

PARSHA
VAYISHLACH

DECEMBER 6TH 2014
KISLEV 14TH 5775

573



THE TORAH LEARNING OF JACOB IN THE HOUSE OF LAVAN

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "I have sojourned with Lavan and I have lingered until now" (Bereshith 32:5).

Midrash Pliyah recounts that during his stay with Lavan, Jacob observed Shabbat. This seems like a surprising remark, since we already know that Jacob continued to observe all the mitzvot while there. In fact Jacob used the expression, "I have sojourned" (garti, which has a numerical value of 613) to inform Esav that he continued to observe all the mitzvot while living with Lavan. That being the case, why does this midrash specify that he observed Shabbat, as opposed to the other mitzvot? Besides, is the concept of Shabbat not included in the rest of the mitzvot?

As we know, Jacob's primary characteristic was Torah learning. In fact we read that Jacob "was an upright man, abiding in tents" (Bereshith 25:27) as well as, "You [G-d] give truth to Jacob" (Micah 7:20) – and the Torah is called "truth." At this point we have a problem: How could Jacob have succeeded in learning Torah during the 20 years that he lived with Lavan? After all, he worked day and night, as he himself told Lavan: "By day scorching heat consumed me, and frost by night; and my sleep drifted from my eyes" (Bereshith 31:40). Hence it's difficult to assert that he could have studied Torah during all those years!

We cannot say that Jacob stole time from his work in order to study, since he said: "You know that I served your father with all my might" (Bereshith 31:6). Our Patriarch Jacob did not steal anything from Lavan, although the latter was an idolater. Indeed, being dishonest with a non-Jew is a very grave matter. The Ben Ish Hai recounts that when a Jew cheats a non-Jew, the latter's guardian angel goes before Hashem and says: "Just as this Jew diminished this non-Jew, likewise I will diminish his mitzvot!" From here we learn that stealing from a non-Jew is a serious offense, one that can lead to a loss in the mitzvot that we have acquired.

In reality, Jacob was very careful not to steal anything while living with Lavan, the result being that he studied Torah as he was working! Even in our days, the great men of Israel are capable of studying Torah while speaking with someone! How much more could Jacob, whose abilities were vast, have done the same by devoting himself to work while simultaneously being absorbed in the study of Torah!

On Shabbat, however, Jacob obviously did not work because he observed this holy day. He therefore took advantage of the day to study Torah with even greater intensity. We even find an allusion to the fact that he observed Shabbat, for this day is called a "time," as it is written: "It is a time [et] to act for Hashem" (Tehillim 119:126). Now Jacob said, "I have lingered until now [ata]" (Bereshith 32:5). As such, he delayed the study of Torah until Shabbat, when

he could apply himself even more, even completing what he could not complete during the week. Hence this is how we must understand the statement found in Midrash Pliyah: It is obvious that Jacob observed all the mitzvot while living with Lavan. However the midrash stresses Shabbat because Jacob did not work during this holy day, and therefore he could catch up with his Torah learning for the entire week. Hence the mitzvah of Shabbat was that much more essential to our Patriarch Jacob, and the midrash underlines that he observed it.

Furthermore, we know that G-d gave the Children of Israel two gifts – the first being Shabbat and the second being the study of Torah – and each gift has its particular aspects. Although Shabbat corresponds to the World to Come (being a foretaste of it), Jacob experienced this foretaste both during Shabbat and while learning Torah. Despite the fact that Jacob's Torah study was accompanied by hardship and great effort during his sojourn with Lavan, it was the only thing that provided him with a foretaste of the World to Come.

This midrash teaches us that a person who pays special attention to a particular mitzvah throughout his life is considered to have observed the Torah in its entirety. Although Jacob observed the entire Torah, the midrash mentions only his respect for Shabbat in order to teach us that this mitzvah, having been perfectly fulfilled, is equivalent to the entire Torah. Hence the midrash did not need to mention that Jacob also continued to observe every other mitzvah.

Along the same lines, our Sages tell us of a man who studied tractate Chagigah throughout his entire life. Upon his death, a woman wrapped in tzitzit appeared and exclaimed: "Come and eulogize this man!" Following his eulogy and burial, the woman disappeared, at which point everyone realized that she was the embodiment of tractate Chagigah, and that she had appeared because the deceased had studied it throughout this life. A single mitzvah that is perfectly fulfilled is therefore extremely important!

