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Parshat Vayetzei

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WELL CHECK-UP

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Fleeing from his brother Esav, Yaakov travels to his uncle Lavan in Charan; as he nears the town, he sees a peculiar sight. He sees a field and in the middle of it, he spots a well with a large rock placed upon its mouth. Three flocks of sheep with their shepherds nearby are standing near it, waiting to be watered. But the shepherds are just standing and waiting. It seems that they have no work to do and are about to take the sheep back to their pens. The flocks are crouching and waiting for something. Yaakov is very curious. So Yaakov greets them, “My brothers!” he begins. “Where are you from?” They tell him that they are from Charan. Yaakov inquires about the welfare of Lavan and his family, and then Yaakov asks the question. “The day is yet large; it is not yet time to bring the sheep back. Why don’t you water the sheep and continue grazing?” (Genesis 29:4-7) Rashi explains the verse in detail. “If these are your sheep,” Yaakov asks, “then why don’t you give them their water? And,” Yaakov continues “if you are working for someone else, then why are you just sitting here?”

The shepherds explain to Yaakov that they would like to water the sheep but unless a large group of shepherds arrive, they cannot. It is impossible to lift the rock and draw water. Therefore they sit and wait each day until enough shepherds arrive to give lift the rock (Genesis 29:8). It seems to be a fair and understandable exchange except for one word. Yaakov began the conversation with a term of endearment. “My brothers!” No pun intended, but Yaakov did not know these shepherds from Adam! Why did he begin his question with words that seem to show an affinity that could not have yet been forged? He just met these men, why does he call them brothers?

A prominent Chassidic Rebbe was not feeling all that well so his doctor recommended that he go for a comprehensive cardio-vascular examination including a stress test, echo-cardiogram and a slew of other tests would be beneficial. He recommended a prominent cardiologist, Dr. Paul Fegil (not his real name), who headed the cardiology department of a large medical center in Manhattan. Waiting for the doctor to arrive, the Rebbe felt very uncomfortable in the unfamiliar surroundings. He barely responded to the nurse’s questions pertaining to his medical health and history. The nurse was frustrated as the Rebbe almost refused to discuss his symptoms. It got worse. When the nurse began attaching electrodes to all parts of his chest, he began to sweat. He became so nervous that the monitors and other meters connected to the wires began to pulsate wildly. The nurse was astounded by the very erratic movements on the heart monitor. Never having seen lines jump off the monitor like that, the nurse quickly ran out of the examining room to summon the esteemed cardiologist immediately. Meanwhile, the Rebbe was still sweating profusely as his heart was pounding wildly. All of a sudden the door opened and in walked Dr. Fegil. He was a distinguished looking man with graying hair a warm smile and a small leather yarmulke on his head. He stood at the opening, and exclaimed to the Rebbe. “Sholom Aleichem! Rebbe! HaKol B’seder? Is everything OK?” Hearing those familiar words, the Rebbe became startled. He picked up his head and saw the doctor. He could not believe it Dr. Paul Fegil was one of his own! Almost magically, the bells and whistles that were muddling the monitor suddenly stopped. Immediately all the readings showed a sign of a very normal heart beat! Minutes later the Rebbe told the nurse every one of his maladies and his entire medical history as well! Dr. Fegil looked at the nurse and laughed. “Sometimes a few haimishe words can fix more problems than open-heart surgery!”

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, explained that Yaakov approached a group of shepherds whom he had never met. He wanted to admonish them in a gentle manner while finding out what was transpiring at the well. After all, he was puzzled, why were they just sitting around waiting. However, Yaakov was smarter than just to criticize. He knew that unless he both called and considered them as brothers they would turn a deaf ear.

It was only after they explained to him that until all the shepherds gathered to lift the rock, they could do nothing, did Yaakov understand that his complaints were unjustified. But Yaakov had no problems presenting his critique to the shepherds for one simple reason. He began with one simple exclamation. “My brothers.” Yaakov approached them by exclaiming, “Brothers! Where are you from?” The moment he initiated the concept of brotherhood, any suggestion — even criticism — would be allowed. Criticisms, even constructive ones, are difficult, but Yaakov taught us a lesson: Before you can espouse your druthers, make sure that you are talking to brothers!

