

Parshat Vayeitzei

Yaakov’s Sheep: The Key to Serving G-d

While at the home of Lavan, Yaakov Avinu occupied himself with shepherding and amassing flocks of sheep. This Sicha discusses the spiritual significance of these sheep, and the lessons they impart in our service of the Almighty.

Parshat Vayeitzei opens with Yaakov’s departure from Be’er Sheva after fleeing from his brother Esav, and his travel from the Land of Israel to Charan.

In Charan, while at the home of his uncle Lavan, our forefather Yaakov immersed himself in the industry of sheep—his occupation being that of a shepherd and his wages being in the form of rams and ewes.

Not only did he work with the flocks, but the cumulative wealth that he amassed also stemmed from these sheep. He first acquired the sheep, and through them he bought other things.

The Torah describes Yaakov’s assets as follows:

Text 1

And the man became exceedingly prosperous, and he had prolific sheep, and maidservants and manservants, and camels and donkeys.

Bereishis 30:43

Indeed, Rashi comments on the verse, and explains:

Text 2

He would sell his sheep at a high price and purchase all these for himself.

Rashi, ibid

However, notwithstanding that Yaakov’s main venture was in shepherding these herds, and that this was the source of his prosperity, he nevertheless does not seem to accord them much significance.

In the coming *parsha*, when he journeys back to the Land of Israel after his extensive stay in Charan, knowing that his brother Esav wishes to kill him, he sends a group of angels to inform his brother of his imminent return to Israel and that he wishes to appease him.

When he tells Esav of the great wealth that he amassed, he does not initiate by declaring his large flock of sheep, but rather, he first lists other possessions and only afterwards mentions:

Text 3

And I have acquired oxen and donkeys, flocks, manservants, and maidservants, and I have sent to tell [this] to my master, to find favor in your eyes.

Bereishis 32:6

Yaakov first mentions his oxen and donkeys and only then does he mention his sheep.

An eternal lesson

Everything written in the Torah has an eternal lesson for all Jews in all places. While this is true concerning all sections of Torah, it is particularly true regarding the events of the patriarchs, as expressed:

Text 4

All that happened to the patriarchs, is a sign for the children.

Ramban, Bereishis 12:6

Furthermore, it is not only a *sign* as to what will happen to the Jewish people, but a *lesson* of how we are to act as well.

In this instance, when the story of Yaakov and his flocks is articulated in great verbosity—throughout the entire *parsha*—the lesson that it holds is most definitely of great importance to the Jewish people.

There are three significant aspects in the narrative of Yaakov and his acquisition of the sheep, and consequently three lessons to be learned:

- 1) It was specifically his work in caring for sheep which produced his boundless prosperity.
- 2) Though the sheep were the foundation of his affluence, they were not his only asset. Instead, he chose to exchange them for other properties as well.
- 3) In his dispatch to Esav, his first mention regarding his possessions was of his oxen and donkeys. Only then does he reference the sheep that he possessed, though they were his primary asset.

The Torah communicates on many levels, and what is a discussion of physical sheep is also a narrative of deep spiritual significance.

Each one of these three concepts that are expressed concerning the sheep of our forefather Yaakov, transmits a particular lesson that every one of us can and must learn in our service of G-d.

In our service to the Almighty, there exists the act of (1) acquiring sheep, (2) bartering them for other possessions, and (3) declaring to our personal “Esav” that we have oxen and donkeys.

Sons and sheep

The Jewish people are deeply connected to the Almighty. It’s a reciprocal connection where we relate to Him in one manner and He responds in kind. The Medrash enumerates many facets of that relationship. Among the various analogies that it discusses, is the comparison of the Jewish people’s relationship with G-d both as a child and its father, and a flock toward their shepherd.

G-d is our father, and we are His children; G-d is our shepherd and we are His flock:

Text 5

He is to me as a father, and I am to Him as a son...He is to me as a shepherd...and I am to Him as flock.

