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Rabbi Yisroel Reisman – Parshas Vayetzzei 5775

1. This week I would like to talk a little bit about the birth of Yosef HaTzaddik and the idea that is mentioned in Rashi which is actually based on a Posuk that Yosef's birth is Sitno Shel Eisav, is somehow the reverse or the antidote to Eisav. Chazal say that Yaakov was not prepared to return to face Eisav until Yosef was born. That is why in this week's Parsha, the moment Yosef is born Yaakov is prepared to return. Because as Rashi brings down in 30:25 from Ovadiah 1:18 (וְהָיָה בֵּית-יַעֲקֹב אֵשׁ וּבֵית יוֹסֵף לְהַבָּה, וּבֵית עֵשָׂו (לְקַשׁ). That somehow Yosef is the flame that destroys Eisav. What is the relationship between Yosef and Eisav as an antidote one for the other? I would like to share with you an idea which I saw in a beautiful Kuntros Al Hanisim from Reb Yechezkel Weinfeld of Yerushalayim and there he talks about this week's Parsha. I would like to share with you an idea that he says there. This idea is based on a Yesod which it says in the Shla Hakadosh on Parshas Toldos and also Rav Tzadok in the Pri Tzaddik on Parshas Toldos, among others. This Yesod deals with Yitzchok's Beracha. We know that Yitzchok had intended to give a Beracha to Eisav and we wonder was he so off in his understanding of who Eisav was? Did he not understand who Yaakov was?

The Shla Hakadosh writes that Yitzchok's plan was that Eisav and Yaakov would be Shutfim, sort of similar to Yisachar and Zivulan. Yaakov and his descendants would be the (יֵשׁב אֵהָלִים) and Eisav and his descendants would support the Lomdai Torah. That is why Yaakov's Beracha was a purely Gashmiodika Beracha, purely a Beracha for success in the material world. 27:28 (וַיִּתֵּן-לָהֶם, הַאֲלֹהִים, מִשַּׁל הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּמִשְׁמַיַּי הָאָרֶץ--רֹבב דָּגָן, וְתִירָשׁ) We don't find a Beracha in Ruchnios like we do find elsewhere, like for example the Beracha of Moshe Rabbeinu who gave a Beracha as is found in Devarim 33:8 (תְּמַיֵּד וְאַוִּירֵד לְאִישׁ חַסִּידֶךָ) who gave Berachos that had to do with spiritual things. Yitzchok's Beracha was Gashmiod, that was his plan. The plan was Eisav would be the Zevulan and Yaakov would be the Yisacher. The Ribbono Shel Olam wanted that Yaakov should have both. That Yaakov should not only have to be an Oved Hashem when he is (יֵשׁב אֵהָלִים), when he is sitting in the Bais Medrash but part of Klal Yisrael is that we should serve HKB"H successfully even out in the work place. That is last week's Parsha.

Turning to this week's Parsha, Yosef Hatzadik was the example, was the one who was Sitno Shel Eisav. He was the only who was able to be an Eved Hashem, a Tzaddik in both environments. The only one of the Shevatim who had that job in his lifetime to be both the one who sat with Yaakov and Shteiged in his learning as they learned B'chavrusa and also the one who sustains and supports the world. Talk about being out in the workplace, Yosef was in Mitzrayim and there was no kosher food, no frum Yidden. There was nothing. He was there first as an Eved, then as a prisoner, and then as a King. Three episodes of extraordinary tests in being influenced by the world around him and therefore, it is fair to say that Yosef succeeded in doing the two, having the two together. That was Yosef's job. So we find that the Shevatim had complaints to Yosef. As Rashi explains in 37:2 (מִתְקַן) that Yosef dressed in a way that was attractive. That is not appropriate for a (יֵשׁב אֵהָלִים). A (יֵשׁב אֵהָלִים) should not be busy with his hair. However, Yosef understood that there is a dual role.

On the one hand he understood that he had to be a Talmid Chochom and at the same time he had to be successful in the outside world.

When the Shevatim come down, Yosef recognizes them and he still does not know are they accepting of his role as a member of the Shevatim. Are they accepting of his role as somebody who can bridge both worlds. He goes and brings in front of them meat and as the Posuk says in 43:16 (וַיִּבְרַח עֶבֶד הַיֵּהוָה (פרע להן בית השחיטה) which the Gemara in Maseches Chullin 91a (5 lines from the bottom) interprets (פרע להן בית השחיטה). He revealed to them not only the Bais Hashchita but (טול גיד הנשה בפניהם). He removed the Gid Hanashe in front of them. He could have done it earlier and they would have seen that the Gid Hanashe is removed. But the Gid Hanashe is an example of Yaakov's supremacy over Eisav and he wanted to be Mirameiz to them this idea. Yosef Sitno Shel Eisav. Yosef is the antidote to Eisav as he is someone who can bridge the two worlds. With this he says we have a new meaning to Yosef's words to the Shevatim at the end of Parshas Vayechi. As it says in 50:20 (וְאַתֶּם, הַשְּׂבָתִים עָלַי רָעָה; אֶל רַיִם, הַשְּׂבָה לְטָבָה) Simply, you thought you were going to do bad to me by sending me to Mitzrayim, but HKB"H understood that it was good.

A deeper meaning. (וְאַתֶּם, הַשְּׂבָתִים עָלַי רָעָה) You thought that my goal to be someone who is successful in the marketplace as well as in the Bais Medrash is bad, (אֶל רַיִם, הַשְּׂבָה לְטָבָה) Hashem understands that it is good. And so, this is the idea of Yosef Sitno Shel Eisav.

I will add to what he writes that the two dreams of Yosef coming up in Parshas Vayeishev match this idea because he has two dreams. When Pharaoh has two dreams we say that the duplication of the dream means that it is immediate. In the case of Yosef he had two dreams; however, it was not immediate. He was 17 and the dreams wouldn't be fulfilled until 22 years later. This is because it wasn't a repetition of one dream it was two dreams.

In one dream everyone was bowing to his wheat, he was serving as the Mashbir Es Ha'aretz, the one who sustains the world the role as a Frum Ehrliche Yid out in the world, in which the Shevatim bowed to him. And one that is found in 37:9 (הַשְּׂמֵשׁ וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְאֶהַד עֶשֶׂר פּוֹכְבִים, מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לִי) is bowing to him, something spiritual. The two dreams are the dual roles of Yosef. And so, Yosef is that example. The example of somebody who can fulfill that role of doing both, doing both well, and remaining Yosef Hatzaddik. That is Sitno Shel Eisav. If we want to succeed in our battle against Eisav the Bais Medrash is the primary place. But when we go out to work we have to succeed there too. We have to be successful in staying Frum, Ehrliche Yidden, Talmidai Chachamim out in the workplace. This is one idea regarding Yosef being Sitno Shel Eisav.

