**S.A.L.T. – Parashat Vayishlach**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

In Yaakov’s impassioned prayer to God before his feared reunion with his brother, he recalls the blessings which God had showered upon him over the last twenty years, recalling how “I crossed this Jordan River with just my stick,” and now returned to his homeland with a large family and an enormous fortune (32:11). The Midrash, in a passage famously cited by Rashi (to 29:11), explains that Yaakov had actually left home with many possessions, but he was forced to give them all to his nephew, Elifaz. Eisav, who had sought to kill Yaakov, sent Elifaz to chase after Yaakov and murder him, but Elifaz, who had spent time with his saintly grandfather, Yitzchak, could not bring himself to commit this criminal act. On the other hand, he could not refuse his father’s command, and so Yaakov suggested that he take his possessions, leaving Yaakov in a state of destitution which, in a sense, resembles death. And thus Yaakov was left with nothing but his “walking stick” when he crossed the river and journeyed to Charan.

Kabbalistic tradition draws an intriguing association between Elifaz, Eisav’s son, and Onkelos, a member of the Roman aristocracy who converted to Judaism during the period of the *Tanna’im*, and emerged as a leading scholar who produced the famous Aramaic translation of the Torah. The Gemara in Masekhet Gittin (56b) tells that Onkelos was the nephew of Titus, the Roman general who destroyed the Second Temple, and when Onkelos considered converting to Judaism, he consulted with his uncle’s spirit. Titus told him not to convert, because he would be incapable of fulfilling the many different obligations imposed by the Torah. But Titus ignored his uncle’s advice, and converted. Rav Menachem Azarya de Fano (*Gilgulei Neshamot*, *Ma’arekhet Alef*, 12) writes, based on Kabbalistic teaching, that Onkelos was a “reincarnation” of Elifaz, and he corrected Elifaz’s mistake of not refusing his father’s command. Although Elifaz conscientiously searched for a way to avoid killing Yaakov, he did not go as far as he should, refusing to cause Yaakov any harm. This mistake was correct by Onkelos, who was told by his wicked uncle to reject Judaism, but refused, and embraced the Jewish faith, instead.

Rav Yechiel Halprein, author of *Seder Ha-dorot*, cites (in the section about Onkelos) this teaching, and proceeds to note the story told in the Tosefta (Demai 6:12) of Onkelos destroying his share of his father’s inheritance. After converting to Judaism, Onkelos refused to associate in any way with the cruel Roman government of which his family was a part, and so he took all the possessions he received as his share of the estate and threw them into the Dead Sea. Rav Halprein explained that this, too, marked the “rectification” of Elifaz’s benefiting from his obedience to his wicked father, taking for himself Yaakov’s wealth.

These sources contrast two opposite models of conscientious rejection of evil. Elifaz was spineless and indecisive in his objection to his father’s plan to murder, whereas Onkelos was firm and resolute in his rejection of the cruelty of the Roman government. Elifaz was content assuaging his conscience by lessening the degree of evil he was willing to perpetrate, whereas Onkelos was courageous and determined enough to completely sever his ties with his evil upbringing, and forge a new path, a life of piety and humble submission to God. The connection drawn by the Kabbalists between these two figures, then, teaches of the need to extend beyond mere discomfort with evil, and to instead resoundingly reject it and fervently commit ourselves to the pursuit of good.

Sunday

Parashat Vayishlach begins with the message Yaakov sent to his brother, Eisav, in anticipation of their feared reunion. Yaakov informed Eisav that he had been living with Lavan, during which time he amassed great wealth: “I acquired oxen, donkeys, sheep, servants and maidservants” (32:6).

Rashi cites a counterintuitive interpretation from the *Midrash Tanchuma*, which explains that Yaakov’s intent in this report was actually to downplay his good fortune. Figuring that Eisav was still angry at Yaakov for “stealing” Yitzchak’s blessing which was intended for Eisav, Yaakov drew Eisav’s attention to the fact that the blessing was unfulfilled. Yitzchak had blessed him that he should enjoy “the dew of the heaven” and “the fat of the earth” (27:28), yet Yaakov received nothing from the heavens or the earth. He acquired only animals, and thus the blessing he received from Yitzchak had not been fulfilled. As such, Eisav had no reason to resent him for scheming to receive the blessings in his stead.

