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Parshat Vayishlach

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*Latest time for Kriyat Shema - 9:31*

**BIG RETURNS**

*By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

Anticipating conflict is quite strenuous. Yaakov had heard that his brother Esav was advancing toward him and his twelve children, accompanied by four hundred armed men. He had no idea of Esav's intentions. Was he still raging over the loss of Isaac's blessings or did thirty years of separation calm his wrath? Yaakov had to act fast. He split his camp into two groups and instructed his children both, how to do battle and how to escape. He sent a large contingent of men laden with myriad gifts to greet the advancing army. He hoped that the large offering will indicate submission to his older brother and thus appease him. And of course, he prayed.

In the middle of the night before the encounter, he made his move. In Genesis 32:23-24, the Torah tells us, "and Yaakov got up that night and took his wives, his children, and all of his possessions and crossed the stream at Yabok." It would seem from this verse that Yaakov was together with his entire family and all their possessions. Yet the next verse tells us that Yaakov remained alone. The Torah places him back on the other side of the river, alone. As he stands alone the Torah relates that an angel fought with him till dawn. The question is obvious. If Yaakov crossed with his entire family, how did he end up on the other side of the stream, alone?

The Talmud in Chulin 91a is also bothered by this question. The Talmud explains that Yaakov returned to his original camping grounds. He obviously had forgotten some Pachim K'tanim, insignificant small earthenware, bric-a-brac, and thus returned alone, to retrieve them. The Talmudic reasoning is thus. If the verse tells us that Jacob crossed with all of his possessions, then it tells us he was alone, whatever he had returned for must have been insignificant and not worthy enough to be considered as possessions.

I am bothered. Why did Yaakov go to retrieve insignificant tchotchkes on the night when he was preparing for the most difficult encounter of his life? Obviously, there is an eternal lesson to be gained. What is it?

*In the summer of 1954, my grandmother, Itta Ettel Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, left Beth Israel Hospital, for the last time, after a prolonged stay. Her condition had deteriorated, and the doctors felt that there was nothing left for them to do. My grandfather, Reb Yaakov zt"l, went together with family members to pick her up from the hospital. My grandmother was wheeled to the waiting automobile and made as comfortable as possible. Suddenly, Reb Yaakov seemed to realize that he had forgotten something very important. He whispered something to his wife, and when she nodded her approval, he asked if it was possible for the driver to wait a few minutes. He had to go back into the hospital. The family members were a bit surprised. Although there was another patient in the room, and items may have been confused, they remembered removing every one of my grandmother's personal belongings from the room. Accompanied by his curious son, Reb Yaakov proceeded to the elevator and pushed the button to the floor on which his wife had stayed. "Pa," his son protested, "we have everything." The elevator stopped at the correct floor. Reb Yaakov proceeded into his wife's former room and turned to her ailing roommate. "In our rush to leave the hospital, I forgot to tell you good-bye and wish you well. May G-d send you a speedy recovery." With that, Reb Yaakov walked out of the room, nodded at the stunned nurses, whom he already had thanked on his first exit, and left toward the waiting car.*

Yaakov went back for something that in our estimation may have been insignificant. But he knew otherwise. A small jug may have had a sentimental value to one of his wives. An old blanket may have meant something to one of the children. Yaakov our forefather taught us that everything in life has value. It is easy to say, "I crossed the river," "I packed the suitcase," or "I left the building, and I'm not going back." Yaakov's lesson tells us that even at a risk, the little things in life are just as important as the big ones. Some acts are glorified, others are seemingly petty. We can never judge which investments yield great returns, and which returns are great investments!

## **Know With Whom You Are Dealing**

*By Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

At the beginning of Parshas Vayishlach [Bereishis 32:5], Yaakov sends Eisav the message (according to the Medrashic interpretation) that I have resided with Lavan (im Lavan garti) and nevertheless I have fulfilled the 613 commandments (v'Taryag mitzvos shamarti). Rashi (in his first explanation of the expression "im Lavan garti") interprets "I did not become a dignitary or notable, but a mere transient alien (ger). It does not befit you to hate me over the blessing of your father who blessed me 'Be a lord to your brothers' – for it has not been fulfilled in me."