Shma Koleinu YUHSB 5774 Parshat Vayetze

Ma'aser Kesafim

Rabbi Michael Taubes

When Yaakov Avinu, while running away from his brother Eisav, awakens after dreaming about the Malachim ascending and descending the ladder, he

davens to Hashem, and vows that if Hashem will provide for his needs and see that he will return safely to his father's home, he will give Hashem one tenth of whatever he has (Bereishit 28:20-22). In the Da'as Zekeinim MiBa'alei HaTosafos (20 s.v. im), a Midrash is cited which indicates that Yaakov at that time instituted that one should give away one tenth of one's money to Tzedakah. Although the Torah itself clearly presents elsewhere the Mitzvah to support the poor by giving Tzedakah (Vayikra 25:35, Devarim 15:7-8), no guidelines are given as to specifically how much money or what percentage of one's income must be given to Tzedakah in order to properly fulfill this Mitzvah. The idea of giving one tenth of one's agricultural produce to the poor is indeed documented in the Torah (Devarim 26:12); this is known as Ma'aser Ani, which was given in years three and six of seven year Shemitah cycle. No other mention, however, of a requirement to give specifically one tenth of anything to the poor is found in the Torah.

Based upon a Posuk in Mishlei (3:9), however, the Yerushalmi in Peiah (1:1 3b) implies that one is required to give Ma'aser Ani, a tithe of one tenth to the poor, from all of one's possessions, not just from agricultural produce. This view is cited by the Mordechai, in his commentary on the Gemara in Bava Kamma (53b Siman 192), where it is presented as a source for the Mitzvah to give Ma'aser Kesafim. Another source is found in the commentary of Tosafos on the Gemara in Taanis (9a) which expounds upon a Posuk later in the Torah (Devarim 14:22) that contains the seemingly extraneous double use of a word in relationship to tithes (Aser T'aser). Tosafos (s.v. aser) cites a statement in the Sifrei (which is not found in our current standard editions) that extrapolates from this entire expression that there are indeed two tithes which must actually be given. The first is the one tenth to be separated from one's agricultural produce, the second is the one tenth to be given to the poor from any other potential source of income, such as business or other capital gains that one may have. This too, then, is a source for the Mitzvah of Ma'aser Kesafim. It is worth noting that this same idea appears in the Yalkut Shimoni, in Parshas Re'eih (Remez 893) and in the Midrash Tanchuma (os 18), where it is mentioned that this gift of one tenth of one's business income should be given specifically to those who are involved in Torah study.

The implication of the above sources is that the obligation to give Ma'aser Kesafim to the poor is rooted in the Torah, a view which seems to be accepted by the Shaloh (Shnei Luchos Habris, Maseches Megillah – Inyan Tzedakah Uma'aser, s.v. umikol makom), among others. Most other Poskim, however, do not consider this to be a Torah based obligation. The Maharil, for example (Shut Maharil, siman 54, 56), writes clearly that the Mitzvah of Ma'aser Kesafim is MideRabbanan, and he consequently allows for certain leniencies in this obligation. The Chavos Yair too (Shut Chavos Yair siman 224), in a lengthy Teshuvah where he discusses, among other things, what exactly is considered income and how to treat business expenses in this regard, likewise quotes an opinion that the obligation of Ma'aser Kesafim is MideRabbanan, and that the Pesukim mentioned above are just a remez, a hint to the idea in the Torah. He notes there as well that the aforementioned Yalkut Shimoni writes specifically that the Posuk in the Torah is only a remez. The Aruch HaShulchan (Yoreh Deah 249:2) likewise writes that the requirement to give one tenth of one's money to the poor is only MideRabbanan, and it is merely hinted at by the Posuk in this Parsha referred to above; the Ma'aser actually required by the Torah relates only to one's agricultural products, and is given to the poor only once every three years.

Still other authorities rule that giving Ma'aser Kesafim to the poor is required neither by the Torah nor by the Rabbanan, but is rather a Minhag, a proper custom. This position is articulated by the Bach, in his commentary on the Tur (Yoreh Deah 331 s.v. av), when he discusses what type of Tzedakah may be given with Ma'aser Kesafim money, as opposed to Ma'aser Ani money, and is agreed to by Rav Yaakov Emden (Shut Sha'ailos Ya'avetz vol. 1 Siman 6), who, quoting the above cited Posuk in this Parsha, writes that giving Ma'aser money to the poor is a middas chasidus, an act of

piety learned from Yaakov Avinu; he then proves that there is no actual obligation, even on the level of a Mitzvah MideRabbanan. In an earlier Teshuvah (Siman 1), Rav Yaakov Emden quotes from his father the Chacham Tzvi that the Bach's position is correct, and he himself brings proofs to his father's view in a subsequent Teshuvah (Siman 3). The Chavos Yair, in the aforementioned Teshuvah, agrees to this position himself as well; this seems to be the majority view. The Pischei Teshuvah (Yoreh Deah s.k. 12) notes that this position that giving Ma'aser Kesafim is only a Minhag was actually presented much earlier by the Maharam of Rothenburg. He then adds, however, that some hold that although it is only a Minhag, once one has observed the Minhag, he shouldn't stop doing so except in a situation of great need. Some of the above quoted Poskim discuss how many times one must observe this practice before it is considered that he has permanently adopted the Minhag.

One of the issues which depends upon whether giving Ma'aser Kesafim is an actual Mitzvah (from the Torah or from the Rabbanan) or whether it is simply a Minhag is the question of to whom one is required to give Ma'aser Kesafim money. The Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 249:1) writes that one must support the poor by giving them as much as they need, keeping in mind how much he can afford; giving one tenth is considered the average contribution, while one who wishes to be generous should give one fifth, as suggested by the Gemara in Kesubos (50a). The Ramo adds, though, that Ma'aser Kesafim money must be used specifically to be given to the poor, and not for any other Mitzvah or to assist any other worthwhile cause. The Shach quotes those who disagree and say that expenses for a Mitzvah which one otherwise would not have done may be paid for with one's Ma'aser money. The view of the Ramo is most likely based on there being a strong connection between Ma'aser Kesafim and Ma'aser Ani; the latter had to be given to poor people and not used even for Mitzvos. The view of the other Poskim probably is that since giving Ma'aser Kesafim is simply a Minhag, its rules do not necessarily parallel those of the Mitzvah to give Ma'aser Ani. The Chasam Sofer (Shut Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah Siman 232) makes this very distinction; in his previous Teshuvah (Siman 231) he suggests that if when one first decides to undertake the practice of giving Ma'aser Kesafim, one has in mind specifically that he would like to use the money to pay for other Mitzvos or to support other charitable causes and not just give it to the poor, he may do so.