The obvious question arises, did it really matter that Yaakov earned his wealth by amassing large herds of animals, as opposed to fields and orchards producing food? Would Eisav not have reason to envy Yaakov just because his blessings did not take the particular form that Yitzchak had wished for him?

The answer, perhaps, is that the Midrash seeks to demonstrate the tendency people often have to focus on what is missing, to feel dissatisfied even while enjoying great blessings. Yaakov himself, of course, was grateful for his blessings, and felt humbly unworthy of them, as he exclaimed later, in his prayer to God: “I am too small for all the kindnesses…that You have performed for Your servant” (32:11). But the Midrash draws our attention to the fact that another person in Yaakov’s situation might not have felt fortunate, and might have seen only what was missing, the meaninglessly trivial flaw in his great fortune.

More specifically, perhaps, the Midrash shows us that human nature is to feel embittered over that which was expected but not received, regardless of how much blessing one already enjoys. For some people in Yaakov’s situation, the enormous fortune acquired would not have satisfied them, because they were not given what they hoped, or were told, they would receive. The Midrash shows us this skewed perspective to warn against this tendency, to teach us the vitally important message of feeling content, blessed and fortunate even if not all our wishes are fulfilled and not all our expectations are realized. We should focus on all that we have, and not on what we hoped we would have but don’t, and this perspective will help us avoid bitterness and resentment, and enjoy the greatest blessing of all – a feeling of joy and contentment each and every day.

Monday

The opening verse of Parashat Vayishlach tells us that as Yaakov made his way back to Canaan, he sent a message of reconciliation to his brother, Eisav, “to the land of Se’ir, the field of Edom.” And later in the *parasha* (36:8), the Torah tells us, “Eisav settled in the mountains of Se’ir; Eisav is Edom.” The nation Eisav founded was called “Edom,” and the he established this nation in the region of Se’ir.

Rav Moshe Leib Shachor, in his *Avnei Shoham*, notes the significance of the fact that Eisav’s nation is forever known by, and associated with, these two names – “Edom” and “Se’ir.” The Torah tells us earlier (25:30) that Eisav became known as “Edom” – a term related to the word “*adom*” (“red”) – because of his sale of the birthright to Yaakov in exchange for lentil stew, to which he referred as “*ha-adom ha-adom ha-zeh*” (“this red stuff”). And the name “Se’ir,” Rav Shachor writes, likely alludes to Yaakov’s receiving the blessing that was intended for Eisav, which he accomplished by disguising as Eisav, wearing goatskins on his arm so they would feel “*se’irot*” (“hairy” – 27:23), like Eisav’s arms. Rav Shachor thus suggests that Eisav specifically named his kingdom “Edom” and his territory “Se’ir” as an eternal reminder of his grievance against his brother. These names signify Eisav’s everlasting resentment for Yaakov’s seizing his birthright and his blessing.

If so, then the names “Edom” and “Se’ir” perhaps give us further insight into Eisav’s nature and character, and the contrast between him and Yaakov. Eisav allowed his legitimate grievances to define him, to become part of his identity. He specifically made a point of carrying his proverbial baggage with him throughout his life, and even ensuring that his progeny for all eternity would be defined as the nation that resents the descendants of Yaakov. Rather than leave the resentment and grievance – valid as it was – behind in the past, and focus on the present and future, Eisav made it his priority to keep alive the memory of Yaakov’s seizing the birthright and blessing, and to continue stoking his feelings of hatred and animosity.