Appreciating the Simple Things in Life

by Rabbi Boruch Leff

Jacob, our Patriarch, was a holy man. We don't usually find holy people overly concerned with their physical well-being. Yet, in this week's Torah portion, read at first glance, it seems that we do.

Jacob rested at '*the place*' (Genesis 28:11) on his way to Charan. Rashi tells us that this place where Jacob rested was the holy mountain of Moriah, the future site of the Temple. While sleeping on holy ground, Jacob is shown a prophetic vision involving heavenly angels, and is told by God:

I am Hashem, God of Abraham, your father, and of Isaac. The ground on which you sleep, I will give to you and to your children. Your offspring will be as the dust of the earth, spreading out to the west, east, north and south. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves through you and your children. Behold, I am with you. I will guard you wherever you go and I will return you to this land. I will not forsake you until I have carried out what I have told you. (Genesis 28:13-15)

One would think that Jacob would be extremely inspired by this vision and sacred location. Therefore, we should find Jacob praying only for something like spiritual help and support as he faces new challenges in going away from Israel to Charan. Physical sustenance should be the last thing on his mind.

Yet Jacob includes in his prayers that he receive '*bread to eat and clothes to wear*' (Genesis 28:22). Why is Jacob thinking about the mundane after such a spiritually transcending experience?

What's more, why does Jacob feel the need to explain the function of bread and clothes? God would know that bread is 'to eat' and clothes are 'to wear'.

The solution requires us to read the Torah more carefully.

Just as $2 + 2$ never equals 5, we cannot accept things that do not make logical sense. It is impossible to understand that Jacob was sincerely interested in his physical well-being just after his amazing prophetic vision. It must be that in the very words that Jacob uses, we can discover the true meaning of his prayer.

Let's read the phrase again. Jacob asks for '*bread to eat and clothes to wear*.' Why does he define the function of bread and clothes? It must be that he is stating his exact intentions of using these material objects. Jacob is saying that he only needs bread to eat. He does not need 57 kinds of potato chips. He does not scan the supermarket aisles for the latest flavor of soda. He simply wants bread, and only bread, if necessary, to eat. As long as he can eat enough to continue living in order to serve God and achieve his lofty, spiritual goals, he is satisfied.

Jacob is not searching for the latest fashions in designer suits. He just wants some clothes to wear so that he can function in the world. Hence, 'bread to eat' and 'clothes to wear'. No luxuries.

Through this short phrase, Jacob defines his priorities of life. Appreciate food for its function - physical sustenance. Do not make food a priority in your life. Don't spend your life running after possessions and clothing. Use and appreciate it for what it is, but don't let it occupy an important place in your mind and in your value system.

We often take basic physical pleasure for granted as we constantly run after new and improved pleasures and luxuries. There is much to enjoy even in the simple things of life. We don't need luxuries to enjoy the world.

There is a Yiddish story written solely about an orange. It is called *The Morantz*, "The Orange." The orange was received as a present on Purim in Russia. Oranges in that part of the world were rare in the 1800's. The first day people from all over town came to look at it. Wow! What an unbelievable sight!

The second day they came to smell it - an incredible aroma. The next day they peeled it, saving each piece of peel with care in order to make marmalade. Then they divided the sections of the orange and crushed it in their mouths, feeling the delicious juices. An incredible experience. And then they had the marmalade that lasted for weeks. A memory for a lifetime - the Orange.

Most of the time, we hardly stop to even notice the blessing and the pleasurable taste of the food we are eating. Oftentimes, before we realize it, we are finished eating without having focused on an appreciation for the pleasure that God has given us. Stop. Eat. Think. Appreciate. Thank God for His blessings. Even the ones we think are small and simple. That is the path of real holiness.

