**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYISHLACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach (35:22) briefly tells of the sin committed by Reuven, Yaakov’s oldest son, who is described as having slept with his stepmother, Bilha. Rashi, based on the Gemara’s discussion (Shabbat 55b), famously asserts that Reuven did not actually engage in a forbidden relationship with Bilha, but rather committed a different offense, which the Torah describes in hyperbolic terms to underscore its severity. Namely, Reuven moved Yaakov’s bed from Bilha’s tent into the tent of his mother, Leah. As Rashi explains, Yaakov had kept his bed in the tent of his favorite wife, Rachel, and after her passing – which, as indicated by the Torah, occurred just prior to Reuven’s sinful act – Yaakov moved his bed into the tent of Bilha, Rachel’s maidservant whom she had Yaakov marry. Reuven considered it a slight to his mother’s honor that Yaakov chose to make his permanent residence with Rachel’s maidservant, rather than with Leah, and so he boldly brought Yaakov’s bed out of Bilha’s tent and into Leah’s tent.

The Maharshal, cited in *Siftei Chakhamim*, elaborates on this account, suggesting a possible reason for why Yaakov chose to move his bed into Bilha’s tent after Rachel’s tent. Accordingly to the Maharshal, Yaakov would have preferred moving his bed into Leah’s tent, rather than in the tent of one of the maidservants. However, Yaakov wrongly assumed that this was not Leah’s wish. After Yaakov had regarded Rachel as his primary wife throughout the years, ever since he married the two sisters, Yaakov assumed that Leah would not want Yaakov’s primary residence to be with her. Therefore, he decided to move his bed into Bilha’s tent. Reuven, however, knew his mother’s preferences, and realized that to the contrary, Leah would find it insulting to have Yaakov move his bed into Bilha’s tent. He therefore took the initiative and moved the bed into Leah’s tent.

Rav Chaim Elazary, in [*Netivei Chayim*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=42858&st=&pgnum=295&hilite=), observes that according to the Maharshal, Reuven acted in a manner which he thought would be beneficial for both his parents. Whereas it is commonly understood that Reuven sinned by inappropriately opposing his father, it seems that according to the Maharshal, Reuven acted to help his father, who wanted to move his bed into Leah’s tent. Reuven moved the bed to fulfill Yaakov’s wishes, not to protest his father’s decision. And yet, the Torah condemns his action in the strongest possible terms, equating it with outright adultery. The lesson to be learned is that even the best intentioned actions, done with sincere motives and out of a genuine desire to help another person, can constitute grievous offenses. Even when we think we are helping our fellow, and even when feel confident that we know better than that person what can help him, this does not necessarily entitle us to interfere with his private affairs without his knowledge. Reuven’s mistake was in trying to resolve this matter through bold, independent action, rather than through communication, by speaking to his father about the situation. The Torah here teaches us that sincere motives do not justify all actions, and that careful consideration is needed before we try to help other people without their consent.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the Gemara’s comments in Masekhet Shabbat (55b) explaining the Torah’s brief account of Reuven’s sin with his stepmother, Bilha (35:22). The Torah writes that Reuven slept with Bilha, but the Gemara explains that in truth, he committed a less severe offense, moving his father’s bed out of Bilha’s tent and placing it in Leah’s tent. This intervention in his father’s private affairs was considered a grievous sin, and the Torah underscores its severity, the Gemara explains, by writing that Reuven actually slept with Bilha. According to a *berayta* cited by the Gemara, Reuven moved Yaakov’s bed in order to protect his mother’s honor. Yaakov’s decision to make his primary residence in the tent of a maidservant was seen by Reuven as an affront to Leah, and thus Reuven moved the bed into Leah’s tent to uphold her honor which had been compromised.

The Ramban, however, in his commentary to Parashat Vayishlach, suggests a startling alternative to the explanation presented by the Gemara. He writes that after Rachel’s death, Reuven sought to ensure that Yaakov would not have any more children with whom he would have to divide Yaakov’s estate, and this is why he wanted Yaakov’s bed specifically in Leah’s tent. The Ramban asserts that Leah was already too old to bear children, whereas Bilha was still fertile. Therefore, Reuven thought he could prevent the birth of more brothers by moving Yaakov’s bed into Bilha’s tent. The Ramban explains that this was done specifically by Reuven, because Reuven had the most to lose by the birth of more brothers. As the firstborn, he was entitled to a double share of Yaakov’s estate, and thus each additional brother resulted in a double loss of his share. This concern drove Reuven to the drastic measure of interfering with his father’s most private affairs, and moving his bed into Leah’s tent. The Ramban explains on this basis why Yaakov responded to Reuven’s action by transferring the birthright from Reuven to Yosef (Divrei Hayamim I 5:1). As Reuven committed his act to preserve his large share as the firstborn, his punishment was forfeiting the rights of the firstborn.

