Midrashic tradition, reported Avraham to the authorities for opposing idol-worship, so he would be executed. This explains why Chizkiyahu was not required to honor his father, who, as the Gemara states in Masekhet Sanhedrin (63b), tried to burn Chizkiyahu when he was child as a pagan sacrifice. This theory would not suffice, however, to reconcile the Rambam’s position with the Gemara’s discussion concerning a thief, exempting the children from respecting him unless he repented.

*Arukh Ha-shulchan* (Y.D. 240:39) raises several approaches to refute the proof against the Rambam’s ruling from the Gemara’s discussion of the deceased thief. One suggestion is to distinguish between actively disrespecting a parent, and refraining from displaying honor. The Gemara does not require the thief’s children to go out of their way to preserve their father’s honor by returning the stolen goods, but this does not necessarily mean that children may actively dishonor a wicked parent. Perhaps, then, the Rambam meant only that one may not disrespect a sinful parent, not that he is required to show the parent honor. Of course, this would not account for King Chizkiyahu’s disrespectful treatment of his father’s remains, though that incident could be dismissed as an exceptional case, as the newly-anointed king sought to make it clear that he was rejecting his father legacy and moving the kingdom in a drastically different direction.

Regardless, *Arukh Ha-shulchan* concedes that this distinction does not seem to be implied by the Rambam’s formulation, which appears to apply all requirements of *kibbud av va-eim* to the case of a sinful parent.

Thursday

We read in the beginning of Parashat Vayeitzei of the famous prophetic vision that Yaakov beheld as he slept during his journey from his homeland to Charan. Yaakov saw a ladder extending from the ground to the heavens, and angels climbing up and down the ladder. Upon awakening, he exclaimed that the site where he had slept was “the house of God” and “the gateway to the heavens” (28:17), as evidenced by the ladder which connected heaven and earth at that spot. Yaakov named the place where he slept “Beit-El” – “the house of the Almighty.” The Torah makes a point of mentioning to us that the area was previously known by the name “Luz” (28:19).

Rav Menachem Bentzion Sacks, in *Menachem Tziyon*, writes that the significance of the shift from the name “Luz” to “Beit-El” may perhaps be understood in light of the Gemara’s description of a city built later that bore the name “Luz.” A verse in Sefer Shoftim (1:26) tells that after *Benei Yisrael*’sconquest of Beit-El, the resident who helped them capture the city moved and built a new city which he renamed Luz. The Gemara tells in Masekhet Sota (46b) that this was a unique city, and “the angel of death did not have permission to pass through it,” such that its inhabitants were protected from death. But “the elders within it,” the Gemara says, “at the time when they were exasperated, they would go outside the wall and die.” The people did not die in the city, and so when people grew old and no longer wished to live, they would go outside the city. Rav Sacks explains that the Gemara here depicts the tragic phenomenon of people who strive to prolong their lives, but fail to find meaning and fulfillment. There are people who work very hard to protect themselves from the “angel of death,” to live long lives, but they eventually find themselves in a condition described by the Gemara as “*da’atan katza aleihen*” – of “exasperation,” of discontentment and fatigue, which leads them to wish for death.

Rav Sacks thus suggests that the renaming of Luz as “Beit-El” – “the House of God” – indicates to us that the way we avoid the phenomenon of “Luz,” of long but unfulfilling lives, is through Yaakov’s dream in Beit-El, which symbolizes the merging of heaven and earth. Alongside our efforts to maintain our physical health and prolong our lives, we must also strive to reach the “heavens,” to connect with God, as symbolized by the ladder extending from the ground to the heavens. If we focus solely on the “ground,” on our physical wellbeing, we might likely experience the lack of fulfillment sensed by the people of Luz. We must instead live here on earth with our minds reaching towards the heavens, striving each day to strengthen our relationship with the Almighty and thereby make each and every day meaningful and fulfilling.

Friday

We read in Parashat Vayeitzei of Yaakov’s encounter with the shepherds of Charan upon his arrival at the well outside the city. Yaakov noticed that the shepherds had brought their herds to the well, instead of having them graze in the fields, and he assumed that they were ending their day, bringing their sheep back to town, even though it was still early in the afternoon. He remarked to them, “The day is still young; it is not yet time to bring in the sheep. Give the sheep water and continue shepherding” (29:7). The shepherds explained to Yaakov that they were not ending their day, and were rather waiting for all the shepherds to come together because the well was covered by a large stone that could be removed only by all the shepherds together.

A creative explanation of this episode is cited by Rav Yisrael of Modzhitz, in his *Divrei Yisrael*, in the name of his great-grandfather, Rav Tzvi Hersh Taub. Rashi (28:11) cites the famous Midrashic tradition that the previous night, when Yaakov slept and beheld the famous dream of the ladder extending to the heavens, the sun set early, before the time for sundown. The Midrash explains that God wanted Yaakov to sleep at that particular spot – the future site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – and so He had the sun set when Yaakov reached that site so he could not continue traveling, and would sleep there. Rav Tzvi Hersh Taub thus cleverly suggested that when Yaakov saw the shepherds appearing to end their day, he mistakenly assumed that they anticipated another early sunset. Since night had fallen early the previous day, Yaakov figured that in the shepherd’s minds, a permanent change occurred in the natural order, and the sun would be setting earlier from that day onward. He therefore approached them to clarify that the sun had set early the previous day specifically for him, and this unusual phenomenon did not herald a permanent change.

The depth of this “witty” reading of the story is that oftentimes, when we experience “darkness,” when it seems as though the “sun” is “setting” on our efforts, we feel discouraged and reluctant to move forward. When our efforts are fruitless, we question our abilities and begin to wonder if perhaps failure is our destiny. When “darkness” overtakes us one day, we might feel that this will happen the next day, too. Rav Tzvi Hersh Taub here applies to us Yaakov’s instructions to the shepherds of Charan: “The day is still young; it is not yet time to bring in the sheep.” If our efforts did not succeed in the past, this does not mean that we should discontinue our efforts in the present. The “early nightfall,” the unexpected failure, we encountered yesterday should not discourage us today. Even if yesterday was “dark,” today could very well be bright and successful. Rather than allow our failures to discourage us, and lead us to “end our day” without investing further effort, we should, as Yaakov told the shepherds, “continue shepherding” – persist with confidence and determination, pursuing our goals to the best of our ability.

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