Shir Hashirim Rabba 2:16

This is perplexing though. Why must the Medrash enumerate additional metaphors of love after the relationship has been portrayed as that of a father and a child? Once it has been expressed that the Jewish people are considered G-d's children, is there something accomplished in describing them as His sheep?

Quite the contrary—there is nothing that can surpass the love that a parent has for his child; there can be no comparison at all between the relationships of the shepherd to his sheep, and the affection of a parent toward his child.

Why then, do we mention that G-d's relationship to us is like a shepherd toward His flock? What is illustrated in that particular description?

Loving like sheep

When the Jewish people are referred to as the children of the Holy One, blessed be He, this is referring to the way that they, like children, have significance in their parents' eyes. The parent possesses a love and endearment for the child, as the child exists, separately from themselves.

For G-d to relate to an individual distinct from Himself—by its very definition—means that the discussion relates to a level outside of G-d's singular reality.

As G-d relates to the world He can love the Jewish People like children. However, on a deeper level—where G-d *transcends* the world—

it is nonsensical to state that He relates to us as a father towards His children.

In Koheles¹, King Shlomo describes G-d as, “a lone and solitary man who has neither son nor brother.” On this level, the Jewish people cannot be compared to children, who have distinct significance to their parents', as on this level, the entire universe is entirely insignificant.

Though the Jewish people cannot be called children in this perception, they still are referred to as G-d's sheep.

This idea that the Jewish people are referred to as sheep, even on a level which *transcends* the world, imparts a remarkable notion.

Even at a level where G-d has “neither son nor brother” and the all of existence is completely nullified before Him, the Jewish people are *still* precious to Him.

What endears us to G-d on this level is the trait that we possess similar to the sheep. It is not our personal identity or the greatness that we are able to achieve on our own which brings about His affinity, but the fact that we are like sheep.

The nature of sheep is that they are submissive and do not possess a strong self-identity. It is this lack of individuality though, that G-d finds precious.

This notion demonstrates, that if we completely submit to the Almighty, we can relate to Him in a deeper way than would be possible, through our personal qualities.

When we are children, we relate to G-d as He relates to the world. When we are akin to sheep, we relate to Him in the manner in which He rises *above* it.

The prophet Yeshaya aptly expresses this idea:

¹ Koheles 4:8.

Text 6

For thus said the exalted and uplifted One, Who abides forever and Whose name is holy: “I abide in exaltedness and holiness, but I am with the crushed and humbled spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the crushed.”

Yeshaya 57:15

When G-d is portrayed as being “high and exalted,” it is not greatness that He finds desirable—as who can be great compared to Him? It is the humility of those of a “crushed and humbled spirit” that He holds dear. It is specifically in humility where the “I” of G-d can be found.

This is expressed in the likening of the Jewish people to sheep. It describes the way that they completely submit to G-d, and are therefore connected to Him on the deepest of levels.

Two ways of serving G-d

Though humility is a tremendous trait which G-d finds endearing, we are told that we should be like children *and* like sheep. We are not to only have the character of submissive sheep, and also not merely have the character of a child who is loved by his parent for who he is. G-d wants us to employ *both* of these methods of service.

The manner of serving G-d as a son, is expressed in the way that we connect to Him through learning Torah.

Studying Torah is about understanding what one learns through his rational mind. Hence, by its very definition, when one learns Torah, they are, in a sense, trapped in the confines of their personal identity—as the only way for a person

to understand something is through doing so in their own paradigm.

Although one’s learning must be accomplished by means of understanding, it must also be prefaced by *humility* towards the Almighty. For, if one is not humble before G-d, he will not properly understand the Torah that he is learning.

We see this idea expressed at the end of the silent prayer that is recited thrice daily. There, we ask G-d to open our hearts to Torah, but we also ask for humility. The Talmud tells us,

Text 7

Mar the son of Ravina, on concluding his prayer added the following: “My G-d, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile. May my soul be silent to them that curse me and may my soul be as the dust to all. Open my heart in Your Torah, and may my soul pursue Your commandments.”