In other words, Yaakov is telling Eisav, "I know you are still angry with me because I 'stole' the brochos; but I want to tell you something: You don't need to be upset, because it did not work! Here I am today 34 years later and I am nothing more than a foreigner, a stranger."

Likewise, on the pasuk where Yaakov explains to Eisav that he has acquired "ox and donkey", Rashi comments: Father said to me, 'From the dew of the heavens and from the fatness of the land'. This property (cattle and slaves) is neither from the heavens nor from the land." Again, the bottom line is that the brochos did not work and in hindsight, there is no reason for Eisav to be getting upset!

We must ask two questions: First, Yaakov certainly did not expect that these blessings of Yitzchak would apply right here and now. These were not 'instant blessings'. These blessings were not fulfilled until years later when the Jewish people returned to the Land of Canaan and settled it – up through the glorious period of Shlomo HaMelech [King Solomon]. It is like starting a business. Everyone knows that a business does not make money for the first few years. A person does not close his business after 6 months because he "hasn't made his first million yet". When Bill Gates started Microsoft in a garage in Seattle, Washington, he did not become a 40 billion dollar individual overnight. In terms of the long range fulfillment of Yitzchak's blessings to Yaakov, 34 years is merely the blink of an eye. So what type of an argument is this to Eisav that he should not be upset now because Yaakov still has not seen fulfillment of his father's blessing?

Rav Moshe Feinstein asks a more profound question: This approach of pointing out to Eisav that "the bracha did not work" gives the appearance as though Yaakov is saying that Yitzchak's bracha — which in effect was prophecy — is not true! He seems to say that the blessing was not worth anything. Heaven forbid can we say that Yaakov did not believe wholeheartedly that Yitzchak's blessings to him would yet come true.

The Sefer Ikvei Erev provides an answer to which I would like to append an idea of the Sforno, which makes the approach even more understandable.

The first rule of public speaking is "Know your crowd". The first rule of negotiations is "Know with whom you are dealing". Back in Parshas Toldos, when Eisav came in from the field tired, he told Yaakov "Sell your birthright to me AS THIS DAY (ka'yom)" [Bereishis 25:31]. The Sforno explains the nuance of the term "ka'yom": Eisav was a person who lived for the here and now — a person who lived for TODAY. When such a person is hungry and he wants a bowl of lentils, he wants it NOW. He is willing to sell something (e.g. – the right of the first born – the 'bechorah') which could be tremendously valuable in the future for the sake of acquiring a simple bowl of soup right now.

Yaakov knew Eisav's attitude and his value system and therefore proposed a "sale price" for the bechorah, which he knew would be attractive to his brother. Yaakov knew that these blessings were something that would be relevant and valuable not only for him and his children but for his great-great-grandchildren for all generations as well. He knew this was something that affected the future of the Jewish people for millennia to come. Future generations and future millennia were not currency for Eisav. He was strictly a man of the present, a man of "ka'yom". He is strictly interested in instant gratification. If it is not right away, it is not worth anything.

In light of this background, we can understand Yaakov's psychological approach to his brother in Parshas Vayishlach. Yaakov tells Eisav, in effect, "Look Eisav, it is now 34 years later. Nothing has come of the blessings I purchased from you." In Eisav's eyes, 34 years is an eternity. He is now more convinced than ever that he got the better deal in the earlier sale. Of course, Yaakov did not doubt the prophetic blessings that Yitzchak bestowed upon him. However, he knew this was a "long term investment" and he knew with whom he was dealing. He was dealing with an Eisav for whom if it is not here today, it does not have much value.

This explains something else. At the beginning of the parsha, Yaakov is full of fear. He prepares for the meeting with Eisav with prayer, with presents, and with preparations for battle. But in fact he had an insurance policy. Eisav had already stated that as long as Yitzchak was still alive, he was not going to kill Yaakov. If so, why was Yaakov so afraid? Yitzchak was still alive at this point!

