**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYISHLACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Vayishlach of Yaakov’s preparations for his feared reunion with his brother, Esav, which included a series of lavish gifts which his servants delivered to Esav. The Torah tells of Yaakov’s instructions to his servants, in which he anticipated Esav asking them, “Who do you belong to, where are you going, and whose are these which went before you?” (32:18). Yaakov told his servants to explain to Esav that they were Yaakov’s servants and were bringing these gifts as a humble tribute to Esav for the purpose of finding favor in his eyes.

The *Sefat Emet* (5635) finds in these verses, the exchange Yaakov envisions taking place between his servants and Esav, an allusion to an exchange that should be taking place in the mind of each and every one of us. Often, we hear a voice in our minds asking us questions similar to the questions Yaakov anticipated being posed to his servants: “Who are you? Where are you headed? What is all this that you are doing?” In moments of brutal honesty, we are likely to begin questioning our own worth, as well as the value of our good deeds. We might look at ourselves and our lives and ask painful questions such as, “What have I achieved? What are the chances of my accomplishing anything truly significant? How much of an impact am I really having on other people and on the world? Can I really consider myself and my life successful? After all the years I’ve spent here on earth, what have I done? How far have I come? And how far do I seriously think I can go? Should I even bother continue working so hard?”

The answer to these questions, the *Sefat Emet* writes, is the answer Yaakov’s servants were to give to Esav: “*Mincha hi*” – “It is a gift.” The word *mincha* refers specifically to a small tribute given to a person of power or authority for the sake of earning his favor. Thus, for example, as the *Sefat Emet* notes, this word is used in reference to the grain offering which would be brought to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* by paupers who could not afford animal sacrifices. *Chazal* (as cited by Rashi, Vayikra 2:1) teach that God views a poor man’s offering with special fondness and affection, given the great sacrifice that it entails. When we begin questioning the value of our limited accomplishments, the *Sefat Emet* writes, we need to remind ourselves that all our efforts are a precious “*mincha*.” We are all flawed human beings, who are limited and challenged by our very nature. While we all have the potential for great achievement, we are hampered by negative tendencies that make it difficult for us to maximize that potential. When we struggle and achieve, even only modest achievements, we must see ourselves as a pauper offering a *mincha* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, a sacrifice which is lovingly accepted and cherished by the Almighty. If we try to grow, advance and accomplish, then whatever we achieve, even if it is but a small, humble “*mincha*,” is inestimably valuable.

The *Sefat Emet* concludes by noting the final words Yaakov instructed his servants to tell Esav: “and he [Yaakov], too, is behind us.” In the *Sefat Emet*’s symbolic reading, this refers to the fact that the Almighty is “behind us,” supporting and encouraging us in whatever efforts we make. We must not fall into despair or become discouraged by our shortcomings and failures, because God is always “behind us,” bidding us to continue working, trying, striving and struggling to improve, and to offer any small “*mincha*” that we are capable of achieving.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Vayishlach of Yaakov’s reunion with Esav, an encounter which Yaakov dreaded but ended up being peaceful and conciliatory. At the meeting, Esav turned to Yaakov and asked, “Who is this entire camp that I met?” (33:8), referring, presumably, to the series of gifts that Yaakov had sent ahead with his servants in an effort to earn Esav’s favor and forgiveness for his having stolen their father’s blessing. Yaakov answered by explaining the purpose of these gifts: “to find favor in my master’s eyes.”

The Midrash, cited by Rashi, adds another level of interpretation, explaining that there was also another “camp” which Esav confronted before his reunion with Yaakov. The Midrash relates that Esav encountered groups of angels, some of which violently struck and shoved him and his men. Other angels called on these angels to desist, as Esav was the child of Yitzchak. After the violent angels disregarded this call, the other angels urged them to stop because Esav was the grandson of Avraham. This call, too, was ignored. Finally, the other angels cried, “He is the brother of Yaakov,” whereupon the angels left Esav and his men alone.

How might we understand the meaning of this story? What does the Midrash seek to teach us through this seemingly peculiar account?

