

PARSHA

# VAYEITZEI

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## 572

# The Path to Follow

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## THE VALUE OF TORAH KNOWLEDGE ACQUIRED THROUGH EFFORT

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

**I**t is written, “And he dreamed, and behold – a ladder was set earthward and its top reached to Heaven. And behold – angels of G-d were ascending and descending on it” (Bereshith 28:12).

Midrash Tanchuma explains that the angels who appeared in Jacob’s dream were the princes of the nations of the world. G-d showed Jacob that just as all these princes were ascending, they would eventually descend. G-d asked Jacob to also ascend the ladder, promising him that he would not descend. Jacob refused to believe this, however, and he remained below. Hashem then said to him, “Since you have no faith in My promise, your descendants will be struck by the princes of the nations.” Jacob asked if this punishment was permanent, to which G-d responded: “But as for you, My servant Jacob, fear not – the word of Hashem – and do not be afraid, O Israel, for behold, I am saving you from afar [Jeremiah 30:10] – every exile and all sufferings will end, and I will deliver the Children of Israel, regardless of how distant they may be!” How could Jacob have refused to ascend to Heaven? After all, G-d had assured him that his ascension would be certain, not followed by a fall! What was Jacob’s underlying fear, the one that made him skeptical to the point of ignoring G-d’s reassuring words?

The nations of the world lose their greatness through immorality, and as a result their downfall is certain. However Jacob, who was faithful to G-d, was not to fear the same fate. Why did he not listen to G-d’s promise, Who assured him of progressing without risk? This question becomes even more relevant when Hashem punished Jacob for his refusal to ascend, telling Jacob that his descendants would be victims of the princes of the nations. How are we to understand that Jacob preferred the punishment of exile to an elevation toward Heaven?

This can all be explained by the fact that Jacob was a living symbol of Torah, as it is written: “Jacob was an upright man, dwelling in tents” (Bereshith 25:27). He embodied the study of Torah through tenacious effort, and by his refusal he sought to lay out a path for the generations to come. He wanted to transmit to his descendants the concept that Torah is not offered to man free of charge. Rather, the acquisition of Torah knowledge requires diligence and effort. If we want to spiritually elevate ourselves and improve our relationship with G-d, we must persevere in the study and understanding of Torah from every angle. It is only after we have entirely devoted ourselves to it that we can acquire all of its riches.

### *A Message for All the Generations*

When Jacob had this dream and G-d asked him to ascend the ladder without having to descend, he

refused because he knew that only Torah knowledge acquired through effort is the best and most authentic kind there is.

By this offer, Hashem wanted to grant Jacob Torah knowledge without weariness. However Jacob declined, for it was opposed to the very nature of his being: A man who put body and soul into learning Torah. Moreover, Jacob admitted that although he might not fall from the ladder, the same might not be the case for his descendants. Jacob sought to transmit to them the concept that effort is crucial in order to gain Torah knowledge, which is why he did not agree to G-d’s offer. Instead, he preferred to remain on earth in order to acquire Torah knowledge himself, by toiling in its pursuit rather than receiving it “free of charge.”

Indeed, it was precisely for the very same reason that Jacob preferred for his descendants to go into exile. In fact by the yoke of servitude, his descendants would acquire Torah knowledge through effort, for difficulties and suffering would lead them to learn with greater vigor. Their Torah understanding, acquired through adversity, would increase their merits and finally deliver them from exile, bringing them from darkness to light. How great was Jacob’s capacity to sacrifice himself for Torah! He preferred that his descendants remain in exile so that their Torah understanding would be genuine and result from effort and toil, the best and most commendable Torah knowledge possible!

### *Threatening yet Filled with Blessings*

At this point, we still need to understand whether or not Hashem approved of Jacob’s choice. It would seem that He did, since He did not punish Jacob directly, but only demanded an accounting from the succeeding generations.

