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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Vayeitzei



PARSHAS VAYEITZEI

Locating Appropriate Wives for the Patriarchs

The *Torah* tells us that *Yaakov* fled to the community of *Lavan*, who was the brother of his mother. He needed to flee because *Esav* vowed to kill him for taking the birthright from him. The *Torah* states, “So *Yitzchak* sent away *Yaakov* and he went toward *Paddan-aram*, to *Lavan* the son of *Besuel* the Aramean, brother of *Rivka*, mother of *Yaakov* and *Esav*.” *Yitzchak* instructed *Yaakov* to take for himself a wife from the daughters of his mother’s brother.

The *Torah* tells us that after *Rivka* returned with *Eliezer* to be presented as a wife for *Yitzchak*, he recounted to him all that had transpired during that period of time. Among his experiences was his meeting with *Lavan* and *Besuel*. Despite the deceitful and evil plotting of *Lavan* and *Besuel*, *Eliezer* was able to miraculously return with *Rivka* to present her as a wife to *Yitzchak*. After knowing the evil nature of *Lavan* and his community,

his brother in law, how could *Yitzchak* consider sending *Yaakov* to his house? Was he not concerned that *Yaakov*, the future Patriarch of the Jewish people, would be spiritually diminished by being exposed to such an intense level of evil? Seemingly, *Yitzchak* understanding his son *Yaakov*, was not concerned. It was because of the innate spiritual capacity that *Yaakov* possessed that he would not be influenced by *Lavan* and his evil community. What was the basis for this understanding?

The verse concludes, “...brother of *Rivka*, mother of *Yaakov* and *Esav*.” Why does the *Torah* need to state that in addition to being the sister of *Lavan*, *Rivka* was the mother of *Yaakov* and *Esav* in this particular context? It is obvious that she was their mother. Because of this difficulty, *Rashi* writes in his commentary, “I do not know what we are to learn from this.” The *Gemara* in Tractate *Bava Basera* tells us that the majority of one’s sons assume the characteristics of the brother of their mother. *Esav*, who was truly evil and deceitful, assumed

the characteristics of *Rivka's* brother *Lavan*. However, *Yaakov*, who was the antithesis of *Esav* in character and spirituality, did not assume those character traits.

Although he did not assume the character traits of *Lavan*; nevertheless, being the son of his mother *Rivka*, the sister of *Lavan*, *Yaakov* was able to understand the subtleties and nuances of deceit, thus being protected and resilient to it. However, we are able to say that because *Yaakov* was the personification of *Torah*, as the verse states, “*Yaakov* was the perfect man who dwelt in the tent (of *Torah*)” he had the ability to recognize evil for what it was. As King Solomon writes in Proverbs, “*Neir mitzvah v’Torah ohr* – the *mitzvah* is fuel and the *Torah* is the light.” Since *Yaakov* was the embodiment of *Torah*, he possessed the clarity to recognize evil for what it was and thus could not be influenced or deceived. Therefore, when *Yitzchak* sent *Yaakov* to the home of *Lavan* and his community, he was not concerned that he would be negatively influenced.

We find that despite the fact *Rivka* was raised in an evil and pagan environment, she was devoutly righteous and a believer in G-d. *Rachel* and *Leah* were also devoutly righteous despite the fact that they were raised by *Lavan* who was an evil pagan. What was even the consideration that *Eliezer* would be able to find the appropriate wife for *Yitzchak*, who would be spiritually compatible with him to be the future Matriarch? How did *Yitzchak* know that *Yaakov* would be able to locate an appropriate wife among the children of *Lavan*, the evil one?

Chazal tell us that at the *Akeidah*, after *Avraham* was told not to slaughter *Yitzchak*, he received a Divine Communication that the wife that was destined for *Yitzchak* was born at that moment. Once *Avraham* was informed, he was no longer concerned, regarding the spiritual compatibility of that wife. He knew that the appropriate mate for *Yitzchak* existed, he only needed to take the initiative to locate her by sending *Eliezer*, his servant.

The *Midrash* tells us that initially *Lavan* was childless. When *Yitzchak* said to *Yaakov* that he was to go to the brother of his mother and find a wife for himself, the wives of *Lavan* conceived. *Rachel* and *Leah* were conceived due to the dictate of *Yitzchak*. *Yitzchak* understood that the wives of *Lavan* were only able to conceive because *Yaakov* needed to have an

appropriate wife who would be qualified to be the Matriarch. Thus, *Yitzchak* was not concerned that the offspring of *Lavan* would reflect his negative characteristics and pagan beliefs. Just as *Avraham* had a Divine communication that the appropriate wife for *Yitzchak* was born to his family, so too did *Yitzchak* understand that his sending *Yaakov* to *Lavan* was not act of futility.