As we read in this *parasha* (32:28), Yaakov was given the name “Yisrael” – the name by which his descendants are forever known – which signifies his triumph over adversity. As the angel told Yaakov, “*…ki sarita im elohim ve-im anashim va-tukhal*” – he struggled against hostile enemies, and prevailed. The name by which our nation is forever known commemorates not our grievances, but rather our successful struggle to overcome them and move on. We are defined by our steadfast determination to succeed in our lofty mission despite the obstacles that stand in our way – not by our anger and anguish over having to confront these obstacles. The Midrash, cited by Rashi (32:22), comments that as Yaakov made his frantic preparations for his feared meeting with Eisav, he was “*sharui be-ka’as*” – overcome by anger that he needed to do all this. He was legitimately aggrieved by the situation, by Eisav coming to avenge something that happened decades earlier. But Yaakov never defined himself by this grievance. Eisav’s hostility was for him a difficult, frustrating challenge to overcome, but not his identity.

This difference between Yaakov and Eisav teaches that we must not allow our grievances – valid as they may be – to define us. Anger and resentment hinder us from achieving. They keep us tethered to the past, preventing us from creating the future that we want for ourselves. Rather than allow our grievances to consume and take over our lives, we need to focus on the process of “*sarita…va-tukhal*,” moving beyond our struggles so we can live the fulfilling, meaningful lives that we want to live.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayishlach of Yaakov’s dreaded – but ultimately peaceful – reunion with his brother, Eisav. The Torah tells that Yaakov made his way towards Eisav with his wives and his “eleven children” (32:23) – despite the fact that he had at that point twelve children. The Radak explains that Dina, Yaakov’s only daughter, was excluded from the count because she clung to her mother, Leah, and so when the Torah mentions Yaakov’s wives, this includes Dina, as well.

The Midrash, however, in a famous and startling passage cited by Rashi, comments that Yaakov actually hid Dina in a chest as he approached Eisav, fearful that Eisav would feel attracted to her and seize her from Yaakov. More surprisingly, the Midrash writes that Yaakov was punished for concealing Dina from her uncle. Rashi comments, paraphrasing the Midrash, “Yaakov was punished for withholding her from his brother, for perhaps she would have brought him back to proper behavior, and so she fell into the hand of Shekhem.” According to the Midrash, Yaakov was expected to allow Eisav the possibility of taking Dina, as she may have possibly exerted a positive influence on him. For preventing this opportunity, Yaakov was punished with Dina’s abduction and defilement by Shekhem, as we read later in this *parasha* (chapter 34). Many writers struggled to explain why Yaakov should have allowed Eisav – an evil, and even violent, man – to marry his daughter, and why he had any reason to anticipate her positively influencing Eisav.

Perhaps, the Midrash’s comment is to be read symbolically, as an analogy to the common phenomenon of parents discouraging their idealistic children. Many youngsters dream about positively changing the world, about succeeding in correcting even “Eisav,” and bringing about a better reality, moving the world forward and improving human life. The older generation, naturally, jaded and fatigued by the harsh realities they’ve witnessed and experienced, and by the unfulfilled dreams and visions of their own youth, instinctively discourage the youngsters, and dismiss them as sincere but starry-eyed idealists who are setting themselves up for failure and disillusionment. The Midrash here perhaps urges us to support the youth’s quest to “change Eisav,” not to be so quick to assume that the unfortunate realities of the world are permanent and that positive change is not possible. Clearly, the prospects of Eisav changing so late in life, after living sinfully for so many years, were hardly promising. Similarly, there are many undesirable conditions in the world which we assume can never be changed, because they have always been the way they are, and nobody has ever succeeded before in changing them. The prospects of them changing seem nil. But nevertheless, we should never discourage the “Dinas” from dreaming and aspiring to change “Eisav.” Idealism should be supported and celebrated, not cynically dismissed. Even when the dreams of youthful idealism seem fanciful and remote, we should not lock them in a “chest,” denying the youth the possibility of trying to bring about positive change, and should instead join them in their hopes and quest to “change Eisav,” and fully support and encourage their altruism.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Vayishlach of the lavish gift that Yaakov sent to Eisav in advance of their reunion, which Yaakov hoped would assuage Eisav’s anger over his having deceived their father into giving him the blessings intended for Eisav. This gift, which consisted of hundreds of animals, was sent ahead with Yaakov’s servants, whom he instructed, “…*revach tasimu bein eider le-vein eider*” – “make a space between one herd and the next” (32:17). Rather than bring all the animals at once, Yaakov’s servants were to bring each herd separately, with a break between each group.

