

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog
VAYISLACH

Our father, Jacob, escapes from the mouth of the lion only to run into the arms of the bear. He leaves, in fact he flees, from the house of Lavan but is immediately confronted first with the angel of his brother Esau and later by Esau himself and an armed band of 400 men. Eventually Jacob escapes even from this trial by means of bribery, appeasement and the affectation of brotherly love exhibited by Esau.

All of this leaves a scar on Jacob's psyche. For his entire life he will be haunted by these confrontations and by the dangers that they represent. Only at the end of days, when the world goes right will he escape from the trauma of being constantly pursued, hated and persecuted. And the fact that it is all so senseless and has really no basis in fact or logic only serves to compound the evil that is involved here. As we know, what occurs to our forefathers really is the harbinger of all later events in Jewish history. The Jewish people, no matter what position or political belief they may or may not espouse, are always in the wrong. They may be persecuted and attacked but they are always seen by Esau as the aggressor and the occupier. They may espouse a capitalistic economy, but they are called communists. In short, they never can win. Because of this there is an overriding sense of unease that always exists within the Jewish world.

This is especially true when less than a century ago over a third of the Jewish people were destroyed simply because they were Jewish. And this occurred in the most civilized and advanced continent that existed then on the face of the earth. The heroic attempts at the revival and rebuilding of the Jewish people that have occurred since have been treated negatively by many sections of the world. It is apparent that the world prefers that the Jews remain subservient and act as appeasers rather than as independent and productive people.

That type of antisemitism, which is so rampant in our time, is really the source of much of the dysfunction that exists in the Jewish world today. The age-old problem of antisemitism has never found any solution, though Jews somehow feel that it is incumbent on them to search for remedies. In reality, there is little if anything that we can do in this regard. It is obvious that there are no simple solutions and that nice speeches and benevolent statements about the need for tolerance and unity have little effect upon the haters and those who wish to do us harm.

The only thing that we can do is to remain firm and strong in our beliefs, our traditions and to confront our enemies in whatever form they may appear. This is the lesson that Jacob taught us after his own difficult experiences. It remains the only valid lesson that has hope and courage for our time as well.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

Physical Fear, Moral Distress (Vayishlach 5779)
Covenant & Conversation
Judaism & Torah
Morality & Ethics
Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Twenty-two years have passed since Jacob fled his brother, penniless and alone; twenty-two years have passed since Esau swore his revenge for what he saw as the theft of his blessing. Now the brothers are about to meet again. It is a fraught encounter. Once, Esau had sworn to kill Jacob. Will he do so now – or has time healed the wound? Jacob sends messengers to let his brother know he is coming. They return, saying that Esau is coming to meet Jacob with a force of four hundred men – a contingent so large it suggests to Jacob that Esau is intent on violence. Jacob's response is immediate and intense:

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed (Gen. 32:8)

The fear is understandable, but his response contains an enigma. Why the duplication of verbs? What is the difference between fear and distress? To this a midrash gives a profound answer:

Rabbi Judah bar Ilai said: Are not fear and distress identical? The meaning, however, is that "he was afraid" that he might be killed; "he was distressed" that he might kill. For Jacob thought: If he prevails against me, will he not kill me; while if I prevail against him, will I not kill him? That is the meaning of "he was afraid" – lest he should be killed; "and distressed" – lest he should kill.[1]

The difference between being afraid and distressed, according to the Midrash, is that the first is a physical anxiety, the second a moral one. It is one thing to fear one's own death, quite another to contemplate being the cause of someone else's. Jacob's emotion, then, was twofold, encompassing the physical and psychological, the moral and the material.

However, this raises a further question. Self-defence is permitted in Jewish law.[2] If Esau were to try to kill Jacob, Jacob would be justified in fighting back, if necessary at the cost of Esau's life. Why then should this possibility raise moral qualms? This is the issue addressed by Rabbi Shabbetai Bass, author of the commentary on Rashi, Sifte Hachamim:

One might argue that Jacob should surely not be distressed about the possibility of killing Esau, for there is an explicit rule: "If someone comes to kill you, forestall it by killing him." Nonetheless, Jacob did have qualms, fearing that in the course of the fight he might kill some of Esau's men, who were not themselves intent on killing him but merely on fighting his men. And even though Esau's men were pursuing Jacob's men, and every person has the right to save the life of the pursued at the cost of the life of the pursuer, nonetheless there is a condition: "If the pursued could have been saved by maiming a limb of the pursuer, but instead the rescuer killed the pursuer, the rescuer is liable to capital punishment on that account." Hence Jacob feared that, in the confusion of battle, he might kill some of Esau's men when he might have restrained them by merely inflicting injury on them.[3]

The principle at stake, according to the Sifte Hachamim, is the minimum use of force. The rules of defence and self-defence are not an open-ended permission to kill. There are laws restricting what is nowadays called "collateral damage," the killing of innocent civilians even if undertaken in the course of self-defence. Jacob was distressed at the possibility that in the heat of conflict he might kill some of the combatants when injury alone might have been all that was necessary to defend the lives of those – including himself – who were under attack.

A similar idea is found in the midrash's interpretation of the opening sentence of Genesis 15. Abraham had just fought a victorious war against the four kings, undertaken to rescue his nephew Lot, when God suddenly appeared to him and said: "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield. Your reward will be very great" (Gen 15:1). The verse implies that Abraham was afraid, but of what? He had just triumphed in the military encounter. The battle was over. There was no cause for anxiety. On this, the Midrash comments:

Another reason for Abram's fear after killing the kings in battle was his sudden realisation: "Perhaps I violated the divine commandment that the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded the children of Noah, 'He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.' For how many people I killed in battle." [4]

Or, as another Midrash puts it:

Abraham was filled with misgiving, thinking to himself, 'Maybe there was a righteous or God-fearing man among those troops which I slew.' [5]

There is, however, a second possible explanation for Jacob's fear – namely that the Midrash means what it says, no more, no less: Jacob was distressed at the possibility of being forced to kill even if it were entirely justified.

What we are encountering here is the concept of a moral dilemma.[6] This phrase is often used imprecisely, to mean a moral problem, a difficult ethical decision. But a dilemma is not simply a conflict. There are many moral conflicts. May we perform an abortion to save the life of

the mother? Should we obey a parent when he or she asks us to do something forbidden in Jewish law? May we desecrate the Shabbat to extend the life of a terminally ill patient? These questions have answers. There is a right course of action and a wrong one. Two duties conflict and we have meta-halakhic principles to tell us which takes priority. There are some systems in which all moral conflicts are of this kind. There is always a decision procedure and thus a determinate answer to the question, "What should I do?"

A dilemma, however, is a situation in which there is no right answer. It arises in cases of conflict between right and right, or between wrong and wrong – where, whatever we do, we are doing something that in other circumstances we ought not to do.

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Terumot 8) describes one such case, where a fugitive from the Romans, Ulla bar Koshev, takes refuge in the town of Lod. The Romans surround the town, saying: Hand over the fugitive or we will kill you all. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi persuades the fugitive to give himself up. This is a complex case, much discussed in Jewish law, but it is one in which both alternatives are tragic. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi acts in accordance with halakha, but the prophet Eliyahu asks him: "Is this the way of the pious? [Vezu mishnat haHasidim]"

Moral dilemmas are situations in which doing the right thing is not the end of the matter. The conflict may be inherently tragic. Jacob, in this parsha, finds himself trapped in such a conflict: on the one hand, he ought not allow himself to be killed; on the other, he ought not kill someone else; but he must do one or the other. The fact that one principle (self-defence) overrides another (the prohibition against killing) does not mean that, faced with such a choice, he is without qualms, especially given the fact that Esau is his twin brother. Despite their differences, they grew up together. They were kin. This intensifies the dilemma yet more. Sometimes being moral means that one experiences distress at having to make such a choice. Doing the right thing may mean that one does not feel remorse or guilt, but one still feels regret or grief about the action that needs to be taken.

A moral system which leaves room for the existence of dilemmas is one that does not attempt to eliminate the complexities of the moral life. In a conflict between two rights or two wrongs, there may be a proper way to act – the lesser of two evils, or the greater of two goods – but this does not cancel out all emotional pain. A righteous individual may sometimes be one who is capable of distress even while knowing that they have acted correctly. What the Midrash is telling us is that Judaism recognises the existence of dilemmas. Despite the intricacy of Jewish law and its meta-halakhic principles for deciding which of two duties takes priority, we may still be faced with situations in which there is an ineliminable cause for distress. It was Jacob's greatness that he was capable of moral anxiety even at the prospect of doing something entirely justified, namely defending his life at the cost of his brother's.

This characteristic – distress at violence and potential bloodshed even when undertaken in self-defence – has stayed with the Jewish people ever since. One of the most remarkable phenomena in modern history was the reaction of Israeli soldiers after the Six Day War in 1967. In the weeks preceding the war, few Jews anywhere in the world were unaware that Israel and its people faced terrifying danger. Troops – Egyptian, Syrian, Jordanian – were massing on all its borders. Israel was surrounded by enemies who had sworn to drive its people into the sea. And yet it won one of the most stunning military victories of all time. The sense of relief was overwhelming, as was the exhilaration at the reunification of Jerusalem and the fact that Jews could now pray (as they had been unable to do for nineteen years) at the Western Wall. Even the most secular Israelis admitted to feeling intense religious emotion at what they knew was a historic triumph.