The *Torah* tells us that after *Yaakov* was in the house of *Lavan* for twenty years, he communicated to *Esav*, “I have sojourned with *Lavan* and lingered until now – *im Lavan gartie*.” *Rashi* cites *Chazal* who explain that the word “*gartie*” is the numerical equivalent of “*taryag*,” which is 613 *mitzvos*. *Yaakov* was saying to *Esav* that although he had lived for a period of twenty years in the home of his evil father-in-law, *Lavan*, his spirituality had not been diminished as much as an iota and that he did not learn from his evil ways. Although he was exposed to an environment that was contrary to all that he represented, *Yaakov* remained spiritually emboldened. *Yitzchak* understanding the true nature of *Yaakov* was thus not concerned that he would be influenced by *Lavan* and his community.

Arrogance the Root of All Evil

The *Torah* states after *Yaakov* had awoken from his prophetic dream in which G-d said to him “I will watch over you wherever you go...” *Yaakov* said, “If G-d will be with me, will guard me on this way that I am going...” The *Midrash* tells us that when *Yaakov* requested that G-d safeguard him, he meant that G-d should protect him from the evil influences of adultery, murder, idolatry, and evil speech (*lashon hara*). How could the concern for being exposed to the evils of the three Cardinal Sins (adultery, murder, and idolatry) be equated to the sin of *lashon hara*? The *Torah* tells us that one is obligated to give his life rather than violate any one of the three Cardinal Sins, which is not so regarding evil speech. Nevertheless, *Yaakov* was equally concerned not to violate the laws pertaining to *lashon hara* as he was regarding the three Cardinal Sins.

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Eirchin* states, “G-d is willing to look away if one transgresses adultery, murder, and idolatry (if he will eventually repent); however, He is not willing to look away if one speaks *lashon hara*.” Evidently, there is an aspect of *lashon hara*

that is even more serious than that of the three Cardinal Sins.

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Yomah* tells us that the First Temple was destroyed because the Jewish people had violated the three Cardinal Sins (adultery, murder, and idolatry). The Second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred among Jews (*sinaas chinam*). *Chofetz Chaim* cites the Jerusalem *Talmud* that explains that baseless hatred and *lashon hara* are one in the same. *Lashon Hara* is an outgrowth of baseless hatred.

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Yomah* tells us that *Reb Yochanan* was asked, "Which generation was greater – that of the First Temple period or that of the Second? It would seem that violating the three Cardinal Sins would be considered more severe than *sinaas chinam* (baseless hatred)..." *Reb Yochanan* responded, "Look at the Citadel (Temple). After seventy years of exile, the Jews returned to Israel after the destruction of the First Temple and rebuilt the Second Temple. However, after the destruction of the Second Temple, it has not yet been restored. Evidently in order to be atoned for *sinaas chinam* / *lashon hara* it is more difficult than to be atoned for the three Cardinal Sins. (It is because although one may believe that his dislike of his fellow is justified and conforms with *Torah* law, very often it is rooted in baseless hatred)." Because *Yaakov* understood the serious nature of *lashon hara* he requested that G-d protect him from its influence while in the community of *Lavan*.

If one values an individual as G-d's creation, who is made in His image, he would not consider taking that person's life. It is because he appreciates and understands the innate value of the other. The only way one could take a life (not within the context of it being justified by the *Torah*) is if he sees the existence of the other as having minimal value. In this same context, one can easily justify committing adultery because, based on his perception of the other, he is not violating the rights of another. The husband's existence has no value. When one speaks *lashon hara* about another (where it does not have constructive value) it is only because he does not sufficiently value the other individual.

Chofetz Chaim writes in his work, *Chofetz Chaim*, that over time if one engages in evil speech, one can be in violation of fourteen positive commandments

and seventeen negative commandments. One of the positive commandments that one could transgress with *lashon hara* is: "You shall love your fellow as you love yourself." When one speaks negatively about another it is an indication that he has no concern for that individual. He definitely does not value that individual to the same degree that he values himself. He thus does not resist speaking negatively about the other, regardless of its consequences.

The minimization of another is rooted in one's own self-centeredness and arrogance. This individual believes that he has the right to pass judgment on whomever he chooses to do so. Thus, one may even resort to idolatry, denying G-d's existence, in order to accommodate his own needs and desires. If one minimizes another through *lashon hara*, believing that he had done nothing wrong, it could lead to the most serious transgression, believing that it is not criminal.