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VAYEITZEI

Yaakov is forced to flee from home and family because of the threat that his brother Eisav poses. He is informed by his mother that his brother, in a moment of jealousy, frustration and anger, threatened to kill him. Yaakov is no physical weakling; he is not the pale yeshiva student, the caricature of nineteenth century Haskalah literature. In fact, we see in this week's Torah reading the description of the great physical strength of Yaakov. He is able to single-handedly remove the rock that covers the well of water, a task that requires many ordinary people to do so in concert.

Later in the biblical narrative of his life, we will see how he is able to wrestle with an angel and prevail and to accomplish other feats of physical prowess. So, why does Yaakov flee from his home and rightful place and embark on a long journey of exile? Why does he not simply stay and fight it out with Eisav?

Later, upon his return to the Land of Israel, it is apparent that he is willing to go to war with his brother in order to protect himself and his family. So,

why does he shy away from confronting Eisav directly when he is threatened? He certainly has the physical ability to do so if he desired to physically defend himself against any violence emanating from his brother. Yaakov will prove himself to be a valiant warrior not only spiritually but in the physical world as well. If so, then why should he be forced to flee instead of standing his ground and justifiably defending himself against the aggression of Eisav?

Yaakov was assigned the characteristic trait of truth by the prophets of Israel. This has baffled many throughout the ages because in the biblical narrative regarding his life we find that Yaakov was forced many times to resort to tactics that were understandably necessary but did not meet the bar of absolute truth.

Because of this obvious contradiction between theory and reality, many different interpretations have been given as to how to judge the truthfulness of Yaakov. The one that appeals most to me is that Yaakov remained true to himself, to his inner being and to his natural personality. Yaakov never desired to be what he was not. He never wished to be like his brother Eisav, a man of force and violence.

His inner self was to be a whole and peaceful person, a scholar and a dweller in tents. Even when life forced him to use the tactics of Eisav, to be a man of aggressive prowess, his inner self always remained true to his nature of peace, harmony and perfection. Being true to one's own inner self, not wishing to be what we are not, not aping the behavior of others – be they celebrities, political leaders, sports champions or simply a reflection of the changing mores of a bewildered society – is the greatest lesson that we can learn from the life of our father Yaakov. And that is the greatest ultimate truth that one can achieve in life.

Shabbat shalom
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Rav Shlomo Aviner Shlit"a

Crossing on a Red Light

Q: Is it permissible to cross the street on a red light when it is late at night and there are no cars?

A: It is certainly forbidden. 1. Pikuach Nefesh - it is a life-threatening situation. There are sometimes people who think they can outsmart the system, and have been hit by a car or caused an accident. If the traffic light is still working at night, there is a logical reason for it (including international regulations). 2. The general principle, or in Aramaic, "Lo Pelug" – "We don't distinguish regarding exceptions" (And Ha-Rav Avraham Genichovsky, Rosh Yeshivat Tshebin in Yerushalayim, was extremely careful not to cross against the light even late at night and even when no one was on the street, lest a child see him from a window and follow his lead. He has added that this is in order to teach a person not to disregard boundaries and accepted standards. And he once noted that crossing against a red light is the mindset of "My power and the strength of my hand" (Devarim 8:17) instead of Hashem providing me with power and strength, i.e. he crosses when he wants and does not need to be concerned with the rules. And he referred to the verse: "And Edom (the name of a nation, but also meaning "red") refused to give Israel passage through his border. Bemidbar 20:21. And it is known that Ha-Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv once saw someone crossing at a red light, and said: Rasha - an evil person. The person was very taken aback and asked why he called him that. Rav Elyashiv said that such an act causes blood to be spilled, since children will see you and learn from your actions. Ha-Rav Genichovsky added that the Gerrer Rebbe - the Beit Yisrael - once saw a person cross against a red light and said the verse: "Edom says: Don't pass through me". Bemidbar 21:4. And Rav Genichovsky explained that the Beit Yisrael did not tell jokes, but

rather intended that everyone would relate his "Vort" and learn not to cross on a red light. Agan Ha-Sahar, p. 456).

Nargila

Q: I found a Nargila in the trash. May I take it?

A: Yes, and break it into little pieces and throw it away, so that no one else finds it and uses it. Nargila is a greater killer than cigarettes, and cigarettes kills 10,000 people a year in Israel, 100 times more than Arab terror (See Shut Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah 3:35. An observant Jew once came to the yeshiva to speak to Ha-Rav Moshe Feinstein and explained that his son was in prison for selling drugs. He wanted Reb Moshe to write a letter to the judge asking to have mercy on his son. Reb Moshe harshly said to him: "Your son causes people to be sick and hurts them. Let him sit in prison!" And the father tried over and over again to convince Reb Moshe, but he in no way agreed to sign such a letter, and added that his actions were against the laws of the country, which are not forfeited. Reshumei Aharon, p. 22).

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By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Is Your Kesubah Kosher?

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Situation #1: Custom-made

Chayim and Chani hired a renowned calligrapher, who was careful to use an approved text, to design their kesubah. Nevertheless, the kesubah still suffered from severe, non-artistic flaws.

Situation #2: Silk-screen

While shopping together before their wedding, Tamar Goldstein and her chasan, Avrohom Fishman, chose a beautiful silk-screen kesubah, without realizing that it was a Sefardic text, which is much lengthier than a standard Ashkenazic kesubah. When the kesubah was filled in, the sections that Ashkenazim do not use were crossed out and the witnesses were instructed to sign.

Situation #3: Standard Hebrew Bookstore

Marcia and Yosef used an inexpensive kesubah, but some of the areas were left blank when the kesubah was signed at their wedding.

In some of the above cases, the couple was married without a kosher kesubah. Halacha mandates that a married woman own a kosher kesubah.[i] In all of the above cases, the person supervising the filling in and signing of the kesubah was apparently unaware of the complex laws involved. How to avoid these problems is required reading for anyone planning a wedding.

Introduction to the kesubah

The Torah placed many responsibilities on a husband to guarantee his wife security in their marriage. In addition to his requirement to "honor his wife more than himself and love her as much as he loves himself,"[ii] he is also responsible to support her at the financial level she is accustomed to, even if he comes from a more modest background, and at the comfort level of his family, if he comes from a wealthier lifestyle.[iii] His support requirement allows her to devote her energies to maintaining a household and bearing and raising children without assuming responsibility for their daily bread. In return for assuming these responsibilities, her husband may use her earnings and the profits from her property to help support the family; although all property that she owned prior to their marriage remains hers, as does anything that she inherits during the marriage. She also has the option of electing to keep her earnings for herself and forego his support.[iv]

Furthermore, a husband's responsibility is not limited to supporting her throughout his lifetime, but includes maintaining her from his property after his passing.