Yet, in the months after the war, as conversations took place throughout Israel, it became clear that the mood among those who had taken part in the war was anything but triumphal.[7] It was sombre, reflective, even anguished. That year, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem gave an honorary doctorate to Yitzhak Rabin, Chief of Staff during the war. During his speech of acceptance he said:

We find more and more a strange phenomenon among our fighters. Their joy is incomplete, and more than a small portion of sorrow and shock prevails in their festivities, and there are those who abstain from celebration. The warriors in the front lines saw with their own eyes not only the glory of victory but the price of victory: their comrades who fell beside them bleeding, and I know that even the terrible price which our enemies paid touched the hearts of many of our men. It may be that the Jewish people has never learned or accustomed itself to feel the triumph of conquest and victory, and therefore we receive it with mixed feelings.[8]

These mixed feelings were born thousands of years earlier, when Jacob, father of the Jewish people, experienced not only the physical fear of defeat but the moral distress of victory. Only those who are capable of feeling both, can defend their bodies without endangering their souls.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Vayishlach (Genesis 32:4-36:43)

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept." (Gen. 33:4)

Years ago, a college classmate provocatively announced that he planned to name his first son "after the most maligned figure in the entire Torah: Esau."

Let's consider Esau's defense. After we are introduced to Esau as Isaac's favorite son since 'the hunt was in his [Isaac's] mouth' [Gen. 30:28], we are immediately taken to the fateful scene where Jacob is cooking lentil soup when Esau came home exhausted from the hunt. The hungry hunter asks for some food, but Jacob will only agree to give his brother food in exchange for the birthright. Who is taking advantage of whom? Is not a cunning Jacob taking advantage of an innocent Esau?

Then there is the more troubling question of the stolen blessing. Even without going into the details of how Jacob pretends to be someone he's not, Esau emerges as an honest figure deserving of our sympathy. After all, Esau's desire to personally carry out his father's will meant that he needed a long time to prepare the meat himself. Indeed it was Esau's diligence in tending to his father that allowed enough time to pass to make it possible for his younger brother to get to Isaac's tent first. Surely, Rebecca must have realized the profound nature of Esau's commitment to his father, for she masterminded Jacob's plan.

On his return from the field, Esau realizes that Jacob has already received the blessing originally meant for him. His response cannot fail to touch the reader. Poignantly, Esau begs of his father,

'Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.' And Esau lied up his voice and wept. (Gen. 27:38)

But it is the beginning of Vayishlach that clinches our pro-Esau case. Jacob finally returns to his ancestral home after an absence of twenty years. Understandably, Jacob is terrified of his brother's potential reaction, and so in preparation, Jacob sends messengers ahead with exact instructions as to how to address Esau. Informed of the impending approach of Esau's army of four hundred men, he divides his household into two camps, so that he's prepared for the worst. But what actually happens defies Jacob's expectations: Esau is overjoyed and thrilled to see him. The past is the past. 'And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept' [Gen. 33:4].

The defense rests. Thus described, Esau hardly seems worthy of the official censure of Jewish history as the personification of the anti-Jew. In fact, my college friend had good reason to name his son after Esau.

So, why are our Sages so critical of him? I would suggest our analysis so far overlooks something central in Esau's character. Yes, there are positive characteristics of Esau to be found in many Jews across the Diaspora. Many are aggressive, self-made people who weep when they meet a long-lost Jewish brother from Ethiopia or Russia. They have respect for their parents and grandparents, tending to their physical needs and even reciting – or hiring someone to recite – the traditional

mourner's Kaddish for a full year after their death. Financial support and solidarity missions to the State of Israel, combined with their vocal commitment to Jewry and Israel, reflect a highly developed sense of Abrahamic (Jewish) identity, just like Esau seems to have. Esau feels Abrahamic identity with every fiber of his being.

But when it comes to commitment to Abrahamic (Jewish) continuity, to willingness to secure a Jewish future, many of our Jewish siblings are found to be wanting – just like Esau. Undoubtedly, one of the most important factors in keeping us 'a people apart', and preventing total Jewish assimilation into the majority culture, has been our unique laws of kashrut. Refusing to break bread with our non-Jewish work colleagues and neighbors has imposed a certain social distance that has been crucial for maintaining our identity. But Esau is willing to give up his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. Hasn't the road to modern Jewry's assimilation been paved with the T-bone steaks and the lobsters that tease the tongues lacking the self-discipline to say no to a tasty dish? Like Esau, the overwhelming majority of Diaspora Jewry has sold its birthright for a cheeseburger.

Esau's name means fully-made, complete. He exists in the present tense. He has no commitment to past or future. He wants the freedom of the hunt and the ability to follow the scent wherever it takes him. He is emotional about his identity, but he is not willing to make sacrifices for its continuity. Primarily, it is on the surface, as an external cloak that is only skin-deep. That's why it doesn't take more than a skin-covering for Jacob to enter his father's tent and take on the character of Esau. Indeed, Esau is even called Edom, red, after the external color of the lentil soup. Esau has no depth; he is Mr. Superficial!

And what's true for a bowl of soup is true for his choice of wives. Esau marries Hittite women. And that causes his parents to feel a 'bitterness of spirit' [Gen. 27:35]. No wonder! The decision of many modern Jews to 'marry out' has reached an American average of 62%! The 'bitterness of spirit' continues to be felt in many families throughout the Diaspora. Even those who marry out and continue to profess a strong Jewish identity cannot commit to Jewish continuity. Perhaps Esau even mouthed the argument I've heard from those I've tried to dissuade from marrying out. 'But she has a Jewish name! She even looks Jewish!' He may have said, 'Her name is Yehudit [literally, a Jewess, from Judah]; she has a wonderful fragrance [Basmal means perfume]' [Gen. 26:34]. But once again, Esau only looks at externals!

Shabbat Shalom

Rav Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vayishlach Doing Something is Better Than Nothing

Yaakov was afraid as his family prepared for their encounter with Eisav. The pesukim say that the handmaidens (Bilhah and Zilpah) came with their children first, then Leah and her children came and bowed down, and finally Yosef and Rochel came and bowed down. Rashi points out the following anomaly. Regarding the handmaidens, it says first the mothers and then the children came and bowed down; regarding Leah, it also says first Leah and then her children came and bowed down. However, by Rochel, it mentions first that Yosef and second that Rochel came and bowed down (the son came before the mother)!

Rashi explains that Yosef purposely broke protocol and stepped in front of his mother for a specific reason. He argued "My mother is beautiful. Perhaps the wicked Eisav will put his eye on her with less than noble intentions. I will therefore stand in front of her to block his view of her." Rashi says that from this incident, Yosef merited having the blessing "Aleh Ayin" [of grace to the eye]. [Bereshis 49:22]

At this point, according to the Seder HaDoros, Yosef was either six years old or four years old. Even granted the fact that he was "Yosef haTzadik" [Joseph the righteous] and was no doubt extremely precocious and maybe smart enough to figure out the potential danger to his mother, he still was not nearly tall enough to "block Eisav's view". How could Yosef have expected to "block Eisav's view" of his mother by standing in front of her? At best, Yosef came up to his mother's hip,

and more likely, he stood closer to her knees at this point in his life.

On top of that, for how long was Yosef going to be able to stand in front of his mother? A couple of minutes at most! Eisav would ask him to move aside and he would still wind up looking at Rochel. So, again, what is Yosef trying to accomplish here? His efforts seem to be a 'blessing in vain.'

If truth be told, Rashi in Parshas Vayechi [ibid.] brings a Medrash that in fact a miracle occurred where Yosef did succeed in blocking Eisav's vision of his mother. However, still, was Yosef really expecting this miracle to occur when he stepped in front of his mother? What was he thinking? He could not have expected such a miraculous growth spurt exactly at that moment!

I heard a beautiful approach to this question from the Tolner Rebbe [Reb Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg] of Yerushalayim, shlit'a. He says that the key to understanding the matter lies in a single word and with this one word Yosef is teaching us a golden rule in life. Rashi writes that Yosef said "I will stand in front of her and I will prevent him (Ah'Ekven'u) from gazing upon her." Granted, my accomplishments may be minimal – it will be only for a minute or two, it may only be a partial blocking – but it is already worth it. "A half of a loaf is better than no loaf." Even for that small amount of accomplishment, it was worth making the effort.

Yosef HaTzadik is teaching us an approach in life – be a minimalist! Many try for perfection. We feel that anything short of perfection is not worth it. Yosef is saying "Not true. Accomplish whatever you can accomplish, even if it does not solve the problem, even if it is not a foolproof plan." Doing something is better than doing nothing!

