

THE STUDY OF TORAH PREPARES US FOR CONFRONTING LIFE'S TRIALS

(BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, "Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran" (Genesis 28:10). Rashi states, "This tells us that the departure of a tzaddik from a place makes an impression, for while a tzaddik is in the city, he is its beauty, he is its splendor, he is its majesty. When he departs from there, its beauty has departed, its splendor has departed, its majesty has departed."

A few questions need to be raised concerning this verse, the first in our parsha. First of all, why does the Torah use such a drawn out expression to tell us that Jacob left Beersheba? We already know this from what we read near the end of the previous parsha: "Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went toward Paddan-Aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebecca, mother of Jacob and Esau" (Genesis 28:5). Even if the Torah wants to return to this subject in order to continue the description of Jacob's journey to Haran, it would have been sufficient to state, "Jacob went to Haran." Why does the text again tell us that he left Beersheba? Furthermore, if the Torah wanted to tell us that Jacob left Beersheba, it could have used a much briefer expression (e.g. "Jacob went from Beersheba to Haran"). Why the need for the lengthy, "Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran"?

There is another issue that needs to be addressed. From the words that the verse uses, it would seem that Jacob left Beersheba and journeyed directly to Haran. Yet he did not go to Haran right away, but rather 14 years later! Commenting on the last verse of Parsha Toldot, Rashi tells us that Jacob "hid for 14 years in the house of Eber, and afterwards he went to Haran." That is, Jacob hid in the Beit Midrash of Shem and Ever for 14 years in order to study Torah. Thus the question becomes why the Torah concealed this fact by giving the reader the impression that Jacob immediately traveled to Haran upon leaving Beersheba.

The answer is that the Torah is telling us by allusion that Jacob's main journey was from Beersheba to Haran. Although he lingered for 14 years in the Beit Midrash of Shem and Eber to study Torah, that was not an objective in and of itself. Rather, it constituted part of his journey from Beersheba to Haran. Learning Torah was a way to prepare for his journey to Haran. Thus Jacob did leave Beersheba and traveled to Haran. How did he succeed? By preparing himself for 14 years through the study of Torah. Why did Jacob require such a long and difficult preparation of 14 years? The answer is that when Jacob left for Haran to live near Laban the Aramean, trials of a different kind awaited him there, trials that he had never confronted until then. True, he was used to living near the wicked Esau, but at least Esau had studied Torah when he was a child, until he finally grew up and became, as the verse states, "A man familiar with hunting, a man of the field" (Genesis 25:27). Yet the treacherous Laban never studied Torah in his entire life. There was another difference between Esau and Laban, namely that Esau believed in G-d. He committed wrongs simply because he chose to follow his evil inclination. He nevertheless possessed the principle of faith, proof being that when Isaac blessed Jacob in his place, Esau wept and bitterly cried out. If he had not believed in Hashem, he would not have attributed any importance whatsoever to these blessings of Isaac, nor would he have regretted losing them. Yet Esau felt that he had lost his share in this world when the blessings were stolen from him, which proves that in his heart he believed in Hashem.

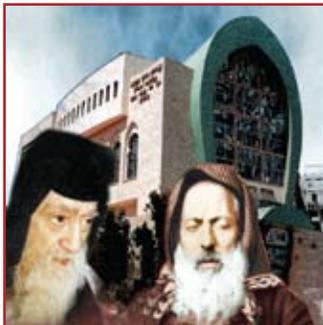
As for Laban the Aramean, he never had the slightest contact with holiness, nor did he possess any faith. He also lived in a place of evil, in Haran, whose name evokes charon af (Divine wrath). It is

not easy to live with such a rasha for so many years. Indeed, it was a tremendously difficult trial for Jacob, one that he hadn't needed to confront until then.

