

At the beginning of this week's *Parashah*, Yaakov prepares to meet Esav for the first time since Esav made up his mind to kill Yaakov. Yaakov hears that Esav is marching toward him with an army of 400 men, and "Yaakov became very frightened" (32:8). Why was Yaakov frightened? Did he not have *Bitachon* / trust in *Hashem*, Who had promised to protect him? Was Yaakov's fear a sin? Many of the classical commentaries--including *Rashi*, *Rambam*, *Ramban*, and *Ibn Ezra*, among others--discuss these questions.

R' Yitzchak Abarbanel *z"l* (1437-1508; Portugal, Spain and Italy) writes: Yaakov's fear of Esav was not due to a weakness in his *Emunah* / faith or his *Bitachon*. Yaakov's fear was like the feeling a brave warrior has before going into battle--he recognizes the reality that he may be killed, but he forges ahead anyway. If one goes into war thinking there is no danger, we would not call him brave! Where is his bravery, if he is oblivious to the danger he is in? If a person does not know the value of money or is so wealthy that money is meaningless to him, would we praise him for his charity? Only one who understands what he is giving up is praiseworthy!

Likewise, continues R' Abarbanel, Yaakov's *Bitachon* was meaningful only because he was afraid of Esav. Had Yaakov not understood what he was up against, his *Bitachon* would have been worthless. Clearly, Yaakov did trust in *Hashem*, for there were many ways he could have saved himself--fleeing, sending a messenger to their father Yitzchak asking him to intervene, etc.--but Yaakov did not do any of those things. Our Sages teach that a Jew should not say, "I hate non-kosher food." Rather, he should say, "It looks delicious, but the Torah prohibited it to me!" Similarly, writes R' Abarbanel, a person should not say, "I am not afraid!" Rather, he should acknowledge his fear, and then he should place his trust in *Hashem*. (*Peirush Al Ha'Torah*)

Shabbat

Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pekudah *z"l* (Spain; early 11th century) writes: There once was a *Chassid* / pious man who traveled to another city to seek his livelihood. There the *Chassid* met an idolator, and he said to the idolator, "How blind and lacking in understanding you are that you worship an idol!" The idolator responded, "And who do you worship?" The *Chassid* answered, "I worship the Creator, Who is capable of everything, Who sustains all, and like Whom there is no other."

"You are a hypocrite!" retorted the idolator. "How so?" asked the *Chassid*. "If what you said is true," answered the idolator, "why must you travel great distances to find your livelihood? Why doesn't G-d sustain you at home?"

The *Chassid* took this message to heart and returned home, confident that *Hashem* is capable of supporting a person without the person wearing himself out excessively. (*Chovot Ha'levavot: Sha'ar Ha'bitachon*)

R' Zvi Elimelech Shapira *z"l* (the *Bnei Yissaschar*; died 1841) elaborates: We read (*Yehoshua* 1:8), "This Book of the Torah is not to leave your mouth. You shall contemplate it day and night in order to observe, to do, all that is written in it. *Az* / For then you will make your ways successful, and *Az* / then you will achieve understanding." And we read also (*Iyov* 3:13), "*Az* / then I would be at rest." Commentaries note that the *Gematria* of "*Az*" (אז) equals 8, and they say that these verses are teaching us how to divide the 24 hours of the day: 8 hours for work ("then you will make your ways successful"), 8 hours for Torah study ("then you will achieve understanding"), and 8 hours for rest, which includes sleeping and all of a person's other physical needs ("then I would be at rest"). Of course, notes the *Bnei Yissaschar*, if one can "sanctify the mundane" by working less and studying Torah more, that is desirable.

He continues: This is the lesson of *Shabbat*. One day a week, we recall that *Hashem* created the world, and we do no work at all. Moreover, we observe the *Mitzvah* of *Techum Shabbat* / not traveling beyond the general area where we began *Shabbat*. In this way, we acknowledge that, as the Creator, *Hashem* can lighten our burden of working if we only accept upon ourselves instead to serve Him more.

(*Derech Pikudecha: Lo Ta'aseh* 24, *Chelek Ha'machashavah* 2)

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“I have been diminished by all the kindnesses . . .” (32:11)

We read (*Devarim* 9:4-5), “Do not say in your heart, when *Hashem* pushes [the Canaanite nations] away from before you, saying, ‘Because of my righteousness did *Hashem* bring me to possess this Land . . .’ Not because of your righteousness and the uprightness of your heart are you coming to possess their Land.” Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi z”l (1210-1263; Spain) writes: This is a commandment that, in general, we should not attribute our success to our own merit. Rather, we should know in our hearts that our success is a kindness from Above and due to His Goodness, as Yaakov Avinu said, “I have been diminished by all the kindnesses”--i.e., I am small compared to all the kindness You have done. (*Sha’arei Teshuvah* 3:29)