The Tolner Rebbe told over a story, which encapsulates this thought: His first two children were daughters and his third child was a son. He wanted to name his son after his father-in-law, but the problem was that his father-in-law's name was Yaakov Yitzchak. Given that his own name was Yitzchak Menachem, he obviously could not name his son Yaakov Yitzchak. The natural thing to do in such a situation is only to name the son Yaakov. However, his father-in-law help (in his lifetime) that if you do not name a child entirely after a deceased person, you are not naming after the person at all!

The Tolner Rebbe was facing a dilemma here. So what did he do? He sent a shaliach [messenger] to the Lev Simcha (the Gerer Rebbe) to ask him this shaylah. The messenger came back with the following exact (Yiddish) quote from the Gerer Rebbe: "Gornisht iz a Greserer Gornisht!" In other words, your father-in-law might be correct that to name a child after him using half his name is "Gornisht" [like nothing]. However, not naming at all after your father-in-law is an even bigger "Gornisht!" [Certainly like nothing]. Therefore – do what you can do and at least use the name Yaakov!

This in fact was the attitude of Yosef HaTzadik. You can only do what you can do, but you must do that even if it does not fully solve the problem or even come close to fully solving the problem. It is a minimalist approach, but the approach makes sense!

The Tolner Rebbe references the Kabbalistic sefer Tzror HaMor (Rav Avraham ben Yaakov Saba [1440-1508]). The Talmud [Yoma 35b] relates that that a poor person, a rich person, and a wicked person come before the Heavenly court for judgement. They are all asked, "Why did you not study more Torah?" If the poor person excuses himself by saying, "I was so poor I had to occupy myself with earning a living to feed myself and my family..." he will be asked, "Were you poorer than Hillel the Elder...?" If the rich person excuses himself by saying "I was too busy with my property and my investments..." he will be asked "Did you have more property and investments than Rabbi Elazar ben Charsom...?" If the wicked person excuses himself by saying, "I was very handsome and was tempted by my evil inclination..." he will be asked "Were you more handsome and more tempted than the righteous Yosef...?" The Gemara then describes the great temptation Yosef faced in the incident in next week's parsha where his master's wife attempts to seduce him.

But hold on for a second! The Rasha could have argued back here. He

should have said: "Do you know why he was called Yosef the Tzadik? It is because he was from the spiritual elite of the world. He was one of Yaakov's Twelve Sons. I am a nothing but nothing. What can you expect from me?"

The Tzror HaMor cites a Midrash that says when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Yosef, he told her he refused to succumb to her enticements. She responded, "You may be unwilling to do it today, but tomorrow you are going to do it." He told her "You know what, you might be right." But nevertheless "He ran outside" because he was determined "At least I will save myself from sinning today!"

"For one more day, I will remain a Tzadik. Even if tomorrow, I know I will succumb to her enticements, let me accomplish what I can today." Sometimes, a person needs to take what he can – even if that falls short of what is ultimately the preferred accomplishment. Half a loaf is better than no loaf at all. As it turns out, Yosef fled, she slandered him, he was thrown into prison – and he never sinned.

What do we tell the wicked person? We know you are not Yosef the Tzadik – you are not telling us anything new. However, hold on for a day, hold on for an hour, behave yourself at least for the next half hour – that much you should have been able to accomplish. We expect this comparison to Yosef haTzadik from the wicked person. Take what you can get, but at least make the effort.

We are soon approaching the holiday of Chanukah. With the approach outlined above, we can gain new insight into the Chanukah story.

The Maccabees came into the Courtyard of the Bais Hamikdash and found total chaos. It was defiled and desecrated. The situation was terrible. What did they find? They found a small jug of undefiled olive oil with the seal of the Kohen Gadol. There was only enough oil to burn a single night (and according to one textual reading of the Midrash, there was not even enough oil to burn for one night).

What does a person do in such a situation? The default reaction is to do nothing! What is the point of resuming the Bais Hamikdash ritual under such circumstances? Does it make sense to light the Menorah for one night and then leave it unlit for another week or so until they put things back into order and the Bais Hamikdash service properly resumed on a permanent basis? Conventional wisdom would be to "do it right" – get new olives, press the olives, manufacture more olive oil, etc., etc. What were they thinking?

The answer is that they knew the approach of Yosef HaTzadik. They were minimalists. One night of lighting the Menorah is also something. One night is not "nothing." "Nothing at all" is a bigger "nothing" than the "nothing of one night."

Rav Yisroel Salanter used to advise that the seamstresses who were Mechallel [violated] Shabbos should at least sew with sewing machines rather than by hand on Shabbos because that involved less Sabbath desecration. What does that mean – "less Chillul Shabbos"? So what? Still, he felt that "less Chillul Shabbos" is better than "more Chillul Shabbos." Even though it does not solve the problem and it does not make them into Sabbath observers, nonetheless, this is the lesson of Judaism – to take whatever we can, to do whatever we can and hope that the Ribono shel Olam will make up the difference.

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Rav Kook Tora

VaYishlach: Reliance on Miracles

Miracles were no novelty for Rabbi Zeira. The Talmud in Baba Metzia 85a relates that the third-century scholar fasted for a hundred days in order to protect himself from the fires of hell. But Rabbi Zeira was not content with theoretical preparations. Once a month he would test himself by sitting down in a burning furnace, to see if he would feel the heat. He didn't. (Once his clothes were singed, but that story is for another time.)

Yet, on very windy days, Rabbi Zeira was careful not to walk among the

palm-trees, lest a strong wind should knock a tree over. His caution in orchards seems bizarre. Why should a man who can sit unharmed in a burning furnace be concerned about the possibility of a falling tree?

The Talmud (Shabbat 32a) counsels the following attitude towards miracles:

"One should never put himself in a dangerous situation and say, 'A miracle will save me.' Perhaps the miracle will not come. And even if a miracle occurs, one's merits are reduced."

The Sages learned that one should not rely on miracles from Jacob. When Jacob returned home after twenty years in Laban's house, he greatly feared meeting his brother Esau. He prayed to God, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faith that You have shown me" (Gen. 32:11). The Sages explained Jacob's prayer in this way: "I am unworthy due to all the kindness and faith that You have shown me." Your miracles and intervention have detracted from my merits.

We need to examine this concept. What is so wrong with relying on miracles? Does it not show greater faith? And why should miracles come at the expense of one's spiritual accomplishments?

The Function of Skepticism

Skepticism is a natural, healthy trait. Miracles can have a positive moral influence, but they also have a downside. Reliance on miracles can lead to a weakened or even warped sense of reality.

At certain times in history, God disrupted natural law in order to increase faith and knowledge. However, this intervention in nature was always limited as much as possible, in order that we should not belittle the importance of personal effort and initiative. This is where skepticism fulfills its purpose. Our natural inclination to doubt the occurrence of miracles helps offset these negative side effects, keeping us within the framework of the naturally-ordered world, which is the greatest good that God continually bestows to us. It is preferable that we do not rely on divine intervention, but rather say, "Perhaps a miracle will not occur."

Miracles and Nature

Ultimately, both miracles and natural events are the work of God. So how do they differ? A miracle occurs when we are unable to succeed through our own efforts. By its very nature, a miracle indicates humanity's limitations, even helplessness. When miracles occur, we are passive, on the receiving end.

Natural events are also the work of God, but they are achieved through our skill, initiative, and effort. When we are active, we spiritually advance ourselves by virtue of our actions. Our zechuyot (merits) are the result of the positive, ethical deeds that we have performed. We should strive for an active life of giving, not a passive one of receiving. Such an engaged, enterprising life better fulfills God's will - the attainment of the highest level of perfection for His creations.

Jacob "used up" merits when he required God's intervention to protect him from Laban and Esau. He admitted to God, "I am unworthy due to all the kindness and faith that You have shown me." But Jacob later regained spiritual greatness through his active struggle against the mysterious angel. "For you have struggled with angels and men, and have overcome them" (Gen. 32:29).

Rav Shlomo Aviner Shlit" a

Ha-Rav answers hundreds of text message questions a day. Here's a sample:

Blessing after Netilat Yadayim

Q: In my community, the custom is to wash Netilat Yadayim, dry one's hands, sit down at the table and then recite the blessing on Netilat Yadayim. Should I continue to do so?

A: The blessing is to be recited before drying one's hands. Piskei Teshuvot 158:25. And in the daily Halachah of Ha-Rav Ovadiah Yosef.. Reciting Blessings Quietly

Q: I apologize for asking a personal question and Ha-Rav obviously does not need answer. Why, when Ha-Rav gives a class, does he speak loudly so everyone can hear, but when he receives an Aliyah to the Torah, he recites the blessings softly?

A: It is simple. I cannot have fear of the audience in front of me, but I do have fear of Heaven, a little.

Killing a Terrorist

Q: If a soldier kills a terrorist should he be happy that he eliminated a murderer or sad that he killed a human being?

A: He should be happy that he eliminated a murderer, but he would obviously have been happier if this person had repented. For example, a surgeon who removes a limb which threatens a person's life, is happy that he saved his patient, but he would prefer that the limb would heal and there would be no reason to remove it.