Giving Thanks to Hashem for His Past Kindness Is Not Sufficient

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

After Leah had her fourth son (Yehudah), she said "...This time I will thank (*o'deh*) Hashem, therefore she called his name Yehudah. And she stopped having children." (Bereshis 29:35) The *Perush haTur ha'Aruch al haTorah* (not to be confused the shorter commentary by the same author known as the Baal HaTurim) says an amazing thing: Leah recognized that she received her fair allotment of *shvatim* (tribes) and asked for nothing more, therefore she stopped giving birth. If a person does not ask for more, they will not get more.

I would have thought, on the contrary, someone receives, and then thanks, and should not be greedy by always asking for more. And yet, the Tur says that when a person thanks and does not include asking for more, then he does not deserve more.

The truth is that we see the same idea from the language used by the Rambam (Hilchos Brochos 10:26). The Rambam beautifully writes: "The general principle is that a person should always cry out for the future, asking for mercy, and giving thanks for the past." The Rambam is saying that when you express gratitude to Hashem, you not only need to give thanks for what you have already received, but you should simultaneously pray intensely for what will be coming your way in the future.

We see several examples of this in our siddur: In "*Modim d'Rabanan*" we say... "We gratefully thank You... who have given us life and sustained us. So may You continue to give us life and sustain us..." In the middle of *Hallel*, we say... "Please Hashem, save us! Please Hashem bring us success!" What is the essence of *Hallel*? Thanksgiving! Why are we inserting a request for salvation and future success in the middle? We include in our thanksgiving a request for the future.

Likewise, when we recite the "*Hadran*" that we say when concluding a tractate of Talmud, we first say "*Modim anachnu lach...*" (We express gratitude before You...) and then we say "...*k'shem she'azartani l'sayem Maseches X, ken te'azreinee...*" (May it be Your will... that just as You have helped me complete Tractate X, so may You help me to begin and complete other tractates and books...)

We see a principle: When we thank Hashem, it is not sufficient to merely thank Him for what we have received, but we must ask for the future as well. What is the reason for this? At first glance, it seems counterintuitive. Our first thought might be that we should be thankful for what we received and not be greedy by asking for more.

I saw an interesting explanation in the *sefer* Abir Yakov. Let's say a person wins \$25,000,000 in a lottery. What is his reaction? "Wow! I am set for life! No more job. No more boss. No more anything. I have my 25 million bucks. I can do whatever I want!" A Jew must know that he is never "set for life." Every single day and every single moment our lives are dependent on the Almighty with whom our souls are deposited. Every single minute of life is a gift. There is no such thing in Judaism as "I have arrived. I am set for life."

Therefore, when a person gives thanks for the past, he needs to bear in mind "Thank you Hashem for giving me this, but I recognize and am aware that I am not set, and unless You continuously shower me with Your Blessings, I could be gone in a minute!"

As we have said many times, the Hebrew word "*Ho'da'ah*" has two meanings. It means to thank and it means to admit. When we thank we also admit, confessing that we are totally dependent on the ongoing assistance and support of "*Yotzeinu, Yotzer Bereshis*" (our Molder, the Molder of the Universe). That is what we learn from Leah, and that is what the *Tur ha'Aruch* says.

“And Yaakov left Beer Sheva, and he went to Charan” (28:10)

Why does the posuk state that Yaakov left and that he went? Obviously, if he left he was going somewhere? Rashi comments that the posuk teaches that when a tzadik leaves a city, the beauty and splendor of the city has left with him because a righteous person is what gives a town its beauty. The posuk is emphasizing that when Yaakov departed from Be'er Sheva, something special left with him. A tzadik makes a big impression on the people around him and those with whom he lives.

“Yaakov took a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and watch over me on this path that I go, and gives me food to eat and clothing to wear” (28:20)

Why did Yaakov make a vow about what he would do “if” Hashem protected him in Lavan’s house when Hashem had just promised him in his dream that He would watch over him wherever he would go? Chizkuni explains that Yaakov was concerned that he might sin and thereby forfeit the protection that Hashem had promised him. A person might earn good things through his mitzvot, but he can lose them as a consequence of sins later on. However, the fact that Yaakov was concerned about losing his merit was really the best guarantee that he would not make a mistake. Those who are overly confident that they have no reason to worry are the ones most likely to slip up and sin because they are being careful.