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Sotah* tells us that if a person is classified as "truly arrogant", G-d says, "The world is not large enough to accommodate both of us." G-d thus withdraws from existence. This is because the arrogant individual believes that G-d exists to accommodate his needs rather than he existing to subordinate himself to his Master. The *Gemara* in Tractate *Sotah* states, "Whoever is truly arrogant – his dust will not be stirred up (at the time of resurrection)." Why is the arrogant one not worthy of resurrection?

At the time of resurrection, one will merit to have a special relationship with G-d. If one was arrogant and self-absorbed during his lifetime, his internalization of G-d's existence was just to accommodate himself. He demonstrated that he has no interest in G-d nor does he need to have a relationship with Him. If that is so, then he is not worthy of resurrection.

The *Torah* tells us that there is a positive commandment that one must give his fellow the benefit of the doubt. It is classified as a *mitzvah*, because it is not a simple accomplishment. Since every person possesses an ego, he may feel that he has the right to pass judgment on another. The *Torah* tells us that one must suppress that ego and behave in a humble manner.

Yaakov understood the subtle nature of *lashon hara* and thus understood its ultimate end. Therefore, when *Yaakov* prayed for protection against the three Cardinal Sins, he included *lashon hara* in the same supplication.

Distraction, An Impediment to Spirituality

The *Torah* states, “*Yaakov* took a vow saying, ‘If G-d will be with me, will guard me on this way that I am going, will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear; and I return in peace to my father’s house...’” The *Midrash* states, “*Reb Brechya* says, ‘Everything that *Yaakov* had requested from G-d was granted. *Yaakov* asked that G-d be with him. The verse states, ‘I (G-d) will accompany you...’ *Yaakov* asked to be protected. The verse states, ‘I shall watch over you wherever you go.’ *Yaakov* asked that he should return to his home in peace. The verse states, ‘I will bring you back...’ *Yaakov* asked G-d to guarantee him bread (sustenance), G-d did not respond. G-d said, ‘If I guarantee *Yaakov* his bread, he would not have any reason to supplicate Me. Therefore I will not guarantee him his bread.’”

The Rabbis argue with *Reb Brechya*: G-d in fact did respond to *Yaakov* guaranteeing him his sustenance/ bread – as it states, ‘I will not abandon you...’ The expression of abandonment refers to sustenance. As King David writes in Psalms, ‘I have never seen a devoutly righteous person abandoned by G-d so that his children should seek out bread.’” Evidently, if *Yaakov* supplicated G-d for certain amenities he understood that if he did not receive them he would be in a compromised state and would not be able to address his purpose in serving G-d. If this is so, why did *Yaakov* need to make the request? Seemingly, it is something that G-d should have naturally provided.

The *Torah* tells us that after *Yaakov* left the house of *Lavan*, he was informed that he would be confronted by his brother *Esav* who he had not seen in thirty-four years. *Yaakov*’s agents informed him that *Esav* was approaching with 400 men to kill him. *Yaakov* was concerned that he would be vulnerable to *Esav*’s attack. If G-d had promised *Yaakov* that He would protect him, why was *Yaakov* concerned about *Esav*?

The *Gemara* in Tractate *Berachos* explains that although he was promised by G-d to be protected, *Yaakov* was concerned that he may have sinned and thus rendered himself unworthy. A *tzaddik* is one who understands the standard of spirituality that G-d demands. He is thus always concerned that he may have failed and thus became classified as a sinner who is not worthy. As much as the *tzaddik* accomplishes, he never feels complacent and secure with his spiritual

achievements because he feels he could do better. Why does one need to pray to G-d for his needs, if G-d knows whatever they are?

Although G-d knows the needs of every living creature, one must pray for His Assistance. According to *Rambam*, it is a *Torah* obligation to supplicate G-d for one’s needs in addition to acknowledging who He is and thanking Him for all that He has provided. In order for one to be worthy of G-d’s Assistance, one must acknowledge that He is the One Who sustains existence continuously. G-d’s involvement in each person’s life is a continuum as it is indicated in our supplications. For example, we continue to ask for an endowment of intelligence as well as other things which could be viewed as unnecessary, since G-d has already given us these various endowments in the past. It is a continuous renewal of the endowment, blessing.