The answer is that when one deals with an Eisav, the whim of the moment can overpower him. While theoretically, he may have felt “I don’t want to cause pain to my father” but with an Eisav, if he gets set off for a moment in the wrong way, he could decide to kill Yaakov on the spot! This is the way of the wicked. They are subject to their whims and their passions. For Yaakov to rely on the fact that Yitzchak was still alive and Eisav once promised not to kill his brother during his father’s lifetime would be foolhardy when dealing with such a personality.

We say these words and we feel smug about ourselves. We say “Yes. Eisav is wicked and he only lives for the here and now (ka’yom).” Unfortunately, all of us, to a greater or lesser extent, many times in our lives make compromises as we live in the “here and now” and we do not take into account the long-range future and certainly not eternity.

The fact is that many people put most of their time, worry, and concern into the temporal things of life — be it money, careers, houses, or all the things that attract us. We are really making a decision to give up things involving eternity for that which is temporal. How many people, when they are 40, 45, 50 years old and their kids are already grown up, realize that they spent the first 20, 25, or 30 years of their lifetime invested in their careers at the expense of their children? When they finally “wake-up” and they say they want to do something with their kids, the kids are already out of the house and it is too late. This is a case of people having decided for the “ka’yom” (here and now) in lieu of the “nitzchius” [eternity]. So we cannot so smugly say to ourselves, “Eh! That is an Eisav. An Eisav sells the bechorah for a bowl of soup. An Eisav gives up Olam HaBah [the world to come] for Olam HaZeh [this world].” We need to ask ourselves how many times we are guilty of the same thing. We need to take the long view of life. We need to take Yaakov’s approach.

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### **Yaakov Did Not Rely Solely on Prayer**

*By Rabbi Berel Wein*

The Torah teaches us, according to Rashi and the words of the rabbis, that our father Yaakov prepared for his encounter with Eisav by adopting three possible strategies. They were mollifying Eisav with gifts, praying to God for deliverance and engaging in physical battle against him. The first strategy proved to be successful, though the Torah records for us Yaakov implementing his second strategy as well, with his heartfelt prayer to the Lord that he be spared from the murderous hands of Eisav.

The question arises why Yaakov had to have alternate strategies in the first place. Was it not sufficient to rely on the power of prayer and God’s original commitment to him that He would be with him and safeguard him from all harm? In the simplicity of faith, is that not sufficient for Yaakov, the chosen one of our forefathers?

I have often been challenged by problems that arise in life. I always prayed for God’s help and succor. Sometimes my prayers were accepted and matters developed as I hoped for. There were other times that this did not occur. But I always had an alternate strategy – a doctor, a lawyer, an accountant, an advisor – that I followed in tandem with my prayers.

Someone once asked me if there was a lack of faith on my part when I insisted that the faculty members of my yeshiva own life insurance policies. Why not rely on prayer and Heaven alone? I replied that I was only following in the methods of my father Yaakov who also adopted alternate strategies and apparently did not rely on prayer alone. My critic thought my answer to be heretical. I thought that he was misrepresenting the Torah value of faith and wise living.

There is a common adage that God helps those that help themselves. To accomplish things in life, both spiritually and materially, effort and planning, devotion and industry must be expended. Once, in my yeshiva days long ago, I had great difficulty in understanding a difficult concept that was raised by one of the commentators to the Talmud. I asked my teacher whether prayer to Heaven would help me understand that concept. He answered that it would help only if one has truly exhausted one’s own abilities to understand the matter.

I then realized that prayer was Yaakov’s second strategy and that he felt it would help only if at first he employed it together with prayer – first the attempt to soothe Eisav’s anger with gifts. Relying on prayer alone without the expenditure of one’s own talents and resources is a way of getting away cheaply in the matter.

The famous rebbe of Sanz, Rabbi Chaim Halberstam stated: “First one must be prepared to tear out one’s own rib before one can expect Heaven to intervene in one’s stead!” Yaakov is prepared to risk all of his hard earned wealth, and in fact his life itself, when forced to deal with Eisav. Because of this, Heaven intervenes and Eisav conciliates with Yaakov. There is a lesson here for all of us.