The reason for this instruction, as Rashi explains, was “*kedei le-hasbia eino shel oto rasha*” – “in order to satiate the eye of that wicked man.” By dividing the gift into multiple different stages, Yaakov hoped to “satiate” Eisav’s “eyes” – meaning, to make the gift look even larger and more impressive. The emotional impact of one very large gift, in Yaakov’s estimation, would be less than the impact of a long series of herds brought to Eisav in numerous installments, separated by empty spaces.

Rav Yechezkel Levenstein noted the symbolic significance of the fact that it was specifically a “*revach*” – an empty space between the herds – that made a profound impression on Eisav. Very often, Rav Levenstein observed, that which impresses us, which lures us, which excites us and which draws our attention, is “*revach*” – “emptiness.” Many times, we are preoccupied or distracted by matters which have little or no value, that do not contribute meaningfully to our own growth or to the betterment of the world. Our “eyes” mislead us into thinking we can experience “satiation” – satisfaction and fulfillment – through activities and pursuits which are, in truth, “*revach*,” bereft of any substance or worth. Just as the empty spaces between the herds aroused Eisav’s interest and evoked feelings of excitement, so are we prone to falling prey to the false allure of “empty spaces,” of worthless matters.

Rav Levenstein’s teaching calls upon us to be careful and discerning in deciding to what to give our attention and in what to invest our time, our minds, and our emotions. We need to remember that many things that appear meaningful, worthwhile and fulfilling are, in truth, “empty” and bereft of value. We must try to avoid falling into the trap of lending importance to vanity and devoting our precious resources of time and mental and emotional energy into meaningless activities, and to instead direct our attention and our minds onto matters that are truly important and worthwhile.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells the unsettling story of Dina’s abduction at the hands of Shekhem, the prince of the city bearing the same name. After Shekhem abducted and raped Dina, he desired to marry her, and sent his father, Chamor, to Yaakov in order to arrange the marriage. At the meeting, Dina’s brothers schemed to convince the townspeople of Shekhem to undergo circumcision, and as the men of the city were recovering from the painful procedure, two brothers – Shimon and Levi – launched a deadly assault on the city. They killed the men, rescued Dina, and looted the city’s property. Yaakov strongly condemned Shimon and Levi for their violent response to their sister’s defilement.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 80:70 cites a startling comment in the name of Reish Lakish, comparing Shekhem’s feelings for Dina to God’s special love for *Am Yisrael*. Reish Lakish noted that the Torah describes Shekhem’s desire to marry Dina with three different verbs: *d.b.k*. (“***va-tidbak*** *nafsho*” – 34:3), *ch.sh.k.* (“***chasheka*** *nafsho*” – 34:8), and *ch.f.tz.* (“***chafeitz*** *be-vat Yaakov*” – 34:19). All these verbs, Reish Lakish observed, are also used in reference to the special bond between God and *Am Yisrael*: “*ve-atem ha-****deveikim*** *b-Hashem Elokeikhem*” (Devarim 4:4), “***chashak*** *Hashem bakhem*” (Devarim 7:7), “*tiheyu atem eretz* ***cheifetz***” (Malakhi 3:12). The three verbs used to describe God’s love for His people, Reish Lakish taught, are learned “from the section of this wicked person” – meaning, from the story of Shekhem.

What connection could there possibly be between the unique bond between God and the Jewish People, and Shekhem’s lust for an innocent girl, whom he violently abducted and defiled?