Yet a man like Jacob did not allow himself to lose hope. When he realized the trials that awaited him in Haran, he prepared himself in the necessary way, a preparation that would make those trials easier to overcome. What did this consist of? He remained concealed within the Beit Midrash of Eber to study Torah with great diligence for 14 years, corresponding to the time that he worked for Laban in order to marry his daughters. By the fact of having diligently labored in Torah, he carried in himself the power to remain upright through all the trials he faced, and to eventually return upright to his father's home, as it is written: "Jacob returned whole" (Genesis 33:18).

According to this explanation, we can understand why the Mishnah states, "Not study, by practice is the essential thing" (Perkei Avot 1:17). In fact when we study in the Beit Midrash, we naturally become influenced for the good. We become meticulous in performing mitzvot and our fear of Heaven grows. The study of Torah also protects us from the temptations of the evil inclination. However that in itself is not the main thing, for the battle begins when we leave the Beit Midrash. That is when our real battle starts, when we must confront the evil inclination. It is then that we are far from the influence of our parents and teachers, being without the special atmosphere that the Torah offers to those who study it. There is no middle ground in this war, for we must either defeat the evil inclination or fall before it, as our Sages have said: "He who places himself in the arena stands either to fail or win" (Shemot Rabba 27:9). It is in this sense that the Tanna said, "Not study, by practice is the essential thing." The essential thing is the realm of action – leaving the palace of Torah, surrounded as it is with the atmosphere of Gan Eden, and journeying toward a mundane world that is devoid of Torah, where nobody is watching us and nobody is there to protect us. It is a place where a person must confront hardships and prove that he can overcome them. Thus actions constitute a proof of study.

The Torah tells us this by stating, "Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran." True, we already know that Jacob left Beersheba, as we mentioned, and we also know that Jacob did not immediately travel to Haran. Yet here the Torah is teaching us the secret to finding strength in trials. Jacob departed from Beersheba, from the great and holy house of Isaac, in order to face the extremely difficult task of remaining for a long time near wicked men such as Laban the Aramean in Haran, a place of evil. How did he confront this trial? By studying Torah in the Beit Midrash. The Torah states that Jacob went from Beersheba to Haran, but does not mention that he went from Beersheba to the Beit Midrash, and from the Beit Midrash to Haran, for studying Torah in the Beit Midrash prepared him for Haran. He departed from Beersheba for Haran with the Torah. That is, from "study" he departed for "practice," which serves as a lesson for us all. In order to go out into a vast world that is filled with trials and temptations, we must prepare ourselves in advance. We must arm ourselves with the weapon we need to overcome, that weapon being the study of Torah.



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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Constant Study and Review

One of the principles for guarding the tongue from speaking evil is to continually study and review the laws of Lashon Harah. Just as Halachah requires every shochet to continually examine the laws of shechita, until he possesses a complete understanding of them and they are engraved in his mind, so too must every person study the laws of Lashon Harah until he knows them to perfection. This is necessary because people use their tongue more often than any other body part. Therefore a person must always know what is permitted to say and what is not. If he does not constantly review these laws, he will make a mistake and speak Lashon Harah.

– The Chafetz Chaim, Chovot HaShemirah 3

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

The Guardian of Israel

It is written, "Behold, I am with you. I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this soil, for I will not forsake you until I will have done what I have spoken about you" (Genesis 28:15).

The Sages say, "He answered all his requests except for sustenance." That is, Jacob had prayed, "If G-d will be with me..." and G-d replied: "Behold, I am with you." Jacob had prayed, "And will guard me..." and G-d replied: "I will guard you." Jacob had prayed, "On this way that I am going..." and G-d replied: "Wherever you go." Jacob had prayed, "So that I come back to my father's house in peace..." and G-d replied: "And I will return you." Nevertheless the Sages hold that G-d did not answer Jacob's request for sustenance. Rabbi Assi counters by stating, "He also answered his request for sustenance, since it says: 'For I will not forsake you'" (Bereshith Rabba 69:6). The question now becomes how this response contains a promise of sustenance, meaning food and clothing. At the simplest level, we may say that what Hashem told Jacob ("I will not forsake you") includes an assurance of food, for it is written: "I have never seen a righteous man forsaken, nor his children begging for bread" (Psalms 37:25). Hence one who has no bread is termed "forsaken." Therefore when Hashem promised Jacob that he would not be forsaken, it meant that he would never lack bread, and the term "bread" automatically includes clothing, since both are basic necessities.