Furthermore, despite the fact that at first glance the exiles endured by the Jewish people were severe and appalling, a source of suffering and pain, we cannot deny their beneficial effects. In fact they brought about a great spiritual elevation among the Jewish people, for the Egyptian exile led to miracles upon their departure, as well as to the festival of Pesach, which is the festival of faith.

As for the Babylonian exile, it gave birth to the Babylonian Talmud. And thanks to the exile of Persia and Media, the Children of Israel accepted the Torah with love, as it is written: “The Jews confirmed and took upon themselves” (Esther 9:27). The exile of Greece is the origin of Hanukkah, the festival of praising and thanking G-d. Finally, the exile of Edom gave birth to the Tannaim and Amoraim, who illuminated the Jewish people in Torah study by compiling the Mishnah and Gemara.



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### What's Truly Yours

Both the classical commentators and collectors of tzeddakah, who completely understand the segula of the mitzvah of giving tzeddakah, give an allegorical interpretation to Jacob's promise ("of all that You give me, I will surely give You the tenth" [Bereshith 28:22]): What is mine? "I will surely give You the tenth" – meaning that the tenth (ma'aser) is mine. As for the rest, it's not really mine; what's really mine is what I give to tzeddakah!

The mashgiach Rabbi Dan Segal Shlita once told someone: "You said to me, 'I earn 5,000 shekels and give a fifth to tzeddakah, meaning 1,000 shekels. Therefore I have only 4,000 shekels left.' However the opposite is true: Only the 1,000 shekels are truly yours! You really have but 1,000 shekels, and you simply don't know what you're talking about."

The maggid mesharim Rabbi Reuven Karlenstein Shlita said, "I knew a Jew who was exceedingly rich – not just a millionaire, but a genuine billionaire [his wealth was estimated at between two and three billion dollars]. The tzaddik Rabbi Ezra Barzel was once in synagogue for a prayer service at the same time as this wealthy man, and he told me that he was surrounded by four armed guards at all times. Why? Because he was constantly afraid for his life, fearful that people would attack him for his money. 'Thank G-d,' Rabbi Ezra said, 'I'm so much happier than this man. I don't need anyone to protect me! I don't require armed guards all around me. Thanks to him, I learned just how happy I am. In short, the wealthy lead a difficult life.'"

What Remained of His Billions?

In the end, what happened to this respected, wealthy man?

He died in great terror (although it's unnecessary to go into the details of what happened, we'll briefly recount it for the lesson that it contains). A fire broke out in this man's home, and he found himself trapped in a room, his only contact with others being through the telephone. His wife also spoke to him by telephone, asking him to open the door to the room in which he found himself, "because the fire will soon reach you, and you'll be burned." Using the intercom system in his home, the police also tried to convince him to leave, but he refused. He was afraid that these conversations were all part of a trick by armed robbers, who may have even been dressed as policemen, to lure him out of his home. That is how he died, having succumbed to smoke inhalation. What remained of his billions? Nothing, absolutely nothing. On the other hand, what he had actually given to tzeddakah, thank G-d, remained with him for eternity. The remainder of his billions? Several non-Jewish trustees came and took control of the majority of his money and possessions.

On several occasions, the maggid Rabbi Reuven recounted what he had heard from the gaon Rabbi Yaakov Galinsky Shlita.

In his youth, Rabbi Yaakov had been jailed by the Bolsheviks, and he once found himself in prison with a very wealthy man. One day, another wealthy man was imprisoned with them, when he suddenly opened his mouth and told the young Rabbi Yaakov a story with tears in his eyes.

"We are here in prison, suffering greatly because of the Bolsheviks. Know that there are two people in this world that I will not forgive – I will never forgive them, neither in this world nor in the World to Come!"

"Who are they?" the young Rabbi Yaakov asked.

"The Rav of Kovno [the gaon Rabbi Avraham Shapira, author of Devar Avraham], and the Rav of Ponevezh," was his surprising response.

"But what did they do to you? What are you talking about?" he said in astonishment. "What did these rabbis do to you to make you speak about them with such resentment?"