The kesubah is a legal document

The kesubah is a legally binding, pre-nuptial agreement whose purpose is to protect a woman's financial interests both during the marriage and upon its termination. One of the differences between the Ashkenazic and Sefardic versions of the kesubah is that the Ashkenazic version omits many halachic details specified in the Sefardic text. In practice, omitting the mention of these details does not change the husband's requirements to fulfill these obligations.

Although an Ashkenazic husband may specify these obligations in his kesubah, the usual practice is not to do so.

So far, there seems to be no reason why a Sefardic couple should not use an Ashkenazi kesubah, or vice versa. However, there are reasons why a Sefardi couple should not use the standard Ashkenazi kesubah without some modification. The Ashkenazic text states

that the kesubah requirement of the husband is min Hatorah, a minority opinion held by Rabbeinu Tam and some other early authorities.[v] However, many authorities contend that the requirements of kesubah were introduced by the early Sages, and some major authorities contend that stating that the husband is required min Hatorah to provide a kesubah invalidates the kesubah.[vi] Since the Rama[vii] justifies the use of this kesubah by Ashkenazim, even though many Rishonim question its kashrus, Ashkenazim may continue this practice, whereas Sefardim should not, without revising the wording.[viii] (An Ashkenazi man marrying a Sefardi woman may use an Ashkenazi kesubah, and a Sefardi man marrying an Ashkenazi woman should use a Sefardi kesubah.)

Documentary details

A kesubah must be written following the rules established by Chazal for the creation of any shtar, a halachically-mandated document. One may write it in any language,[ix] yet the almost-universal practice is to write it in Aramaic, which is written in Hebrew characters and is halachically considered a Hebrew dialect.[x]

Anyone may write a kesubah – man or woman, adult or child, Jew or gentile, human or machine. However, two people who have the status of kosher witnesses regarding all Torah laws must sign the kesubah. In addition, the custom in many places is that the groom also signs the kesubah, a practice that dates back at least to the thirteenth century and is mentioned by the Rashba.[xi]

Halachic details involved in writing a kesubah

The halachos of writing kesubos are manifold. As I mentioned before, the kesubah is a shtar, a halachically-binding document. Chazal established very detailed rules regulating how a shtar must be drawn, most of them to make it difficult to forge or alter. Because these details are highly technical, someone writing a kesubah who is unaware of these rules will probably produce an invalid document. It is therefore very important that the kesubah be reviewed by someone well-versed in these areas of halacha. Here are some examples of Chazal's regulations:

Everything in a shtar must be written in a tamperproof way. For example, one must write the word mei'ah (hundred) so that it cannot be altered to masayim (two hundred). This is done by placing the word in the middle of a line, not at the end, and by writing it close enough to the next word so that two letters cannot be inserted between them. A shtar may not be written on paper or with ink that can be erased without trace.[xii] One may not write words in the margin that can be easily altered. For example, one may not place the numbers shalosh (three), arba (four), sheish (six), sheva (seven), or eser (ten) in the margin, since these numbers can easily be altered to make them plural.[xiii] The witnesses must sign the shtar close enough to the text that one cannot insert other conditions or factors above their signature.[xiv] As an additional safeguard, no new conditions or details are derived from the last line of a shtar, just in case someone figured out how to sneak a line between the end of the shtar and the witnesses' signature.[xv] For this reason, the last line of every shtar simply reviews the basics of the transaction to which it attests; typically, the last line of a standard kesubah reviews the names of the bride and groom -- all information previously noted.[xvi] The accepted practice today is to safeguard every shtar in an additional way, by closing it with the words hakol shrir vekayom, "and everything is valid and confirmed," since no supplements are allowed after these words.

May one initial a correction?

In addition to the above examples, a shtar may have no blank spaces, erasures or cross-outs. The common, modern practice of modifying a contract by initialing adjustments is halachically unacceptable for a very obvious reason – how does this method guarantee that one party did not tamper with part of the contract already initialed by the other?

How does one correct a kesubah?

What does one do if one made a mistake while writing a shtar, or if one wants to adapt or modify a standard printed kesubah document? Must one dispose of the shtar and start over?

Not necessarily. Halacha accepts the following method of validating corrections: At the end of the shtar, one notes all the erasures and other modifications, closes with the words hakol shrir vekayom, and then the witnesses sign the shtar.[xvii] Thus, any irregularity is recorded immediately above the witnesses' signature. If the witnesses mistakenly signed the shtar without verifying its modifications, they should place these modifications directly below their signatures and then re-sign the shtar.[xviii]

Does a mistake automatically invalidate a kesubah?

If someone wrote a shtar and did not follow Chazal's instructions, is it valid? The Rishonim dispute whether the shtar is still valid, some contending that any shtar that does not follow Chazal's rules is invalid. Both the Shulchan Aruch and the Rama conclude that the shtar is still legitimate, although the Rama rules this way only when it is quite clear that the shtar has not been tampered with.[xix]

Incorrectly corrected

I was once at a wedding where the couple had purchased a beautiful, specially-designed kesubah. While reading the kesubah before the wedding, someone noticed an error in

the text of the kesubah. Can one correct this text immediately before the wedding ceremony? Fortunately for this couple, the mesader kiddushin (the rabbi overseeing the ceremony) admitted that he did not know the correct procedure for correcting text in a shtar. Instead, he presented them with a kosher, although far less beautiful, kesubah, saving the artistic one as a beautiful memento. Had he attempted to correct the kesubah, they could have spent their married lives without a kosher kesubah!

One prominent Rosh Yeshiva I know will not be mesader kiddushin. He unabashedly tells his talmid that he has never had the opportunity to study the laws of documents thoroughly, and therefore he is not qualified to preside at a wedding. He arranges for a prominent talmid chacham to be mesader kiddushin in his stead. I give him much credit, and consider his behavior worthy of emulation.

What if the names are illegible?

Often, the names in a kesubah are written illegibly. These kesubos are invalid, since it must be clear who are the marrying parties using this kesubah.

At this point, we can already appreciate the problems that happened to the above-mentioned kesubos:

Chayim and Chani's calligrapher used an approved text for the kesubah. Nevertheless, the kesubah still suffered from severe flaws – several words were written in such a way that they could be altered; numbers were placed at the end of the line in a way that they could be modified, and too much space was left in the middle of some lines. The result was a beautiful piece of art, but not a properly written kesubah.

Tamar chose a beautiful Sefardic kesubah, which in itself does not present a problem, provided that it was either fully filled out, or that the corrections were noted at the end. However, the person filling out the kesubah simply crossed out the remaining sections of the kesubah and then instructed the witnesses to sign. If it was indeed obvious that these parts of the kesubah were not tampered with after the signing, the kesubah is kosher, even though it was not filled in correctly.[xx] However, he should have noted at the end of the kesubah which lines were crossed through and have the witnesses sign below this declaration.