Finally, let us add a few remarks on the value of learning Torah during Shabbat. The Chafetz Chaim affirms that "one hour of learning Torah during Shabbat is equivalent to one thousand hours of learning during the week." What does this mean? In reality, one thousand days for us is but a single day for Hashem, as it is written: "A thousand years in Your eyes are but a day that has passed" (Tehillim 90:4). Likewise, what we call "one thousand hours" is but one hour in G-d's eyes. Now Shabbat is a snippet of the World to Come, which is why Hashem considers our one hour of learning on Shabbat according to His measure of time. The result is that "one hour of learning Torah during Shabbat is equivalent to one thousand hours of learning during the week."

Publication of
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Under the Direction of
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Respect for Torah

A row of somber-looking soldiers preceded the Israeli delegation. The members of this delegation were thoroughly searched, and the tension was palpable. It wasn't every day that such individuals would enter the official residence of the president of a South American country, the presidential palace, where this story took place. This particular president was known for the cruelty with which he treated his own citizens, as well as for his hostility toward Jews. Not a day passed without people being sent to prison for no reason, and not a week went by without innocent citizens disappearing. Whoever dared show the slightest sign that could be construed as a lack of respect for the president or his secret police, or more, to have the audacity to contest them, was likely to be killed. Fear and terror reigned in this nation, and the presidential palace represented, more than anything else, the power of the government.

Despite all this, the Jewish delegation was prepared to meet with "His Majesty the President." The delegation was comprised of the Israeli ambassador, an interpreter, and numerous others, at the head of which was Rav Mordechai Eliyahu, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel. The entire group was welcomed into the president's office and offered seats before an imposing desk. After the customary greetings, Rav Eliyahu offered the president a gift: A Spanish edition of Ethics of the Fathers. The president quickly leafed through it, politely thanked him, and placed the book on his desk.

Several subjects were discussed during the meeting, and at a certain point the president took out a cigar and began to smoke. He then placed an ashtray on the book.

Upon seeing this, the Rav naturally moved the ashtray off the book and placed it on the table.

Everyone was stunned into silence by the Rav's "audacity." The Israeli ambassador became as white as a sheet, while everyone else in the delegation was wringing their hands out of nervousness. The presidential guards were already preparing themselves for the order to expulse them.

As for the president himself, he didn't say anything. Instead, he simply placed the ashtray on the book for a second time.

"Ask the president to move the ashtray. We don't put such an object on a holy book!" the Rav whispered to the ambassador, who was seated by his side. "That's...that's impossible! We don't tell him such things! He doesn't appreciate such remarks," the ambassador stammered. "Still, tell him not to put the ashtray on the book – it's sacred," Rav Eliyahu stubbornly repeated. The president, easily noticing the whispered exchange, asked the ambassador what the Rav had said. The ambassador mumbled something without giving a clear response, at which point the president asked the interpreter to tell him what was going on. The interpreter was therefore forced to recount what the Rav had said. All while repeating to the interpreter that it wasn't right to place an ashtray on a holy book, the Rav once again moved the ashtray and placed it on the table.

After this explanation, the president didn't dare place the ashtray back on the book. However our story doesn't end there. After this meeting, the president got up, took the Rav by the arm, and accompanied him out of his office. Nobody understood what the president was doing, nor what it meant. Did the president intend on personally escorting the Rav into prison? Or perhaps he wanted to deliver him to the soldiers who were normally stationed outside the presidential palace?

And yet...what was this? Why was a red carpet being laid out before their feet? And why was an honor guard being formed? Who was all this for? Was it just to honor the Rav? It quickly became apparent that the president had ordered the honor guard and red carpet, reserved for heads of state and exceptional dignitaries, in order for his guest to leave in the most dignified way possible.

In fact the president himself accompanied the Rav all the way to the car. He then opened the door for him and bowed his head in bidding him farewell. Just before the Israeli delegation left, the president asked the Rav to meet with him once again before leaving for Israel.