"I'll tell you what they did. They usually came to ask me for money to save their yeshivot. And how did they ask me? As is customary when visiting the wealthy, they spoke to me politely and calmly, asking me to help them save their yeshivot. I actually did give them money, but how much did I give them? Did I offer enormous sums? No! I gave them a few cents, mere crumbs from my treasures."

"So why do you resent them so much?" asked the young Rabbi Yaakov.

"Why do I resent them? Because they didn't force me to give more! Look at what's happening today with my money! I'm here in prison while the Bolsheviks have gotten away with all I have. They've left me with nothing, absolutely nothing!"

"But what could they do? Was it their fault?"

"Why didn't they come to see me with guns in hand, saying: 'Give us money, or else!'? If they had done that, they would have at least saved my money by forcefully taking it from me. Some of it would have remained, and it could have at least served as my defender in the World to Come!"

And with that, the wealthy man burst into tears.

This is the image of a person whose heart is broken after seeing with his own eyes that nothing remains of his money. Are you listening? In fact there are two types of guns: One type protects life and property, such as the guns carried by the security guards who surrounded the wealthy man in synagogue. Another type is for the Jew who cried out in prison, asking why they didn't come with guns to take his money for tzeddakah.

It is as we have said: "Of all that You give me, I will surely give You the tenth" – the ma'aser is mine, but what about the rest? It is not really mine. The money that I give to tzeddakah – that's mine for all eternity.

## *In the Footsteps of our Fathers*

### *Extras Lead to Worries*

It is written, “If G-d...gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear” (Bereshith 28:20).

Our father Jacob revealed to his descendants how to serve G-d: Everyone must be satisfied with what G-d has given him, and he should rejoice in it, even if it consists of only “bread to eat and clothes to wear.” Our teacher, the author of *Chovot HaLevavot*, explains and develops this concept in the fifth chapter (Shaar Habechina) of his book. There he writes, “For such is the request that the righteous make of G-d. They do not wish for unnecessary things. They desire only what is necessary, things that are essential in the life of man. We are well aware that the thirst for wealth is the source of numerous problems. Hence every G-d-fearing person should be satisfied with his lot, make do with little, not covet luxuries, and be joyful because of his fear of G-d.”

It is said that a certain philosopher, a wise man from among the nations, was very poor. One day a king gave him a substantial amount of money in order to alleviate his suffering. Yet on the following day, early in the morning, the philosopher went with all his newfound wealth to see the king, to whom he declared: “Please take back the money that you offered me. I do not want it.” Stunned, the king exclaimed: “But why are you rejecting my gift?” The philosopher replied, “Sire, I have always led a peaceful and tranquil existence, for I have never been greedy for money. Rather, I am content with the basics. All that I possessed was more than enough, and I used my understanding to explain and delve into the wisdom of Creation, for ‘Great are the deeds of Hashem’ [Tehillim 111:2]. Yet after receiving your gift yesterday, I was worried and concerned because I did not know how to invest it: Should I acquire goods, entrust it to a faithful man, or purchase property? I could no longer sleep, and my heart was restless. I was inundated by a flood of thoughts and countless worries. I cannot continue like this, which is why I prefer to return the money to you.”

In his book *Da’at Torah* (Parsha Beha’alotcha), the gaon Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz recounts that following this exchange, the philosopher resumed his previous life of grinding poverty. He then adds, “Each time that philosophers from among the nations taste the pleasures of wisdom, they renounce all the pleasures of this world and separate themselves from everything that disrupts a life of reflection. Yet that is not the goal of our holy Torah, which does not aim at asceticism.”

In fact our Sages affirm, “As long as this bandage [the holy Torah] is on your wound, you can eat and drink at will, and bathe in hot or cold water without fear” (Kiddushin 30b).

Everything must be done in the smallest measure possible, along the lines of “bread to eat and clothes to wear.”