Rav Chaim Zaitchik, in his *Ha-mada Ve-ha’chayim* (vol. 1, p. 138), explains this Midrashic passage as emphasizing the basic concept of *teshuva*. The point being made is that Esav could not earn forgiveness without correcting his flaw, his hostility towards Yaakov. His stature as Avraham’s grandson and Yitzchak’s son did not allow him any shortcuts or dispensations. When a person has a flaw, his process of repentance and atonement requires him to address his area of wrongdoing and work to correct it. Any virtues he has are immaterial in this regard; there is no substitute for working to improve oneself by struggling to eliminate flaws. In Esav’s case, this meant overcoming years of hatred and hostility and once again becoming Yaakov’s “brother” in the full sense of the term. If he wished to avoid the consequences of his wrongdoing – symbolized by the image of his being beaten by angels – he needed to perform complete repentance, which entailed restoring his brotherly feelings towards Yaakov.

Accordingly, the Midrash teaches us that we cannot comfortably tolerate our faults on the basis of our achievements. While we all have much to be proud of, it does not absolve us of the need to honestly acknowledge our faults and try to correct them.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells the story of Yaakov’s nighttime wrestle with a mysterious assailant, who is generally identified as an angel sent by God. After Yaakov triumphed, he demanded that the angel grant him a blessing, and the angel responded by proclaiming, “Your name shall no longer be called ‘Yaakov,’ but rather ‘Yisrael’…” (32:29).

Rashi explains, “You are destined to have the Almighty reveal Himself to you in Beit-El and change your name…” In other words, the angel did not change Yaakov’s name to Yisrael, but rather blessed him that God should change his name later in a prophetic revelation in Beit-El. Indeed, as we read later in this *parasha* (35:10), God appeared to Yaakov when he went to Beit-El to erect an altar, and He announced that his name would now be “Yisrael.” Rashi makes a similar remark in his commentary to Sefer Yeshayahu (44:26), where he writes that God fulfilled the angel’s wish by agreeing to change Yaakov’s name. Consistent with his comments in Parashat Vayishlach, Rashi clearly indicates that the angel did not actually change Yaakov’s name, but rather extended a blessing that Yaakov’s name would be changed in the future, which it was.

Some have questioned Rashi’s comments in light of the fact that the name “Yisrael” is used in reference to Yaakov in between these two accounts – meaning, after the angel’s blessing, and before God’s revelation to Yaakov in Beit-El. The Torah tells that after Dina was abducted and defiled by Shekhem, her brothers were angered “*ki nevala asa be-Yisrael*” (34:7) – a disgraceful act was perpetrated against “Yisrael.” The name “Yisrael” is used here even before God’s prophecy to Yaakov announcing the name change, clearly suggesting that the angel did not simply wish that Yaakov should be known by this name, but actually changed the name already at that point.

This question is easily resolved by the theory advanced by [Rabbi Menachem Leibtag](http://www.tanach.org/breishit/vayish3.htm), claiming that the narratives in Parashat Vayishlach are written out of chronological sequence. Rabbi Leibtag compellingly notes several indications that the story of Dina’s abduction, and her brothers’ violent act of revenge, occurred after the story of Yaakov’s prophecy in Beit-El. The Torah’s account gives the impression that the story of Shekhem occurred soon after Yaakov’s return to *Eretz Yisrael* and peaceful encounter with Esav, and then later, after Shimon and Levi attacked the city, Yaakov proceeded southward to Beit-El, where he received his prophecy, and then continued onward to his father’s home in Chevron, losing Rachel along the way. However, for several reasons, as Rabbi Leibtag explains, it seems likely that these accounts are written out of chronological order. For example, if the story of Shekhem took place soon after Yaakov’s return to *Eretz Yisrael*, Shimon and Levi were at that time around the age of thirteen, considerably younger than the age at which we would expect them to launch a daring, violent attack on an entire city. Moreover, it seems difficult to understand why Yaakov would settle in Shekhem before fulfilling his vow to erect an altar in Beit-El, and before reuniting with his father in Chevron. It is more likely that Yaakov merely purchased a plot of land near Shekhem upon returning to the Land of Israel (33:19), but did not actually reside there until much later. According to this theory, we easily understand why the name “Yisrael” is used in the story of Shekhem, as it in truth occurred after God’s revelation to Yaakov in Beit-El.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells of the violent assault launched by Shimon and Levi on the city of Shekhem after the city’s prince abducted and defiled their sister, Dina. Shimon and Levi killed every male in the city, and then proceeded to loot the entire city. Yaakov strongly condemned the attack, saying to Shimon and Levi, “You have disgraced me, making me foul among the residents of the land” (34:30).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 80:12), cited by Rashi, interprets the word “*akhartem*” (“you have disgraced”) as a derivative of the root *a.k.r.*, which means “murky.” Yaakov said to his sons, in Rashi’s words, “The barrel was clear and you made it murky.” In other words, Yaakov and his family enjoyed a noble reputation among the local population, appearing peaceful and amicable, just as clear wine looks appealing and inviting. This changed now that Shimon and Levi deceived the people in Shekhem by convincing them to undergo circumcision and then proceeding to kill them and seize their property. Their reputation was now sullied, and they became like murky wine, filled with sediment, which people do not wish to drink. The Midrash continues that Shimon and Levi retorted back, “The barrel was murky and we made it clear… What, are they treating us like insignificant people?!” Shimon and Levi countered that to the contrary, as long as the family failed to act in response to the crime perpetrated against Dina, they were “murky” – they were looked at with scorn and disdain. It was specifically by avenging their sister’s honor, Shimon and Levi argued, that the family earned the respect and admiration of the surrounding nations.