Text Message Answers

Q: I send text message questions to Ha-Rav but I don't always receive an answer.. Is there a problem with Ha-Rav's cell phone?

A: No. But I never promised anybody that I would answer all the questions, and I am unable to do so. I receive 400 questions a day, and 700 a day around the holidays. If each text message question takes me 2 minutes, this is 1400 minutes, i.e. 23 hours a day. I therefore mainly answer emergency questions, and then other questions according to my ability. I apologize.

Rav or Wife

Q: If my wife asks me to help her with the kids at home, and my Rav asks me to help him to set up for a Siyum, whom should I help? My Rav brings me to the World to Come and my wife helps me in this world?

A: Ask your Rav directly.

Autist and Mitzvot

Q: Is a person with medium-functioning Autism obligated to fulfill the Mitzvot?

A: According to his ability, without pressure.

O.K.

Q: I heard that it is forbidden to say O.K. because it has its source in idol worship?

A: Its source is unclear but it is not from idol worship. It seems that it is an abbreviation of All Korrekt, which was corrupted from All Correct. In any event, it is a Mitzvah for us to speak Hebrew and not English.

Speaking in Hebrew

Q: Why does the Torah emphasize that Yaakov Avinu called the name of the place "Galed" (in Hebrew) and Lavan called it "Vagar Sahaduta" (in Aramaic)?

A: I heard an explanation from Ha-Rav Avigdor Nevenzal based on Sforno that this is in order to teach us that Yaakov Aviner continued to speak Hebrew even when he lived with Lavan (See Yerushalayim Be-Moadeha - Pesachim p. 52 where Rav Nevenzal noted various places in our prayers and blessings where we thank Hashem for our holy language).

Additional Guest in Hotel

Q: I am staying at a hotel and there are a few extra beds. Is it permissible for me to invite a few friends to stay with me, or is it a problem of theft?

A: Ask directly in the hotel.

High in the Thigh

The Mitzvah of Gid Hano'she

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

In the process of vanquishing his opponent wrestler, Yaakov Avinu was left with an injured thigh. To commemorate this event, the Torah teaches *al kein lo yochelu benei Yisroel es gid hano'she asher al kaf hayarech ad hayom hazeh ki naga bechaf yerech Yaakov begid hano'she*, "Therefore, the children of Israel may not consume the sinew that was displaced, which lies upon the 'spoon' of the thigh, since he struck the 'spoon' of Yaakov's thigh on the displaced sinew (Bereishis 32:33 with Rashi)." As we will see shortly, this pasuk is written with precision, and we derive most of the halachos of this mitzvah from its words.

We see from the pasuk that Yaakov's injury was that his "sinew" was "displaced." The word "sinew" is not a scientific term, but a household or butcher's term. Its Hebrew equivalent, *gid*, describes stringy body parts whose texture is too tough to chew comfortably, and may refer to nerves, tendons,

ligaments, or even blood vessels (see Rambam, Peirush Hamishnayos, Zevachim 3:4).

In Yaakov's case, the sinew involved is what is known in anatomy as the sciatic nerve, which runs through the pelvis and upper leg, from the lower back over the top of the hip and down the leg, at which point it divides into other nerves. The Torah describes this as the sinew that lies across the *kaf hayarech*, which literally means the "spoon of the thigh." This refers to a piece of muscle that lies atop the femur and that has a spoon-like shape. Part of the sciatic nerve lies on top of this muscle, wedged against the bone socket on the other side. The Torah prohibits the consumption of this nerve, notwithstanding that it is not tasty, nor really edible. (It is not technically accurate to translate *kaf hayarech* as the socket, since the socket is above or in front of the femur [depending on whether we are describing a two-legged or a four-legged animal] and above or in front of the sciatic nerve. I will note that this is not the only mistranslation of this verse I have found in works that are reputed to be authoritative.)

This mitzvah is not mentioned anywhere else in the Torah. According to the Sefer Hachinuch, which lists the mitzvos in the order of their appearance in the Torah, this is the third mitzvah and the first *lo saaseh* of the 613 mitzvos. An entire chapter of Mishnayos, the seventh chapter of Chullin, is devoted to this mitzvah. Let us understand its details.

Not for the birds

The Mishnah states that the prohibition of *gid hano'she* does not apply to birds, because they do not have a "kaf," which I have translated as the "spoon" of the thigh. Although birds have both a femur and a sciatic nerve, they are excluded from the prohibition of *gid hano'she* because the shape of their bones and muscles is different and does not fit the Torah's description of the mitzvah (Rambam, Hilchos Ma'achalos Asurus 8:4). The Rambam (Commentary to the Mishnah) explains that the reason for this law is because the structure of the bird's leg is very different from that of a man, and therefore not reminiscent of the miracle that occurred to Yaakov. (Those who would like to see an explanation of the Talmudic passage involved should look at the encyclopedic work *Sichas Chullin* and other contemporary works.)

The Gemara (Chullin 92b) discusses whether the halacha exempting birds from the prohibition of *gid hano'she* is true if a particular individual bird has an unusually shaped leg that resembles the "socket" of an animal, or, conversely, if the prohibition of *gid hano'she* still applies if an animal's leg is misshapen, such that the muscle on its upper femur is not shaped like a spoon. The Gemara does not reach a conclusion on this question. Since it is an unresolved halachic issue germane to a Torah prohibition, a *safek de'oraysa*, the Rambam (Hilchos Ma'achalos Asurus 8:4) and the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 65:5) conclude that both of these instances are prohibited.

Non-kosher species

Is the prohibition of *gid hano'she* limited to kosher species, or does it apply also to non-kosher species? This is actually a dispute among *tanna'im*. Rabbi Shimon contends that the prohibition of *gid hano'she* is limited to kosher species, whereas the *tanna'im* who disagree with him contend that the prohibition of *gid hano'she* applies equally to non-kosher species. In their opinion, the sciatic nerve of a horse, camel, pig or donkey is included in the prohibition of *gid hano'she*. The Rambam (Hilchos Ma'achalos Asurus 8:5) rules like Rabbi Shimon.

What difference does it make whether this sinew is prohibited as a *gid hano'she*, when it will be prohibited anyway as non-kosher? The answer is that since sinews have no flavor on their own, according to the opinion we will soon explain that *ein begiddin benosein taam*, sinews from a non-kosher species are not prohibited *min haTorah*. However, the *gid hano'she* would be prohibited *min haTorah*, according to the *tanna'im* who disagree with Rabbi Shimon.

Which thigh?

A person has two sciatic nerves, one on each leg. The verse implies that Yaakov was wounded on only one side. Which of his sciatic nerves was injured? Nothing overt in the story tells us. However, we can prove what happened from a passage of the Gemara, although we may be left to wonder how the Gemara knew this. There is a dispute among the *tanna'im* (Chullin 91a) whether the prohibition of *gid hano'she* applies to the sinews of both the right and left sides, or only to that of the right side. Both opinions understand that Yaakov was injured only in his right thigh. The question is whether Hashem prohibited the sciatic nerves of both sides so that we remember what happened, or only the one on the right thigh. We follow the opinion that it applies to both sides (Rambam, Hilchos Ma'achalos Asurus 8:1).

Inner and outer

On each thigh, there are actually two sinews that can be called the *gid hano'she* and are near one another. The inner *gid*, thus called because it runs alongside the bone on the interior of the animal, is the true *gid hano'she*, whose consumption is prohibited by the Torah. The outer *gid* does not lie on top of the thigh and is therefore not prohibited *min haTorah*. Nevertheless, Chazal prohibited eating the outer *gid*, also (Chullin 91a).

The tanna'im dispute how much of the inner gid is prohibited min haTorah. Rabbi Meir contends that the entire nerve is prohibited min haTorah (Chullin 92b), whereas the chachamim contend that, min haTorah, only the part of the gid lying atop the thigh bone is prohibited. In their opinion, the rest of the gid is prohibited only miderabbanan. A third opinion, that of Rabbi Yehudah, contends that the rest of the nerve is not prohibited even miderabbanan, and, therefore, he did not require its removal (Chullin 92b, 96a).

The dispute among the tanna'im appears to be how one translates the words of the Torah, the children of Israel may not consume the sinew that was displaced, which lies upon the "spoon" of the thigh. According to Rabbi Meir, the Torah is merely explaining the location of this sinew, but it is prohibited in its entirety. According to the other tanna'im, the prohibition is limited to the part of the sinew that "lies atop" the thigh, but not its continuation.

"Fat of the gid"

The sciatic nerve lies protected in a layer of fat. This fat is called shumano shel gid and is permitted min haTorah. However, already in the time of the Gemara it was established practice not to eat it (Chullin 91a). It is therefore treated halachically as an *issur derabbanan*, a rabbinically established prohibition, and it must be removed together with both the inner and the outer giddin.

How early?

The tanna'im also dispute whether the prohibition of gid hano'she began already in the days of Yaakov Avinu, or whether it was first prohibited when the Jews received the Torah at Har Sinai (Mishnah, Chullin 100b).

