

Parshat Vayishlach- Animal Allusion

Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles

After Yaakov leaves Lavan's house, he fears meeting Esau and prepares by sending angels bearing gifts. They relate this message to Esau, "I have acquired an ox(en), a donkey(s), sheep, servant(s) and maidservant(s) and I am sending to tell my lord to find favor in your eyes." The gifts seem to have had no effect, for Esau continued heading toward Yaakov ready for war.

While each of the gifts was written in the singular, it is logical to assume that Yaakov had many flocks of animals and servants and maidservants. When the Torah records the actual gifts Yaakov sent, there were over five hundred assorted animals. Why does Yaakov seem to be humble about his wealth? Why does he mention only two animals?

The Toras Yoshiyahu quotes the Noam Elimelech who points out that most people are impressed by wealth and prestige. Yaakov felt that he had to impress Esau through materialism. Therefore, he showed him his herds and flocks. Further, Yitzchak's blessing were agricultural. Clearly, Yaakov who had no land, attained wealth unrelated to his father's blessing. Therefore, Esau needn't continue to hate him. Yaakov states, "*Im Lavan garti*, I lived with Lavan all these years," which Rashi interprets as equal to 613/*taryag*. Lest Esau think he had learned Lavan's evil ways and no longer merited the blessings, Yaakov clarified that he had remained true to Torah. Esau finally acknowledges Yaakov's

arguments. He admits that he was only interested in instant gratification; for a bowl of lentils he sold his birthright. Now for the gift of these animals, he's again relinquishing the blessings. He finally concedes, "I have much; you keep what you have." Herein lies the quintessential difference between Yaakov and Esau, writes the Birkat Mordechai. While Esau is primarily interested in the here and now of the physical, external world, Yaakov sets his eyes on the eternal world. Just one letter separates the two, so is it often easy for one to masquerade as the other. Our battles with Esau throughout history may have been presented as ideological, but in truth it was about, a physical, immediate victory. For the Jew, on the other hand, the view is always spiritual.

But we live in a physical world, and we must learn to differentiate between good and evil. Before Adam sinned, these lines were clear. The job of our Patriarchs was to reestablish these parameters. Yaakov had that clarity of vision, writes Rabbi Svei z"l. His mentioning specifically the ox and the donkey was meant to convey this message, that he knows that the ox is kosher while the donkey is not. He did not mention the camel, for it is missing one kosher sign, and is symbolic of the blurred line. Yaakov is hinting that he is still living a life of clarity and was not affected by Lavan. Rabbi Svei emphasizes that it is easy to get caught up in one's external surroundings while one's inner self gets lost in the process. That's why it's important to surround oneself with

people who have good values. Nevertheless, we have the ability to bring spiritual value even to that which is not "kosher." Although the firstborn ox is holy, even the non-kosher donkey's firstborn can be redeemed. Similarly, we can elevate everything material and physical to a spiritual realm. Further, adds the Halekach Vehalebuv, a Jew can elevate another human being, for if a Jew would buy a Canaanite slave, that slave becomes obligated in some commandments. Moreover, if the slave is bought by a priest, he can even partake of the priestly gifts. In contrast, a non-Jew cannot elevate another spiritually. A Jew can imbue all his possessions with sanctity. That is why Yaakov went back for those small jugs, because there was potential sanctity in them.

Rabbi Freifeld explains that the world was created with ten utterances which established order, precision and symmetry. Good is that which flows in harmony with creation, while evil is anything which threatens to disrupt that. Sensitivity to the physical is related to sensitivity to the spiritual. A student who leaves his books haphazardly strewn about the study hall for someone else to put away creates chaos and is limiting his personal growth. Making one's bed or cleaning up after dinner helps maintain order and symmetry, promoting growth. Esau was hoping that Yaakov would fall into the pattern of Lavan, and good and evil would become intermingled. But Yaakov's vision remained clear and he retained his relationship with Hashem throughout.

The Courage of Chanukah

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hanoch Teller

The lesson of Chanukah is to emulate the Maacabim, to be willing to fight for the Torah and for the truth against all odds. This is something we're tested with all the time. Where did the Maacabim get their courage? Rabbi Yisroel Miller quotes the Gerrer Rebbe. Avraham Avinu said, "V'ani v'hanaar neilech ad koh." Koh are the letters kaf, heh. Avraham said they would walk to the 25th of Kislev. They were embedding Jewish genetics, courage, and fortitude, into future generations. Where did Avraham get his courage? Rabbi Miller discusses another Midrash. An enormous man sat at the crossroads. When people would pass he would call out to them to come closer. When they came, the bandit would smite them dead. Then a smart Jew realized that the bandit had no legs and skirted around him. The bandit is the *yezer hara*, our eternal enemy. The clever man was our forefather Avraham. The *yezer hara* is older, wiser, and more adept than we are. But it has no legs. It can tempt us all day long but we must come up close to him for him to defeat us. Washington was the greatest American general. Yet he fought very few battles. His genius was that he knew when to retreat and ultimately he outfoxed the British army. The smartest thing you can do is to

circle around the *yezer hara* and avoid it. It doesn't sound too brave but it's the wisest advice you can follow. Smart people know when to run away. Avraham Avinu understood that no matter what is threatening a person, if he can eternalize the knowledge of *Hashem hu Elokim*, he can overcome any test.