What about using a standard printed kesubah?

If a standard kesubah is arranged properly, it will reduce the incidence of many of the above-mentioned problems, but it is by no means foolproof. I have seen numerous standard kesubos improperly filled out. There are standard kesubos that have mistakes, such as placing certain information in the margin and leaving too much space between the kesubah and where the witnesses are expected to sign.

Situation #3:

Marcia and Yosef used an inexpensive kesubah for their wedding, but some areas were still blank when it was signed at their wedding.

Obviously, one may not use a kesubah without filling in all blank spaces, since someone could subsequently add information not in the originally signed document. If areas were left blank without omitting vital information from the kesubah, then whether the kesubah is kosher or not depends on the above-mentioned dispute between the Shulchan Aruch and the Rama. Sefardim who follow the Shulchan Aruch may assume that the kesubah is kosher, notwithstanding its flaws, whereas Ashkenazim must replace this invalid kesubah as quickly as possible.

Correcting a kesubah

What does one do if, after reading this article, one checks one's kesubah and discovers that it has one of the above-mentioned fatal flaws?

Don't panic. Simply contact a locally available talmid chacham, telling him that you suspect your kesubah may be invalid. He will check it and rule whether it requires replacing or not. One should not replace a kosher kesubah, but an invalid one must be replaced. There is a special text to be used when replacing an invalid kesubah, called a kesubah demishtakich bei ta'usa, a kesubah in which a mistake was found, that is used in these circumstances. The talmid chacham fills in the corrected kesubah, which is then signed by two witnesses and given to the wife. The form for such a corrected kesubah is not difficult to obtain.

(Similarly, if a woman has misplaced her kesubah, the couple should have it replaced immediately. Replacing a lost kesubah is a simple procedural matter that takes a matter of minutes and should not involve any major costs. Speak to your local posek. Also, a couple who were originally not married in a halachic fashion and are now observant need to obtain a valid kesubah.)

Datelineing a kesubah in the wrong place

By the way, datelineing a kesubah with the wrong location does not invalidate it.[xxi] Thus, it is not of the highest importance to determine the exact legal location of a hotel or hall where a wedding is located.

What if we misspelled one of the names?

Halacha has extensive rules how to spell names, yet I have seen many kesubos with the names misspelled. Fortunately, this rarely invalidates a kesubah, and one should not rewrite the kesubah of a married couple because of this mistake.

Should we include our family names?

Many contemporary authorities feel that family names should be included in the kesubah. In fact, whether one does or not is usually dependent on local custom.

A humorous error

The kesubah states that the husband will support his wife bikushta, faithfully, with the “i” sound spelled with the Hebrew letter tes. I once saw a kesubah where the scribe misspelled the word with the letter taf, and therefore the word translates as “with a bow,” thus committing the groom to support his wife “with the bow.” For her sake, I hope that he was an expert archer or violinist. Fortunately, this kesubah is kosher, even if the groom is as talented in these areas as I am.

As we see, writing a kesubah correctly requires extensive halachic knowledge of the laws of documents, an area not as well known as it should be. Without question, this is the most common cause of so many people having invalid kesubos.

Many people place much effort into obtaining a beautiful kesubah, with stunning artwork and calligraphy. Indeed, there is nothing wrong with enhancing the kesubah in this way. One must, however, be careful that, whether beautiful or not, the kesubah fulfills its purpose as a valid shtar. After all, a non-kosher kesubah is not worth the paper on which it is written.

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subject: Rabbi Riskin on the Torah Portion

Parshat Vayetze (Genesis 28:10-32:3)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had placed under his head, and set it up as a monument, and poured oil on the top of it.” [Gen. 28:18]

Our Biblical portion, Vayetze, tells of Jacob’s journey into exile and, not coincidentally, the first instance of a monument (matzeva) to God in Jewish history. Until this point, the great Biblical personalities have erected altars (mizbahot, singular, mizbeah), to God: Noah when he exited from the ark [ibid. 8:20], Abraham when he first came to Israel [ibid. 12:8], and Isaac when he dedicated the city of Be’er Sheva [ibid. 26:25]. An altar is clearly a sacred place dedicated for ritual sacrifice. But what is a monument? An understanding of this first monument in Jewish history will help us understand the true significance of the Land of Israel to the Jewish People. Fleeing the wrath of his brother, Esau, Jacob leaves his Israeli parental home and sets out for his mother’s familial home in Haran. His first stop, as the sun is setting, is in the fields outside Luz (Beit El) – the last site in Israel he will spend the night before he begins his exile. He dreams of a ladder standing (mutzav) on land with its top reaching heavenwards, “and behold, angels of God are ascending and descending on it” [ibid. v. 12]. God is standing (nitzav) above the ladder, and promises Jacob that he will return to Israel and that this land will belong to him and his descendants eternally.

Upon awakening, the patriarch declares the place to be “the House of God and the Gate of Heaven” [ibid. v. 17]. He then builds a monument (matzeva) from the stones he has used as a pillow and pours oil over it.

Jacob’s experience leaves us in no doubt: a monument is a symbol of a relationship that stands forever. It is the physical expression of a ladder linking Heaven and earth, the Land of Israel and the Holy Temple of Jerusalem (House of God), which connects the descendants of Jacob to the Divine forever. A monument is a gateway to Heaven, a House of God on earth. The Land of Israel, with its laws of tithes, Sabbatical years and Jubilee, magnificently expresses the link between humanity and the Almighty, and the promise of Jacob’s return from exile bears testimony to the eternity of the relationship between the People of Israel and the Land of Israel. Every link with God expresses eternity.

Furthermore, a monument is made of stone, the Hebrew word for stone being even, comprised of the letters aleph-bet-nun. It is also a contraction of parent-child (Hebrew, av-ben) which also uses the letters aleph-bet-nun symbolizing the eternity of family continuity (“Binyan Adei Ad” – an eternal building from generation to generation). And the monument is consecrated with oil, just as the Messianic Redeemer will be consecrated with oil – and herald eternal peace and redemption for Israel and the world.

In exile, Jacob spends two decades with his uncle Laban, who does his utmost to assimilate his bright and capable nephew / son-in-law into a life of comfort and business in exile. Jacob resists, escaping Laban’s blandishments, and eventually secretly absconds with his wives, children and livestock to return to Israel. Laban pursues them, and they agree to a covenant-monument: “And Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a monument” [ibid. 31:45]. Here again, we find the expression of an eternal promise: Abraham’s descendants will never completely assimilate – not even into the most enticing Diaspora.