“And Lavan said: It is not done so in our place to give the younger one before the firstborn” (29:26)

When Yaakov confronted Lavan about tricking him and giving him Leah instead of Rachel, Lavan denied any wrongdoing and justified his decision as conforming with the local custom. Obviously, this was just an excuse – if he were sincere about following protocol, he would have mentioned that to Yaakov years earlier. But not only did he refuse to acknowledge his true intent, he tried to argue that he was doing the right thing. A wicked fraud like Lavan will never admit wrongdoing under any circumstances and is willing to defend blatant misconduct with a straight face. There is no point arguing and engaging in debate with such people because they will always hold themselves to be right. That is why did not respond to Lavan’s ludicrous statement. He saw no point in discussing the issue anymore.

“Hashem listened to Leah and she conceived and bore Yaakov a fifth son” (30:17)

Why did Hashem listen to Leah at this point? Once she had offered her maidservant to Yaakov and brought her into the family as an equal, she had made an effort to earn Hashem’s grace through an act of kindness. With the winning combination of prayer combined with good deeds, she was able to convince Hashem to heed her request. Rachel also needed to combine actions and prayer in order to merit a child. When she finally gave birth to Yosef, the Torah says that Hashem “remembered Rachel and listened to her.” Rashi says that Hashem remembered her sacrifice by allowing Leah to marry Yaakov and sharing the secret signs that Yaakov had given her to verify her identity. Seforno says that Hashem remembered how she selflessly gave her maidservant to Yaakov and selflessly allowed Leah to have Yaakov’s company in exchange for the *duda'im*. After doing these acts of kindness, she then prayed and the combined merit resulted in Hashem finally granting her request. Hashem “remembered” her actions and “listened” to her prayer. An important takeaway from these stories is that when we sincerely want to improve our circumstances in life, we must combine prayer with good deeds to really turn things around. Words alone are not enough – we must combine them with actions to convince Hashem to answer our prayers. One example of this can be found in the Gemara in Berachos 60a which teaches: “One who goes to do bloodletting should say: May it be Your will, Hashem my G-d, that this endeavor be a cure for me.” The Mishna Berurah (230:6) adds that “this applies to all medical efforts. One should say this and not think that some activity will be a cure for him without the Creator. Therefore, through this prayer, he will place his trust in Him and ask of Him that it should be a cure for him.” Prayer without effort and effort without prayer are not the correct approach in dealing with health issues. When prayer accompanies the medication and we recognize that Hashem controls the success of our efforts, then Hashem will be most receptive to our needs.

“She called his name Yosef, saying: Hashem should add a second son for me” (30:24)

By naming her son Yosef as on a prayer for future children (“Hashem should add another son for me”), Rachel displayed an understanding of the power of prayer. Every time that she mentioned his name, she would be uttering another prayer for additional children. A child’s name should not be selected at random or because it has a nice ring to it. Throughout the parsha we read how the Imahot carefully and thoughtfully selected a name for each of their sons which was invested with great meaning. Naming a child is an opportunity to give thanks to Hashem or to express a prayer for the future. It is a big opportunity that should not be squandered because of trivial considerations.

Ask Not What Your G-d Can Do For You

By Sheldon Stern

At the end of Parshas Toldos, Yaakov is sent by each of his parents, albeit for different reasons, to Avraham's homeland and look up his uncle Lavan. Yaakov, ever the dutiful son, complies and finds himself in Charan after a 14-year stop-over in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever. He meets some locals and asks them (29:5) if they know Lavan Ben Nachor. They replied ruefully, "Yeah, we know him." Here's the problem, actually two. Nachor is not Lavan's father so why did Yaakov use that appellation? Second, how did the Charanites know to whom our Patriarch was referring?