The Mesilas Yesharim says that life is a test. If we are given a test we can pass it. Rabbi Abraham Twersky points out that the *yezer hara* works in a clever way. He'll never tell you outright to sin. He'll say, "You know your track record, time and again you sin and fail." If you dwell on past failings you won't be successful. When Lot was fleeing the soon to be destroyed Sodom, the angel instructed him not to look back. Ruminating about the past drains you of energy to work constructively for the future. Perhaps Avraham was no more courageous than all of us. But he understood that the *yezer's* strength is scaring us into thinking- what's the use, the *yezer* will win anyway. We allow the *yezer* to beat us but it doesn't have to be that way. We can avoid him. It says in *Avot*, "Run towards a light *mitzvah* and run far away from sin." Ben Azzai teaches, if you have an opportunity to do a *mitzvah* and you go about it in a lethargic way the *yezer hara* will head you off the pass. Your only hope is to

gather speed and enthusiasm and run. Fleeing does not sound macho but it's the way to go when one feels the urge to sin. It's much harder to hit a moving target.

The idea of a spiritual test is to maximize one's potential. Life is made up of challenges. In Hebrew the word for a test is *nisayon*, a trial of faith or character. The root of the word is nes which is related to miracles. It can also mean a flag, something you lift up high. A miracle is something supernatural, above nature. A *nisayon* is the actual test, not a philosophical idea. Going through a test makes you a greater person. When Avraham went to the *akeida*, a rushing stream came upon him and rose up to his neck. He called out to Hashem and only then the water receded. Once one has the courage to take on the *Satan*, the test itself is diminished. The Maacabim understood that their test at the time was to stand up and fight for what was right, explains the Bach. The real *nisayon* was that they had slackened off in their observance. The temple was defiled and Judaism was on the verge of distinction. But the Maacabim rose to the test. They fought back for that which was true and holy. And although they were weak, their bravery won out.

Derech Hashem: The Causes of Our Decisions

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

The third chapter of Derech Hashem discusses the body and soul which are called beloved companions. There are all sorts of things that happen to us in this world in order to create a bond between them. They are called *nisyonot*, tests or challenges to the soul, through which the soul becomes articulate and strong enough to speak to the body. If there's real communication, the mind will speak to the heart and together they'll speak to the body. The body yearns to listen. But if there's divisiveness, if the body and heart talk louder than the mind, it will not work. There's a part within every person that's moved towards good or evil. There are myriad things that can inspire you. You see a child and his mother experience a moment of intimate bonding. You observe a teenager enjoying an ice cream and the expression of sheer delight on his face moves you. There are all sorts of possibilities. Sometimes you'll see outstanding acts of righteousness or self-

sacrifice. You'll also see things that are bad, people destroying each other with words, people that are blocked or ungrateful. There are numerous possibilities how to respond.

There are traits that are inclined towards inspiration and others that are inclined to destruction. However every trait has the potential to go either direction. *Gaavah* is a feeling of arrogance. Its opposite is humility. The more Hashem gives you, the more you should feel humble. That feeling can take you to good, unless you destroy it by letting it take you to low self-esteem and self-hatred. But if left to its own devices, *gaavah* takes you to evil and *anavah* takes you to good. Every middah has an inherent nature but you can make choices within it. There are times when mercy could be perverted to evil. A parent who values their child's love so much that they can't ever say no, is acting cruel. Sometimes cruelty is necessary such as a doctor inflicting pain on a

patient in order to heal him. But if left to its own devices, cruelty is bad and compassion is good. Being content brings joy and that's good. The mentality of prosperity is something that's treasured. A feeling of- I have so much, leads to joy. Its opposite- I don't have what I want or need, leads to depression. You can make choices. Being satisfied with what you have can lead you to be so unwilling to move beyond your reality, that you're basically dead at age 17. Being spiritually discontent can lead you to be ambitious. But if left to its own devices, being discontent is bad and being content is good. Hashem's *chochma elyona* -the highest source of wisdom, anticipates every possibility of response. He determines what should be found and what should become possible for people in order for them to choose good. He knows how much choice to put into the picture.