R’ Gershon Edelstein z”l (1923-2023; Rosh Yeshiva of the Ponovezh Yeshiva) elaborates: When a person receives kindness from *Hashem*, that obligates him more. One should feel that he is not doing everything that is incumbent upon him. For the kindness he has received, he should be more humble, he should perform more good deeds, and he should have more *Emunah* / faith in G-d. If he does not, he is an ingrate. One must feel “small” compared to all the good *Hashem* does for him. (*Peninei Chizuk*)

The *Midrash Tanna D’vei Eliyahu Zuta* (1:5) teaches: Yaakov is to be praised especially for his *Tzedakah* / acts of charity, as it is written, “I have become small.” This refers to *Tzedakah*, as it is written (*Mishlei* 16:8), “Better a small amount of *Tzedakah* . . .” [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R’ Chaim Abulafia z”l (1669-1744; *Eretz Yisrael* and Izmir, Turkey) writes in the name of R’ Y. Chabiliv z”l (referred to by those who quote him as the “*Chassid*” / “pious one” and “*Kadosh*” / “holy one”; possibly a reference to a 17th century rabbi of Chevron by that name): What led the *Midrash* to conclude that our verse refers to Yaakov’s giving *Tzedakah*? Seemingly, Yaakov is saying the opposite: I have insufficient merits with which to deserve Your kindness!

R’ Chabiliv answers: The *Arizal* teaches that one should not put himself down or minimize his own good deeds in a time of danger. Consistent with this, the author of the *Midrash* was bothered by Yaakov’s seeming to minimize his own merits. Therefore, the *Midrash* reinterpreted the verse as extolling Yaakov’s merits. (*Etz Ha’Chaim: Parashat Vayakhel*)

R’ Chaim Yosef David Azulai z”l (1724-1806; *Eretz Yisrael* and Italy) adds: Nevertheless, Yaakov did not want to appear to have served *Hashem* for the sake of receiving reward. Therefore, he used an ambiguous expression that both alluded to the diminishment of his merits because of G-d’s kindness and alluded to his performing the *Mitzvah* of *Tzedakah*.

(*Pnei David*, quoted in *Otzrot Ha’Chida*)

“I have been diminished by all the kindnesses and by all the truth that You have done for Your servant; for with my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.” (32:11)

Midrash Rabbah records a dispute regarding the interpretation of Yaakov’s statement, “I have been diminished.” Rabbi Abba bar Kahana says, “I am unworthy.” Rabbi Levi says, “I am worthy, but I have been diminished.” [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R’ Meir Popperos Katz z”l (1624-1662; Poland and *Eretz Yisrael*; arranger of the teachings of the *Arizal* and a prolific author in his own right) writes: It is well established that a person is born so that he can earn a share in *Olam Ha’ba*. *Hashem* could have left all of the souls in Heaven and let them bask in His light without having earned that reward. However, a person generally enjoys what he has earned more than he enjoys a handout--one even feels shame when he must receive something for nothing--so *Hashem* requires us to toil for our *Olam Ha’ba*.

R’ Katz continues: My teacher R’ Zerachiah Guta z”l (Turkey, Egypt, and *Eretz Yisrael*; died 1648) explains the verse (*Tehilim* 140:14), “Behold the righteous will give thanks to Your Name; the upright will dwell in Your presence,” in light of this idea. Why will the righteous give thanks to *Hashem*? Because they are able to hold their heads upright, without shame, in His presence!

In this light, as well, we can understand why Yaakov felt small after all the kindness *Hashem* had done for him. However, the sages in the *Midrash* disagree about the extent of those feelings. R’ Katz explains:

Our Sages say that Yosef was taken from Yaakov for 22 years because Yaakov did not honor his parents for the 22 years that he was away from home. In particular, Yaakov’s fulfillment of the *Mitzvah* of honoring parents was deficient compared to Esav’s. Thus, Yaakov said, according to Rabbi Abba bar Kahana in the above *Midrash*, “I am unworthy because of all the kindness”--referring to the kindness that Esav performed for his parents while Yaakov was absent, in addition to all the undeserved kindness that *Hashem* had done for Yaakov.

Rabbi Levi disagrees, however, since Yaakov was honoring his parents by obeying them and going away, as we read (*Bereishit* 28:7), “Yaakov obeyed his father and mother and went to Padan Aram.” Thus Yaakov said, “I am worthy, but I have been diminished”--i.e., I did go away originally to honor my parents, but I stayed away longer than necessary to get married, and I become wealthy through *Hashem*’s kindness, as is evident from the fact that “with my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.” (*Tal Orot*)

In answer to the question of why Yaakov was punished when he was merely obeying his parents by going away, R’ Gedaliah Anemer z”l (1932-2010; *Rosh Yeshiva* of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington and rabbi in Silver Spring, Maryland) explained: Yaakov was not punished. Rather, though he was excused from honoring his parents for 22 years, the fact remains that he was lacking the merit and protection that performing that *Mitzvah* would have given him. (If one is unavoidably prevented from performing a *Mitzvah*, he is excused, but he still does not get credit for performing it.) (Heard from Rabbi Anemer z”l)