

THE PATH TO FOLLOW



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SECRETS BELONG TO G-D

(FROM RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

Jacob suffered so much that he said, "I had barely finished suffering over the tragedy of Dinah, the tragedy of Joseph, the tragedy of Laban..." (Tanhuma Mikeitz 10). It was in those circumstances that he revealed all his greatness, as the Sages have said: "He suffers yet does not complain about the severity of justice" (Tanhuma Toldot 14).

I reflected upon these words. Why did Jacob, who fathered the twelve tribes of G-d (Psalms 122:4) and whose face is engraved on the Throne of Glory (Pesikta Zutah Vayeitzei 28:13), suffer so much during his life, especially after Dinah was violated and defiled by a non-Jew (Genesis 34:2,5)? Why did Jacob have to suffer all this?

It was perhaps in order to point out to future generations that Dinah, in being confined inside (which is likened to being in a yeshiva), teaches us that each Jew should avoid leaving the walls of the house of study, and that if he leaves he must suffer the consequences. Institutions of Torah learning must be created in order to protect against assimilation. Be that as it may, we may rightly ask why Dinah was kidnapped and violated by this immoral gentile.

We learn from here just how exacting justice is, since even for the Patriarchs – who were the vehicle for the Divine Presence (Bereshith Rabba 47:8), who stood upon the heights of perfection, and who were "as resplendent as the angels that ministered to them" (Bereshith Rabba 75:4) – judgment was severe. Even though they had angels at their service, ones created by the good deeds that they performed solely to obey their Creator's will, they were not protected from the strictness of justice.

Jacob had just attained great spiritual heights since he had conquered Esau's angel (Chullin 92a) and rejected Esau's offer: "Travel on and let us go – I will proceed alongside you" (Genesis 33:12). Esau wanted to accompany and go along with him only so as to harm and prevent him from progressing. Jacob should have therefore immediately carried out his vow in order to attain an even greater degree of perfection, for there is no limit to perfection and a man can deepen his understanding every day and at each moment. A man should continue to advance from strength to strength, without stopping at what he has. He should progress every day, every hour, and at every moment, for true perfection is without limit.

When Jacob attained his great spiritual level at that moment, he should have continued to progress. He still had much to do before

reaching the level of the "All" in the World to Come (in the sense of "All Israel has a portion in the World to Come" [Sanhedrin 90a]), and this "All" is without limit. It was only the performance of his vow that could have assured him of perfection (Bereshith Rabba 81:2), and it was why he was punished by the tragedy that struck Dinah.

Jacob sought to fundamentally distance himself from evil, since he said to Esau, "My lord knows that the children are tender, and the nursing flocks and cattle are upon me" (Genesis 33:13). He explained to his brother that he did not want to live with him because he did not want the education of his children to be disrupted, an education that cost him much money and that required great effort. This is why he said to him, "I will make my way at my slow pace according to the gait of the drove before me and the gait of the children" (v.14). In other words, I will go step by step, from strength to strength, for it is only because of the Torah that I will attain the "All" in the World to Come, without being diverted from my goal by wealth, which is also called "all", as it is written: "For upon his death he will not take hakol [literally: 'The all']" (Psalms 49:18). Jacob possessed what he needed, since he said, "G-d has been gracious to me and because I have all" (Genesis 33:11). In other words, he was rich in the sense of being "happy with his lot" (Perkei Avoth 4:1), and he generously used the excess of his possessions to perform good deeds.

And yet, justice's severity overtook him because there was a defect in his level of perfection. This was because he did not immediately fulfill his vow and promise. Far be it from us to think that Jacob did not keep his word, yet his stay in Shechem was considered as a defect in spite of the house of study that he established there. It is difficult for us to understand the exactitude of justice that was then awakened against him, even though he progressed in other domains. This occurred because he had not yet fulfilled his vow towards G-d, Who had recently saved him from the hands of Esau and confirmed his blessings (Bereshith Rabba 78:11). It was only the fulfillment of his promise that could have allowed him to attain the summit of perfection. Even though the text says that at that very moment, "Jacob arrived shaleim [intact, whole]" (Genesis 33:18) – "whole in his body, in his goods, and in his Torah" (Shabbat 33b) – he did reach the summit of perfection in "All", this being an instruction for future generations concerning the strictness of justice and its exactitude.

