

Shabbos Bamidbar 5780 – Pirkei Avos Chapter Six

These last two months have certainly altered our perception of many formerly held truths.

One of our members confided to me that after living so restrictedly, he has come to realize how much he really does not need so many things he formerly thought he could not live without.

Traditionally each day of the Sefirah corresponds to one of the 48 ways the Torah is acquired through, with each day devoted to excelling in that trait, and all of them reviewed on the last day of 49.

There is a series of indulgences in six areas of life that we are expected to limit so that we may acquire Torah.

Please enjoy this essay which has an eyewitness account of a simple Jew who heard a class in Torah from the Vilna Gaon himself!

The Outer Limits

Each of our Avos fortified one of the pillars the world stands on.

Avraham exemplified the attribute of *Chessed*, kindness, as evidenced in his extraordinary devotion to the three arab wayfarers who became his guests.

Yitzchok offered himself as the ultimate *Korban*, sacrifice, when he joyously submitted himself to be slaughtered at the *Akeidah*, representing for all eternity the absolute submission to G-d's will that *Avodah*, service to G-d in prayer, calls for.

Yaakov places himself in the tents of *Torah* in a tireless, constant and total immersion in a consciousness of G-d, through the intellectual pursuit of G-d's mind-set that the *Torah* is.

Yet, where as regards the former two's experiences which are explicitly portrayed in the Torah, as it relates to Yaakov Avinu however, it is never clearly spelled out.

The description of his being a "dweller of tents" in stark contrast to his brother Esav being a "man of the field", might reflect on Yaakov's quiet and contemplative withdrawal from an involvement in the outer world of action his brother was so engaged in, but it bears no apparent emphasis on what he was doing in the tent.

Why wouldn't the Torah clearly state what it is specifically that Yaakov so devoted himself to, rather than just mentioning the venue and manner under which he operated?

Rav Aharon Walkin, the colorful and noted Rabbi of the great city Pinsk-Karlin, author of the renowned sefer, *Bais Aharon*, who perished in the Holocaust, is reported to have met an elderly Jew in Vilna who once had the privilege to hear words of Torah from the Vilna Gaon. Apparently the Gaon once substituted for the local Rav who was absent that day, in

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delivering a Pirkei Avos shiur to the local *Baalei Batim* between Mincha and Maariv, which this elderly Jew attended.

The shiur revolved around the Mishna in Avos that lists the 48 ways one must follow in order to acquire Torah. Among the many qualities necessary for the acquisition of Torah is a list of areas of life in which one must restrict oneself, *limited business activity, limited carnal activity, limited pleasure, limited sleep, limited conversation, limited laughter...* (Avos 6, 6)

The Gaon posed the following query:

The Mishna uses the verb נקנית, rooted in the word קנין, to connote the “acquisition” of these 48 ways. קנין accurately describes one attempting to possess an item, a quality, an entity. Yet here we are asked to refrain from something, to relinquish an involvement. How can this be appropriately described then as an act of קנין, of acquisition?

The great Gaon answered, that we must take note of the exact phrase used here, במיעוט ... בחוק. ... במיעוט שיחה ... במיעוט ... סחורה, “limiting” business... conversation... laughter... Wouldn't it be more correct to state that one must ideally refrain altogether from these activities if one wishes to attain greatness in Torah? Evidently the goal here is to “acquire” these seemingly mundane activities as well, which are needed to succeed in Torah. They aren't just barriers and impediments to achieving Torah, but rather distinct values that must be utilized in their optimum form. One must even engage in laughter and conversation, to acquire Torah properly. Indeed these are vital and positive “acquirements” to succeeding in Torah. (As heard from the Tolna Rebbe and referred to in the preface of the *Sefer Bais Aharon*)

If we peruse the events of this week's reading we will discover startling parallels to this notion.

Yaakov Avinu comes out from his fourteen-year stint in “Tents of Torah” of Shem and Ever, to now engage in the next phase of “acquiring” Torah. He now begins his entry to the arena of life that must be conquered, that is an equal prerequisite for the attainment of Torah.