At the end of the Parsha Yaakov convinced his wives that it was time to vamoose but Lavan and his posse caught up with them. After exchanging some unpleasanties Yaakov and his father-in-law got down to brass tacks, forging a covenant. Yaakov swore to keep his end of the deal by the dread of Yitzchok, but Lavan pledged his troth by the G-d of Avraham and the god of Nachor (Rashi tells us that this mention of god was profane.) You know the SAT question which name doesn't belong? So let's tap into our inner Jew and answer that question by asking another, "How do we explain Lavan's religious bi-polarism?" When Eliezer related his meeting with Rivkah, Lavan responded, "This is from Hashem." Sounds good. But then we have the various references to Lavan's divination, so what gives? Belief in Hashem actually has two components that demand very different skill sets. There's the G-d who gave us rules and regulations. If we observe them we'll be rewarded and, of course, there's the converse. The Yirei Shomayim focuses on that aspect. But there's also the G-d who provides all our needs and He wants us to communicate with him through prayer and the like. Lavan isn't "down" with the first type of relationship but is very big on the second. Therefore he recognizes the G-d of Avraham who took a nomad and made him, "Nasi Elokim Bitocheinu." and gave him a son at 100 years old and he wants a piece of that action. On the other hand, we have Nachor. The Midrash tells us that after Avraham emerged from Nimrod's fiery furnace his brother Charan faced a similar choice. Ultimately he took the plunge but he didn't emerge. But what happened to Nachor? Malbim tells us he was an idolater and so he never considered following suit. Instead, he sidled up to Nimrod and the powers that be and did quite well for himself, by all appearances.

The Gemara tells us that a Roman nobleman named Onkelos wanted to convert to Judaism. He conducted a séance with his uncle Titus to ask for advice and was told to antagonize the Jews because those who do so become great. Onkelos nixed that suggestion because he wasn't interested in self-aggrandizement; he wanted to do the right thing, but not Lavan. Therefore when Lavan swore by the god of Avraham and of Nachor he was demonstrating his belief that each was equally great because they each took good care of their adherent(s) and got them where they wanted to go. Therefore the Ramai wanted to be on the good side of these respective gods. Maybe this Moshol is illustrative. The Potoker Rov told me that Rav Moshe was "the ein un einziger in de velt in Torah. In ich ken dus zugen" Let's consider the second part of his remark. The Potoker was a Godol in his own right and so he knew how to judge greatness in Torah. But that's not true of the rank and file Jew. The "Jewish Vues" has a weekly fun question. Let's imagine they asked an eclectic group of 20 Orthodox Jews, "Who was the greatest post-WWII Rabbi?" I highly doubt that Rav Moshe would come out on top because the masses confuse celebrity and popularity with true greatness, But Lavan was impressed with celebrity and that's why he was drawn to his grandfather Nachor.

Now we can return to our questions. Why did Yaakov say, "Lavan ben Nachor?" We can assume that Rivkah told her son that this is how her father wanted to be addressed. Not only that but this is also how he was known by his landsmen. And this explains why, in Parshas Chayeh Sarah, Lavan interposed himself ahead of his father. He viewed Besuel as a non-entity. No Lavan was the son of Nachor, at least that was his public persona. That's how he wanted to be perceived and like Paroah who played god Lavan was not only Nachor's flesh and blood but he wanted to be viewed as his heir apparent.

The Torah provides us with, as the Beach Boys wrote, "Heroes and Villains" But I would suggest it's not our job to "praise nor bury" rather we must learn from them. The truth is that we all have some Lavan in us. Consider those who run to Kabbalists. What's the reason? We think that they can manipulate Hashem and make Him do their bidding.

Let me share a story that my son Ittai just told me. Rav Hershel Schachter Shlita visited Israel some years back. A cab driver asked the Rosh Yeshiva if he could drive him around because he heard that he was a great Rabbi. Now it's not uncommon for drivers to start up conversations with their passengers but this was different. The Nahag asked Rabbi Schachter for a Brocha since he and his wife had been married for years and had not been blessed with children. The YU Rosh Yeshiva agreed and thought nothing of it. About a year later someone arrived at the YU Bes Medrash looking for Rabbi Schachter, "Do you remember the cab driver who asked you for a Brocho for children last year? Well your Brocho worked, he had a son and he asked me to inform you since I told him I was coming to America." The students were surprised because Rabbi Schachter isn't known as a miracle worker. He told them, "I don't give Brochos I just davened for him." I entitled this piece, "Ask not what your G-d can do for you." It follows, "Ask what you can do to serve your G-d."