The Ramban’s account of the events, and of Reuven’s concerns about his share of the inheritance, should perhaps alert us to the dangers of discontentment and anxiety about long-term financial security. Ironically, Reuven was in line to receive twice as much of Yaakov’s wealth than any of his brothers, yet it was specifically he who was concerned about the effects of another brother on the size of his share. His anxiety over losing part of his exceptionally large share made it difficult for him to happily accept his privileged status as firstborn, and enjoy the double portion he would be receiving. We must try to feel content with the blessings we have rather than worry about what we might not have. Reuven’s mistake, as understood by the Ramban, should remind us of the ill effects of financial anxiety, how even those who are privileged can resort to drastic, imprudent tactics to preserve their wealth. The lesson we learn is to find joy and contentment in what we have rather than fretting over what we do not have.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells the famous story of Yaakov’s confrontation with a mysterious assailant who attacked him one night as he made his way back to Canaan in preparation for his feared reunion with Esav. Seeing that he could not defeat Yaakov, the man asked Yaakov to release him, and Yaakov agreed only after the man blessed him, giving him the name “Yisrael.” It is generally understood that the assailant was an angel sent by God to sabotage Yaakov’s return to Canaan, and who symbolizes the conflicts and struggles that Yaakov’s descendants would have to endure over the course of their history.

The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (91a) cites two views regarding the appearance of this angel: one opinion is that the angel appeared to Yaakov as an idolater, whereas the other claims that the angel disguised as a pious scholar.

How might we understand these two possibilities? Why did *Chazal* suggest specifically these two disguises as the possible appearances of the assailant that symbolizes *Am Yisrael*’s struggles and confrontations?

The likely explanation is that *Chazal* here alert us to the fact that spiritual adversaries come in different forms, and can sometimes appear as our ally. While our foe is often unmistakably an “idolater,” a temptation or ideology that is clearly at odds with our belief system, such that the need to oppose it is obvious, other “assailants” assume the appearance of a “scholar,” of wisdom and piety. Sometimes we need to oppose and struggle against a belief, outlook or approach that outwardly seems noble and virtuous, but is, in truth, foreign and hostile. When we confront an “assailant” of this kind, we might be misled by its noble appearance to yield and surrender. The Gemara teaches us that the strength, persistence and determination with which Yaakov defeated his assailant is necessary even if when we come upon an adversary which appears as a “scholar,” when we are threatened by foreign values and ideals that initially strike us as noble and spiritual.

Tuesday

Parashat Vayishlach begins with the account of Yaakov sending messengers to his brother, Esav, as he made his way back to Canaan. After having been separated from Esav brother for twenty years, Yaakov now delivers a message of reconciliation in the hopes of ensuring a peaceful reunion. Rashi famously comments that the messengers whom Yaakov sent were angels, likely referring to the angels mentioned in the final verses of the previous parasha, where we read that Yaakov encountered angels after he left Lavan and began making his way to Canaan.

The Rebbe of Kotzk (in *Ohel Torah*) makes a startling statement about this incident. The Torah describes Yaakov’s dispatching messengers with the phrase, “*Va-yishlach Yaakov malakhim lefanav*” – “Yaakov sent messengers ahead of him,” and the Kotzker Rebbe notes that the word “*lefanav*” (“ahead of him”) seems superfluous. He therefore suggests, remarkably, that Yaakov’s true intent was to send these angels away. Yaakov felt that he did not need the angels who came to greet him, as he was confident in God’s protection and care, which did not depend on the presence of any angels. He therefore sent the angels “*lefanav*” – “away from him,” seeing no need for them.

As is the case with many Chassidic readings of the Biblical text, the Kotzker Rebbe’s interpretation of this verse seems very difficult to accept, and it is likely, or at least possible, that he himself did not intend to offer this insight as the actual explanation of the verse. Rather, he sought to convey a valuable lesson by way of this description of Yaakov sending away the angels that he encountered.