The Torah continues: “And Jacob said to his brethren, gather stone, and they took stones and made a heap.... And Laban called [the monument] Yegar-Sahaduta, but Jacob called it Gal-Ed” [ibid. v. 46-47].

The wily Laban wants the monument to bear an Aramean name, a symbol of the gentile aspect of Jacob’s ancestry, while Jacob firmly insists upon the purely Hebrew inscription of Gal-Ed – the eternal, Israelite language.

When they take their respective oaths at the site of the monument, the deceptive Laban still endeavors to manipulate: “May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor, the gods of their fathers, judge between us” [ibid. v. 53]. Jacob refuses to give an inch; this monument must give testimony to the eternity of his commitment to Israel, both the faith and the land: “But Jacob swore to the fear of his father Isaac” [ibid.]. Jacob’s response is a subtle – but emphatic – rejection of Laban’s attempt at assimilation.

Although this monument is erected with Laban after Jacob leaves his home, it is nevertheless still established in exile; therefore it is not anointed with oil. Whatever important role the Diaspora may have played in the history of Israel – as long as we maintained our unique values and lifestyle – the oil of redemption will emerge only in the Land of Israel. When Jacob returns to Beit El, the House of God, he will erect another stone monument in order to fulfill his oath [ibid. 35:14]. And, of course, that monument – erected to God in the Land of Israel – will be anointed with oil.

Shabbat Shalom

*Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Vayetzei
For the week ending 10 December 2016 / 10 Kislev 5777*

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonofthemoon.com

Insights

In the Midst of the Darkness

“He (Yaakov) encountered the place” (28:11)

The spiritual masters explain that the word “vayifga” — “he encountered” — is an expression of prayer, and it is from this word that we derive that Yaakov instituted Ma’ariv, the Evening Prayer. The reason that the Torah did not plainly say “he prayed” is to teach that the earth contracted for Yaakov and made his journey shorter.

What does prayer have to do with the contraction of the earth?

In verse 15 Yaakov says, “Surely G-d is in this place, and I did not know!”, implying that indeed this place was very distant from being able to sense the Presence of G-d. So much so that Yaakov was surprised to be able to sense the Divine Presence there.

Inside Yaakov there was a tremendous desire to be close to G-d, and it was for this reason that the earth contracted, and Mount Moriah came to meet Yaakov.

There is a message here for us all:

However distant we may feel from G-d, and however dark our world may seem, if we make a sincere effort, G-d will move mountains to bring us close to Him.

That, in essence, is the concept of the Evening Prayer, Ma’ariv — to reveal the light in the midst of the darkness.

Sources: *Sfat Emet in Talelei Orot*

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Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

OU Torah

Rabbi Weinreb's Parasha Column, Vayetzei

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

"Tears"

Many years ago, when I was studying for my doctorate in psychology, we had a number of fairly strict requirements in addition to our courses in psychology. For example, we were expected to possess a reading knowledge of two foreign languages, and Hebrew was then not one of them. We were also required to study statistics and to take several courses in what was called "the biological bases of behavior." These courses were designed to provide us would-be experts on the "mind" with some understanding of the workings of the "body."

The instructor was a specialist in human physiology who only lectured sporadically. Instead, he had each of us choose a topic of interest to us, research it thoroughly, and present our findings to the class. I still remember some of the topics I selected. One was the physiology of sleep, and another, the effects of physical exercise on emotions. Perhaps I'll find a way to weave one of those topics into a future column on the parsha. But this week, I'll refer instead to a third topic I selected; a talk I gave about tears. If I recall correctly, I entitled the talk "'Shedding Tears: A Uniquely Human Behavior."

It amazed me at how little was known about tears back then. In preparation for this column, I had a brief "consultation" with Google and discovered that not much more is known about the subject today than was known back in my graduate school days.

What we do know is summarized in the simple dictionary definition: "A tear is a drop of the clear salty liquid that is secreted by the lachrymal gland of the eye to lubricate the surface between the eyeball and the eyelid to wash away irritants." We still know little about the physiological explanations for the correlation between tears and mood improvement, and questions as to why women shed tears more easily than men are still largely unresolved. We are on solid ground when we explain why onions stimulate tears, or why our noses run when we cry. We remain in the dark when we attempt to understand the significance of the fact that crying for emotional reasons seems to be unique to humans. Crocodiles shed tears, but not because they are emotionally upset or aesthetically inspired.

At this point, I am sure that the reader has begun to wonder about the connection of my abiding and consuming interest in the phenomenon of human tears to this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayetzei (Genesis 28:10-32:3). Let me assure you, dear reader, that there is a connection, and it is to these remarkable verses: "Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes; and Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance."

Many find it curious that the Bible accentuates Rachel's physical beauty. There is, however, ample precedent for that. Her predecessors Rebecca and Sarah are both described as exceedingly beautiful. But why is Leah's physical appearance denigrated? Why do we need to be told that her eyes were weak, soft, and tender? Is this facial feature of Leah's a virtue or a blemish? And if it is the latter, why mention it?

Rashi helps us answer these questions. He comments, "Leah supposed that she was destined to marry Esau, hence she shed tears. She heard people say that Rebecca had two sons and Laban two daughters. Surely, the older daughter will marry the older son, and the younger daughter the younger son." This prediction, this assumption that she was destined to spend her life with the wicked Esau, troubled her greatly, and she cried and cried until her tears disfigured her beautiful face.

Chassidic masters have interpreted this seemingly superficial difference between Rachel's pristine beauty and Leah's imperfect appearance as symbolic of two types of moral heroines. Rachel represents the perfect

tzaddeket who encounters no challenges to her moral perfection. Leah, on the other hand, exemplifies the person who overcomes obstacles and experiences setbacks in her struggle to achieve the status of tzaddeket. Leah's tears are the tears of a ba'alat teshuvah, one who has known disappointment and failure in her progress toward perfection and whose tears are an essential component of her moral triumph.

This view of tears as part and parcel of the struggle of the searching soul is found time and time again in King David's Book of Psalms. Thus, in psalm 42, we read: "Like a hind crying for water, my soul cries for You, O God...my tears have been my food day and night; I am ever taunted with, 'Where is your God?'"

And in psalm 56, we learn that not only do tears comprise the experience of the spiritual seeker, but that the Almighty keeps track of tears, cherishing them and preserving them: "You keep count of my wanderings; You put my tears into Your flask; into Your record."

Finally, the Book of Psalms teaches us that tears shed in the interest of drawing closer to God not only are eventually effective, but that those tears are transformed into songs of joy. Thus, we have become familiar with the phrase in the Shir HaMaalot, or Song of Ascents, psalm 126, which reads: "They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy."

