



ארגון רבני צהר



הסתדרות הציונית העולמית
המערך לשירותים רוחניים בתפוצות

Parashat Vayeshev What Motivates You?

-Rabbi Uriel Ganzel-

What motivates Yaakov? As the successor to Avraham and Yitzchak, we would assume that the foundational values that guided his forefathers would have constituted a primary focal point in the constitution of Yaakov's life. A reading of Yaakov's complex and turbulent life story demonstrates an interesting trend.

Yaakov was dispatched to Haran by his father, Yitzchak, to find himself a fitting wife, i.e. one who was not plagued by the customs of the Land of Canaan: "You shall not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Padan Aram, to the house of Betuel, your mother's father, and take yourself from there a wife of the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother" (Bereishit 28:1). However, it is difficult to shake the feeling that Yaakov did not really travel to Haran to search for a wife, but rather primarily to escape his home at the behest of his mother: "Behold, your brother Esav regrets [his relationship] to you [and wishes] to kill you. And now, my son, hearken to my voice, and arise, flee to my brother Lavan, to Haran" (Bereishit 27:42-43). The haphtarah portion further emphasizes this point: "And Yaakov fled to the field of Aram" (Hoshea 12:13).

The fear factor is clearly evident as a driving force when Yaakov left Haran as well: "And Yaakov saw Lavan's countenance, that he was not disposed toward him as [he had been] yesterday and the day before" (Bereishit 31:2). This was also how he described his motives to his wives: "I see your father's countenance, that he is not disposed toward me [as he was] yesterday and the day before" (Bereishit 31:5).

This explanation is extremely surprising. We would have assumed that after 20 years in exile Yaakov would have been rushing to return home, even if he had not felt threatened by Lavan, particularly since he still had to fulfill the vow that he took at Bet El prior to his departure for Haran (and as the angel explicitly reminded him: "I am the God of Bet El, where you anointed a monument, where you pronounced to Me a vow" (Bereishit 31:13)) and presumably also missed his elderly parents: "to come to Isaac his father, to the land of Canaan" (Bereishit 31:18). Instead, we are told again that fear and anxiety represented a primary element in Yaakov's decision making process.

We might have expected that upon returning to the Land of Israel, Yaakov's first stop would have been at Bet El, where he would fulfill his vow, or perhaps at the home of his parents who he had not seen for 20 years. Yaakov, however, surprisingly chooses to settle in the vicinity of the town of Shechem, and he did not leave that place until his sons, Shimon and Levi, killed all of the male inhabitants of Shechem and Yaakov began to fear remaining in the area: "and I am few in number, and they will gather against me, and I and my household will be destroyed" (Bereishit 34:30). Only later did Yaakov go to fulfill his vow and return home to visit Yitzchak.



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This recurring theme in Yaakov's life requires some explanation. Marrying a fitting woman at the behest of his father, fulfilling a vow made to Hashem and returning to his parents' home after 20 years of absence and wandering are not sufficiently important values to motivate Yaakov to act? Why is it only that when he felt threatened did he move on? What happened to the tradition of proactivity that Yaakov learned from his forefathers?

Yaakov merited what Avraham and Yitzchak before him did not: "that his bed was pure before Him and did not contain any waste" (Shir Hashirim Rabbah 3:6). Ishmael and the concubine children were banished from Avraham's house and Esav was sent away from that of Yitzchak and Rivka, while all of Yaakov's children merited inclusion in his house and serve as our namesake as the children of Israel.

I suggest, then, that Yaakov's focus was directed inward, toward his family and the education of his children, to the extent that Hashem was forced to periodically remind him of his other functions by means of external threats.

One often pays a familial price when dedicating themselves completely and thoroughly to the public domain and the pursuit of their ideals. Yaakov teaches us that one must also invest in their own family, even if certain ideal pursuits must be temporarily pushed off. Yaakov's family survived difficult challenges that threatened its combustion and ultimately ended up a unified and inclusive unit.

The issue of balance between personal and public pursuits versus investment in family is one that challenges many. We often find that reality forces a person to give of himself to the extent that without realizing he or she pays a steep familial price. Yaakov demonstrates that finding a proper balance between the two ideals leads to the foundation of an everlasting structure.

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