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The one who makes a vow to serve G-d with all his strength is considered as being flawed as long as he has not accomplished his vow, or if he accomplishes it partially, even if in other areas his conduct is flawless.

The Sages said, "For having confined Dinah inside, she ended up falling into the hands of Shechem, the son of Hamor" (Bereshith Rabba 80:4). Why did this happen? It was because the sentence had already been pronounced against Jacob because of his lack of perfection. If G-d had promised to watch over him and his family, why did he fear the ill-intentioned gaze of Esau? If Jacob had hastened to fulfill his vow after having confined Dinah inside, it is possible that the sentence could have been annulled. We would have then explained that Jacob could have rejected the marriage proposal of Esau for Dinah by using the pretext

that she was still too young. Yet we see that he stopped at the city of Shechem and that he delayed in fulfilling his vow. Such is the strictness of justice towards one who lacks perfection. Jacob's conduct teaches us to always aspire to greater perfection.

What is the right path to follow?

Each individual should perform good deeds and carry out his vows to progress in serving G-d, this being in every area. The opportunity to progress should not be put off until later. For example, as soon as one is free from current occupations, he must run towards the house of study, otherwise the strictness of justice will weigh down upon him for having let an opportunity pass to perform good deeds with his possessions, as Jacob demonstrates for us.

THE STORY OF THE WEEK

AN EXCERPT FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE KRAKOW CHEVRA KADISHA

After the death of our revered teacher, the author of Megaleh Amukot, a young man living in Krakow went to see the administrator of the Chevra Kadisha because he wanted to purchase the burial plot adjacent to the grave of the Megeleh Amukot. This young man was not known as a famous Talmid Chacham, which is why the administrator rejected his request, one that seemed marked by a sign of pride and vanity. The Gaon and Tzaddik who had just left this world was among the greatest names of Torah. He had written many works, and it was impossible to give the plot adjacent to his grave to someone who was unknown, a common man, this being contrary to Halachah.

Yet the young man did not give up, and when all the administrators went home, he went to speak to one of the oldest ones who remained there. He implored him to give his approval for this purchase, for his soul ardently yearned for that place close to the Gaon and Tzaddik. "No price will seem too much for me," he repeated to the elderly man who was over 80 years old. "I will give you whatever price you ask."

"Do you agree to pay 1,000 silver rubbles?" the old man asked with a little sarcasm. The answer did not take long: "Yes!" the young man declared, and he took out the money from his wallet and handed it to the old man. This elderly administrator told himself, "What's preventing me from taking this money? I don't have much longer to live. I'm old and this man is young, hardly 20 years old. From now until the time he passes away, there will be other administrators, and who among them will come to me and claim this money?" Now the next day, the bitter news spread that this young avrech had suddenly died. The Chevra Kadisha was called upon to take care of his burial, but since no one was aware of the secret agreement that he had concluded with the old man, the administrators chose a burial plot that seemed appropriate to them. The night following the burial, the young man appeared in the dream of the old administrator that had sold him the burial plot adjacent to that of the Megaleh Amukot, demanding that he transfer his body to the grave that he had purchased.

This dream, which the old man paid no attention to in the beginning, occurred again the next day and the day after that. The young man warned the Chevra Kadisha's administrator that if he did not obtain the adjacent plot, he would convene him to the Celestial Court.