Leah's weak eyes are not a physical defect. Her tears are emblems of her moral strivings. Her tears are not signs of weakness or cowardice; quite the contrary, they encompass her strength of character, and we would be well advised to learn from Leah how and when to cry.

It was about the time that I presented that paper on the physiology of tears in graduate school that I first read and appreciated what has since become one of my favorite novels, Charles Dickens' Great Expectations. I favor it for many reasons, one being that in this novel, Dickens portrays a Jew as a kind, compassionate, and heroic figure. But I also admire the following quotation from the novel, one that I have copied down for reference in my work as both a psychotherapist and spiritual guide:

"Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears...I was better after I had cried, than before—more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle."

I could easily conclude this essay with the above quotation from this great British novelist, one of the keenest observers of the human condition. But I choose instead to conclude with this Talmudic teaching, found in Tractate Berakhot 32b:

"Rabbi Elazar also said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer were locked, as it is said: 'Though I plead and call out, He shuts out my prayer.' (Lamentations 3:80) Yet, despite the fact that the gates of prayer were locked, the gates of tears were never locked, as it is stated: 'Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading, keep not silence at my tears.' (Psalms 39:13)"

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Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg

A Desire to Go Higher

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"Vayifga bamakom...vayishkav bamakom hahu - and he encountered the place...and he slept in that place (Vayetzei 28:11)" The word vayifga sounds like Yaakov Avinu unexpectedly arrived at the place. Chazal explain (Chullin 91a) that this indicates that the earth contracted for him - kaftza lo ha'aretz. When Yaakov arrived in Charan, he said to himself, "Could it be that I passed a place where my forefathers davened, and I didn't daven there?" He set his mind to return, and the earth contracted and brought Har Hamoriyah to him.

If Hashem wanted Yaakov to daven at the makom hamikdash, why didn't He stop him there on his way to Charan? Rashi answers that since Yaakov

didn't have the desire in his heart to daven when he passed the makom hamikdash, Hashem didn't stop him. Only after he set his mind to return to the place, and he traveled to Beis Eil, did the earth contract on his behalf.

This shows the power of a heartfelt desire. When a person demonstrates a genuine desire for spiritual achievement, and he puts in effort to try to attain his goal, Hashem gives him the siyata dishmaya he needs to complete the task. And Hashem is even willing to "move mountains" - to give the person extra strength and resources - to be able to achieve his goal.

The Ramban takes Rashi's idea one step further. He points out that from the words of the Gemara (both in Chullin 91a and Sanhedrin 95a) it would seem that Yaakov did not even return to Beis Eil. But rather, the moment he felt a desire in his heart to return to Har Hamoriyah, the earth contracted and brought the mountain to him. This shows that just having the desire for spiritual growth can bring divine assistance even before a person actually invests any effort in the process.

The importance of desire and effort is alluded to in the end of the pasuk as well. Rashi quotes from the Midrash that the phrase "and he slept in that place" implies that Yaakov slept only there, but for the previous fourteen years he didn't sleep because he was busy learning Torah in the yeshiva of Sheim and Eiver.

This statement of Chazal cannot be taken literally because the Gemara (Shavuos 25a) says that if a person swears that he will not sleep for three days, we immediately give him malkus for taking a sh'vuas shav (an unnecessary oath) because it is impossible for a person to go for more than three days without sleeping. What Chazal probably meant is that Yaakov Avinu didn't sleep in a bed for fourteen years. He didn't have a good night's sleep. He simply dozed off when he felt tired. But that still seems like an incredible feat. How was Yaakov able to go for fourteen years without sleeping normally?

Reb Chaim Shmulevitz (Sichos Mussar #32) explains that this shows the importance of willpower. When a person has a desire to accomplish something, he sometimes can discover hidden strengths and abilities that he never thought he had. Yaakov Avinu knew that how he spent his years in yeshiva would determine the kind of person he would become. So he pushed himself to his limits, and he discovered wellsprings of energy that he never knew he had. That is why he was able to forge ahead, learning Torah for fourteen years without a deep, comfortable sleep.

But perhaps there might be another explanation for Yaakov Avinu's superhuman ability. Since Yaakov had a genuine desire to learn Torah and he invested effort in the process, Hashem gave him extra siyata dishmaya. He gave him additional strength, beyond his natural abilities, to enable him to accomplish his dream. Chazal say, "Haba l'taheir, m'sayin oso - one who comes to purify himself receives divine assistance. (Shabbos 104a)" Hashem is ready to help those who truly desire to accomplish spiritually. But the prerequisite for receiving that gift is that a person must be a ba l'taheir. He has to take the first step, like Yaakov Avinu, to show that he has the desire to achieve and that he is willing to put in effort to accomplish his goal.

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Rav Frand - Parshas Vayeitzei

Paying the Tribe of Torah Learners / "I Have Received More Than I Deserve"

The Tribe of Torah Learners Was Created As A Result of Someone's Payment

I recently heard a story involving a Rav Orenstein, who was a Rav in Detroit more than 50 years ago. Rav Orenstein was a student of the Chofetz Chaim in Radin, Poland. Rav Orenstein commented that he once heard an interesting observation from his esteemed teacher:

The pasuk [verse] in Parshas Vayeitzei talks about the birth of the Tribe of Yissacher. Reuven brought home certain flowers for his mother. Rochel saw the flowers and asked Leah for some of them. Leah responded "Was your taking my husband insignificant? - And to take even my son's flowers!" Rochel proposed an offer that Leah accepted: "Therefore, he shall lie with you tonight in return for your son's flowers". [Bereshis 30:14-15] Yaakov in fact spent the night with Leah and that night the Tribe of Yissacher was conceived.

Rav Orenstein said over in the name of his Rebbi that we know that the Tribe of Yissacher is the tribe in Klal Yisrael that personifies Torah study. The whole genesis of Shevet Yissacher occurred because somebody paid somebody else. This set the tone for the rest of Jewish history. The existence of the "Tribe of Torah learners" amongst the Jewish nation comes about because other people are willing to pay. This is the "ma'aseh Avot siman l'Banim" - that there should be a concept amongst the Jewish people that there is a class of individuals devoted to Torah study amongst the nation that involves someone else "footing the bill". The classic relationship between the supporters of Torah and the Torah learners has its beginning in Parshas Vayeitzei when Yissacher came into existence because of the flowers that Rochel was willing to pay for.

Leah Was Commended For Recognizing "I Have Received More Than I Deserve"

Upon the birth of her fourth son, Yehudah, Leah said, "This time I will thank Hashem" [Bereshis 29:35]. Rash"i quotes the Rabbinic explanation that this expression of gratitude was due to the fact that she now had given birth to more than her share of Tribes. "Now that I have received more than my portion, it is time to express my gratitude to G-d".

