

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת וישלח

ויאמר יעקב אלקי אבי אברהם ואלקי אבי יצחק ה' האמר אלי שוב לארצך ולמולדתך ואיטיבה עמך

“Then Yaakov said: G-d of my father Avraham and G-d of my father Yitzchak; Hashem who said to me: Return to your land and to your relatives and I will do good with you” (32:10)

One of the strategies that Yaakov employed in order to defend himself against Esav was prayer. Yaakov understood the power of tefillah and that communicating with Hashem was one of the best ways to protect himself from Esav and his men.

In order to gain a better appreciation of tefillah and its importance, we need to understand where the text of our prayers came from and why they were written. Early in the period of the בית שני, Ezra and his court, the אנשי הגדלה, wanted to do something to unite the Jews and prevent them from assimilating among their host nations, as many Jews were still living in exile. Ezra also understood that the בית שני was unable to fill the spiritual void that was created by the destruction of the בית ראשון. It would be destroyed and it also did not match the grandeur or sanctity of the בית ראשון. These sages decided to institute a uniform text of prayers which would be recited by all Jews around the world every day. R' Chaim Volozhin wrote in his sefer Nefesh HaChaim that it is not for naught that it took 120 of the greatest sages, among whom were some prophets, to author the prayers that we say today. Obviously, it must have been written with great Divine inspiration and insight. These prayers give a person the ability to achieve a closeness to Hashem and to establish a one-on-one conversation with Him. The siddur also functions as a mobile miniature בית המקדש. A person can take it with him wherever he goes and become closer to Hashem.

ויאמר עשו יש לי רב אחי יהי לך אשר לך

“Esav said: I have plenty. My brother, let what you have remain yours” (33:9)

The Kli Yakar points out a distinction between the way that Yaakov and Esav describe their possessions. Esav says that he has “a lot” while Yaakov says that he has “everything.” A wicked person is never satisfied with his material possessions. No matter how much he has, it is not enough to meet his needs and he must always have more. As Chazal famously state, “One who has 100 desires 200.” A righteous person is the exact opposite. No matter what he has, be it a lot or a little, the righteous person is satisfied with what Hashem has given him and desires nothing more than his allotted portion. His happiness with what he has makes him feel as if he has everything he could possibly need. The different attitudes that Esav and Yaakov had regarding their wealth is reflected in their descriptions of their assets.

וישב ביום ההוא עשו לדרכו שעירה

“So Esav started back that day on his way toward Seir” (33:16)

Why does the Torah tell us that Esav returned to Seir? The Tzror HaMor explains that when Esav heard from Yaakov about the special protection that he had merited from Hashem in his encounters with Lavan and the angel, had an opportunity to learn from Yaakov and change his evil ways. When a person finds himself inspired, he has the opportunity to seize the moment and grow to higher levels. Esav had that opportunity but he failed to capitalize on it. He should have jumped at this chance to be honest with himself and recognize the truth. The Torah tells us that he did not do that. Instead, he went back to Seir, to his old home and to his old ways. Meeting Yaakov and hearing about how Hashem had guarded him from harm made no impression on him whatsoever. He had his chance and he missed it.

Later on in the parsha, we find that the Torah again hints to an opportunity that Esav had when he could have changed his ways and improved himself. Rashi (36:3) points out that Esav’s wife Basmah is referred to as Machalas at the end of Parshas Toldos. In truth, her real name was Basmah. The added name Machalas is from the root "מחל," "to forgive." This teaches us that one who gets married has all his sins forgiven at the time of his wedding. The Magen Avraham in סי' תקע"ג implies that this is true for men and women and writes that this is the reason why the

bride and groom fast on their wedding day. Marriage is a chance to start life anew and begin again. Hashem gives a person the chance to begin with a clean slate at this auspicious moment. Obviously, this potential for forgiveness only works if the bride and groom repent at the time of their wedding as well. This may be the reason why they recite the וידוי, confession prayer, at mincha on the day of their wedding.

R' Moshe Feinstein asks: Why is this point taught to us specifically in connection with the marriage of Esav? He answers that this shows us the extent of Esav's wickedness. Esav had the opportunity to change when he got married but he let this opportunity go by. Many times opportunity stares us in the face and we fail to take advantage of it. When we are faced with certain life-changing events, such as marriage, that provide us with a chance to change, we must seize those opportunities and improve ourselves.

The Gemara in מגילה י"א cites the final posuk of our parsha, "He is Esav," as a proof that he was always Esav, he was wicked from the beginning of life until his end. The Torah Temimah explains that unlike Yishmael, Esav did not repent at the end of his life. At Avraham's burial, the posuk writes that Yitzchak preceded Yishmael. Chazal see this as proof that Yishmael repented later in life and recognized Yitzchak's greatness. When the parsha records Yitzchak's burial, it states that Esav preceded Yaakov. This indicates that he still held fast to his old habits and never changed his ways, despite the opportunities presented to him.

ויעקב נסע סכתה ויבן לו בית ולמקנהו עשה סכת על כן קרא שם המקום סכות
“But Yaakov journeyed to Sukkos and built himself a house, and for his livestock he made shelters; he therefore called the name of the place Sukkos” (33:17)

What was notable about the animal shelters that Yaakov built that they were inspiration for the name of the town Sukkos? The Or HaChaim suggests that Yaakov was the first person who was felt pity for the animals who had to live outside and built shelters in order to protect them from the elements. Because this was a novel concept, the place where this happened was named Sukkos for the remarkable event. We can learn from Yaakov Avinu that it is important to care for all of Hashem's creatures.

ויקן את חלקת השדה אשר נטה שם אהלו מיד בני חמור אבי שכם במאה קשיטה
“He bought the parcel of land upon which he pitched his tent from the children of Chamor, Shechem’s father, for one hundred kesitas” (33:19)

The Midrash on this posuk says that this is one of the three places that the nations of the world cannot claim that the Jews stole as it was purchased legally. These three places are the מערת המכפלה (which Avraham bought from Efron), the burial place of Yosef (Shechem, which Yaakov purchased), and the location of the בית המקדש (which Dovid HaMelech bought).

R’ Nissan Alpert comments that we can see these three purchases reflected in the three stages of how the Jewish people are returning to Eretz Yisrael. The first stage was when people would travel to Eretz Yisrael in their old age or purchase burial plots in the holy land. This is symbolized by Avraham’s purchase of land in order to bury Sarah Imeinu. The next stage is the current times, when people buy land from the Arabs and actually live a full life in the Eretz Yisrael, which has become a home for the Jewish people. This is symbolized by Yaakov’s purchase of land on which to build a house. The third stage is the redemption and the construction of the בית שלישי. This is symbolized by Dovid’s purchase of the place that would be the location of Hashem’s house.

ויצב יעקב מצבה על קברתה הוא מצבת קברת רחל עד היום
“Yaakov set up a monument over her grave; it is the monument of Rachel’s grave until today” (35:20)

The Malbim writes that the posuk twice mentions that the monument of Kever Rachel is not a monument for Rachel herself, but rather a monument for her grave. This is different from other tombstones, which are a way of ensuring that the person is remembered. Rachel’s tomb is remembered because of her. Rachel’s personality and her special character are still known by all to this day and it is because of this that people flock to her tomb. Leading a fruitful life is what stands as a remembrance of the righteous and ensures that their deeds and lives endure for all generations in a way that no epitaph ever could. In fact, the Vilna Gaon writes that the Torah tells us that מצבת קברת רחל was the full text of her epitaph because nothing more needed to be said.