The Maggid of Dubno, however, used a parable to explain this Midrash in a deeper way: One day a man was about to send his son to study in a distant yeshiva, and he planned on generously providing him with money for the costs of the journey. He also planned on giving him food in abundance, winter and summer clothes, and all kinds of sweets. However when the man learned that there was a band of robbers on the road who were accosting innocent travelers and stealing all they had, he feared for his son's safety. He therefore decided not to send him off to the yeshiva alone, but to accompany him there. Hence they traveled together on this long and difficult journey. Contrary to initial plans, the father did not give his son any money or food for the road. His son asked, "Father, you prepared food and money for the journey, so why don't you give them to me?" He replied, "As long as I thought that you were traveling by yourself, I planned on giving you money and food. Yet now that you're with me, I'll pay for whatever you need. So why do you need money or food? I'm constantly with you, so just ask me for whatever you want and I'll give it to you."

"So too," said the Maggid of Dubno, "did Jacob ask Hashem to give him bread to eat and clothes to wear. To this Hashem replied, 'Behold, I am with you. I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this soil, for I will not forsake you.' If I were to forsake you, then I would provide you with money for your sustenance. Yet now that I am with you, why would you want money and food? I will provide you with whatever you need!"

A Pearl From the Rav:

Who May Stand in His Holy Place?

It is written, "If G-d will be with me...then this stone that I have set as a pillar shall become a house of G-d" (Genesis 28:20-22).

Jacob knew that by going to Haran, he was entering a place that endangered all the spiritual traits he had worked hard to achieve. This is why he made a vow by stating: "If G-d will be with me and guard me on this way that I am going" – so that I don't fall from my

spiritual level or be led astray by the evil deeds of those who live in Haran – "and gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear" – so that I lack nothing I need to continue serving Hashem – "the L-RD will be G-d to me" – I will continue to be connected to G-d. And so, "This stone that I have set" – my connection to G-d – "as a pillar" will I make it. That is, it will have an existence and a future, and Haran will not have a detrimental influence on me. When I depart from there, this pillar shall be "a house of G-d" – I will continue to progress in the service of Hashem.

It Rests Upon the Humble

It is written, "Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the L-RD is in this place, and I did not know it'" (Genesis 28:16).

What is the meaning of, "Surely the L-RD is in this place"? It results from the statement, "I did not know it," through which Jacob negated his personality by humbling himself, for the Shechinah rests only on a person who is humble.

– Tiferet Shlomo

As Strong as a Lion

It is written, "Jacob awoke from his sleep" (Genesis 28:16).

We see before us the difference between a tzaddik and a rasha. As soon as he awoke, Jacob roused himself like a lion, ready to do the will of his Creator, and he said: "Surely the L-RD is in this place."

As for Pharaoh, when he awoke from his sleep it is written: "Pharaoh awoke, and he slept and dreamed a second time" (Genesis 41:4-5). He immediately returned to his sleep and his dreams.

– Rabbi Meir of Premishlan

G-d Stands in the Divine Assembly

It is written, "Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the L-RD is in this place, and I did not know it'" (Genesis 28:16).

The last letters in the expression vayikatz Yaakov mishnato vayo-mer ("Jacob awoke from his sleep and said") form the word tzibur (community, public). Therefore when a community exists, "The L-RD is in this place," for "G-d stands in the divine assembly" (Psalms 82:1) and answers their prayers. Yet "I" – if there is but a single person – "did not know it" – he cannot be sure that his prayer has been accepted.

– Afikei Torah

The Gate of Heaven

It is written, "This is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of Heaven" (Genesis 28:17).

