

Vayishlach: Possess Your Possessions

- Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz.

In speaking to non-observant Orthodox members, he pleads that the haftorah's words, "House of Jacob, Possess your Possessions", are significant. It is possible to own things and not possess them. Are our children really ours in heart as well? Do we really possess the Bible we have, the books we have on our shelves, or are we merely legal owners?

VAYISHLACH: POSSESS YOUR POSSESSIONS

(This is a sermon based on Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz, z"l, "Sparks From the Anvil". He was then Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of Johannesburg and the Transvaal. It is obviously dated, and applies to the kind of non-observant Orthodox affiliated members that comprised his membership at that time. The complexion of South Africa has changed a great deal since then. The most important institution that had done most to make South Africa more frum and learned, is the Yeshiva College of South Africa, founded and created by Rabbi Yechiel-Michel Kossowsky, zt"l, my father-in-law, assisted by Rabbi Joseph Bronner, yibadel lechayim, who is now in Los Angeles. Their partnership in creating the Yeshiva College at that time, led to the formation of many other Torah institutions, Kollels, and so on. Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris, the current Chief Rabbi of South Africa, continues to develop the Jewry of that country in the direction set by the Yeshiva College. The point of this sermon, though applied to another time, is a good one, and can be made currently meaningful, applying it to our communities and especially to our families, by choosing other examples, yet applying the words of Ovadiah as Rabbi Rabinowitz did. I therefore made very few changes in the original, leaving it for you, the recipient, to adapt it. [Ed.]

The haftorah today comes from the book of Obadiah, the shortest book in the Bible, and consists of only one chapter. It reflects the struggle between Yaakov and Esav in our Torah portion. Ultimately to Yaakov will be the victory in the future years, just as in the Torah portion Yaakov triumphed when the dawn came after that lonely night of wrestling with the angel of Esav.

There is one passage in this haftorah that is quite puzzling. The passage is Veyarshu bet Yaakov et morasheyhem; The Hertz Chumash Rabbi Hertz translates, "The house of Yaakov will possess their possessions." That is an accurate translation, but isn't it a strange statement? Evidently it is possible to have possessions and yet not possess them.

In our daily conversation, for example, we speak of having children. Many people only beget children, but do they really have them? Do they enjoy their confidence? When they are about to choose a spouse, do the children care for the opinion, the advice, or the feelings of their parents? Recently, a couple came to see me about getting married. I usually offer to meet a second time before the marriage, this time with the entire family. This couple answered, "Not necessary, Rabbi. We're in love, and that's all that matters! It's our wedding after all!" Those parents must have labored and spent sleepless nights on their children's account, and yet the children were willing to rob them of their parental status in so crucial a matter as marriage.

We have children, but are they spiritually ours? Of how many can it be said, as was written of

Abraham and his son Isaac that "They walked together" - that father and son shared a spiritual affinity, served the same G-d and believed in the same moral principles? A young man told me he was going overseas for the holidays this year. I asked him, "Why? Your father will be in shul and I know that he is very happy when you are sitting next to him. Why should you go and deprive him of that nahas? To which he replied, "I'll tell you the truth. When I go to shul with my father he watches me like a hawk. He knows when I come in and when I go out. When I sit near him, I can't get away with anything. I must daven! But when I go away, I am a free man. I go in to a shul for a few minutes, do my duty, say a few words, and then I have the whole day to myself to do with as I please."

Do we enjoy the love of our children? You and I know people who have many children, but when they really need them they have no one to turn to.

Let us therefore pray with the old prophet to be privileged to live to possess our possessions and to enjoy the confidence and respect of our children.

In the stately homes of England there is usually a library, and the more stately, the more impressive the shelves of books. It is fashionable for people to have bookshelves built into the walls and books with expensive bindings on them. The book was in fact the crown of the Jewish home, not necessarily new books, but books well used and worn. We cannot say that now. A woman once came to a book department of a large store and asked for five yards of books with white and gold bindings to match the colour design of her library. Such a person could not really possess the books she bought. What understanding could such a woman who buys books by the yard have of Shakespeare, Milton, Browning, or Burns?

External ownership and legal title are not enough. That makes us owners of objects only in a physical and legal sense. External ownership will enable us to possess a house, but not a home. It will provide us with books but not with knowledge. It will give us acquaintances, but not friends, and a book must become a friend. It will enable us to amass a fortune, but not to attain contentment and peace.

How can one speak of owning a siddur when he does not pray, or a kiddush cup when he does not recite kiddush over it? How can one possess a candlestick and not kindle the Sabbath and festival candles, or a talit and not wear it?

A religious bookseller told me that a well-dressed woman came to his store and asked for a talit for her husband. He showed her a large and expensive talit, which she rejected saying, "It's much too large. I want something smaller." He showed her a smaller size. Again, the same. This went on until he showed her a very small talit. What that too was too large, he asked, "Madam, is your husband a midget?" "O no!", she answered. "He's six feet tall! But, you see, for the once a year hat he'll use it, the smallest talit you have will be good enough."

Here we are in a beautiful Synagogue. I don't know when I have seen one more beautiful. Many people here realise what a treasure we have. But all of us sometimes say, "If only more people would use it! If only they would possess their possessions!"

That is the message of Ovadiah. Fitting and appropriate for the Torah portion which deals with Yaakov, and his children and his possessions, a portion whose haftorah calls out to all of us to become worthy of the gifts with which we are entrusted. THE PROPHET OVADIAH MANAGED TO CRAM INTO ONE PHRASE, A POWERFUL APPEAL TO US ALL:" HOUSE OF YAAKOV, POSSESS YOUR POSSESSIONS!"

Submitted by Nisson Shulman