A few days later, that second meeting took place. This time, the president wanted a private discussion with the Rav. Neither political leaders nor Israeli delegates participated – only the president and Rav Eliyahu. They had to manage the intricacies of communicating with one another despite the language barrier. They remained in a room together for some time before departing amicably, and neither man wanted to reveal what had transpired during their meeting.

It was only a few years later that Rav Eliyahu decided to reveal to his grandson what had happened during their face-to-face talk: "When the door closed behind us, and I was still wondering what the goal of this meeting was, and why we were all alone, the president surprised me. This feared man, whose very name made people tremble, got down on his knees and kissed my feet. He then bowed his head and asked me to bless him. Before giving him a blessing, I asked him how he could help the Jewish people. He thought for a moment, and then announced that he could sell oil to Israel at a low price. I then asked him for greater assistance, and he promised me, speaking in general, to respect and be faithful to the Jewish citizens of his country, both their religion and their way of life. Upon hearing this, I placed my hand on his head and gave him a blessing that he should have the merit of being good and doing good for the Jewish people. The president was very moved by this blessing, and we left one another on good terms."

When the Israeli ambassador asked the Rav why he had been honored by a second meeting with the president, who was generally stingy with his time, the Rav simply responded: "It is explicitly stated in the verse, 'Glorify it, and you will be glorified.' If you respect Torah, you will also be respected. I did not merit such an honor as an individual. I was just concerned over a respect for Torah, and the man standing before me was intelligent enough to appreciate it. He then honored the Torah and those who observe it."

Who is Happy with His Lot?

The Kli Yakar asserts that in general, the tzaddikim are content and happy with their lot, feeling that they have everything even if they possess very little. This follows the example of our father Jacob, who said: "Since G-d has been gracious to me, and since I have everything" (Bereshith 33:11). Contrary to this, Esav said: "I have plenty" (v. 9), for the wicked always feel that they are lacking something, even if they have all the gold and silver in the world. They possess a great deal of things, but it is never enough, as the well-known principle states: "If he has 100, he wants to turn them into 200" (Kohelet Rabba 1:32).

Better Here or There?

It is said that Rabbi Yitzchak Schorr Zatzal (the head of the Beit Din in the village of Gvazditch) despised gain, was happy with little, and fled from honor. Although his village was small and poor, he still did not allow himself to be seduced by an offer from the rabbinate of a large and wealthy city in Germany. What happened is the following:

The leaders of the Jewish community from that city came to see Rabbi Schorr, offering him a new position in their community with a very handsome salary. Together they began to go over the numbers, and the Rav showed them that his new salary would be equal to his new expenses. In other words, he would gain nothing over and above what he was now earning in his small village. It was therefore clear that he would be much busier in his new position, but not making a better living.

The leaders of the community therefore said to him, "In that case, we'll offer you an even higher salary so you can benefit from it!" However the Rav replied, "How will I pay for my journey?"

Stunned by this question, the leaders responded: "Do you think that travel expenses are an obstacle when it comes to bringing you to our city? We'll bring you and your family over, and you'll even travel in magnificent carriages! There's no reason to worry."

The Rav then replied, "I am not worried about that journey, but rather about the journey back. In fact who knows whether the community will accept me, or whether I will like the new position? Perhaps I will have to return here, in which case who will pay for my journey? That is why I prefer to stay here, in my tiny village, and make do with what I have."

In Need of Nothing

During one of his classes, the Klausenburg Rebbe (Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam) recounted that a Rav had come to see him after being freed from the Nazis. This Rav said to him, "Rebbe! The disciples to whom you teach Torah, do they possess everything they need, given that they are constantly learning?" The Rebbe replied, "I teach them not to need anything, and as a result they have everything they need."

Rabbi Moshe Aharon Stern, an educator and the mashgiach of the Kamenitz yeshiva, writes in the book Bayit U'Menucha: "I've noticed a strange phenomenon: The more possessions we have, the less we have! For example, try going to the home of a scholar who lives in poverty, and ask him to shelter you. You will see that his home is filled with children, but that his family will gladly welcome a guest and even place the children in another room to accommodate him. Conversely, a man who lives at ease in a home with many rooms will always find some excuse for not having enough space: 'Here is the bedroom, here is the dining room, here is the living room, this room is a library....' By saying this, he will try to convince you that he would have gladly welcomed you into his home. But since he has no place, what can he do?"