(וישכב במקום ההוא (בראשית כח יב), *and lay down in that place*. Rashi infers from the stating, “in that place”, a language of “מיעוט”, exclusion, implying that this was first time he laid down to sleep in fourteen years.

Even during that sweet slumber, the Torah reports, (שם שם טו), *Yaakov awoke from his sleep*, ready to slough off the comforts of sleep to nourish himself from the opportunities that await him in this holy place, the Temple Mount.

במיעוט שינה, limiting sleep.

In Yaakov's subsequent vow of allegiance to G-d, he requests that in turn G-d provide him, לחם לאכול ובגד ללבוש (שם שם כ), *bread to eat and clothes to wear*. Isn't it self-evident what

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these items are needed for, why does he need to emphasize; to eat, to wear? Yaakov comprehends the value of the creature comforts that man needs for happy survival, but it needs to be understood precisely in that context only; to eat, to wear, neither for ingratiating indulgence nor for glory, beauty or honor but rather to survive.

במיעוט תענוג, limiting pleasure.

As Yaakov heads towards his encounter with his “*bashert*”, Rochel, he comes upon a group of shepherds. He initiates an engaging conversation by referring to them as אחי מאין אתם? (שם שם ד), *My brothers, where are you from?* Clearly this warm greeting wasn't merely a tactic used in his fact finding mission to discover Lavan's whereabouts, but was Yaakov's earnest endeavor to implement meaningful conversation and interaction among men. (רד"ק, מדרש הגדול)

שיחה במיעוט שיחה, limiting conversation.

ויגל את האבן מעל פי הבאר (שם שם ו), *he rolled the stone off the mouth of the well.* Rashi informs us that he removed the stone as easily as one would “pop off a cork from a bottle” in a stunning display of might. What was Yaakov's intent with this act? Was it really necessary? Couldn't the shepherds have jointly removed it together with Yaakov, as indeed it was the local custom, without the need for this startling presentation?

The great sage Rav Avraham Saba in his brilliant treatise, צרור המור, interprets this episode in a most fascinating way. He writes that it is well known how people in love will go to great lengths to perform magnificent stunts to impress upon their beloved their deep affection for them. In a similar vein Yaakov sought in this unexpected and almost humorous feat, to amaze Rochel with his sincere fondness for her. In this “light moment”, Yaakov taught us the positive value of joy and laughter and its implementation in everyday life.

במיעוט שחוק, limiting laughter.

The Matriarchs in the House of Yaakov understand the privilege to carry the children of Yaakov and be part of the destiny of the Jewish people. They each know that the building of the nation requires the highest levels of selflessness and devotion to G-d. The children's names, nevertheless, reflect the bonds of love and deep emotions that were generated in their quest of this noble goal.

עתה יאהבני אישי (שם כט לב), *now my husband will love me,* הפעם ילוה אישי (שם שם לה), *This time my husband will become attached to me.*

The women “negotiate” the privilege to be with Yaakov. It is apparent that this is no haphazard encounter but rather a carefully planned and purposeful arrangement that reflected both the deep bonds that existed between husband and wife and the mission to bring worthy children into the world.

במיעוט דרך ארץ, limiting carnal activity.

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Yaakov proves his mettle as an able shepherd and “businessman”, bringing great benefit to his “wonderful” employer, Lavan. Upon the birth of Yosef however, Yaakov declares; “time’s up”. The industry of life is a vital necessity but never at the expense of the transmission of our heritage to the next generation. Yosef, the inheritor of that mantle, must be educated and it is now the appropriate time to limit financial endeavor to enable that, so Yaakov decides to depart.

במיעוט סחורה, limiting business activity.

The Torah left out the obvious and chose rather to accentuate the importance of placing every aspect of our life within the proper limits so that we may acquire the Torah in its full glory.

Torah is not a compartment within our life, it is the defining detail in all that we endeavor.

Yosef represents the antidote to Esav and all its forces. With his birth the battle plan to finally assert the supremacy of Torah in the world by living an inspired life is initiated. Yaakov Avinu bequeaths that mission to us.

We must embrace the joys of life our Creator has offered us, by acquiring them with a spirit of Torah that must permeate every aspect of our lives, every fiber of our existence.

If we succeed then we will achieve the ultimate victory!