

Gratitude In Its Purest Sense

By: Rabbi Daniel Fridman

Parshat VaYishlach commences with Yaakov in deep distress. In a classic example of going from the frying pan into the fire, Yaakov moves directly from his nearly lethal confrontation with Lavan directly into his confrontation with Esav.

Yaakov is forced to prepare for total annihilation, and is forced to take the harrowing step of splitting his family into two camps, “for is Esav will come to the one camp and destroy it, the second camp will survive.” To take a moment and actually consider a father being forced to split his children into two different groups, out of consideration that half will be murdered, is simply terrifying.

And yet, if we carefully examine the prayer which Yaakov issues to God at this moment in time, one finds something truly shocking. Yaakov, rather than opening with a plea for his life, first praises God for his survival over the previous two decades in hostile conditions. Yaakov contrasts his poverty when he was a refugee from his father’s home with his newfound wealth, noting “with only the stick in my hand I crossed this Jordan, and now, I have become two camps”.

It is simply astonishing. Yaakov is not only willing to express gratitude to God at a moment when a lesser man could only think of issuing a plea for his life, but on the contrary, Yaakov *redefines* the very symbol of his current crisis into a symbol of gratitude. Instead of looking at his two camps for what they actually are, a product of the fact that Esav may literally be prepared to kill his children, Yaakov expresses gratitude for the fact that, when he first left his father’s home, he had no assets or family that could possibly be divided.

This, to my mind, is gratitude in its purest sense. Gratitude cannot be limited to moments when we have everything that we desire- if we waited for those moments, no one would every express thanks altogether, as, in this world, we can never have everything. Gratitude cannot be limited even to those parts of our lives that are working in a manner that we would desire. On the contrary, Yaakov takes that most explicit symbol of his crisis, the existence of two camps, and gratefully reflects on the existence of his family altogether.

Yaakov’s capacity to redefine the two camps as something for which he needed to express gratitude, before pleading for these two camps, is a sign of nothing less than spiritual greatness. It gives all of us a sense of pause, just before we open our mouths in distressed prayer regarding some aspect of our life which is sub-optimal, to be reminded of the fact that this very area of our lives, upon further reflection, may itself require an expression of gratitude.