A Future Fulfillment

It is written, "I have sojourned with Lavan and I have lingered until now. I have acquired oxen and donkeys, flocks, servants and maidservants, and I am sending to tell my lord to find favor in your eyes" (Bereshith 32:5-6).

On the expression "I have sojourned," Rashi explains: "I did not become an officer or a dignitary, but a stranger. It is not worthwhile for you to hate me on account of your father's blessing, with which he blessed me: 'You will be a master over your brothers' [Bereshith 27:29], for it was not fulfilled in me." Rashi says something similar in regards to the expression, "I have acquired oxen and donkeys," namely: "My father said to me, 'of the dew of the heavens and the fatness of the earth' [ibid. 27:28], but this is neither from the heavens nor from the earth."

We need to understand how this would console Esav. The answer is that Esav believed in Isaac's blessings, and if they had not yet been fulfilled, they would certainly be fulfilled in the future.

It is fitting to cite a statement made by our Sages in the Midrash: "The rabbis maintained that 'oxen' is an allusion to the one anointed for battle [the Kohen Gadol, who accompanies the army out to war], as it says: 'His firstling ox, majesty is his' [Devarim 33:17]; 'donkey' refers to king Mashiach, for of him it says: 'A humble man, riding upon a donkey' [Zechariah 9:9]; 'flocks' refers to Israel, as it says: 'Now you are My sheep, the sheep of My pasture' [Ezekiel 34:31]" (Bereshith Rabba 75:6).

We need to understand what Jacob meant to tell Esav by this, and how it could enable Jacob to find favor in his eyes. Jacob sent a message to Esav, telling him that Isaac's blessings had not been fulfilled. If Esav had replied, "Your father Isaac blessed you, and those blessings were certainly not in vain," Jacob could have countered that the blessings would definitely be fulfilled after the coming of Mashiach. That is why he said, "the ox is the one anointed for battle." Our Sages state that this refers to Mashiach ben Yosef, while the donkey refers to king Mashiach. As for Esav, he didn't believe any of this, for it is written that when Esav sold the right of the firstborn, he denied the resurrection of the dead (Bereshith Rabba 63:14). Hence Jacob told Esav, "You don't have any reason to hate me because of the blessings, which will be fulfilled in a time that you don't even believe in."

Guard Your Tongue

Major Damage

There is no difference in terms of rechilut [talebearing] when it comes to a man or a woman, an adult or a youngster. Some people fall into this trap, for when they see two children fighting, they will go and inform the parents of the beaten child. At that point major damage will usually result, for the father of that child will become enraged, and he will go and punish the other child. A regrettable dispute will then erupt between the parents.

– Chafetz Chaim

The Sad Implication

It is written, “Jacob became very frightened, and it distressed him” (Bereshith 32:8).

Why the redundant expression (“frightened...distressed”) to describe Jacob’s fear before Esav his brother?

The Kli Yakar answers that when Jacob heard that his brother Esav was coming to meet him along with 400 warriors, other than the fact that Jacob was frightened of the approaching confrontation, he was distressed by the sad implication that his father Isaac had died. In fact before Jacob fled to Haran, Esav had said: “When the days of mourning for my father are at hand, I will kill my brother Jacob” (Bereshith 27:41). Hence Jacob believed that since Esav was now coming kill him, it meant that his father was no longer alive.

The result of this sad news “distressed him” – for Jacob was anguished over the passing of his father.

Jacob’s Gift

It is written, “He took, from what had come into his hand, a gift for Esav his brother” (Bereshith 32:14).

Since Jacob wanted to please his brother by sending him this fine gift, it was preferable for him to choose the best among his flocks, herds, and camels. That being the case, why did he take “from what had come into his hand”?

A marvelous response to this question is found in the book Kohelet Yitzchak. In it, Rabbi Moshe Shimon HaCohen of Vilna responds in accordance with the words of the Darchei Moshe (Yoreh Deah 35): “I have found in the name of Rabbi Yehudah Chassid that he had to pass his hand over a live animal. If it yielded beneath his hand, it was certainly kosher. Otherwise, it was treif. This indication comes from, ‘A broken and contrite heart, O G-d, You will not despise’ [Tehillim 51:19].”