Is the abode of the Holy One, blessed be He, not the entire universe, as it is written: "The whole world is filled with His glory" (Isaiah 6:3)? This was Jacob's question: "How fearful is this place" – how is this place different from all others? The answer is, "This is none other than the house of G-d" – this place is special because of communal prayer – "and this is the gate of Heaven." Hence the prayer of the community, since they are numerous, is more favorably accepted and ascends to the gate of Heaven.

– Sha'ar Bat Rabim

I Will Never Forget

It is written, "This stone that I have set as a pillar shall become a house of G-d" (Genesis 28:22).

In general, when a poor person is rescued from his poverty, he will try to quickly forget the pain of his past. In fact he will try to repress all his painful memories, in which case he will also forget G-d. He will then grow fat and rebel. Such is not the way of the tzaddikim,

who often remind themselves of the difficulties they experienced in the past. They do this in order to remember G-d's wonders and to never forget what condition they were in. Thus the Torah commands us to eat matzah and bitter herbs because the lives of the Children of Israel were filled with bitterness and hard labor. When eating these things we say, "This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate while in Egypt." As such we constantly recall days of bitterness, even during times of joy, which prevents us from sinning and rejecting Hashem. This is what Jacob did, for the stones that he slept on during his journey were a reminder of his days of misery. Those were the stones that he made into a monument for the future, a pillar for all the generations. Jacob also said, "If G-d is with me and will raise me to great heights, then these stones, which I have made into a pillar, will be the house of G-d, and from it I will learn to constantly recall the past so as to strengthen my faith."

– Ateret Paz

Overview of the Parsha

Our parsha describes the beginnings of Jacob's life far from his father's home. The parsha describes Jacob's life with Laban in Haran, where he encountered many hardships. In leaving Beersheba and heading towards Haran, he encountered "the place" (Genesis 28:11), and there he had a dream and uttered a vow. He went to the land of the children of the east, and while living with Laban he was given Rachel and Leah as wives, though in the reverse order. They and their maidservants gave birth to Jacob's children while he cared for Laban's flocks. In obeying Hashem's command, Jacob fled with his family and journeyed to the land of his fathers. However Laban, who was deceived and whose idols were stolen, overtook Jacob. Following Hashem's command, however, Laban allowed him to continue his journey.

EISHET CHAYIL

It Loves Us...It Hates Us

Chovot HaLevavot states that we must consider the evil inclination as our greatest enemy. This is why the battle against it must not entail any compromises on our part, for its goal is to ruin and destroy a person in both worlds, and it does not allow itself to be appeased by compromises. Our Sages say that the evil inclination works by first appealing to a person as his greatest friend and giving him everything he desires, to the point that he becomes lethargic and falls asleep. The evil inclination, however, never sleeps. It ascends before the Holy One, blessed be He, and begins to accuse the person in question by saying, "Master of the universe, so and so has just sinned before You! Give me permission to kill or punish him." By the next day, the evil inclination has become his adversary, one that seeks his life. If such is the case for any given sin, how much more does it apply to a person who breaks every bond of decency, which is what the evil inclination works towards and from which it gathers fruit. Imagine that a woman goes to a store to buy some clothes, and there she sees a stunning and brilliant outfit, one that fits her to a tee and is within her budget. In fact it is even on sale, for the Satan has already planned everything, and the only problem is that the outfit is not entirely modest. A woman must realize that here her greatest enemy is disguised as a sympathetic friend, seemingly wanting to help her. She should not forget, however, that this "friend" is cruel and impatiently waits for her to fall into its trap by wearing clothes that do not befit a dignified Jewish woman.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

The Patriarchs Prepared the Way for Us

It is written, "He encountered the place" (Genesis 28:11).

The Gemara (Berachot 26a) states that the Patriarchs instituted the three daily prayers: Abraham instituted Shacharit, Isaac instituted Mincha, and Jacob instituted Arvit, as it is written: "He encountered bamakom [the place]" (Genesis 28:10), the word makom being one of G-d's Names.