### *Happy in His Poverty*

It is said that Rabbi Yaakov Aryeh of Radzymin lived in a state of extreme poverty when he served as the Rav of Ritchevil. He was so poor that he could not even purchase a hat, and he covered his head with a cabbage leaf, as the poorest of peasants would do. Nevertheless, he was content with his lot.

One day a family member encountered the Rav as he was outside walking calmly and happily, his head covered with a cabbage leaf. Curious, he asked the Rav: “Aren’t you ashamed of your poverty?”

Surprised by the question, the Rav responded: “Why should I be ashamed? I didn’t steal it from someone.”

## *In the Light of the Parsha*

### *He Endured for Over Sixty Years*

It is written, “Jacob departed from Beersheba and went towards Haran” (Bereshith 28:10).

I heard the following explanation on this verse from our teacher Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, the Rav of Jerusalem. He asked why the description, “the perfection of the Patriarchs” is applied to Jacob, rather than to our father Abraham, the only one to have overcome ten trials.

He responds by saying that Jacob had to confront a trial that was even more difficult than all those faced by Abraham. Which trial was that? Having to grow up with the wicked Esav and live by his side for 63 years. This was a daily, constant trial! It was all the more difficult because their father Isaac, the tzaddik of the generation, loved Esav, which could have led Jacob into believing that his brother’s path was the one to follow. Nevertheless, Jacob did not allow himself to be led astray, but maintained himself in the path of truth.

As for Abraham, he experienced short-term trials, trials that he had to overcome only once. This is why Jacob is described as “the perfection of the Patriarchs.”

Thus Rav Sonnenfeld teaches us that Jacob endured a very great trial by living with Esav for so long in Beersheba. Nevertheless, that trial was but an apprenticeship for what lay ahead: Living with Lavan the Aramean without being influenced by his conduct.

The expression, “Jacob departed from Beersheba” tells us by allusion that because he had left Beersheba – where he trained himself not to be influenced by Esav – he then “went towards Haran.” That is, the perfection of the Patriarchs was ready to travel to Haran and live with Lavan the Aramean, where he would start a family that would establish the House of Israel.

## *Guard Your Tongue*

### *It Makes No Difference*

Know that in regards to the prohibition against gossip, it makes no difference whether the listener is a man or woman, a relative or a stranger. Even upon hearing it from another person, if he speaks negatively about his father or mother even to defend their honor, it is also considered gossip.

### Prayer

It is written, “And he encountered the place and spent the night there” (Bereshith 28:11).

Here the term *vayifga* (translated as “And he encountered”) signifies prayer. That being the case, why does the text not simply state: “And he prayed”? Why instead does it use the term *vayifga*, which in general means to harm?

Rabbi David of Lelov responds by stating that the Torah is teaching us that when we pray and address our requests to G-d, we must adopt the approach of a child beseeching his father. The more a child wants something, the more he will insist upon it from his father, to the point that he will truly irritate him. Seeing the extent of his child’s pleading, the father will in turn answer his request.

In similar fashion, Jews must pray to G-d with such intensity and persistence that we will become like a weight to our merciful Father. In order to convey this lesson, the Torah chose to use the term *vayifga* for prayer, which means to harm.

### Not a Slave

It is written, “I will work for you for seven years, for Rachel your younger daughter” (Bereshith 29:18).

“Seven years” – not six – to prevent Lavan from attempting to give him the status of a Hebrew slave, for which the rule is: “he shall work for six years, and in the seventh he shall go free, for no charge. ... If his master gives him a woman, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out by himself” (Shemot 21:2-4).

As Rabbi Shalom HaCohen of Zarziss in Tunisia writes in his book *Nahar Shalom*, “Jacob was afraid of proposing to Lavan that he work for him for six years, since he [Lavan] would have taken advantage of this by applying the rule of the Hebrew slave to him [Jacob]. Since Jacob wanted to serve Lavan in exchange for his younger daughter Rachel, he asked if he could serve him for seven years, knowing that Lavan would not have agreed to a lesser period of six years.

