

Vayishlach: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt"l, 1958

- Vehalachta bidrachav is a lesson from Vayishlach, where Hashem demands no more than the vow Yaakov made be fulfilled, and not more, even though he owes Him much more. Yaakov is not told not to be afraid, as Hashem told Avraham and Yitzchak, for Yaakov's struggle is one for all generations.

VAYISHLACH: SHIUR HARAV

(Wed Jan 3 22:58: mj-ravtorah@shamash.org)

I have made a few minor adjustments in the text, but only for the sake of clarity (Ed.)

And G-D said to Yaakov go up to Beth El and stay there. Make an altar there for the G-D who appeared to you when you fled from Esav your brother.”

In the next pasuk Yaakov tells his family to discard the idols which they have in preparation for the ascent to Beth El, where he would build an altar for ‘the G-D who answered me in my time of need and was with me on the path which I traveled’. The question is obvious: Why did Yaakov change the description of G-D from that which G-D himself had used?

There is a Mussar Haskel to be learned from the above. It is a lesson in Vehalachta Bidrachav, emulating the ways of Hashem. The humility of Hashem is clearly demonstrated by the way Hashem asks Yaakov to pay his vow. Hashem only reminded Yaakov of the vow that he had taken upon awakening from the vision of the ladder. Yaakov promised that he would give thanks to Hashem if Hashem would return him home in peace to his father and provide him with the bare physical necessities of life (clothing and food). As it turned out, not only was Yaakov saved from Esav, but also many miracles were done on his behalf and he returned home a wealthy man. However Hashem (Bereishit 35:1) only asked Yaakov to build an altar in thanksgiving for his delivery from Esav, i.e. to fulfill the conditions of his original vow. Hashem did not ask for the complete Hakarat Hatov which would have included such major miracles as the defeat of Shechem, protection from reprisals of the neighboring lands, his deliverance from Lavan and the wealth he amassed. Yaakov understood on his own that he owed Hashem a tremendous Hakarat Hatov. Hence his announcement to his family that he was to build an altar to Hashem who answered him in all the times of trouble and who accompanied him throughout all his travails.

The Mussar Haskel is for us to emulate the ways of Hashem and the response of Yaakov. One who is in a position to grant a favor to another should not limit his largesse to the minimum amount requested. In turn the one requesting the favor should show proper Hakarat Hatov that recognizes the complete scope and extent of the favors that were done for him (e.g. the concept of Chesed Shel Emet).

When Avraham defeated the four kings the posuk says "Do not fear, Avraham, your reward is very great". The Ramban comments that Avraham was afraid that the kings whom he had just defeated would regroup and attack him. About this G-D tells him not to worry. When Moshe was about to enter into battle with Og G-D told him not to fear him. However, when Yaakov fears

Esav “And Yaakov was very much afraid and it pained him”, G-D does not reassure him telling him not to be afraid!

The Rav explained that in the cases of Avraham and Moshe each was concerned about a one-time conflict. (Ed: Hashem anticipated the fear of Avraham and Moshe and calmed them before they could even express the fear they felt). Yaakov however foresaw a conflict down through the ages – “until I come to my master to Seir” upon which the Medrash, noting that there is no pasuk stating that Yaakov actually came to Seir, teaches that this refers to the coming to Seir in the times of Mashiach “and the redeemer will ascend Mt Zion to judge the mountain of Esav”. Yaakov fears the struggle with Esav which begins here and stretches out across the millennia. That is the fear he expresses. He cannot be told not to be afraid of this struggle. The conflict is too long and bitter.

Chazal interpret the displacement of the thigh of Yaakov as the loss of Jews in times of shmad. Can Yaakov be reassured not to fear Esav in such a protracted struggle? Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi and Antoninus were the closest of friends, yet when Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi went to see this “friend”, he first consulted the parsha of Vayishlach. The struggle is too long and the gap between Yaakov and Esav is too wide and unbridgeable. That is why Yaakov was afraid. And that is why G-D could not reassure him.

The Rav concluded this shiur with the following observation: Vayira Yaakov m’od vayetzer lo. Rashi comments Vayira Yaakov that he should not be killed and vayetzer lo that he should not kill others. The Rav commented that Yaakov, knowing that the conflict with Esav will continue through the ages, was afraid that Bnei Yisrael might adopt the modus operandi of Esav, that of yadayim y’dei Esav, and thus Yaakov’s children might sink to the level of Esav.

[Dr. Israel Rivkin, Gershon Dubin, Arnie Lustiger, Josh Rapps. Permission to reprint and distribute, with this notice, is hereby granted. These summaries are based on notes taken by Dr. Rivkin at the weekly Moriah Shiur given by Moraynu V’Rabbeinu Harav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveichik ZT’L over many years.]