Talmud, Brachos 17a

While we must learn using our own minds, in order for us to merit to come to the truth of G-d’s Torah—which transcends mortal intellect—we must first be nullified before Him. Only then is it possible to properly comprehend G-d’s wisdom.

Ultimate humility

This however, is not the true aspect of sheep, as the purpose of *this* humility is as a means—for the study of Torah—and not an end to itself.

The true spiritual significance of sheep is when one’s humility is not aimed towards *another* goal, but is the ultimate objective, in and of itself.

The aspect of sheep indicates that one serves the Almighty in a way in which he transcends his personal identity and serves the Holy One, blessed be He—not for individual gain, but for G-d Himself.

This idea is demonstrated when a person leaves their Torah study and goes out into the *world* to make it a dwelling place for the Almighty.

Doing so, he leaves his self-identity, and steps down a level to involve himself with the world around him. He does this not for his own greatness, but because he submits to G-d's will of turning the world into His G-dly abode.

It is when a person leaves Torah to serve G-d in worldly things that a Jew is called a sheep—as it is at that point when his humility, as an end to itself, comes to the fore.

The word for sheep in Hebrew is “*tzon*,” which is etymologically related to the word “*la-tzeit*,” meaning, to go out. This is expressive of the above idea: leaving the confines of the spiritual and involving oneself with the physical world in order to transform it.

It is in this state where a Jew connects to G-d in the deepest of ways, as he is utterly and completely humbled. This is where he leaves his identity and is truly serving G-d for G-d's sake.

Yaakov and Sheep

The story of Yaakov's life is personified by these two aspects—being a child and serving G-d with sheep.

Before Yaakov came to Charan he was completely immersed in Torah. Studying its wisdom was his sole pursuit. The Torah tells us the following, concerning Yaakov's character:

Text 8

And the youths grew up, and Esav was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field, whereas Yaakov was an innocent man, dwelling in tents.

Bereishis 25:27

Rashi comments on the expression that Yaakov dwelled in tents, and tells us² that his dwelling in tents was in “the tent of Shem and the tent of Ever.” During this period, he studied Torah in the two schools of learning at the time.

We find, that after Yaakov left his parents' home, he did not go immediately to the house of his uncle Lavan either. Instead, he went to study Torah for fourteen years in the school of Ever³.

This is the way Yaakov was expressive of the son-personality.

However, afterwards, Yaakov left the school of Torah study and traveled to Charan; leaving the comforts of spirituality, for a life of toil and hardship.

The adversity that he faced in Charan was both in a physical and spiritual sense. He physically toiled with all his strength in his work⁴, and was spiritually exposed to the depravity of Charan's environment.

The Torah tells us, that when Yaakov came back to the land of Israel he instructed his messengers to tell Esav⁵, “So shall you say to my master, to Esav, 'Thus said your servant Yaakov: I have lived with Lavan, and I have tarried until now.'”

² Rashi, *ibid*.

³ Talmud, Megilla 16b.

⁴ Bereishis 31:6.

⁵ Bereishis 32:5.

Text 9

“I have lived (גרתי),” has the numerical value of 613. That is to say, “I lived with the wicked Lavan, but I kept the 613 commandments, and I did not learn from his evil deeds.”

Rashi, Bereishis 32:5

It is specifically *there*, in Charan that— notwithstanding the tremendous disinterest from G-dliness that flourished in the home of Lavan—Yaakov raises the first Jewish family, with the birth of the twelve tribes. It is specifically in Charan that his nullification to the Almighty is expressed to the utmost degree.

This is the reason the wealth that Yaakov amassed was in the form of sheep. Sheep connote the spiritual heights that Yaakov attained through his humility towards G-d’s.

It was for this reason that Yaakov became exceedingly wealthy in Charan—for when a person is nullified before G-d, they are able to reach a level that transcends all boundaries of nature.

Being tough

However, just as one understands that humility is an essential prelude to Torah study, the opposite is true as well, that one must not always express their humility.