This is what the verse in question is saying: “From what had come into his hand” – these are the animals that remained firm beneath his hand and did not yield.

Those which yielded beneath his hand and lay down, Jacob kept for himself, for it indicated that they were kosher. As for those which did not yield, he sent them to Esav as a gift.

A Gift that Brought Peace

It is written, “He took, from what had come into his hand, a gift for Esav his brother” (Bereshith 32:14).

In his book Yismach Israel, the gaon Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer explains why Jacob sent his brother Esav such a great gift: Two hundred she-goats, twenty he-goats, etc. He writes, “It is because Esav certainly borrowed the services of these 400 men or told them: ‘We shall kill Jacob, take his money, and share it among ourselves.’”

It would therefore have been difficult for Esav to make peace with Jacob, since he had to pay these 400 men. Yet when Esav received Jacob’s gift, he could pay them with it. As such, it was a gift that brought peace.

Satisfying His Eyes

It is written, “Leave a space between one drove and another” (Bereshith 32:17).

According to Rashi, Jacob left a space between his droves “in order to satisfy the eyes of the wicked man.” From here (as mentioned in the book Pirchei Shoshana) the Chafetz Chaim derived a great principle: The Torah

teaches us that when we need to bribe a non-Jew – in order to annul a decree of something of the sort – if we are using money, we should give it to him in smaller amounts so as to satisfy his eyes. Why so? Because if we give it to him in larger amounts, it will not have the same effect as a greater number of smaller amounts.

In Precise Terms

It is written, “Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav. For I fear him, lest he come and strike me down, the mother upon the children” (Bereshith 32:12).

Here too is a lesson: That in praying, a man should state what he requires in precise terms. Thus Jacob began: “Rescue me, please.” And since it might be said that he had already been rescued from the hand of Lavan, he added: “from the hand of my brother.” And since, again, the term “brother” covers all relatives, he added “from the hand of Esav.”

And yet again, lest it be suggested that he did not need to be rescued, he continued: “For I fear him, lest he come and strike me down, the mother upon the children.” All this in order that there should be no possibility of misunderstanding.

– Zohar I:169a

Men of Faith

Heaven Has Sent Me

On Sunday, Adar 10, 5755, Rabbi David Hanania Pinto served as the Sandak at a Brit Milah in the home of Rav David Cohen, a prominent member of the community.

During the reception following the circumcision, one of the guests, a man by the name of Mr. Bensoussan, recounted the story of his journey to Mogador during the previous Hilloula of Rabbi Haim Pinto. At the time, he was suffering from serious and intense pain in his legs, as well as other health problems that prevented him from walking on his own. As a result, he needed the help of two people in order to walk about.

Having arrived at his destination, he decided to sleep near the grave of the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto, for perhaps G-d would, by the merit of the Rav’s holiness, send him a complete healing. Hence that’s precisely what he did – he slept next to the tzaddik’s grave.

During the night, he had a dream in which the tzaddik personally came and healed his legs. The Rav said to him, “By the merit of your faith in Hashem and the tzaddikim, know that Heaven has sent me to heal you. Now you can get up, for you are no longer suffering. You can return to France without any help. Wake up!”

He immediately awoke and began to reflect upon his dream, thinking: “Maybe it’s just a dream. I slept next to the grave of the tzaddik in the hope of being healed by his merit, which is why I dreamed about it. It was nothing but a dream.”

Yet suddenly he felt his legs moving by themselves. He tried to get up without any help and...a miracle occurred! He was able to get up by himself – and it was all witnessed by his friends!

Upon seeing this, his stunned friends exclaimed: “Mr. Bensoussan, what happened to you? You’ve been mocking us until now, claiming that your legs are hurting and that you can’t walk. Were you just pretending to be disabled?” Overcome with strong emotion, he shared the details of his dream to them, a dream that was both frightening and wonderful. At that point, joy erupted among everything present, and a great sanctification of Hashem’s Name took place by the grave of Rabbi Haim Pinto, may his merit protect us, on his Hilloula.