To what can this be compared? Today we are accustomed to using the telephone to speak with people who are far away. Voices can be transmitted in an instant without any effort on our part, for by the touch of a button we can connect to others and have our voices heard, regardless of place or time. We should realize, however, that an enormous amount of work went into building the telephone network in the first place. Great minds invested tremendous time and effort into developing this practical invention, and years of extensive research and development were needed to create the entire telephone network. Just in the United States alone, thousands of workers were needed to install telephone cables, build network stations, and construct the expensive and complex instruments needed to run the entire system. Today a person who telephones his friend is reaping the fruit of all this labor, the result of thousands of people who worked for years.

The ease at which we can communicate with others over the telephone actually rests on the tremendous groundwork of the past. The same applies to our prayers. Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian explained that a Jew rises early in the morning, envelops himself in his tallit, dons his tefillin, and stands in prayer before his Creator. He concentrates on his prayers, his voice is heard, and his words are accepted by our Father in Heaven, Who listens to the prayers of His people Israel. However we must realize that the present situation, wherein we can address our Creator through fixed prayer, was only made possible through enormous spiritual work in the past. The Patriarchs instituted the three daily prayers; they were the ones who laid the spiritual "cables" that connect man to the Creator, Israel to Him Who dwells in Heaven. They were the ones who laid the path from earth to Heaven. They gathered the secrets of Creation – hidden wisdom and concealed truths – so as to include them in our prayers, enabling us to stand before Him and pour out our requests. Since the foundations of prayer have already been established, every Jew can pray to the Creator. However he must remember just who were the ones who established these foundations for us: The holy Patriarchs, by whose merit we continue to pray at all times.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Shaoul Hacoheh of Djerba

Three hundred years ago, there were no well-known rabbinical figures on the Isle of Djerba. However there was someone special there, a man who was quite famous. This was Rabbi Shaoul Hacoheh Zatzal, whose lineage could be traced back to the High Priest Ishmael, a man whose descendants are sought even today for the Pidyon HaBen ceremony.

Rabbi Shaoul served as the Av Beit Din, a devoted man who was well-versed in the Gemara, the Poskim, and the Midrashim. He had a young son named Moshe, who even from childhood was very gifted. From his youth he could easily swim in the “sea of the Talmud” as handily as an older man could. The boy was also well-versed in the writings of the Poskim. One day a great and important Rav was staying at their home as a guest. There he saw the boy studying, not the Chumash or the Gemara, but the Shulchan Aruch and the Poskim! The Rav began to admonish the boy, for he was still young and should have first been learning the Gemara and the basic commentators such as the Maharsha, the Sha’ar HaMelech, and the Machaneh Ephraim, whose opinions are straightforward. Only once a boy is infused with an understanding of the Gemara, the Rav said, should he begin studying the Shulchan Aruch and the Poskim. Rabbi Shaoul, who was standing nearby, did not agree with the Rav’s remarks. Although they were correct in general, they did not apply in this particular case. Hence Rabbi Shaoul casually asked the Rav some difficult Halachic questions, which he could not clearly answer. Next Rabbi Shaoul turned to his son Rabbi Moshe, and the boy immediately gave the correct answers and their explanations. The guest understood his mistake and excused himself before Rabbi Moshe and his father Rabbi Shaoul.

Already by the age of 10, Rabbi Moshe decided that the fish known as amnon was kosher, whereas on the Isle of Djerba it was confused with the non-kosher fish called pe’er. Rabbi Moshe wrote a commentary on the Shulchan Aruch entitled Penei Moshe, a very profound and insightful work.

– Ma’asseichem Shel Chachmei HaSephardim

A TRUE STORY

The Fault of the Poor?

It is written, “Jacob took a vow, saying: ‘If G-d will be with me...of whatever You give me, I will surely give You a tenth’ ” (Genesis 28:20-22).

Why does the Torah stress that Jacob performed the mitzvah of ma’aser (tithing)? Since we already know that “the Patriarchs fulfilled the entire Torah,” why the need for this statement?

Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshutz explains: “The Sages have said, ‘Give tithes that you may become rich’ [Taanith 9a]. Therefore a person is liable to give his ma’asser with less than perfect intentions, meaning in order to become rich. Hence Jacob said, ‘I will surely give You a tenth’ – not a tenth for me to become rich, but for You – meaning solely for the sake of Heaven.”

Rabbi Shalom, the grandfather of Rabbi Shalom Mordechai Hacoheh (the author of Responsa Maharsham), earned a living as a goldsmith. He tithed all the money that came into his hands and gave it to tzedakah. One day he made a mistake at work and lost a great deal of money. Nevertheless he set some money aside for tzedakah in proportion to what he had lost. When he was asked why he did this, he replied that in the Talmud we find, “It is incumbent on a man to bless [G-d] for the evil in the same way as for the good” (Berachot 54a). Therefore just as he gave a tithe from his profits, so too did he give a tithe from his losses.

Rabbi Chaim of Sanz was also in the habit of allocating a tithe for the poor in town, even if he earned no money during the month. He would say, “If I lost money, how is that the fault of the poor?” – Afikei Torah

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

The Days of our Years are Seventy

This righteous man [Honi the Circle-Drawer] was throughout the whole of his life troubled about the meaning of the verse, “A song of ascents. When the L-RD will return the captivity of Zion, we will be like dreamers” [Psalms 126:1]. Is it possible for a man to dream continuously for 70 years? One day he was journeying on the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, “How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit?” The man replied, “Seventy years.” He then asked him, “Are you certain that you will live another 70 years?” The man replied, “I found carob trees in the world, for my forefathers planted them for me so I would also plant them for my children.”

Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept, a rocky formation enclosed upon him that hid him from sight, and he continued to sleep for 70 years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and he asked him, “Are you the man who planted the tree?” The man replied, “I am his grandson.” Thereupon he exclaimed, “It is clear that I slept for 70 years.” He then caught sight of his donkey, which had given birth to several generations of mules, and he returned home. There he inquired, “Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive?” The people answered him, “His son is no more, but his grandson is still living.” Thereupon he said to them, “I am Honi the Circle-Drawer,” but no one would believe him. He then went to the Beth Hamidrash and there he overheard the scholars say, “The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer, for whenever he came to the Beth Hamidrash he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had.” At that he called out, “I am he,” but the scholars would not believe him, nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly, and he prayed [for death] and he died. Rabba said, “Hence the saying: ‘Either companionship or death.’ ”

– Taanith 23a

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

The Time is Now

It is written, “In the womb he seized his brother’s heel, and with his strength he struggled with G-d. He struggled with an angel and prevailed. [The angel] wept and beseeched him” (Hosea 12:4-5).

Why did the angel weep? The Midrash states that the angel wept and beseeched Jacob to release him so he could ascend to Heaven and sing the praises for the day, for dawn had broken and it was the time to sing praises. In fact from the moment the angel had been created until then, his time for reciting praises had not yet arrived (see Bereshith Rabba 78:1-2).

This teaching is enough to pique our curiosity. It tells us what our attitude should be with regards to not squandering the appropriate time – fixed and exact – to elevate ourselves and sing praises. That is, we must learn how to use the appropriate time in order to spiritually elevate ourselves. Delaying it brings about everlasting sorrow, for our future depends on this hour and this moment. It is the first and also the last, since from the day the angel was created until then, its time for elevation had not yet arrived.

The angel that comes from the supernal world knows the value of this hour and this moment. The angel was awake, standing, trembling, weeping, and beseeching Jacob to release him, not to delay him and thereby cause an everlasting and irreparable loss.

If a person knew the value of the present moment, if he knew the secret meaning of his role and the order of Creation, the “order of the song” that is destined for everyone, then when his turn comes to elevate himself, he will not squander his hour. He will not allow himself to stray or be delayed.

It is said that a great Torah figure would wake up his neighbors in the morning and ask them to arise and wash up because an important visitor had just arrived, a visitor they had never before met. When he was asked who the visitor was, he replied: “This very day.” – Ma’ayanei HaChaim