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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Finding in the Dark

“And he encountered the place...” (28:11)

In Parshat Vayetze, Yaakov Avinu leaves the holiness and security of his father Yitzchak’s home and steps out into the uncertainty of exile; alone, without possessions, without protection.

The Torah says, “*Vayifga bamakom – and he encountered the place.*” Chazal teach that this word *vayifga* implies prayer — an encounter not by arrangement, a *chance* encounter so to speak. Yaakov does not plan to find Hashem; it’s as though he stumbles upon the Divine.

This is the essence of *galut* — of exile. In that darkness, when the familiar secure structures of holiness fall away and we don’t “see” Hashem through the clear light of prophecy or miracles. Instead, we *stumble upon* Him — in the loneliness, in the confusion, in the pain. It is precisely there, in the hiddenness, that the deepest revelation awaits us.

For a pillow, Yaakov takes stones — separate and unyielding. Yet by morning, they have become *one* stone. From the fragmented world of exile emerges unity. This merging of the stones represents the inner work of the Jewish People in exile: to gather the scattered sparks of holiness and reveal, in a world that appears unreparable, beyond fixing - the oneness of the Creator.

And Yaakov dreams: “*Sulam mutzav artza...A ladder standing on the earth with its top reaching heaven.*” On this ladder there are Angels ascending and descending. Heaven and earth — two opposites — are connected through this ladder. The Torah says that the angels were ascending and descending ‘*bo*’. *Bo* can mean “on it”, on the ladder, or “in him” – in Yaakov. That ladder, says the Zohar, is the soul of Yaakov, the bridge between the upper and lower worlds. In every generation, that ladder exists — that ladder is the Jew who, even in a dark world, lives a life that connects earth to heaven.

Today, as our people once again face fear and uncertainty — with threats, divisions, and moral confusion — the vision of Yaakov Avinu speaks directly to us. The world feels

fragmented, the night long. But each of us holds a stone. Each mitzvah, each word of prayer, each act of kindness — these are our stones. When we dedicate them to holiness, they unite and become one foundation, the foundation of the *Beit HaMikdash* itself.

Yaakov awoke and said “*Achen yesh Hashem bamakom hazeh va'anochi lo yada'ti* — *Truly, G-d is in this place, and I did not know.*” This is the voice of discovery after darkness — the awareness that even in confusion, in exile, in the darkest night, the *Shechinah* never departs. You can stumble across Hashem in the darkest places.

May we, like Yaakov Avinu, awaken to find that the very stones of our struggle have become the foundation of holiness — and that even in the most hidden moments, *Hashem is in this place.*

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Fleeing from Esav, Yaakov leaves Be'er Sheva and sets out for Charan, the home of his mother's family. After a 14-year stint in the Torah Academy of Shem and Ever, Yaakov resumes his journey and comes to Mount Moriah, the place where his father Yitzchak was brought as an offering, and the future site of the *Beit Hamikdash*. He sleeps there and dreams of angels going up and down a ladder between Heaven and earth. G-d promises him a) the Land of Israel, b) that he will found a great nation, and c) that he will enjoy Divine protection. Yaakov wakes and vows to build an altar there and tithe all that he will receive. Then he travels to Charan and meets his cousin Rachel at the well. He arranges with her father, Lavan, to work seven years for her hand in marriage, but Lavan fools Yaakov, substituting Rachel's older sister, Leah.

Yaakov commits himself to work another seven years in order to marry Rachel as well. Leah bears four sons: Reuven, Shimon, Levi and Yehuda, the first Tribes of Israel. Rachel is barren and, in an attempt to give Yaakov children, she gives her handmaiden Bilhah to Yaakov as a wife. Bilhah bears Dan and Naftali. Leah, too, gives Yaakov her handmaiden, Zilpah, who bears Gad and Asher. Leah then bears Yissachar, Zevulun, and a daughter, Dina. G-d finally blesses Rachel with a son, Yosef.

Yaakov decides to leave Lavan, but Lavan, aware of the wealth Yaakov has made for him, is reluctant to let him go, and concludes a contract of employment with him. Lavan tries to swindle Yaakov, but Yaakov becomes extremely wealthy. After six years, aware that Lavan has become dangerously resentful of his wealth, Yaakov flees with his family and all his possessions. Lavan pursues but is warned by G-d not to harm them. Yaakov and Lavan agree to a covenant and Lavan returns home. Yaakov continues on his way to face his brother Esav.