Chayos

The Mishnah teaches that the mitzvah of gid hano'she applies to all kosher mammals. This includes the species of beheimah and of chayah. In other words, although there are mitzvos that apply to beheimah but not to chayah, and vice versa, the mitzvah of gid hano'she applies to both.

It is difficult to define the differences between beheimah and chayah. Although we know that beheimah includes cattle and sheep, whereas chayah includes deer and antelope, the common definition of beheimah as domesticated species, and chayah as wild or non-domesticated species, is not halachically accurate. For example, reindeer, which qualify as chayah, are domesticated, whereas wisents and Cape buffalo, which are not domesticated, are probably varieties of beheimah. A more complicated, but far more accurate, definition of beheimah is a halachically recognized genus or category in which most common species qualify as livestock, and chayah is a halachically recognized genus or category in which most common species are not usually livestock.

The Gemara explains that it is dependent on the type of horn that the animal displays, but the terminology the Gemara uses to explain this is unclear and subject to disputes among the rishonim. Since we are uncertain which species are considered beheimah and which are considered chayah, we are stringent. This means any species of which we are uncertain is treated lechumra as both beheimah and chayah -- unless we have a mesorah, an oral tradition, about the halachic status of this species (see Shach, Yoreh Deah 80:1, as explained by the Pri Megadim).

Cheilev

The Torah forbade consumption of certain internal fats, called cheilev -- these are attached predominantly to the stomachs and the kidneys. Since the Torah prohibits consuming both cheilev and the gid hano'she, these forbidden parts must be removed from an animal before its meat can be eaten. This process is called "traberen," a Yiddish word that derives from tarba, the Aramaic word for cheilev. The Hebrew word for the process is "nikur," excising, and the artisan who possesses the skill to properly remove it is called a menakeir. It is interesting to note that the Rema (Yoreh Deah 64:7 and 65:8) points out in two different places that nikur cannot be learned from a text, only through apprenticeship.

Cheilev versus gid hano'she

There is a major difference between gid hano'she and the prohibition of cheilev. The prohibition of cheilev applies to species of beheimah, but not to chayah (Mishnah Chullin 89b). Thus, we have a difference in halacha between gid hano'she and cheilev, in that gid hano'she is prohibited in a chayah, whereas its cheilev is permitted.

This is germane in practical halacha. Because of the difficulty in removing all the cheilev correctly, many communities have the halachic custom not to traber the hindquarters, but, instead, to sell them to gentiles as non-kosher. However, many contemporary authorities have ruled that even those who have accepted this practice may still traber the hindquarters of a deer, which is definitely a chayah, to remove the gid hano'she, since the cheilev of a chayah is permitted. This is because the gid hano'she that is prohibited min haTorah is relatively easy to remove and does not involve as serious halachic issues as does the cheilev. Notwithstanding this heter, there is still a requirement that one who trabers the gid hano'she of a deer may do so only if he has been trained in performing this nikur.

The Mishnah

Having established the basic rules from the pasuk itself, we can now analyze more of the halachos of this mitzvah. An entire chapter of Mishnayos, the seventh chapter of Chullin, is devoted to understanding it. The opening Mishnah of this chapter begins as follows: (The prohibition of) gid hano'she applies both in Eretz Yisroel and in chutz la'aretz, both during the times of the Beis Hamikdash and when there is no Beis Hamikdash, regarding both chullin and sanctified offerings. It applies both to beheimos and to chayos, to both the right thigh and the left thigh. But it does not apply to birds, because they do not have a kaf.

The Gemara asks why the Mishnah needed to report that the prohibition of gid hano'she applies to kodoshim. Since animals are born as chullin, at the time of birth the animal's sciatic nerve becomes prohibited as gid hano'she. Why would we think that the prohibition of gid hano'she might disappear when the animal is declared to be holy?

To resolve this difficulty, the Gemara proposes the following solution: There is a dispute among tanna'im referred to as yesh begiddin benosein taam, sinews have flavor, or ein begiddin benosein taam, sinews do not have flavor. "Sinews" refer to the parts of an animal that are not tasty, but are eaten incidentally while consuming the tasty meat. The dispute is as follows: Since sinews are eaten only as part of a piece of meat, are they considered food? If they are not considered food, then other prohibitions, such as the mixing of meat and milk, or the prohibition of non-kosher species, do not apply to them min haTorah, since these prohibitions apply only to edible parts of an animal.

Thus, regarding the giddin of a kodoshim animal, if giddin are not considered food (ein begiddin benosein taam), then the prohibition of kodoshim does not apply. However, the sciatic nerve of a kodoshim animal is prohibited because of the prohibition of gid hano'she. The Shulchan Aruch concludes that ein begiddin benosein taam (Yoreh Deah 65:9).

Jewish identification

It is very interesting to note that, at times in Jewish history, the mitzvah of gid hano'she became the identifying characteristic of the Jew. Kaifeng, China, is a city of 4.5 million people on the southern bank of the Yellow River that attracts much tourism for its rich history. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, Kaifeng was the capital of China, and, for this reason, the city is known as one of the Seven Ancient Capitals of China. As history notes, when there are a lot of people, there is money to be earned, and when there is money to earn, one will usually find Jews.

At one point, over a thousand years ago, Jewish merchants from Persia and India settled in the area, created for themselves a Jewish community, and built shullen. Their shullen faced west toward Yerushalayim. Unfortunately, with the passing centuries, their descendants became completely intermarried and assimilated into the Chinese population. To this day, about 1,000 Kaifeng residents claim Jewish ancestry.

What does this have to do with the mitzvah of gid hano'she? The answer is that the Chinese identified the Jews with the practice of removing the gid hano'she, referring to Jews as the sinew-plucking people. Until recently, there was even a street in Kaifeng called "The Lane of the Sinew-Plucking Religion," a reference to the Jews who once lived there.

Jewish American identification

Not only the Chinese identified the Jews because of the mitzvah of gid hano'she. Many years ago, when I was a rav in a small community in the United States, a non-observant Jew was interested in making a strictly kosher wedding for his daughter, because he had frum friends whom he wanted to accommodate. His daughter was willing to have a kosher wedding, as long as it did not look "too kosher." I asked her what she meant that it should not look "too kosher," to which she answered: "no ribs and no briskets." I had been unaware that, to someone who did not keep kosher, forequarters meat, such as rib and brisket, is associated with "kosher-looking," whereas hindquarters meat, not consumed in many places because of the difficulties in removing the gid hano'she and the cheilev, is viewed as "non-kosher looking." Thus, the prohibition of gid hano'she defined a Jewish menu. (Fortunately, the executive chef of the hotel doing the kosher catering provided ideas for a perfectly kosher and very delicious meal that would, by the bride's definition, not look too kosher.)

Conclusion

Although above I translated the word noshe as "displaced," which is the approach of Rashi and therefore the most common rendering, Rav Hirsch understands that the root of the word noshe, similar to no'she, a creditor, means submission and powerlessness. Yaakov's gid had been dislodged by his adversary; he was unable to control the muscle that moves the bone. The nerve, muscle and bone all existed, but their use was temporarily hampered. Thus, the gid hano'she denotes temporary relinquishment, but not permanent loss. Ya'akov is a no'she, a creditor, who has quite a large account to settle with Eisav and his angel.

To quote the Sefer Hachinuch: The underlying understanding of this mitzvah is to hint to the Jewish people that, while in the exile, although we will undergo many difficulties from the other nations, and particularly the descendants of Eisav, we

should remain secure that we will not be lost as a people. At some point in the future, our offspring will rise and a redeemer will arrive to free us from our oppressor. By always remembering this concept through the observance of this mitzvah, we will remain strong in our faith and our righteousness will remain forever!

Certainly some very powerful food for thought the next time we sit down to a fleishig meal and note that we are eating only "kosher cuts!"

OU Torah

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

A Lion or a Bear?

A friend recently commented to me that nowadays, we are not only "multi-tasked," but we also have "multi-problems." When simultaneously beset by a number of problems, he continued, it becomes necessary to prioritize those problems and to decide which one is the worst. Then, we can tackle that problem first before we move on to the others.

Personally, I'm not so sure that we are the first generation to be involved in "multi-tasks," and I'm certain that we are not the first generation to face "multi-problems." Certainly, we, the Jewish people, have known times in our history when we confronted numerous problems at the same time, and over the course of our history, our problems were innumerable.

In fact, we even debate over which of our enemies was worse. For example, the question has been asked over and over again, "Who was worse? Pharaoh or Haman? Haman or Hitler?" Are we to judge our enemies by the extent of their sadism, by their success or failure, or by the number of their victims?

Last week, and again this week, the Torah portion gives us the opportunity to compare two of our classic enemies, Laban and Esau, with each other. Laban, to say the least, was inhospitable to our Forefather Jacob. He was ungrateful and deceitful. Moreover, we are told in the Passover Haggadah that he sought to completely undo us.

Certainly, he was a formidable enemy. But let's compare him to Esau. Remember that it was because of Esau that Jacob fled to find refuge in the house of Laban in the first place. Remember too that Rebecca herself informed Jacob of Esau's murderous intentions against him: "Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob... And Esau said to himself, 'Let the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob.'" Despite the statement in the Passover Haggadah, there is no clear evidence in the Biblical text itself that Laban wished to kill Jacob.