What is the meaning of the statement that Leah received more than her portion? Our Rabbis explain that Leah made a simple mathematical calculation. She divided the twelve future tribes by 4 wives and arrived at the result of 3 tribes per wife. Now that she had her fourth son, she offered praise to G-d. The Rabbis praise Leah for her recognition that she owed a debt of gratitude to the Almighty.

Although Leah's recognition that she owed a debt of gratitude is certainly praiseworthy, this teaching of our Rabbis does not seem to make sense. Who deserves more praise - the person who receives his or her proper share and feels indebted to G-d, or the person who receives more than his or her fair share and feels indebted to G-d? Obviously, the first person is more deserving of praise.

I saw a very interesting observation from Rav Dovid Kviat (Maggid Shiur in the Mir Yeshiva, New York): The praiseworthy aspect of Leah's behavior here was that she viewed what she received as "more than her fair share".

By nature, human beings view that which they receive in life as something that they had coming to them. "This is what I deserve." If my friend is earning \$30,000 a year and I am earning half a million dollars a year, it may not be so easy to recognize my great fortune. It is easy to think, "I am smarter than him, I am cleverer than him, I earned this on my own - it was coming to me!"

The novelty of Leah's comment is that we see that a person has the ability to step back, look at a situation objectively and conclude, "I am getting more than I deserve". This is not our normal tendency. The normal tendency is to view life as either "I am getting my fair share" or at best, "I am getting less than I deserve." The rare person, who lives their life with the attitude that "I have gotten more than I deserve," is indeed a praiseworthy person.

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Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

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Parashat Vayetze: Big deceit, small deceit

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

When conveying the history of Am Yisrael (the People of Israel) and of the fathers of our nation, the Torah tends to give us not the entire story but rather specific parts of it from which we can learn significant lessons. For example, the Torah tells us Abraham's life story beginning at the age of 75. Isaac's life is conveyed briefly. The Torah chooses to tell us about two years of the many spent by Am Yisrael in the desert.

Another interesting characteristic of the way the Torah speaks to us is that frequently there are two opposing personalities shown in contrast to one another, one positive and one negative. Last week, we read about the clash between Jacob and Esau, and this week in Parashat Vayetze, the role of the negative character goes to Laban, Jacob's father-in-law.

What is so negative about Laban's character? What is the trait that characterizes him as someone whose behavior we should not emulate? That trait is deceitfulness. Laban is a person for whom deceit is the default option. We continuously encounter him cheating in some way. When Jacob asks him for permission to marry Rachel, Laban conditions his consent on Jacob working for him for seven years. Jacob agrees to this, and when the seven years pass, Laban tricks him and has him marry Leah instead of Rachel. When Jacob complains, Laban pretends to be innocent and says, "It is not done so in our place to give the younger one before the firstborn." He ignores the issue of why for seven years he failed to mention to Jacob that this is the tradition of the place while leading him to believe he would be marrying Rachel. After this, he deceives Jacob when he keeps changing his wage conditions governing what Jacob should be earning for his work.

After 20 years of work – seven for Leah, seven more for Rachel, and six more for dubious wages – Jacob escapes with his wives and children and returns to the land of his ancestors, the Land of Canaan. Laban does not accept Jacob's escape and chases after him. When they meet, Laban wonders with feigned innocence: "Why have you fled secretly, and concealed from me, and not told me? I would have sent you away with joy and with songs, and with drum and with harp" (Genesis 31:27).

It almost seems that from Laban's perspective, they had an ideal relationship for 20 years and he just couldn't comprehend why Jacob would escape.

As a historical personality, Laban is two-dimensional.

He is described with a focus on one central trait: deceitfulness. But people are not cardboard cutouts.

There are always other traits that make up personalities.

It stands to reason that Laban also had other traits that are not described in the Torah because they were not relevant to the story.

The moral of the story is that deceit and dishonesty are destructive traits. But it is not just Laban's type of obsessive deceitfulness that is destructive. Even small deceptions that stem from unpleasantness or the desire to embellish the picture are no less problematic.

Integrity and honesty are the basis for a proper society.

Laban represents the negative side of the story so that we, the readers, learn from him how not to behave; so we see from up close what the ugly face of lying looks like and learn our lesson.

One of the aims of the Torah is to teach us how to build a proper society. Judaism's universal vision to create a humanity that exists in peace and solidarity begins the moment we deliberate over whether or not to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. That is the crucial moment that determines whether we are partners in tikkun olam, repairing the world, or, God forbid, the opposite.

*The writer is the rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.
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Psalm 87: The Beloved Gates of Zion

“אֱהָבָה ה' שַׁעְרֵי צִיּוֹן מִכָּל מִשְׁכְּנוֹת יַעֲקֹב.”

“God loves the gates of Zion above all the dwelling places of Jacob.”
(Psalms 87:2)

What are these beloved “gates of Zion”? Why are they so dear to God? A simple understanding of this verse would point to the gates of the holy Temple in Jerusalem, treasured above any other building or edifice.

But what about nowadays, after the Temple's destruction? Do we have anything that can take the place — to some extent, at least — of the holy Temple?

Four Cubits of Halachah

Rav Hisda expounded this verse by noting that the word ‘Zion,’ ordinarily a synonym for Jerusalem, literally means ‘distinguished.’ “God loves the distinguished gates of Halachah [Jewish law] more than the synagogues and houses of study.” As the Sages taught, “Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One has nothing in His world except the four cubits of Halachah” (Berachot 8a).

In the absence of the Temple, Halachah takes on its central role. But what gives Jewish law such cosmic importance?

Communal Holiness

The Temple and a unifying code of Jewish law share a common function. They both embody the unique sanctity of the Jewish people. After all, what makes the Jewish people special? What is their 'zion' — their distinguishing trait?

The unique sanctity of the Jewish people is not expressed in the synagogue or the house of study. Other nations also set aside time for prayer and study. What truly distinguishes the Jewish people is the lofty goal of an entire nation living its life, both private and public, according to the Torah's teachings. This is not a sanctity of individuals, but a communal holiness, whereby Halachic standards in all areas of life — food, dress, speech, business dealings, and so on — unify the people to live as God's holy nation.

In the time of the Temple, the central service in Jerusalem was a unifying force of communal sanctity. The entire nation directed its spiritual aspirations towards this one focal point of holiness. All prayers were recited facing the Temple's Holy of Holies.

After the Temple's destruction, however, the only remaining spiritual force uniting the nation was the “the four cubits of Jewish law.” With great insight, Rav Hisda saw in Halachah the beloved “gates of Zion.” Halachah provides the Jewish people with ‘gates’ — a moral guide to all aspects of life, for the individual, the family, the community, and the nation. They are gates of Zion, gates of ‘distinction,’ expressing the unique mission of “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

(Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I, p. 40)

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