Questions

1. When Yaakov traveled to Charan, the Torah stresses that he departed from Be'er Sheva. Why?
2. On the night of his dream, Yaakov did something he hadn't done in 14 years. What?
3. G-d compressed the entire Land of Israel underneath the sleeping Yaakov. What did this symbolize?
4. Yaakov said "I will return with *shalom*." What did he mean by "*shalom*"?
5. Why did Yaakov rebuke the shepherds?
6. Why did Rachel, and not her brothers, tend her father's sheep?
7. Why did Yaakov cry when he met Rachel?
8. Why did Lavan run to greet Yaakov?
9. Why were Leah's eyes tender?
10. How old was Yaakov when he married?
11. What did Rachel find enviable about Leah?
12. Who was Yaakov's fifth son?
13. Who was Leah's handmaiden? Was she older or younger than Rachel's handmaiden?
14. How do you say *dudaim* in Arabic?
15. "*G-d remembered Rachel*" (30:22). What did He remember?
16. What does "Yosef" mean? Why was he named that?
17. G-d forbade Lavan to speak to Yaakov "*neither of good nor of bad*." Why didn't G-d want Lavan to speak of good?
18. Where are there two Aramaic words in this week's parsha?
19. Who was Bilhah's father? Who was Zilpah's father?
20. Who escorted Yaakov into *Eretz Yisrael*?

Answers

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 28:10 - The departure of a righteous person leaves a noticeable void in that place.
2. 28:11 - Sleep at night lying down.
3. 28:13 - That the Land would be easy for his descendants to conquer.
4. 28:21 - Completely without sin.
5. 29:7 - He thought they were loafing, stopping work early in the day.
6. 30:27 - Her brothers weren't born yet.
7. 29:11 - He saw prophetically that they would not be buried together; or because he was penniless (and had nothing to give in order to marry her).
8. 29:13 - He thought Yaakov was carrying money.
9. 29:17 - She cried continually because she thought she was destined to marry Esav.
10. 29:21 - Eighty-four.
11. 30:1 - Leah's good deeds; Rachel thought they were the reason that Leah merited children.
12. 30:5 - Dan.
13. 30:10 - Zilpah. She was younger than Bilhah.
14. 30:14 - Jasmine (*Yasmin*).
15. 30:22 - That Rachel gave Leah the "signs of recognition" that Yaakov had taught her, so that Leah wouldn't be embarrassed.
16. 30:24 - "Yosef" means "He will add." Rachel asked G-d for another son in addition to Yosef.
17. 31:24 - Because the "good" that comes from wicked people is bad for the righteous.
18. 31:41 - *Yagar Sahaduta*, meaning "wall of testimony."
19. 31:50 - Lavan.
20. 32:1 - The angels of *Eretz Yisrael*.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Mevarchim HaChodesh
Blessing the New Month (Part 4)

*“The greatest darkness comes just before dawn –
but most people give up one minute before the light.”*

Ba'al Shem Tov

The opening prayer of Mevarchim HaChodesh concludes: **...A life in which our heartfelt requests will be fulfilled for the good. Amen Selah.**

Rabbeinu Nissim ben Reuven (1290-1376) of Girona, Catalonia, was one of the greatest Halachic authorities in his generation. He authored multiple works on many different facets of Judaism including the Talmud, responsa and philosophy. He is usually referred to simply as RaN – an abbreviation of Rabbeinu Nissim, and till today his commentary on the Talmud is considered a staple for all budding Talmud scholars.

Rabbeinu Nissim questions what the word “*LeTovah* – for the good” adds to our understanding of what we are asking for. His answer is simple but extremely profound: We do not know what is truly good for us and what is not.

Very often, we beseech Hashem for something that we desperately need or want - which is absolutely the correct thing to do, to turn to our Father in Heaven and ask for whatever we want; but being realistic, we must admit that we cannot be objective about what we truly need, no matter how convinced we may be. That thing that we “know” we need might just be to our grave detriment.

What a conundrum! On the one hand, I *need* to ask Hashem for what I want. On the other hand, I don't want to ask for anything that might be bad for me. What is the answer?

The answer, explains Rabbeinu Nissim, is the word “*LeTovah*”!

LeTovah means that I am begging Hashem to fulfill my heart's desires – but only if they will be for my benefit. If what I am asking for is not “*LeTovah*”, then I don't want it.

So often we think something is perfect, exactly what we wanted and prayed for, only to find out that it wasn't good at all. The opposite is true as well: how often do we experience something “negative” that later turns out to be just exactly what we needed?

So, we add the word “*LeTovah*” to our *Tefillah* to remind ourselves that only Hashem knows. Yes, I can want. Yes, I can ask. And, yes, I can cry out. But only Hashem knows whether or not the thing is truly “*LeTovah*”.