**“And he commanded them, saying: So shall you say to my master to Eisav: Thus said your servant Yaakov: I have sojourned with Lavan and I have tarried until now” (32:5)**

Rashi comments that Yaakov sent the following message to Eisav: “I stayed with Lavan and I kept the 613 mitzvos and did not learn from his ways.” How was Yaakov able to avoid being influenced by Lavan despite spending twenty years under the same roof? The secret is in the word **גֵּרִי**, he considered himself as a stranger, an outsider who was not part of the local society in Charan. He acted differently and that helped him remain committed to his values which he did not share with Lavan and his neighbors. When we remember that we do not truly fit in or belong in our home countries, then we will be able to retain our Jewish values. R’ Meir Yechiel of Ostrov was once asked where he was from. He responded: “My home is the Holy Land, but I am currently in exile in Poland.” That is the attitude which a Jew in exile needs to remember in order to withstand the challenges of living among the nations.

**“Yaakov was very afraid and he was distressed. He split the people who were with him, and the sheep, cattle, and camels, into two camps” (32:8)**

Why was Yaakov afraid of Eisav? Daas Zekainim suggests two merits that Eisav possessed that Yaakov did not. For the past 20 years while Yaakov had been away, Eisav had earned the merit of honoring his parents and the merit of living in Eretz Yisrael. Yaakov did not have the protection afforded by these mitzvos. This shows us that someone can be doing all sorts of terrible sins, but the merit of one special mitzvah can be a difference maker. Of course, he will be taken to task for his sins, but one mitzvah advantage may be a larger merit. With regard to living in Eretz Yisrael, the Shelah writes that although living in Eretz Yisrael is a great mitzvah, committing a sin in Eretz Yisrael is worse than doing it elsewhere. Imagine how horrified we would be if a person goes to a shul and does a sin there. We would consider it much worse than if he had done the same thing at home. When one lives in Eretz Yisrael, he is in the King’s palace and violating the King’s edicts in such close proximity to Him is a greater offense.

**“Yaakov named the place Peniel: Because I saw Hashem face to face and my life was saved” (32:31)**

After Yaakov defeats the angel, he names the site of their fight Peniel, which means “the face of the angel,” to create an eternal memorial of the fact that he had been saved from harm despite wrestling with a higher being. When something important happens, we need to remember those feelings and preserve them for the future. People sometimes forget about good things that happen to them, but we should be like Yaakov and find ways to remember all the kindnesses that Hashem has done for us. This is exactly what we are doing whenever we celebrate a holiday. Just as we remember miracles that happened in our nation’s past, we must also make an effort to commemorate that which Hashem does for us on an individual basis.

**“Please, take my blessing which was brought to you, for Hashem has favored me and I have all. He pressed him, and he took it” (33:11)**

Rabbeinu Bachya points out that Yaakov mentions Hashem multiple times throughout his conversation with Eisav – “the children that Hashem has granted your servant,” “seeing your face is like seeing the face of Hashem,” “Hashem has graciously given to me” – while Eisav never mentions Hashem. The way Yaakov talks shows how he constantly feels the presence of Hashem. When a person speaks about his children or his possessions, he should refer to them as that which Hashem has given to him. Chazal created the concept of blessings over food as a way to make sure that we are always mentioning Hashem and maintaining an awareness of Him during a regular day. Unfortunately, people tend to be lax about these blessings and we have to ensure that we and those around us are careful to recite blessings on food properly so that we have consciousness of Hashem in our lives at all times.

**“Yaakov’s sons came upon the slain and plundered the city that had defiled their sister” (34:27)**

Why does the Torah say that the entire city had defiled Dinah? Seforno explains that if abducting young girls and abusing them would have been unacceptable to the citizens of his town, Shechem would not have acted this way. It must be that they agreed with his actions. As such, they were held responsible.

*By Rabbi Mayer Friedman*

## **Shimon and Levi**

*by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen*

In Parshas Vayishlach, we are told of how Shechem kidnapped Dina. All of the brothers conspired to bring her back; their plan was to persuade the people of Shechem to perform circumcision and then they would come and retrieve Dina whilst the people were still recovering. However, Shimon and Levi planned a more drastic course of action; they believed that all of the people of Shechem were guilty for their part in the taking of Dina and proceeded to wipe out the whole city in the process of saving her. Jacob strongly disagreed with their course of action, fearing that it would greatly damage the reputation of his family. Shimon and Levi defended their actions, saying, "Should our sister be treated like a harlot?!"