Perseverance

By Rabbi Berel Wein

After twenty years in the house of Lavan, Yaakov prepares to leave for home. But he is afraid to do so openly, for Lavan will certainly object. Yaakov has been too valuable an asset in Lavan's house and commercial enterprises to be abandoned easily. And there is the fact that Yaakov's wives are Lavan's daughters and Yaakov's children are Lavan's grandchildren. The fact that Lavan has mistreated his children and grandchildren during Yaakov's stay in his home do not alter the fact that he views them as being his children and grandchildren. He will tell Yaakov that "the sons are my sons and the daughters are my daughters!" Yaakov also knows that Lavan resents that Yaakov, in spite of all the machinations and dishonesty of Lavan towards him, has become wealthy and powerful. Lavan is jealous of Yaakov's success and will do all in his power to prevent Yaakov from going home to the Land of Israel whole and be allowed to enjoy the fruits of his labor and marriages. Therefore, Yaakov feels compelled to leave Lavan unannounced, in the dead of the night, almost as a fugitive. Yaakov wishes desperately to avoid a painful and unnecessary confrontation with Lavan. But it is not to be. Lavan pursues Yaakov, overtakes him, berates him and threatens him, but finally Yaakov manages to enter into a covenant with Lavan that allows him to escape from Aram and continue on his journey back to the Land of Israel.

"The actions and incidents of the lives of the Fathers are the precursors of the history of their children." This story of Yaakov and Lavan has been played out so many times in Jewish history as to be repetitive, though never boring. The Jewish people in their long journey in many different exiles have always suffered discrimination, bigotry, oppression, and the constant threat of violent action against it. Yet, somehow, the Jewish people always were able to grow and many times even prosper in such a hostile environment. And the Jewish contribution to the development and prosperity of the general societies in which they lived was always major and continuing. The blessing given to our father, Avraham, that "through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" was fulfilled with beneficence, if not even vengeance, throughout the long Jewish exile. There is no nation or society that has "hosted" the Jewish people that has not benefited enormously from the Jewish presence in its midst. Nevertheless, the Jews were always seen as being foreign, untrustworthy, exploitative, and dangerous. The Nazi slogan in Germany summed up the matter succinctly, albeit brutally: "The Jews are our misfortune!" And in our century, the attitude of the leaders of the Soviet Union towards its Jewish population was also one of pathological disdain and suspicion. Yet, the Jews were castigated for leaving (and in many instances prevented from leaving) their "homeland," for longing for Zion and Jerusalem. The countries of our exile always claimed that our children belonged to them and that everything that we possessed was in reality somehow taken from them. The sad events of this bloodiest of centuries testifies to Lavan's true intentions and the difficulties of living in Lavan's home and the difficulties of leaving Lavan's home.

But somehow Yaakov did leave Lavan and he did finally return home. There would be many difficult and sad stops on that way home, but Yaakov nevertheless persevered and came home. And that pretty much is the story of this century of Jewish life. The great centers of the Jewish exile, except for North America, have all practically closed down. The Sefardic world of the Mediterranean and Near East countries, the heartland of Ashkenazic Jewry in Eastern and Central Europe, all are almost judenrein today. Most of the Jews (and many non-Jews as well) have left Russia and settled in Israel. The Diaspora is slowly closing down. Yaakov is going home, no matter what. Lavan, may not be happy with Yaakov's decision, or that Yaakov has a home to go to, but Yaakov owes Lavan little, and therefore Lavan's objections are no longer too relevant to Yaakov's plans. The children of Yaakov live his odyssey in their lives in the present. So may we be able to follow in his footsteps in the future.