In order for one’s service of G-d to be complete, one must also employ his personal strengths, attaining the proper balance of both aspects.

Humility alone will not vanquish the darkness of the world. A person should not conduct himself solely with a meek demeanor. He must know how to garner his strengths in his efforts to spread G-dliness.

This is the reason that the first directive brought in the code of Jewish law is the *mishna* that instructs a person to have a strong identity in their service of G-d. For, without this, they would not be able to accomplish anything.

Text 10

Yehudah the son of Teima would say: “Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, fleeting as a deer and mighty as a lion to do the will of your Father in heaven.”

Mishna, Avot, 5:20

One must have strength of character and not be uncomfortable in their faith. A person must be strong as a lion to be able to overpower his evil inclination which tempts him to sin.

It is through the tenaciousness of oxen and donkeys that one is able to properly affect the world and transform its darkness into light.

A person must be vigilant, though, not to allow this powerful might to become an expression of his own ego. His strength must stem only from G-d and the Torah.

This is the reason why the author of this statement, Yehudah ben Teimah, is specifically mentioned.

The word “Yehudah” derives from the word “*hoda’a*,” which means to submit, and to have humility. The word “[ben] Teimah,” which means saying or expressing, teaches that this humility must be expressed in our ego as well.

Not only does a person need to begin his service of G-d with humility, but throughout the entire service, he must not forget it for a moment. This humility must be the driving force behind his entire identity—that his goal is to serve G-d.

When he uses in his own strong qualities to fight the darkness of the world, coupled with a sense of humility, he will be successful in transforming the world into a G-dly place.

Yaakov's sheep

According to the above, it is understood the three abovementioned points regarding Yaakov's sheep:

- 1) Yaakov's success came as a direct result of his "sheep," his complete *submission* to the Almighty. Only through this nullification did he acquire his other "possessions" and the strength of his personal identity.
- 2) Though Yaakov primarily served G-d through self-nullification, it was imperative that he include the service of "maidservants, manservants, camels and donkeys." He needed to also employ his personal strengths to accomplish his spiritual mission.

Yet, even after accumulating other forms of wealth, Yaakov always kept his sheep, and in fact they remained the main component of his wealth. Meaning to say, that even when a person is involved with fighting the darkness of the world with the necessary strength and force, his total subservience to G-d must always remain primary.

- 3) When Yaakov told Esav about the property that he had acquired, he did not mention his sheep—i.e. his humility—as his first possession, even though this was his primary possession. Yaakov wanted to instill fear in Esav, and therefore first mentioned all the great things that he had accomplished. He first spoke of his strength, not his humility.

This is what Yaakov must portray to others. Concerning himself however, his main asset was the sheep, his subservience to the Almighty.

The lesson

In our generation specifically, we must all conduct ourselves in the manner of "*vayeitzei*" - going out, as did our forefather Yaakov. We need to go out of our comforts into the world and illuminate it with G-dliness.

First, however, we must prepare by sitting in the tent of Shem and Ever, in the study of Torah. Only then does a person have the ability to conquer the world. This preparation must lead to the eventual efforts of bringing the light to the outside world.

The effort of "*vayeitzei*" is the primary action that must be done in our times, in the moments before the coming of *Moshiach*.

We must work on transforming the darkness of the world into a beacon of light. Our mandate to go out into the world and bring G-dliness to places that are dark is especially necessary nowadays, when affecting another Jew who is in darkness is literally saving his very Judaism!

One must keep in mind constantly, however, that his success is ensured when he is nullified to G-d, dedicated to fulfilling His mission.

When a person approaches this effort with absolute submission to the Almighty, a person is not limited by his individual nature or specific interests, but is able to transcend his very being.

Through accomplishing this holy work in any place in which he finds himself, and through investing all of his energies into the efforts of affecting multitudes of Jewish souls, he will see success.

This will prepare the entire Jewish people for the imminent redemption, during which no Jew will be left behind...!

(Based on Likutei Sichot 15, Vayeitzei 4, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel.

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