It was only many years later that Jacob gave his final rebuke to the two brothers. In Vayechi, in his blessings to his sons, he criticized Shimon and Levi for their impulsiveness. Moreover, he punished them, saying, "I will separate them in Yaakov and disperse them within Yisroel." The simple understanding of this punishment is that its purpose was to separate the two brothers in order to prevent them from further violence. However, Rav Kamenetsky notes that Rashi provides a different explanation - that Shimon and Levi will be *sofrim* (people who write Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot) and Torah teachers of children who will travel from city to city to fix the holy items and to teach the Jewish people Torah.

Why was the future Torah education of the Jewish people deliberately put in the hands of Shimon and Levi; what is the measure for measure here?

He answers that Jacob saw that they possessed a positive character trait that the other brothers did not. He recognized their motivation in destroying Shechem: they were willing to risk their whole lives in order to defend the honor of their sister. The other brothers also saw the terrible situation in which Dina was in, but only Shimon and Levi felt the pain as if it were their own pain. Rav Kamenetsky writes: "Yaakov saw that their actions stemmed from an inner pain and genuine empathy with the pain of another, and this motivated them to a burning zealotry that was without limit... Only men of this character, who feel the pain of their fellow as if it is their own pain - only they would ... show sufficient self-sacrifice and give up their physical resources, in order to wander from city to city to spread the God's Torah in the world and to teach the children of *Bnei Yisroel*."

Even though Shimon and Levi misapplied their zealotry in the incident of Shechem, Jacob saw in that trait a potential that could be used for a very positive purpose, spreading Torah amongst the Jewish people. However, in this week's portion we see how the descendants of these two sons of Jacob, followed very different paths: Pinchas, a member of the Tribe of Levi, was able to channel his zealotry to doing the God's will - his act of violence brought an end to the plague that killed thousands of people. God rewarded him highly to show that He acknowledged that Pinchas was acting purely for the sake of Heaven. However, Zimri, a Prince of the Tribe of Shimon, expressed the zealotry of his ancestor in a forbidden way, breaking boundaries that the Torah forbade. How did these two tribes divert so drastically from each other?

Rav Kamenetsky explains that whilst most of Klal Yisroel were slaves in Egypt, the tribe of Levi was free to learn Torah. It was this period of internalization of Torah values that enabled the Levites to channel their zealotry in the right way. In contrast the members of the tribe of Shimon never had the opportunity to learn Torah in the same way. Consequently their zealotry was without guidance and therefore expressed itself in forbidden ways.

One vital lesson that can be derived from Rav Kamenetsky's explanation is the novel understanding of how zealotry should express itself. True zealotry should bring a person to a tremendous feeling of pain when people act in a detestable fashion. The great Torah figure, the Alter of Kelm zt"l expressed this feeling throughout his life: On one occasion he and another Rabbi noticed a Jew taking hay from a gentile's wagon. After that the Alter was sad, and went about all day with a long face. That evening the other Rabbi asked what the matter was. The Alter seemed surprised at the question. "How can a person be at peace when he sees so much sin in the world?" In addition to feeling pain at such behaviour, he should motivate himself to try to rectify the problem in a suitable fashion.

The great leaders of the Jewish people didn't suffice with expressing pain at areas that were lacking, rather they did whatever they thought necessary to improve the situation - may we all merit to learn from them and help solve the numerous problems that the Jewish people face at this time, whether it be mass assimilation, poverty or the threat against the State of Israel.