### Have I Transgressed?

It is written, “Give me children, or else I will die!” (Bereshith 30:1).

In his book *Chomat Anach*, the Chida gives a wonderful explanation for this discussion between Jacob and Rachel:

When Rachel saw that she was barren, she thought that it was because Jacob had transgressed the prohibition against marrying two sisters. This is the meaning of the phrase, “Rachel envied her sister” (ibid.). In reality, Rachel’s *kiddushim* had occurred prior to those of her sister, but in the course of events the situation was reversed and Leah became permitted to Jacob, whereas Rachel would have become forbidden to him.

Rachel therefore said to Jacob: “Give me children” – I trusted you, thinking that you would act according to the *halachah*. Yet now I see that our marriage may be prohibited. Therefore pray that G-d gives us children, for in this way I will know that our bond is not tainted by any sin.

Thus “Jacob’s anger flared up at Rachel” (v.2), for she had suspected him of sinning by marrying two sisters. He said to her, “Am I in G-d’s place?” (ibid.), which is to say: “Have I transgressed, G-d forbid, a divine prohibition? It’s obvious that I acted according to the word of Hashem!”

### Allusions

It is written, “And Jacob said when he saw them...” (Bereshith 32:3).

The author of *Ahavat Chaim* finds an extraordinary allusion in the phrase *Vayomer Yaakov ka’asher ra’am* (“And Jacob said when he saw them”): The initials of these words form the verb *vayakirem* (“and he recognized them”). This means that Jacob recognized the angels who appeared to him in a dream, ascending and descending a ladder.

Furthermore, the letters forming the term *ra’am* (*resh*, *aleph*, *mem*) are the initials of the angels’ names: Raphael, Uriel, and Michael.

Likewise, the letters forming the name of the place (*Machanayim*) are the initials of the phrase *Meotam chayalim natal Yaakov malachim* (“from these soldiers, Jacob made angels”).

### Dreams and Visions

It is written, “And he dreamed, and behold – a ladder was set earthward and its top reached to heaven” (Bereshith 28:12).

It may be asked: How is it that Jacob, the holy man, the perfection of the Patriarchs, only had a vision [of Hashem] in a dream, even in such a holy place?

The reason is that Jacob was not yet married at the time, and because Isaac was still alive. It is true that we find him subsequently saying, “I saw in a dream” [Bereshith 31:10], even when he was already married. Yet that was because of the inferiority of the place, as well as because Isaac was still alive. So when he came into the Holy Land with all the tribes, with “the foundation of the house, the mother of the children rejoicing,” we read: “G-d spoke to Israel in visions of the night” [Bereshith 46:2] – not “dreams,” but “visions.” – *Zohar I:149b*

## Men of Faith

### A Double Blessing

The following story was recounted by a certain Mrs. Ohayon to Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita. Mrs. Ohayon’s mother had several children who died at a very young age. When her third son was born, she and her husband went to pray by the grave of Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol Zatzal, where they made a vow: If their son would live, they would cut his hair upon his third birthday by the *tzaddik’s* grave, as well as organizing a great meal of thanksgiving.

Their third son in fact lived, but when he reached the age of three, his parents had already forgotten the vow they made by the grave of the *tzaddik*. Then one morning, there came a sudden knock at the door. Standing at the entrance was Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan (the grandson of Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol), who asked if he was at the home of Mrs. Moyal. He was told that he was.

“My grandfather,” he said, “appeared to me in a dream last night and asked me to come here, for you vowed to cut your son’s hair by the grave of my grandfather, which you have apparently forgotten about. He therefore wants you to come and honor your vow today.”

The Rav then repeated, “This son will live, he will live...”

Having remembered their promise, the boy’s family traveled to the grave of Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol. There they carried out the “cutting of the hair” ceremony for the boy, who benefited from the blessing of the *tzaddik* during his entire life.

The blessing of Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol, as well as the blessing of Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan (who had repeated, “he will live”), had a definite effect on their third son, as well as on their other family members, who all lived in good health.