According to the opinion of *Reb Brechya*, *Yaakov* did not receive his request for sustenance because G-d wanted him to continuously supplicate Him for his daily fare. By having the need to continuously supplicate G-d, *Yaakov* would be engaged with G-d on a daily basis. The value of *Yaakov*’s supplication was not for the sake of being worthy for the sustenance (as it is with others), but rather, it was because of G-d’s love for him that He wanted *Yaakov* to engage with Him – just as a father wants to continuously engaged with his beloved son.

According to the Rabbis, G-d provided *Yaakov* even with his sustenance. The Rabbis are not minimizing the position of *Reb Brechya*, that G-d wanted *Yaakov* to engage with Him on a daily basis, but rather the basis for the disagreement is that the need for *Yaakov* to address his material needs would be a distraction from something of greater spiritual value. *Yaakov* as the Patriarch of the Jewish people experienced exile in his lifetime in many contexts. Based on the principle of “the experience of the Patriarchs foretells the future experience of the Jewish people until the end of time” it was crucial that *Yaakov* should be focused and undistracted to address all of the needs of the Jewish people, regardless of their predicament (whether in exile or not) to guarantee their survival and spiritual viability. G-d, therefore guaranteed *Yaakov* with his request for sustenance.

It is interesting to note that after the Priestly blessings in the *Amidah*, we supplicate G-d, “Just as G-d listened

to the outcry of *Yaakov*...You should provide my household with food and sustenance..." Seemingly, the text of our supplication is based on the opinion of the Rabbis who understand that *Yaakov* was also provided with sustenance.

Yaakov's Dimension of Being

Torah tells us that initially *Rachel* and *Leah* were both barren. The *Torah* states, "G-d saw that *Leah* was despised (by *Yaakov*), so He opened her womb; but *Rachel* remained barren..." *Leah* gave birth to three sons, *Reuvain*, *Shimon*, and *Levy*. Each of them were named for specific reasons that are mentioned in the *Torah*. After she had given birth to *Levy*, the third son, the *Torah* states, "*Leah* said, 'This time my husband will become attached to me for I have borne him three sons.' Therefore He called his name *Levy*." *Rashi* cites *Chazal*, "G-d sent the angel *Gabriel* to bring the child to Him and G-d gave him the name *Levy*. He was given twenty-four gifts of the *Kehuna* (Priesthood)..."

It was known that *Yaakov* would father only twelve sons. Since there were two Matriarchs and two maidservants who would bear children for *Yaakov*, *Leah* understood that since she had already given birth to three sons, she had fulfilled her share of children as a Matriarch. *Yaakov* would thus value her because she had given birth to her portion of the twelve tribes of Israel and become attached to her.

The *Torah* tells us that the Holy Ark, which was the location of the Divine Presence, was in the portion of *Binyamin* (in the Temple), the son of *Rachel*, our Matriarch. The *Gemara* in Tractate *Megillah* refers to *Binyamin* as "the host of the Divine Presence." The *Gemara* explains that he merited to be the host of the Divine Presence because he yearned to cleave to G-d more than any of his brothers. Since he was totally consumed with wanting to be the host of the Divine Presence, G-d gave him the opportunity and privilege. The Ark was thus located in his portion.

The *Midrash* in the Portion of *Zos HaBeracha* tells us that because *Binyamin* was the youngest son of *Yaakov*, he would assist his father in his old age when he would walk. *Yaakov* would lean on *Binyamin's* shoulder for support. The *Midrash* tells us that because *Yaakov* leaned on *Binyamin*, he merited to be the host of the Divine Presence. What is the relevance of *Binyamin*

being the location of *Yaakov's* leaning to meriting to be the host of the Divine Presence?

Chazal tell us that *Yaakov* was the most special of the three Patriarchs. He was the most perfect and complete Patriarch who fathered the twelve tribes, which are referred to as "the Tribes of G-d (*Shivtei Ka*)."
Rabbeinu Bachya tells us that when G-d is in heaven, *Yaakov* is on earth. Meaning, *Yaakov* on the terrestrial level is a reflection of G-d's Profile in heaven. For example, the heavenly throne has four groups of angels that are comprised of seventy angels that encircle it. *Yaakov* had four wives that ultimately gave forth the seventy souls that accompanied him to Egypt. Just as the angels in heaven that encircle His throne emanate from G-d, the seventy souls emanated from *Yaakov*.

Thus, *Yaakov* was the most beloved of the Patriarchs because he reflected G-d's Presence. He was the only Patriarch who was confronted by an angel in battle and defeated him. Because of his victory over the angel, G-d named him Israel to indicate that he was able to dominate the physical and spiritual. Since *Yaakov* was the representation of G-d on the earthly level, his leaning on *Binyamin* was the equivalent of the Divine Presence resting upon him. Thus, *Binyamin* merited to be the host of the Divine Presence.