This severe warning greatly worried the old man, who did not know how to get out of this predicament. It was to the point that, in his fear and distress, he went to find the Rav of the city and told him everything that had happened and asked him for advice. The Rav was astounded when he heard the story,

He severely reprimanded the old man for what he had done, and demanded that he give him the money he had received so that he could give it to charity. This would allow the avrech's soul to rest in peace. Nevertheless, the Rav absolutely refused to give him permission to transfer the dead man's body to the unused burial plot adjacent to the grave of the Megaleh Amukot. The old administrator was overcome by fear. What was he now going to do? The Rav gave him his cane and ordered that he go to the grave of the young man and summon him to Din Torah at the Rav's home three days hence in the afternoon. Since the old man feared for his life, he obeyed. To his great surprise, the dead man accepted to present himself to a Din Torah as the Rav had asked.

When the old man arrived at the Rav's home at the prescribed time, he saw that in the room in which the Rav studied was a partition that had been set up, behind which the dead man was to be. The Rav was seated on the other side, and with him was the Chevra Kadisha's administrator. The spirit on the other side of the partition presented his grievances: "I obtained the rights to the burial plot and purchased it with my own money. No one has the right to chase me away from it." The Rav asked the dead man to identify himself by name, but he responded that this was forbidden for him to do. To calm the dead man, whose voice could be heard coming from the other side of the partition, the Rav said, "As a result, if it is forbidden for you to identify yourself and to give your actual name, we cannot grant your request. The money has thus been distributed to the poor for your soul to rest in peace. And now, go and rest in peace." However the dead man refused to give in. He repeated that the administrator had not kept his word, and he demanded that he rectify his mistake.

Upon hearing these words, the Rav was filled with great consternation. He finally had the idea of saying, "If such is the case – if your soul is so great that it is forbidden to reveal your identity – then take action yourself and make your body role from its present resting place to the burial plot that you asked for and purchased with your own money on the day before your death." The Rav promised him only that he would make the Chevra Kadisha aware of this decision so that the plot adjacent to the grave of the Megaleh Amukot would not be given to anyone else. The next day, when the members of the Chevra Kadisha of Krakow went to the cemetery, they found a new grave that they did not recognize and which they had not dug. The administrators then convened to discuss the situation and decided to erect a headstone upon it, and since they were unaware of the dead man's name, they decided to inscribe the following words upon it: "His Neighbor will Testify for Him." This story spread far and wide.

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADDIKIM

RABBI YITZCHAK ARYEH SEKEL – THE BAAL SHEM OF MICHELSTADT

Jews in Russia gave Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer of Okup, the founder of the Chassidic movement, the name “Baal Shem Tov”. In Germany as well, Jews called Rabbi Yitzchak Aryeh Sekel of Michelstadt the name “Baal Shem”. Like Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem was a hidden Tzaddik and great scholar, and he was equally versed in the ways of the world. Many people came to see him to ask for advice regarding both spiritual and material concerns. The general public considered him to be a miracle worker, and they sought him out in times of distress. Even non-Jews addressed themselves to him, and he never sent anyone away empty-handed.

The people of Michelstadt have said that all the Jews and non-Jews who prayed by the grave of the “Baal Shem” before being drafted into the army during WWI came back safely from the war. The local council placed a plaque on the house where he lived in memory of its “Baal Shem”.

Rabbi Yitzchak Aryeh Sekel was born in 5529 (1768) in Michelstadt. His father Matiyahu was a simple and upright man who feared G-d and distanced himself from evil. He was a descendant of Rashi and King David.

From his youth, the young man demonstrated his exemplary character traits and extraordinary abilities, which enabled people to see that he would become a genius and the glory of his people. He was known throughout the region of Michelstadt as a child prodigy. At the age of eight, there was no one in the tiny city who could teach him Torah any more.

When he reached the age of 13, he implored his parents to send him off to study in yeshiva. Yet because they had lost six sons before him, they could not accept the departure of their young remaining son. He understood that he could rely only upon himself, and so he devoted himself to sacred study with all his heart and with all his soul. He studied Torah day and night, and more than once did his mother extinguish, despite his wishes, the candle in his room at a late hour of the night. As soon as daybreak occurred, he arose like a lion, got dressed quickly (lest he fall back asleep), then washed his hands and ran to the Beit Midrash.