As we see in the opening verses of this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayishlach (Genesis 32:4-36:43), Jacob is far more frightened of Esau than he is of Laban. From the beginning of their relationship, Jacob is rather confident that he could deal with Laban's deceitfulness quite competently. Throughout their relationship, Jacob has no problem negotiating with Laban, and much to Laban's frustration, he eventually succeeds. Laban may intend to harm Jacob, but one divine dream dissuades him from doing so. Laban and Jacob part company relatively peacefully.

On the other hand, we quickly learn that Esau comes to meet Jacob with four hundred men, presumably well-prepared for battle. "Jacob was greatly frightened." He fears the overwhelming threat of Esau's attack and prepares for this attack by every means at his disposal: bribery, strategic maneuvers, and prayer.

Clearly, then, Esau is the greater enemy of the two. I always thought that that was because of Esau's wickedness—that is, until I recently came across a passage in the Midrash with which I was previously unfamiliar. I encountered it in one of the weekly sermons on the Torah portion delivered by one of today's Hasidic masters of both traditional Talmudic scholarship and profound spiritual wisdom. I refer to the Tolner Rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg, may he be well, who currently resides and teaches in Jerusalem.

The passage that Rabbi Weinberg brought to my attention begins with a verse in the writings of the prophet Amos (5:19): "As a man should run from a lion and be attacked by a bear..." The Midrash continues: "The man is Jacob... The lion is Laban from whom Jacob fled. He is called a lion because he pursued Jacob to take his life. The bear is Esau who attacked him on the road... The lion knows shame, the bear knows no shame."

I am certainly no expert on wildlife, but I'm sure we will all agree that the lion has a reputation for greater ferocity than the bear. Yet the Midrash considers the bear more dangerous. Why?

Rabbi Weinberg, in his analysis of this Midrash, focuses on the very essence of Esau's personality. He reminds us of the verse in last week's Torah portion in which we learned that "they called him by the name of Esau." Rashi informs us that "they"—all who knew him—called him "Esau," which means "completely made, all done, finished." Esau was a finished product. He was born resembling an adult, physically and behaviorally. And he remained that type of person throughout his life. He never changed.

There are people who are so confident of themselves, of their motives and attitudes and actions, that they see no reason to change. They are not open to criticism. They have not even a single measure of self-doubt. Such people, our Midrash suggests, can never be ashamed. They are bold and brazen and impervious to criticism. That is the nature of the bear, who knows no shame. Such a person is truly dangerous. Such a person was Esau.

The lion, on the other hand, is open to opinions. If he errs and is made aware of his errors, he feels ashamed. As a result, he takes his errors to heart and alters his behavior. He develops and grows and changes in the course of his interaction with others. He is willing to consider other people's perspectives. He can change his mind. Perhaps this is why he, and not the bear, is the king of beasts.

Let us move on from the animal kingdom and reflect upon two very different types of human beings. There are those who, like the bear, insulate themselves from the opinions of other people. They shut the door to the suggestions of others and close their ears to constructive criticism.

Not only do such individuals not develop over the course of their lifetime, but they pose a threat to society, especially if they are in positions of leadership.

But there are others who, like lions, not only tolerate criticism but seek it out. They know well the 48 qualifications for a Torah scholar. Among them are that he "love mankind, love righteousness and justice, and love admonishment." (Avot 6:6) That's right—love admonishment, love constructive criticism, love rebuke. That's how one grows to be a lion, a royal personality, a true talmid chacham.

In an earlier column, written just two weeks before this one, I contrasted the personality of the "Eagle," whose soars ever upwards toward the light, with the personality of the "Bat," who flees the light. This week, I contrast the "Bear," who cannot be ashamed and thus cannot develop and grow, with the "Lion," who lets himself experience shame and thereby is enabled to develop and grow.

The ideal Jewish leader is like the eagle and is always in search of new experiences and new opportunities. He is also like the lion who is not ashamed when others alert him to his faults, but who uses the input of others to foster self-improvement.

We can now comprehend that when our Sages speak of the eagles and bats and lions and bears, they are not being simplistic. Quite the contrary, they are wisely employing those simple creatures as templates for teaching us profound lessons about personal development.

Hopefully we will take those lessons to heart.

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Rabbi Hershel Schachter

Just One Mitzvah

When the messengers returned to Yaakov Avinu and reported that Eisav is on his way with four hundred men Yaakov was petrified. The Midrash comments that part of his concern was that his brother Eisav had been living in Eretz Yisroel all these years while he was living in chutz la'aretz and perhaps the zechus of observing the mitzvah of living in Eretz Yisroel would tip the scales in favor of Eisav in the event of a confrontation. But we know that Eisav was not an orthodox man; he violated many of the Torah's mitzvos. Why should his living in Eretz Yisroel be considered a zechus for him? Apparently, each one of the mitzvos is so precious and so significant that even if one does not observe all the rest of the mitzvos, the one mitzvah that the one does fulfill will certainly be considered a zechus for him. It is quoted in the name of Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld that perhaps Eliezer Ben Yehuda will go to Olam Habah because he was so instrumental in getting so many people to speak lashon ha'kodesh. Rabbi Sonnenfeld knew quite well that Ben Yehuda was far from being an observant Jew but nonetheless he thought that maybe the zechus of this single mitzvahalone merits one's share in Olam Habah.

Many years ago, Rabbi Mallen Galinsky z"l mentioned to me that he had a neighbor in Givat Shaul who was a descendent of a prominent chassidishe rebbe from over two hundred years ago. This person had a sefer in manuscript from his ancestor which he felt he was unable to print because readers would probably assume that the whole book was a forgery. This chassidishe rebbe from two centuries ago wrote in the manuscript that when the people from the dor ha'midbar who refused to go to Eretz Yisroel passed away and were brought in front of the heavenly court for judgment, they pleaded for mercy and asked if they could be brought back again by way of a gilgul into this world in order

to rectify the sin that they had committed. After much debate back and forth, the heavenly court finally gave in and permitted them to return to this world to be misakein the aveira that they did, but only on the condition that they only fulfill this one mitzvah of yishuv Eretz Yisroel; they were not allowed to fulfill any other mitzvah. Many of the secular Zionists who built up the medina did exactly that. Who would believe that anyone who lived two hundred years ago could have ever dreamt up such a "wild idea" that the generation of the dor ha'midbor would come back in a gilgul for the sole purpose of fulfilling only one mitzvah?

Many poskim are of the opinion that one can only convert an infant if the child will be raised by an observant family and given a proper Torah education. The gemorah tells us that converting infants who are unable to accept upon themselves the commitment to keep mitzvos is based on the principle of zochen la'adam sh'lo b'fonov. Rav Yitzchok Elchanan and many other major poskim felt that it is only a zechus for the infant if he will be brought up to be an observant Jew. In such a situation, we are not really doing the baby a favor by converting him but rather a disservice. Remaining a non-Jew who is not obligated in mitzvos would seem to be the more reasonable choice than converting to Judaism, being obligated in mitzvos, and not observing them. The author of the Kli Chemdah visited in America briefly and was extremely impressed by the extent to which the American Jews gave tzedakah. He published a teshuva where he suggests that even if the adoptive parents are not religiously observant (regarding habbos, kashrus, teffilin, etc.) but the adopted child will be brought up with this attitude of the significance of tzedakah, this case also should be considered a zechus for the infant. It is highly improper for human beings to pass judgment on other human beings. The possuk in Tehillim states, "Elokim Nitzov B'adas Keil", i.e. a beis din can only pass judgment on other human beings because we assume that the dayonim will have a Divine assistance to judge properly. We can never overestimate the value and the significance of any single mitzvah that others will fulfill.

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Vayishlach

פרשת וישלח תשל"ט

ויותר יעקב לבדו

Yaakov was left alone. (32:25)

Rashi cites Chazal (Chullin 91a) who posit that Yaakov Avinu had forgotten some *pachim ketanim*, small earthenware pitchers, and he returned for them. Clearly, these pitchers had inconsequential value. Yet, to Yaakov, they were valuable enough to return for them, even if it meant exposing himself to danger. From this, Chazal derive that to the righteous (not only Yaakov), their money is dearer to them than their bodies. Our Sages explain that since the righteous are meticulous in avoiding any form of dishonesty, their money represents integrity at its apex. Thus, it is dear to them. Wealth earned through honesty is unique; to the *tzaddik*, there is no other wealth. Thus, its spiritual value is significant. Yaakov's pitchers were vehicles of sanctity, which is a difficult concept to grasp, especially in context of today's materialistic society.