After *Leah* had her third son, *Levy*, she declared, "Now my husband will become attached to me..." Since *Yaakov* was the reflection and representation of G-d on earth, it was the equivalent of the Divine Presence cleaving to *Leah*. *Leah* was thus attached to the Divine Presence. Since *Levy* was the cause of *Leah* becoming attached to *Yaakov*, he merited to be the officiant of G-d in the Temple. Thus, when *Reuvain* moved his father *Yaakov's* bed from the tent of *Bilhah* and placed in the tent of *Leah*, his mother, he forfeited his birthright because it was the equivalent of tampering with the location of the Divine Presence.

The Material to Facilitate the Spiritual (From Toldos)

The *Torah* tells us that *Esav* returned from the field in a fatigued state. He came upon his brother *Yaakov* when he was cooking lentil soup. When he saw the soup, which was made of red lentils, he said to *Yaakov*, because of his weary state, "Give me some of that red red stuff!"

Esav, being eager to satisfy his hunger, did not articulate the identity of the food, but rather, he could only say “red stuff.” *Yaakov*, seeing his brother in this compromised state would only agree to give him the food, if he would sell him his birthright. *Esav* agreed to sell his birthright in exchange for the lentils and some bread. It would seem from the narrative, that *Yaakov* took advantage of his brother, to gain possession of the birthright.

Rashi cites *Chazal* who explain that when the *Torah* tells us that *Esav* was fatigued when he returned from the field, it was because on that day he had violated the three Cardinal sins (murder, idolatry, and adultery). He was weary and depleted as a result of sin. *Yaakov* understood that if his brother would have the birthright, he would be the officiant to do the service in the Temple. If this were to be, it would be a disgrace to G-d. *Yaakov* purchased the birthright not to take possession of something that was not rightfully his, but rather, because *Esav* was not worthy to be chosen to be the *Kohen*. It was for the sake of G-d’s Glory that *Yaakov* purchased the birthright from *Esav* at the moment of his weakness.

The birthright entitles the firstborn to a greater claim on one’s father’s estate. *Yaakov*, being the more spiritual son of *Yitzchak*, dedicated his life to the study of *Torah* as the verse states, “*Yaakov* was the perfect man who dwelt in the tent (of *Torah*).” If *Yaakov* believed that *Esav* was unqualified to be the officiant of G-d, why would he not allow *Esav* to have the material benefits of being the first born. Why was it necessary for *Yaakov* to also have the material benefits of a firstborn? Evidently, the spiritual and the material are interlinked.

Yitzchak, our Patriarch intended to bless *Esav* rather than *Yaakov*. Although *Yitzchak* knew that *Yaakov* was the more spiritual son because he had fully dedicated his life to *Torah* and spirituality; he nevertheless believed that *Esav* should have the blessing.

Sforno explains that *Yitzchak* believed that it would be similar to the partnership that *Yaakov* would establish between *Yissachar* and *Zevulun*. *Yissachar* was the tribe that was dedicated to the study of *Torah* without any distraction whatsoever. He thus, attained an advanced level of *Torah* knowledge. *Zevulun* was the tribe responsible to provide every aspect of *Yissachar*’s material needs. It was due to *Zevulun* that *Yissachar* was able to achieve his unique level. *Esav*, being adept at the ways of the world as a hunter and a man of the field, would be able to provide for all the material needs of *Yaakov*, who was fully engaged in the study of *Torah*.

Because *Rivka*, our Matriarch understood the true nature of *Esav*, as being evil, if he were to receive the material blessing, *Yaakov* would not be able to survive. She understood that *Esav* would not be the provider for *Yaakov*. If *Esav* were to receive the material blessing, *Yaakov* would not be able to exist to become the officiant of G-d. She thus instructed *Yaakov* to take the blessing material from *Yitzchak*.

As the officiant, *Yaakov* needed to have material support. The *Torah* tells us that the *Kohanim* did not have a share in the land because G-d was their portion. They needed to rely on the tithes of the Jewish people for their sustenance. Thus after acquiring the birthright and becoming designated to be the officiant of G-d, *Yaakov* needed to take the material blessing from *Esav* because *Yaakov* himself needed to be the *Zevulun* to provide for the *Yissachar*. Since the material blessing and the birthright are interlinked, one must say that once *Yaakov* purchased the birthright the blessing of his father’s material blessing is by right his.



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