There is much to discuss about this tense exchange between Yaakov and his sons in terms of the age-old question of whether and when revenge is an appropriate and necessary means of preserving national dignity, or brings disgrace and dishonor. Additionally, however, a number of writers noted the significance of the analogy drawn by the Midrash comparing Yaakov’s family’s situation to a barrel of wine. All barrels of wine have undesirable sediment on the bottom. As long as the sediment remains on the bottom, the wine looks appealing and desirable. However, when the sediment is mixed with the wine, such as when the barrel is jostled, then all the wine has a dirty, unseemly appearance. A barrel of wine does not have to be entirely sediment-free to look appealing; it needs simply for the sediment to remain on the bottom, and not mix with the wine.

This is precisely the message the Midrash seeks to convey regarding the way we are to appear in the eyes of other nations. Naturally, *Am Yisrael*, like every group of people, has its share of “sediment.” Bot individually and collectively, we make mistakes, including serious mistakes, and we have members who fail to act according to our values and principles. As long as we keep this “sediment” at the “bottom of the barrel,” we appear “clear” and likeable. In order to maintain a positive reputation, we need to make it clear that the “sediment,” all forms of wrongdoing and all kinds of wrongdoers, are kept at the “bottom,” are unequivocally condemned and marginalized. We cannot, and should not be expected to, eradicate every ounce of “sediment” from our midst. We must, however, ensure that the “sediment,” the unseemly elements of our nation, are kept away from the mainstream, so that our “wine,” the nation as a whole, will appear beautiful and invite respect and admiration.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells the disturbing story of Dina’s abduction and defilement by Shekhem, to which two of her brothers – Shimon and Levi – responded by launching a violent attack on Shekhem’s city, killing its men and looting its property.

Surprisingly, throughout the entire narrative of this story, the name of Shekhem’s city is not mentioned, and is referred to merely as “the city.” It is commonly assumed, of course, that Shekhem’s city was the city that bore his name – Shekhem. This assumption is based on the verses that precede this narrative, which tell that Yaakov “arrived whole in the city of Shekhem” (“*Va-yavo Yaakov shaleim ir Shekhem*” ) and encamped near the city (33:18) where he purchased a plot of land from Shekhem’s family (33:19). It is thus commonly understood that when it says later that Dina was abducted by Shekhem and her brothers then retaliated against the entire city, this refers to the city of Shekhem.