Horav Reuven Karlinstein, *zl*, notes that the *tzaddikim* whom he had met had no use for money. The *Chazon Ish*, for example, would take every penny given to him and immediately give it away to those in need. The *Satmar Rav* acted similarly. Those *gedolim*, Torah leaders, who appear to live more conspicuously are "victims" of *chassidim* and *talmidim* who provide for them in accordance with their personal perspective. The *gedolim* have no use for the material opulence that often surrounds them. I remember visiting Horav Aharon Leib Shteinman, *zl*, and pointing out to my grandson how the pulse of our nation beat from such spartan quarters. We were simultaneously taken aback and impressed by the austerity. From his white plastic chair, to his simple card table and bed, his "office" was the paradigm of ingenuousness. With this in mind, why do Chazal state that the material

possessions of the righteous are of greater value than their bodies, when, in fact, their material assets mean nothing to them?

Rav Karlinstein explains (in the name of the *Arizal*) that when one asks the average person about a material possession, he might say, "Where did you get this hat (or any other object)? The response will likely be "the hat store, etc"; "I received it as a gift." Concerning the *tzaddik*, the feeling is that he has received everything in his possession from Hashem as a gift. "Where did you get this pen?" "*Baruch Hashem*, I received it from Hashem." By what means did he receive this gift from Hashem? He earned some money, and he purchased it at Walmart. That is the vehicle, the medium by which Hashem gave him the pen, but, as far as he is concerned, the pen was given to him by the Almighty.

When a *tzaddik* eats, he feels that Hashem has provided this food for him. Everything that the *tzaddik* has in his possession is a gift from Hashem; thus, it is dear to him due to its Source. Yaakov valued the small pitchers not because of their intrinsic value, but because of what they represented: a gift from Hashem. Imagine receiving a gift from a great leader. It would be precious. One would never take his eyes off it, protecting it to the best of his ability.

Chazal say that *tzaddikim* appreciate their material assets because they never steal. Their money represents the height of integrity. The *Maggid* explains that money which comes into the possession of a person through inappropriate/questionable means – or, worse, blatant theft – is not money from Hashem. The Almighty does not gift a person money that is stolen. This is money that the individual appropriated on his own. The *tzaddik* is careful to take only such money that he is certain has Hashem's blessing.

ויאבק איש עמו עד עלות השחר

And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. (32:25)

Chazal (quoted by Rashi) say that the "man" who wrestled with Yaakov Avinu was no ordinary human; rather, he was the archangel of Eisav, who had been dispatched by Hashem to pave the way for the ultimate salvation of Yaakov and his descendants. We derive a portent for the future from their fight. Just as Yaakov was injured during the course of the struggle, but, nonetheless, he prevailed and went on to even greater achievements; so, too, will our People suffer losses in the future, but will emerge stronger, better, spiritually healthier – in preparation for our ultimate *geulah*, redemption.

Later on (*Bereishis* 37:15), Yosef *HaTzaddik*, upon searching for his brothers, encountered an *ish*, "man," who Rashi identified as Gavriel, Hashem's ministering Angel. The question that the commentators immediately ask is, "What is the criteria for defining *ish*?" Why is Yosef's *ish* Gavriel, while Yaakov's *ish* is identified as Eisav's Angel?

The answer (which has been mentioned in an earlier edition of *Peninim*), as explained by Horav Yechezkel, *zl*, *m'Kuzmir*, is that Yaakov transformed himself into a bridge for helping others. He would take what he received in one place and give it/use to (help) others. When he asked the *ish* to stay and help him, the *ish* replied that he was late for singing *shirah* to Hashem. His time had come; his purpose in Creation had arrived. He could not be late. Only Eisav's angel would employ his personal agenda as an excuse for not helping a Jew in need. When a Jew is suffering, when he is in dire need of assistance – one must come to his aid. Personal spiritual ascendance is not an excuse. It indicates a degree of selfishness, a deficiency in his spiritual integrity.

Yosef, on the other hand, was lost in the field. The *ish* took pity on him and asked him how he could help. Such an *ish* represents the highest form of *chesed*. He is someone who does not wait to be asked to help – but sees a need and immediately "rolls up his sleeves" and jumps in to help. Thus, he is identified as Gavriel.

Rav Yechezkel once sent a *shliach*, agent, to solicit funds from a certain wealthy man. When the *shliach* arrived at the home of the would-be benefactor, the man ignored him. Apparently, the man was in the middle of baking *matzos* for *Pesach*. He was just too busy to listen to anyone. "Take a number and come back" was probably his reply. The *shliach* returned to the *Rebbe* empty-handed and depressed. He was no

shmatte. He was on a mission for his *Rebbe*. He expected a little common courtesy. When he related his experience to the *Rebbe*, the *Rebbe* remained silent. On *Shavuos*, however, when the wealthy man came to Kuzmir to spend *Yom Tov* with the *Rebbe*, the *Rebbe* shared the above *dvar Torah* with him.

I was thinking about this Torah thought today when a harmless, but bothersome, well-meaning, but annoying, person wanted me to drop everything to listen to him relate the latest antics of his granddaughter. At first, I was tempted to avoid him, but then I realized that he had only one granddaughter after waiting some time for his only son to get married. Most of his counterparts have been blessed with many grandchildren. He has one – and his life revolves around her. Who was I to deprive him of his joy and *nachas*?

We think that our time, our *mitzvah* observance, our good deeds, take precedence over anything our friend or neighbor has to discuss with us. If it is important to him – it should be important to us (or at least we should act interested). I have a dear friend who has a puppy (I am scared of all animals – even goldfish.) Every conversation starts or ends with news about his puppy. This is important to him. Who am I to argue? It is not all about me. Eisav's angel indicated that his singing *shirah* took precedence over Yaakov's plea for help. The *Malach Gavriel* did not wait for Yosef to come over and ask for help. He reached out to him. We have before us two paradigms of behavior, two standards of service – two Angels: One represents Eisav; one represents Hashem. Do we really have a choice whom to follow?

ויאמר אליו מה שמך ויאמר יעקב... וישאל יעקב ויאמר הגידה נא שמך ויאמר למה תשאל לשמי

He said to him, "What is your name?" He replied, "Yaakov"... Then Yaakov inquired, and he said, "Divulge, if you please, your name." And he said, "Why then do you inquire of my name?" (32:28,30)

Eisav's angel asked Yaakov *Avinu* for his name. It is not as if he did not know his name. He simply wanted to know the source of Yaakov's strength, his power. Our Patriarch replied, "Yaakov. My power is in the heel. I enter the fray from the side, unnoticed. This is how I succeed." The angel said, "From now on, your name will be Yisrael, a name which implies strength. You will no longer have to come from the *eikav*, heel/side. You will come with strength."

Our Patriarch seemed content with this new designation. He now said to the angel, "Since we are discussing 'names,' and you inquired as to the source of my strength, let me ask you the same question: 'From where do you derive your power? What is your name?' How do you succeed in ensnaring people, seducing the unsuspecting, and using your guile to entrap those who do not know better? How do you convince people to see darkness and call it light; to see evil and call it good; to see and taste bitter and call it sweet?"

The angel replied, "Why, then, do you inquire of my name? This is the source of my strength: no questions!" The unsuspecting do not question. They live life in the fast lane, without pausing to think, to ask if perhaps what they are doing is wrong, dangerous, spiritually foolish. When one does not bother to ask, then he cannot be told that it is wrong. Some are too busy to question; others are either afraid that the reply will be negative, or they do not care about the reply. They are having too much fun. Why stop to ask questions?

This is how the venerable *Maggid, Horav Shabsi Yudelvevitz, zl*, explains their dialogue. If we would just pause for a moment to digest these words, to permit them to enter our minds and permeate our hearts. The *yetzer hora*, evil inclination (represented by Eisav's angel), understands that if a person stops to think, to ask, he will receive a negative reply – and he will refrain from doing the wrong thing. Thus, the *yetzer hora* sees to it that there is no time to ask, no breaks: "Live your life; go about your merry way; eat, sleep, enjoy, waste every minute of your day, but, absolutely do not pause to think." When one thinks, he questions – and the answers are not acceptable.

Question number one: What is my purpose in life? Why was I created? If we would even stop long to answer this question cogently,

we would put the *yetzer hora* out of business. This is what Eisav's angel replied to Yaakov, "Why now do you have to ask? Do not ruin all of the fun."

ויענו בני יעקב את שכנם ואת חמור אביו במרמה

Yaakov's sons answered Shechem and his father Chamor cleverly. (34:13)

Mirmah is usually translated as "treachery/deceit." In this instance, *Rashi* translates it as, *chochmah*, wisdom, or cleverness. This interpretation begs elucidation, since how much wisdom does it take to overpower a community of men on the third day following surgery, when they are in intense pain? One could hardly call this cleverness. The *Netziv, zl*, explains that "cleverness" in this case serves as a disclaimer, to declare that at no time did the brothers intend to accept this base people into their family. Shechem and his cohorts were not becoming Jews. The use of the word *mirmah* reminds us not to ever make such a mistake.