Seventy years ago, there was a young woman from Bnei Brak who needed a life-saving operation. The doctors were relatively confident that the operation would be a success but they were also sure that as a consequence of the operation she would never be able to bear children.

The young woman was advised to travel to Yerushalayim, an arduous journey in those days which could take many hours, and seek a blessing from the great Rabbi Yitzchak Ze'ev HaLevi Soloveitchik, known by all as the "Brisker Rav". When she entered the Brisker Rav's home, she told his son why she had come and that she desperately sought his blessing.

The son approached his father and asked to bring the young lady into his study. Completely uncharacteristically, the Brisker Rav told his son, "Tell her to come back tomorrow."

His son was taken aback. The desperate young lady had come all the way from Bnei Brak desperate for a blessing; how could she be told to come back tomorrow?! With no alternative, the young lady stayed in Yerushalayim overnight and returned to the Rabbi's home the next morning, only to be told that she should return later that evening! The Brisker Rav's son was once again taken aback at the seeming insensitivity towards such a vulnerable, virtuous young lady.

When she returned that night, she was the recipient of a beautiful and heartfelt blessing from the Brisker Rav.

Later, the Brisker Rav explained his behavior: when the young lady first appeared, he was very close to completing the study of Tractate *Yevamot*. He wanted her to come for a blessing when he had *finished* the entire Tractate, because the completion of a Tractate is a time of great Heavenly favor.

Thus, what seemed like a lack of sensitivity - asking her to come back the next day - was actually an *abundance* of sensitivity! He wanted to bless her at the most opportune time.

The young lady in question must have been devastated when she first failed to receive a blessing. I imagine she would not describe being told to come back again (and again!) as "*LeTovah*". Yet that is *exactly* what it was. Because, had she received the blessing when she thought she should have received it, the blessing would not have carried the same potency as the blessing that she ultimately received!

To be continued...

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TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

The Introduction and the Conclusion of Birkas Hamazon

In last week's article we discussed the structure of the four blessings of *Birkas HaMazon*. We will now focus on the prefatory *zimun* (invitation) and the concluding series of requests, each one beginning with the word "*HaRachaman*" - "the Merciful One".

When a group consisting of three or more men dine together, one of them invites the other participants to join him in reciting *Birkas HaMazon*. This is known as '*zimun*' is done in order to unite their individual blessings into a single communal one, in line with the dictum "*berov am hadras melech*" — a king's glory is apparent in a multitude of people (*Ritva* to *Berachos* 45a). Moreover, when people call to each other to praise Hashem, the praise is magnified (*Kol Bo* §25). This invitation is even more important when ten men dine together, ten constituting a community for religious purposes, and it conveys more honor to Hashem. The Kabbalists elaborate on the importance of a *zimun* and advise endeavoring to eat in a group of at least three — and ideally ten — in order to obligate oneself to fulfill this Mitzvah (*Ben Ish Chai*, *Pinchas*, citing *Arizal*).

Meiri gives a simpler explanation: the invitation to recite *Birkas HaMazon* reminds and "warns" the diners, who were until now focused on their food, to focus on the sacred words of the blessings (*Berachos* *ibid.*; see also *Yeshuas Daniel* 192:1). This is well understood in light of *Aruch*'s translation of the word *zimun*, "make ready."

It is customary to append to *Birkas HaMazon* a series of requests that begin with "*HaRachaman*" - "the Merciful One". Simply understood, having asked Hashem for continued mercy in general terms in the blessings of *Birkas HaMazon*, it is then appropriate to ask for additional mercy regarding specific matters, which we introduce with the word *HaRachaman* to appeal to Hashem's mercy.

The Chafetz Chaim (*Ki Savo*) explains that *whenever* we complete a Mitzvah, it is a time of favor for prayer. Having completed this all-important Mitzvah of *Birkas HaMazon*, we take the opportunity to ask for all that we need, up to and including the coming of *mashiach*.

After the *HaRachaman* requests, we ask Hashem to bless us with peace because *mashiach* will bring peace to the world, and because all the blessings that Hashem grants us are useful to us only if we can enjoy them peacefully (*Ri ben Yakar*). It later became customary to add a paragraph of verses that begin with the word *Y'ru*. Continuing the theme of *Birkas HaMazon*, these verses praise Hashem's benevolence and express how He can always be trusted to provide for us and take care of us.

Some of the sources cited here were drawn from an extensive article on the topic by R' Shmuel Zlotnik in Alibah D'Hilchasa #33, pg. 42-45.