We are sent many “angels” over the course of our lives – people, assets, circumstances and opportunities that can help us achieve our goals and fulfill our wishes. Undoubtedly, we are allowed and expected to make use of these “angels” for our benefit. However, the image of Yaakov sending away the angels that came to him perhaps reminds us not to feel overly dependent on any particular “angel” or “angels” that we come upon during our lives. Sometimes we feel too attached to certain possessions, relationships or arrangements in our lives, such as a certain job or personal connection, such that we feel that our happiness or wellbeing depends on it. The Kotzker Rebbe is perhaps urging us to let go of our “angels” when we need to, to recognize that we are never dependent on anyone and anything other than God Himself. When life takes an unexpected turn, when we experience some drastic change, losing somebody or something that had been a fixture in our lives, we must try to let go of that “angel” and recognize that we are under the Almighty’s care. Just as Yaakov recognized that he could be cared for without any angels, we, too, must always remember that God can care for us without any given “angel” with which we have been blessed. And thus as we go through life trying to make use of the many different “angels” that are sent our way, we must remain cognizant of the fact that we are ultimately under God’s direct care and protection, and not dependent on anything or anyone.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Vayishlach of the mysterious man who attacked Yaakov and began wrestling with him as he made his way back to Canaan after spending twenty years with Lavan. The Midrash (cited by Rashi to 32:25) identifies the assailant as *saro shel Eisav* – the heavenly angel which “represented” Esav in the heavens.

The Torah describes Yaakov’s wrestle with the term “*va-yei’aveik*” (“struggled,” or “wrestled”), which the Gemara (Chulin 91a), intriguingly, associates with the word “*avak*” – “dust.” As Rashi explains, people who wrestle tend to kick dust into the air over the course of their fight. But the Gemara adds that this dust was special, in that “it reached the Heavenly Throne.” The dust sent into the air through Yaakov and the angel’s wrestle did not just fall back down to the ground, but rather soared to the highest place in the heavens, reaching the Almighty’s throne.

This image, of dust rising from the earth and extending to the heavens, brings to mind another seminal moment in Yaakov’s life, namely, the famous dream he beheld as he slept along his journey from Canaan to Charan. Yaakov dreamt of a ladder that is described as being firmly planted in the ground (“*mutzav artza*”) and extending all the way to the heavens (28:12). Interestingly, both Yaakov’s vision of angels as he left his homeland, and his encounter with an angel as he returned to his homeland twenty years later, involved the bridging of the gap separating heaven from earth. On both occasions, he was shown that heaven and earth can be joined together; that the process of implanting ourselves in the ground, engaging in ordinary, mundane pursuits, does not require severing ourselves from the heavens, and that even when we find ourselves in the “dust,” involved in the less pleasant and less seemly aspects of life, we can still soar heavenward, all the way to the Divine Throne.

Appropriately, this notion of merging heaven and earth appears as “brackets” around Yaakov’s difficult but significant sojourn in Aram. Throughout this period, Yaakov was involved in the “earth,” in material pursuits. He spent these years earning his keep shepherding Lavan’s flocks, and then earning his own fortune by outmaneuvering Lavan. As Yaakov himself testified (31:40), he loyally tended to Lavan’s sheep day and night, hardly sleeping. During these years, Yaakov struggled with Lavan in the “dust,” confronting the filth of his uncle’s unbridled greed and shameless duplicity. At the beginning and at the end of this twenty-year period, Yaakov was shown that even his worldly engagements can reach the heavens. Spiritual achievement does not require detachment from mundane life, but to the contrary, necessitates firmly implanting ourselves in the “ground,” in the practicalities of life, as we work to ascend to the heavens. It is specifically by struggling “in the dirt,” confronting the less serene aspects of human life, that we are capable of rising to spiritual heights and earning a place near the Heavenly Throne.

Thursday

Parashat Vayishlach begins with the humble, conciliatory message sent by Yaakov to Esav as he made his way to Canaan after spending many years with Lavan to escape from Esav. Yaakov opens his message by stating, “*Im Lavan garti*” – “I have dwelled with Lavan.” Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, interprets the word “*garti*” as expressing a lowly status. Yaakov was telling Esav, in Rashi’s words, “I did not become an officer and person of distinction, but rather a foreigner. You have no reason to hate me for the blessing with which your father blessed me, ‘you shall be a lord over your brother’ (27:29), [because] it was not fulfilled for me.”