The Rashbam, however, offers a much different, and very surprising, interpretation. He argues that the aforementioned phrase, “*Va-yavo Yaakov shaleim ir Shekhem*” cannot mean as it is commonly understood, “Yaakov arrived whole in the city of Shekhem.” If the Torah here refers to the city of Shekhem, the Rashbam writes, then it would say, “***ha****-ir Shekhem*” – “the city Shekhem.” The phrase “*ir Shekhem*,” according to the Rashbam, must be read as, “Shekhem’s city” (as in the phrase “*ir Sichon*,” which means “Sichon’s city” – Bamidbar 21:26-27). The Rashbam explains that Yaakov arrived at a city named “Shaleim” – the word in this verse that other commentators understand as an adjective, meaning “whole,” or “complete” – which was ruled by a person named Shekhem. And thus the ensuing story, which tells of Dina’s abduction by Shekhem and Shimon and Levi’s retaliatory assault, takes place not in the city of Shekhem, but in the city of Shaleim. Shaleim was the city which Shimon and Levi attacked, and it was led by a ruler named Shekhem. This approach is also taken by Chizkuni, who adds that the city Shaleim mentioned here should not be confused with the city Shaleim mentioned earlier in Sefer Bereishit (14:18) in the context of Avraham’s war against the four empires. There we read of Malkitzedek, the king of Shaleim, festively greeting Avraham upon his return from battle, and it is generally understood that the city Shaleim mentioned there refers to Jerusalem. Chizkuni contends that the city Shaleim ruled by Shekhem was a different city, as there is no indication that Shekhem ruled over any area in the Jerusalem region.

This theory is accepted also by Rav Wolf Heidenheim, in his *Havanat Ha-mikra* commentary, where he applies it to arrive at a fascinating reading of a verse later in this narrative. After abducting Dina, Shekhem visited Yaakov with his father and asked for Dina’s hand in marriage. Yaakov’s sons said that they would agree only if all the men in Shekhem’s city undergo circumcision – their plan being to attack the city as the men were reeling from the painful procedure. Shekhem returned to his townspeople and convinced them to accept this condition, saying that Yaakov and his sons were “*sheleimim…itanu*” (34:21). This is commonly interpreted to mean that Yaakov and his family were peaceful, an explanation predicated on the etymological relationship between the word “*sheleimim*” and “*shalom*” (“peace”). However, Rav Heidenheim argues that this phraseology – “*sheleimim…itanu*’ – is never used to mean “peaceful.” He therefore asserts that the word “*sheleimim*” means “Shaleimites” – people of the city of Shaleim. Shekhem informed his townspeople that Yaakov and his family had already purchased land on the city’s outskirts, and were therefore poised to fully participate in city life, both economic and social, but they would do so only if the people of Shaleim agreed to undergo circumcision. Eager to benefit from Yaakov and his family’s involvement in the city, the people agreed. Rav Heidenheim thus utilizes the Rashbam and Chizkuni’s original interpretation of the phrase “*Va-yavo Yaakov shaleim*” to arrive at an original approach of his own to the phrase “*sheleimim heim itanu*.”

Thursday

We read in Parashat Vayishlach of the enormous gift sent by Yaakov to his brother, Esav, in advance of their reunion. Upon learning that Esav was approaching with an army of four hundred men, Yaakov feared that Esav was planning his revenge for Yaakov’s having “stolen” the blessing which their father had intended to confer upon Esav, and so he sent Esav large herds of animals in the hopes of earning his brother’s forgiveness. Yaakov sent the herds with his servants, and instructed them, “*ve-revach tasimu bein eider le-vein eider*” – that they should bring the herds one at a time, with a delay in between each, rather than present the entire gift all at once (32:17). Rashi explains that this was done in order to make the gift look especially generous, as Esav would be repeatedly approached by men bringing him animals as gifts.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 75) sees in Yaakov’s instruction to his servants an allusion to a prayer he recited on behalf of his descendants: “Yaakov said before the Almighty: Master of the world, if troubles befall my children, do not bring them one right after the other, but rather give them respites from their troubles.” The delays between the presentations of the herds to Esav serve as a symbol of the gaps that Yaakov prayed should separate between the hardships which he foresaw would be brought upon *Am Yisrael*.