In a *drashah*, speech, on *Shabbos Vayishlach, Horav Yehonasan Eibeshutz, zl*, said that *Bnei Yaakov* were powerful enough to wipe out the city of Shechem. The people of Shechem deserved the punishment, and *Bnei Yaakov* could and would do it. The problem was: "What will the neighbors say?" The gentile nations that bordered on Shechem would certainly take umbrage with the fact that an entire people was killed out by Jews. They would take revenge. In order to circumvent such a reaction, the brothers suggested that the people of Shechem be circumcised, a ritual which leads to conversion. Word would spread that the Shechemites were now converted Jews. If this would be the case, the gentiles would not intervene. "If Jews kill Jews, it is none of our concern." That was a clever move on the part of *Bnei Yaakov*. They played on the age-old hatred that Eisav harbors for Yaakov – and it worked.

ויאמר יעקב אל שמעון ואל לוי עכרתם אתי להבאישני בישב הארץ... ויאמרו הכוזבה יעשה את אחתנו

Yaakov said to Shimon and to Levi, "You have discomposed me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land..." And they said, "Should he treat our sister like a harlot?" (34:30,31)

Yaakov *Avinu* rebuked his two sons for putting their lives and the lives of their entire family at risk when they killed all of the people of the city of Shechem. Shimon and Levi replied, *Ha'k'zonah yaaseh es achoseinu?* "Shall he treat our sister like a harlot?" We do not find Yaakov countering their argument, an indication that he conceded to their claim. *Chazal* teach that on the *Degel*, Banner/Flag, of the Tribe of Shimon, there is an allusion to the *maaseh Shechem*, the incident of Shechem. Apparently, if their revenge had been out of place, Yaakov could not have conceded, nor would the Banner have proudly displayed the incident.

Targum Yonasan ben Uziel explains Shimon and Levi's reply in the following manner: "It is not appropriate for it to be related among the Jews that gentiles acted with impunity in violating/contaminating a Jewish girl, treating her like a harlot; rather, it should be said that an entire nation was decimated because of its role in violating a Jewish girl. Let the whole world see the punishment that is meted out to those who abuse our girls.

Horav Aryeh Leib Bakst, zl, questions this explanation, wondering what the gist of their response was. Yaakov claimed that it was all after the fact. They had violated Dinah. The *chillul Hashem*, desecration of Hashem's Name, had been committed. However they responded afterwards did not alter the *chillul Hashem*. What was to be gained by risking their lives and the lives of their collective family just to prove a point? What point? The *chillul Hashem* sadly was a done deal. Over. Finished. It was time to move on. These people were savages. Our family is small and weak. They could rise up against us and wipe us out. What did Shimon and Levi achieve with their vengeance?

Shimon and Levi countered, "We cannot allow them to treat our sister like a harlot." In other words, they argued that a *chillul Hashem* had been committed. We know that. What did their response

add to the situation? The *chillul Hashem* was done and complete. It was the Jews who would speak about this in their gathering places. If nothing would have been done to demonstrate to the Jews that a gentile cannot act with impunity against a Jewish girl – then it would have been a *chillul Hashem*. If, however, an entire nation was to be decimated because they violated Dinah, it would mitigate the *chillul Hashem*, showing that no one hurts a Jew and is able to talk about it.

We may offer an alternative perspective on the debate between Yaakov and his sons. In his *Haamek Dayar* commentary to *Chumash*, the *Netziv*, *zl*, distinguishes between the terms: *zonah*, harlot, and *temeiah*, contaminated (woman). A *zonah* is a consenting adult who agrees to a liaison with another party, gentile or not. A *temeiah* is a contaminated woman who has been violated against her will. The brothers claimed that if they stood by and did nothing, people would perceive their sister to be a *zonah*, a girl who willingly cohabited with a gentile. This would be a grievous error and a flagrant *chillul Hashem*. By acting decisively against Shechem and his supporters, however, the Jewish People would be sending out a clear message: our sister was the victim of an egregious sin, an act of debasement, a violation of her womanhood and a wanton act of incursion against the Jewish People of whom Dinah was a princess. Perhaps they would not be able to reverse the *chillul Hashem*, but they could see to it that their sister's good name not be besmirched.

Regardless upon which approach we decide, one thing is clear: Yaakov *Avinu* did not counter their argument. What about *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying Hashem's Name? May one risk his life to sanctify Hashem's Name under such circumstances that his actions would not make a difference? The damage had been done. Giving up his life would only add to the "collateral damage." The gentiles would just chalk up another dead Jew. They certainly would neither lose any sleep over it, nor would they be impressed by Jewish action. The following three short incidents, recorded by Shimon Huberband, demonstrate that a Jew acts *al Kiddush Hashem* because glorifying Hashem's Name is part of the Jewish psyche – regardless of one's religious affiliation or commitment. It is who we are and what we do.

In September 1939, the *reshaim*, wicked ones, arrived in Bendin, Poland, and immediately surrounded the Jewish quarter. With the *shul* in the midst, they proceeded to set fire to the *shul* and the houses alongside it. Any Jew who attempted to escape the burning house was shot. Nonetheless, even as the flames engulfed their *shul*, a number of heroic Jews, led by a fellow named Schlesinger, his sons and sons-in-law, ran into the burning edifice. They fought their way to the *Aron HaKodesh*, Holy Ark, and every one of them succeeded in rescuing two *Sifrei Torah*, one in each arm. When they emerged from the inferno, the *Sifrei Torah* in their arms, they were promptly shot by the *reshaim*. Thus, they died *al Kiddush Hashem*. They knew they would die, but they wanted their last deed on this world to be an act of protecting the Torah. These men were the true heroes of the Holocaust. It is so easy for the alienated secular Jew to sit on his couch and question why the Jews went like sheep to the slaughter. Do they even understand the meaning of spiritual heroism? Veritably, how could they, since they have no idea concerning the meaning of spirituality?

The second story concerns an incident that occurred in Piotrkow, Poland. A carful of Nazi beasts arrived one day, drove straight to the *shul*, dragged out thirty *Sifrei Torah* and lay them down in shame in the middle of the town square. They posted a 24-hour guard, lest some Jew "steal" the Torahs. A few days passed, and a Bundist leader by the name of Avraham Weisshof could no longer tolerate the shame of the *Sifrei Torah* lying in the street. He gathered together a group of Bundists, and they devised a plan for retrieving the Torahs during the night when the guards would be sleeping. They did this, and one-by-one they buried the *Sifrei Torah* in the local cemetery. We must remember that the members of the Bund were Socialists/Communists, irreligious Jews who had alienated themselves from their ancestral faith. In the past, this Bundist leader had referred to the Torah scroll as being no more than a fancy piece of parchment. Yet, he and his men risked torture

and death to show honor to the *Sifrei Torah*. How did a group of assimilated Jews risk everything for something in which they did not believe? Obviously, the "essential" Jew lies beneath the façade of external assimilation. *Kiddush Hashem* is a fundamental component of the Jew's DNA.

The third incident took place in Radzymin, Poland, where a devout *Chassidic* Jew named *Rav Yitzchak Meir Kaminer* lived. The Nazis were savages who relished conjuring up cruel ways of debasing their victims as they murdered them. They felt that as long as a dominant Jewish spirit existed, they would not succeed in destroying us. Here, too, they failed. They ordered *Rav Kaminer* to don his *Chassidic* garb, *shtrimmel*, *bekeshe*, *Tallis* and *Tefillin*. They then took him to the town square where they had erected a large cross. They placed him next to the cross and ordered him to kiss it. When he blatantly refused, the policemen threatened that they would not simply shoot him; they would beat him to death mercilessly. *Rav Kaminer* looked them straight in the face and said, "No." He remained unmoved as they began to beat him relentlessly like wild beasts, until they thought he was dead. After the Nazis left him beaten and bloodied, a few Jews went over to check on him. He was still breathing! Immediately, they picked him up and carried him to a doctor who managed to save his life – a tribute to his *Kiddush Hashem*.

The Jew neither lies down, nor does he back down, because he does not live for himself. Hashem gave him his life, and Hashem will take it when his time has come. Until then, he is on Hashem's "time."

Va'ani Tefillah

'יהמו רהמיך ד' – *Yehemu rachamecha Hashem*. May Your mercy be activated.

Hashem's mercy surrounds us at every minute, at every juncture of our existence. Without His mercy, we could not possibly be alive. *Horav Shimon Schwab*, *zl*, explains that while we know that Hashem's mercy is what keeps us going (so to speak), we ask that we "feel" and notice it more. For example, the air we breathe is a manifestation of Hashem's mercy, but we feel it only when the wind blows. We implore Hashem to make His mercy more evident to all of the aforementioned. We may know that something is "there," but, unless we actually feel it, we are apt to lose sight or take it for granted. We recite a beautiful *Tefillah*, prayer, thrice daily in the *Modim/hodaah*/Thanksgiving section of *Shemoneh Esrai: V'al nifliosecha v'tovosecha she'b'chol eis, erev, va'voker, v'tzaharayim*; "And for Your wonders and favors in every season – every morning and afternoon." If we would just slow down a bit and take notice of what it is that we are saying, our *davening* would be that much more meaningful. Do we need a health scare to remind us to be thankful? The very fact that we ask Hashem to "activate" His mercy, when we know that it is present, is a clear indication that we take so much for granted.

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