Likewise, commenting on the next verse, in which Yaakov speaks of the large herds of cattle he had amassed, Rashi explains that Yaakov sought to prove to Esav that the blessing he stole was not fulfilled. Yitzchak had blessed Yaakov that he should be granted “the dew of the heavens” and “the fat of the earth” (27:28), yet his wealth came from cattle, not from agriculture. Therefore, Esav had no reason to resent losing this blessing – which had proven ineffectual – to Yaakov.

The obvious question arises as to why Esav would assume that Yaakov’s current circumstances proved that the blessing had no effect. Seemingly, it was understood that Yitzchak’s blessing to his son was intended for the distant future, for his son’s offspring and later generations. This is, presumably, how Yaakov perceived the blessings he received – as promises for his offspring generations henceforth. How, then, would his current circumstances demonstrate to Esav that he had no reason to resent losing the blessing?

It has been suggested that Rashi’s comments reflect a certain aspect of Esav’s character. Namely, his attention was focused on the “here and now,” on his immediate surroundings and circumstances, without long-term vision. Thus, for example, some commentators explain that Esav was prepared to sell his birthright, the privileges of which would come only in the distant future, for the sake of satisfying his hunger on one particular occasion. He looked at his current circumstances, and chose to satisfy his immediate desire at the expense of invaluable future opportunities. The Midrash cited by Rashi perhaps seeks to allude to us this important difference between Yaakov and Esav. Yaakov, of course, fully believed in the future fulfillment of his father’s blessing. From Esav’s perspective, however, the fact that the blessings had gone unfulfilled for several decades proved that they were worthless. For somebody who sees only the present conditions and circumstances, without any long-term consciousness, a blessing that was not fulfilled for over thirty years will never be fulfilled.

We, the descendants and heirs of Yaakov, are thus reminded not to allow our present conditions and immediate needs to lead us to neglect the future. We must remember that our circumstances in the present are fleeting and transient. The problems we confront today will be replaced by other problems in the future, and our priorities today will be replaced with priorities in the future. Even as we work to address our current conditions, we must live with an awareness of the future and ensure to prepare for what lies ahead, rather than focusing exclusively on the here and now.

(Based on an [article by Rav Yissachar Frand](http://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5775-vayishlach/))

Friday

We read in Parashat Vayishlach of the deadly assault mounted by Shimon and Levi on the city of Shekhem after the city’s prince – who bore the name of the city, Shekhem – abducted and raped their sister, Dina. In telling of their attack on the city, the Torah refers to Shimon and Levi as “*benei Yaakov*” – “Yaakov’s sons” (34:25). Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 80:10), detects in this reference a subtle critique of Shimon and Levi’s bold action: “They were his sons, but Shimon and Levi nevertheless conducted themselves like other people, who were not his sons, in that they did not seek his advice.” By describing Shimon and Levi here as “Yaakov’s sons,” the Torah emphasizes the fact that they failed to act as Yaakov’s sons by acting independently, without consulting him and seeking his guidance for how to respond to the unfortunate situation that arose.

Rashi’s comments cast a degree of irony on his remarks a bit later, where he cites an explanation from the same Midrashic source for why Shimon and Levi are described as attacking Shekhem “confidently” (“*betach*”). The simplest reason, as Rashi notes, is that the men of Shekhem were physically frail as a result of their circumcision, and thus Shimon and Levi faced little or no resistance when they descended upon the city. The Midrash, however, explains, as Rashi cites, “They were confident in the strength of the elder one [Yaakov].” They launched their attack feeling assured that the merit of their saintly father would assist them and ensure the success of their campaign. From these two comments of Rashi it emerges that Shimon and Levi felt assured of their ability to access Yaakov’s merits, but felt no need to submit to his authority and seek his counsel. They assumed they could reap the benefits of Yaakov’s unique stature, without needing to turn to him for direction. The Midrash thus reminds us that our status as the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov entails both benefits and obligations. We enjoy *zekhut avot* – the merit of our patriarchs – and the promises included in God’s eternal covenant with our forebears, but we also bear the responsibility to adhere to their legacy and faithfully follow our ancestral traditions.

More generally, perhaps, we are reminded that we cannot enjoy the benefits of membership in *Am Yisrael* and the Jewish community without committing ourselves to the obligations entailed. If we want to access “the strength of the elder one,” we need to humbly accept and submit to the authority of “the elder one,” and work to fulfill all our obligations as part of the Nation of Israel.

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