An insightful explanation of the Midrash’s remarks is offered by Rabbi Natan of Breslav, in *Likutei Halakhot* (*Kil’ei Beheima*, 4:8). He writes that *Chazal* here call upon us to recognize the “spaces” in our lives, the blessings and good fortune that we enjoy. Often, people focus mainly on their troubles and hardships, such that their lives appear as an endless series of misfortunes. This perception then leads to melancholy and despair, and the individual loses the emotional strength to struggle to overcome life’s challenges and to petition the Almighty for help. In this Midrashic passage, Rabbi Natan teaches, *Chazal* instruct us to recognize the “*revach*,” the large “spaces” of joy and blessing that we each have. Although life presents us with challenges, it also presents us with good fortune, many beautiful blessings, and countless precious opportunities for achievement and gratification. We need to try to recognize and maximize those blessings and opportunities, rather than see only the darker aspects of our lives.

Friday

The Torah tells in Parashat Vayishlach of God’s command to Yaakov to fulfill the vow he had made when he left Canaan to erect an altar in Beit-El (35:1). Before journeying from the area of Shekhem, where he had been residing, to Beit-El, Yaakov instructed his family members and the other people with him to rid themselves of any idolatrous objects which they may have had in their possession. Rashi explains that this refers to the booty which his sons collected from the city of Shekhem after Shimon and Levi’s assault on the city, which included jewelry and utensils that had been used in pagan rituals. The Torah relates that Yaakov took all these objects and buried them “underneath the *eila* tree which was near Shekhem” (35:4). Curiously, the Torah here uses the definitive article “*ha-*” (“the”), suggesting that this is a tree with which the reader is already familiar.

This nuance led some scholars to speculate that Yaakov buried these articles at the site of Avraham’s first stop when he emigrated to *Eretz Yisrael*. Earlier, in Parashat Lekh-Lekha (12:6), we read that when Avraham moved to Canaan in fulfillment of God’s command, he journeyed through the land “until the area of Shekhem, until ‘*Eilon Moreh*’,” where God appeared to him and promised that his descendants would inherit the land. Avraham then erected an altar at that site and “called out in the Name of God” – a phrase which has been interpreted to mean either that he prayed, or that he preached monotheism. It has been suggested that the word “*eilon*” is synonymous with “*eila*,” such that Yaakov buried his family’s idolatrous articles at the site of his grandfather’s altar, which he erected at his first station after arriving in Canaan upon beholding a prophetic vision. Yaakov buried these article underneath the “*eila*” – the “*eilon*” (which was called “*Eilon Moreh*”)where Avraham had erected his altar.

The significance of Yaakov’s choosing this specific site likely relates to the fact that Yaakov was now retracing his grandfather’s footsteps. Just as God appeared to Avraham in Charan and commanded him to move to Canaan, similarly, God appeared to Yaakov when he was living with his uncle in Charan and commanded him to return to Canaan. After twenty years of exile, Yaakov was now reenacting Avraham’s move to the Promised Land, and so he returned to the site where Avraham had erected an altar and reaffirmed his commitment to God, and did something very similar. Yaakov buried there the symbols of idolatry which he seized from his family and servants as a strong display of unbridled commitment to God, affirming that they have returned to *Eretz Yisrael* for the specific purpose of serving the Almighty.

This pattern continued generations later, in the times of Yehoshua. The final chapter of Sefer Yehoshua (24) tells of Yehoshua assembling *Benei Yisrael* in Shekhem after the completion of the process of conquering and distributing *Eretz Yisrael*. There Yehoshua had the people reaffirm their covenant with the Almighty, using language nearly identical to Yaakov’s instruction to his household in Shekhem before journeying to Beit-El: “Remove the foreign gods that are among you and turn your hearts to the Lord, God of Israel” (Yehoshua 24:23). He then erected a stone as a monument “underneath the *ala* tree.” Rashi and the Radak cite a tradition that this was the very site where Yaakov had buried his family’s pagan articles. Now that the process of conquest and settlement was completed, Yehoshua had the people return to the site where Avraham and Yaakov proclaimed that their entry into the Land of Israel was for the purpose of serving God. Yehoshua drew the people’s attention to the fact that they were establishing a nation in *Eretz Yisrael* to continue Avraham’s work of “calling in the Name of God,” to represent the Creator and live in a manner that brings glory to His Name throughout the world.

(This general approach was briefly presented by a contributor to the journal *Ha-pisga*, Vilna, 5657.)

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