## Brotherly Love?

*By Sheldon Stern*

At the start of this week's Parsha, Yaakov Avinu sends two messages to his long-estranged brother hoping to avoid a bloody confrontation. First, he conveyed that he lived with Lavan and then added that he had amassed a sizeable fortune. The question is why tell Eisav, the quintessential "material boy" that you're well off if you're trying to assuage his anger?" We can actually ask a stronger question, "Seemingly it would've sufficed to just make the first point to wit simply say, "Im Lavan Garti." Eisav would've surely "chopped" his brother's intent. Despite spending 20 years with that knave I left with my spirituality intact. When Eisav realized that Yaakov had acquired "his" blessings he pleaded for a consolation Bracha from his father. It contained a loophole that gave our nemesis more than a sliver of hope, "When he (Yaakov) gives you cause you will remove the yoke from around your neck." With those few words, Yaakov made it clear to Eisav that had no chance to defeat him at this time. Yes, you may have assembled a formidable collection of mercenaries but this battle wouldn't be fought in the trenches So why did Yaakov bring up his material success which then led to semi-groveling in an attempt to curry Eisav's favor?

If Yaakov had just wanted to stave off a personal conflict then yes, all that was needed was to say "Im Lavan Garti." But our Patriarch was looking down the road and he wanted to completely undo the bad blood between himself and Eisav. Rashi, as usual, clues us in. By telling Eisav that he had accumulated livestock and slaves, Yaakov was implying that these didn't come from Yitzchok's blessing which was framed in terms of land. In essence, Yaakov was reminding his brother that material possessions are determined by Hashem every Rosh Hashanah and they're subject to His whims. Yaakov could elaborate. When I left for Charan I was loaded. Abba knew that Lavan went gaga when Eliezer showed up with the family jewels so he told me to show the house to that Rosho. But as they say, "The best-laid plans." Your son Eliphaz intercepted me and I gave him everything to save my life. I spent 20 years with Lavan and had nothing to show for all my work due to his duplicity. But Hashem had mercy and allowed me to put my husbandry skills to good use and that's why I come now with this farneiganz which I want to share with you. Yaakov would continue i.e. he knew that Eisav would intuit all these ideas on his own. You hated me for stealing the birthright, but I was doing you the greatest favor. You looked at the Bchor as a special privilege and felt that it connected you to Abba, but the birthright is a spiritual entity. Ok, so you'll say that it begins with tidings of material bounty, but that's all a facade. Abba couched the Brochos in a Gashmius matrix but they're completely spiritual and would be anathema for you. So I never took anything from you that you would've wanted.

So how well did Yaakov's strategy work? Better than one might've thought. We're told, in Genesis 33:4 that when the brothers met, Eisav kissed him and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai commented, "Although it's Halacha that Eisav Sonei Yaakov" at that moment the kiss was sincere." So why didn't the warm feelings that were engendered last and get passed down as Yaakov planned? The key is in the Tanna's words, "Halacha Eisav Sonei Yaakov." What does that mean? I spend a lot of time online and Nebach there are often violent acts against Jews perpetrated by Eisav's descendants as well as from Yishmael, one of Eisav's several fathers-in-law. The knee-jerk reaction is for the posters to scream Halacha Eisav Sonei Yaakov as if it's a fait accompli that all Goyim hate Jews, but I challenge this Pshat. If that's what Rashbi meant he would've simply said, "Eisav Sonei Yaakov" or Yoduah Eisav Sonei Yaakov.". The word Halacha adds a dimension that must be accounted for. When Rivkah's Nevuah was revealed to her it was of cosmic importance. Rabbi Miller noted that a Nevuah is fluid, meaning that it must come true but the form it takes depends on manifold factors. The prime example is the prophecy that Nineveh would be overturned and this came to fruition when the residents did Tshuvah. Halacha Eisav Sonei Yaakov means that these two entities are constantly struggling for supremacy as they did in the Matriarch's womb. Therefore mass assimilation can lead to a Holocaust. But sometimes we can't understand how Halacha Eisav Sonei Yaakov manifests and so we wave our arms and say, "That's Just the Way It Is." So Yaakov's intent was terrific and he would've pulled it off but his mother's Nevuah held sway. And this is the reality which eternally dictates the course of mankind. History will play out as Hashem sees fit. Is it hopeless? The bond between Rebbi and Antoninus demonstrates that there is potential for rapprochement but only when the Yaakovs of the world act in the manner that Rebbi did, materially successful but at all times completely devoted to the Torah.