Rav Zev Wolf Einhorn of Grodno (the “Maharzu”), in his commentary to *Midrash Rabba*, offers a surprising explanation, asserting that according to Reish Lakish, Shekhem’s feelings for Dina evolved from sheer lust to genuine respect and admiration. Rav Einhorn writes: “At first, it says only, ‘He saw her…and took her’ (34:2)… But then afterward, when he understood who she was and whose daughter she was, the desire ignited within him to attach himself to her not only out of physical desire…but because he sensed in Yaakov the notion of ‘attachment’ [to God].” According to Rav Einhorn – difficult as it might be to imagine – although Shekhem was initially attracted to Dina solely by sexual desire, thereafter he was drawn to her because of her piety and that of her saintly father. Shekhem had committed a grievous, violent, criminal act, but a spiritual spark of sorts was ignited within him as a result of his exposure to Dina’s righteous character.

Rav Henoch Leibowitz (*Chiddushei Ha-leiv*) points to this passage in the Maharzu’s commentary as a striking example of our tradition’s belief in the capacity of all people to improve their characters. We recognize the innate goodness within every human being, and trust that even the lowliest evildoers have a spark of nobility within them that can be kindled and which can lead them to change and improve.

As many have noted, this might also be the meaning of the Midrash’s famous comment earlier (cited by Rashi to 32:23) that Yaakov was punished for hiding Dina from Eisav out of fear that Eisav would want to marry her. The Midrash writes that Yaakov should have allowed this to happen, as it was possible that Dina’s character could have inspired positive change in Eisav’s conduct. One approach to explain this remark is that the Midrash seeks to note that everybody, including somebody as evil as Eisav, is capable of positive change. We should never assume that people who have acted wrongly in the past will continue doing so in the future, and we must instead recognize every person’s capacity for change and encourage all those around us to unlock their hidden potential.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells of Yaakov’s wrestle with a mysterious assailant who confronted him as he brought his family and belongings across the Yabok stream on his way back to Canaan. Yaakov suffered a serious thigh injury during the fight, but ultimately prevailed. The attacker – commonly identified as an angel – asked Yaakov to release him, but Yaakov refused to let the angel free until he blessed him. The angel responded by pronouncing that Yaakov’s name would now be “Yisrael” (32:28).

Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro of Piacezna, in *Eish Kodesh*, offers an explanation for why Yaakov insisted on receiving a blessing from the angel before releasing him. Yaakov wanted to set a vitally important precedent for his offspring – that periods of hardship will ultimately prove beneficial, that they will not merely survive and recover from adversity, but come out of difficult situations “blessed.” It was not enough for Yaakov to simply defeat his assailant and proceed. He wanted to establish that the struggles should be sources of “blessing,” showing his descendants that they would not only survive periods of hardship, but would grow from them.

A generally similar message is perhaps by conveyed through *Chazal*’s emphasizing to us that Yaakov fully recovered from the injury he sustained during his wrestle with the angel. After this story, the Torah tells that “the sun shone for him” (32:32), and the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 78:4), cited by Rashi, interprets this to mean that the sunrise cured Yaakov’s injured thigh. Likewise, the Torah later (33:18) tells that Yaakov arrived “*shaleim*” (“complete”) at the city of Shekhem, and Rashi cites the Midrash’s explanation that Yaakov was “complete” in several different ways, including physically, as he fully recovered from his injury. It would seem that *Chazal* seek to emphasize that Yaakov did not endure long-term suffering as a result of his struggle, that he came away from this unfortunate experience not hobbling, but rather strong and energized.

Interestingly, the Gemara in Masekhet Avoda Zara (11b) tells that the people in Rome would celebrate a holiday once every seventy years, during which a lame individual would be paraded through the streets with a healthy individual on his back. This spectacle symbolized the superiority of Eisav – represented by the healthy man – over Yaakov – represented by the incapacitated man. This depiction perhaps points to the mistaken perception of our nation’s adversaries that the “injuries” we suffer are permanent, that we can never recover from hardship. *Chazal* emphasized to us that to the contrary, Yaakov was fully healed – indicating that we are capable of complete recovery, that no matter what we’ve endured, we should look to the future with hope and optimism, and trust in our ability to move on with vigor, without “limping,” and emerge from adversity better and stronger than we were before.

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