The young man’s reputation also reached the ears of the Duke of Michelstadt, who asked his father to send him alone, without a guide, to his palace. He wanted to see how he would find his way around in a large palace, and how he would find the Duke’s reception room. The young man easily found the room where the Duke waited for him. “Who showed you where I was waiting for you?” the Duke asked.

“His lordship the Duke himself,” the boy replied. “I glanced up and looked all around, and I noticed that the windows of the all the palace’s rooms were open except for a single one, it being closed and covered by a curtain. I then understood that your lordship was certainly there, hidden from the eyes of those who came to the palace.”

The Duke understood that the boy knew that he had hidden himself in order to put him to the test, and that it was precisely in this way that he had revealed his hiding place to the boy. He asked him, “Tell me, my dear boy, if you had encountered ten servants in the stairways or the halls, and you had asked them where I was, how would you have found me if they gave you different answers?”

“In that case,” he replied, “I would have followed the advice of the majority. For example, if three servants had indicated one room to me, three other

servants another room, and four other servants yet another room, I would have gone towards the last room.”

At the age of 16, this intelligent boy entered the yeshiva of Rabbi Nathan Adler of Frankfurt, and there he met Rabbi Moshe Sofer (the Chatam Sofer, who later became the Rav of Pressburg). Together they studied the revealed and hidden Torah with their great Rav and devoted themselves to emulating him.

At the age of 18 he took it upon himself, for the rest of his life, to never eat or drink anything that had animal products in it. Following this vow, he not only abstained from eating meat and fish, but also from consuming eggs, milk, and butter.

Rabbi Yitzchak Aryeh Sekel studied Torah in Frankfurt for six years. One of the residents in the Jewish community there, Yitzchak Reiss, gave him his daughter in marriage, and after the wedding he returned to his place of birth, the small town of Michelstadt. He then lived several years in Manheim, where he learned Torah from Rabbi Yaakov Ettinger, who was later known as the Rav of Altona and the author of Aruch LaNer. After the death of his parents, he was forced to go into business to feed his family, but even then he did not interrupt his Torah study, continuing to publicly teach it as well.

At the age of 54 he was chosen as Rav of Michelstadt, and there he founded a yeshiva that he directed. During the last 25 years of his life, he was known throughout all of Germany as a worker of miracles, and none of the words that emanated from his mouth were ever in vain.

He was known as the “Baal Shem of Michelstadt”, and from near and far students came to hear Torah from his mouth. Among these were some very wealthy people who came to ask him for advice and received his blessings, but even during this period of prosperity he himself lived in poverty and ate only vegetables and vegetable products. As for the students of the yeshiva, he provided them with an abundance of meat, fish, and all sorts of good things. His heart and home were wide open to whoever came to ask for help or support. Rabbi Yitzchak Aryeh Sekel brought to his home every Jew passing through town, and he fed them lavishly. Sometimes, when dozens of guests were at his home, he went to the market and purchased bundles of straw. He then loaded them on his shoulders and brought them back to his home, where he himself prepared beds for his guests.

He was accustomed to saying, “It is forbidden to abandon the poor to Divine mercy. A man should concern himself with them and take care of their needs.” Rabbi Moshe Sofer said, “I have learned the mitzvah of Tzedakah and hospitality from my friend Rabbi Yitzchak Aryeh.”

The following is an account of Rabbi Yitzchak Aryeh’s final days, as told by his son: “He wanted to strengthen our hope that the end wasn’t so close. Lying on his bed, he tried hard to encourage my mother, promising her that she would lack nothing. He also told her that if she came to his gravesite at a difficult time, his soul would intercede for her before the Throne of Glory.

“The night of Rosh Hashanah 5608 [1847], we returned from synagogue and wanted to receive our father’s blessing. Yet his weakness was such that he could not pronounce a single word. He spread out his trembling hands over our heads, and we sensed that this would be his last blessing. The morning of Rosh Hashanah, he expressed his ardent desire to hear the Shofar. His soul left this world during the Fast of Gedalia, at seven o’clock at night. He recited Shema Israel aloud, and his soul departed at the word echad.”

THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

It is written, “And Jacob was greatly afraid, and was distressed” (Genesis 32:8). This verse has greatly perplexed the Commentators. It seems to me that it should be explained in light of what the Midrash states: “At that moment, Jacob raised his eyes and saw Esau from afar. He raised his eyes towards Heaven and asked the Holy One, blessed be He, to have pity on him. His prayer was heard, and Hashem promised to save him from all harm because of his merits, as it is said: ‘May the L-RD answer you on the day of distress. May the Name of Jacob’s G-d make you impregnable’ [Psalms 20:2].”

This is a very surprising way of putting it, but the main idea is one that we have already spoken of, namely that the deeds of the Patriarchs are a sign for their descendants.

To understand this, let us illustrate with a parable:

Several people became sick in a certain town, but there was no doctor there to treat them. The governor lived far away, in another town, but near him at all times was an extremely competent doctor who was worthy of trust. The governor also had a friend living in the aforementioned town, a very respectable man whom the governor greatly liked, and for whom he was quite willing to send his doctor if he became sick. Up to that point, however, his friend in the town had not become ill. One day this man had a slight headache. It was nothing really, but he decided to exaggerate his condition and immediately began to moan and cry out. He then sent a messenger to the governor and asked that he send his doctor to him. Those close to the man were stunned to see him making such a fuss over so slight a headache. “Fools! Are you senseless?” he said to them. “Is it for my pain that I’m crying? Is it for myself that I sent someone to get a doctor? I know just as well as you do that there’s nothing seriously wrong with me, but I’m feeling sorry for my fellow citizens who are in a state of despair and have nobody to come and treat them. Once the doctor will be here for me, he will take care of them as well!”

Hashem knew of the generations to come and their doings. He knew that their merit would be insufficient to justify His protection and salvation, to the point that in the depth of His goodness, He precipitated matters by having the Patriarchs live through hardships that awaited their descendants, this in order for the latter to obtain salvation through the Patriarchs’ prayers. What

Hashem did for them is thus forever acquired by their posterity. As for the Patriarchs themselves, they could have easily done to their enemies what they wished, especially Jacob, whom the Midrash states was accompanied by tens of thousands of animals, dogs, and shepherds (without even mentioning his personal strength and that of his sons). And yet, it was to Hashem that he turned in imploring Him, “Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau” (Genesis 32:12), as if he felt that he was weak. In reality, it was because he sensed in all that was happening to him a foreshadowing of things to come in the latter generations. He therefore pushed himself to awaken Hashem’s kindness towards his descendants. “True, it would be easier for me to get through this by myself,” he told himself, “but what will become of my children when they will be placed in a similar situation?” He therefore preferred to rely entirely on Hashem by requesting a miraculous intervention, which would then be acquired once and for all by the generations to come.

Let us return to the Midrash: “At that moment, Jacob raised his eyes and saw Esau from afar.” He sensed that far off in time, the sons of Esau would come and persecute his own children. “He raised his eyes towards Heaven” so that Hashem would save him, despite the fact that he could have defended himself alone. Actually, he wanted this salvation to be eternally acquired by his descendants. This is the meaning of “[He] asked the Holy One, blessed be He, to have pity on him” – he wanted to be saved in a supernatural way. “His prayer was heard, and Hashem promised to save him from all harm because of Jacob’s merits” – the words “because of Jacob’s merits” apply to his descendants, for they will benefit from the events that the Patriarchs experienced. The Midrash ends with a promise: “May the L-RD answer you on the day of distress” (Psalms 20:2). How can we be certain of this? “May the Name of Jacob’s G-d make you impregnable” (ibid). He will command that the support granted to Jacob, which continues to exist, manifest itself once again on their behalf.

It follows from all this that the fear of Jacob and his distress over what happened to him was not caused by problems, but rather by the suffering that he felt because these events did not bode well for the far future. He therefore poured out his heart before Hashem in imploring him to grant His salvation to all the generations.