

Parashat Vayishlach, Rabbi James Proops

One of the primary challenges that we continue to face amidst this pandemic is that we have to adjust how we carry out and fulfil various functions throughout our daily lives. Some of these changes do not necessarily have a direct impact on the outcome and we are still able to achieve our desired objective. For example our new reality dictates that we go to the supermarket in a mask, but what we choose to buy and have in our homes is largely the same as always. However regarding other aspects of life, such as how we celebrate birthdays or how and where we exercise, the changes that we have to accommodate can have a real impact on the end result. A zoom or drive-by birthday celebration does not necessarily garner the same excitement and enjoyment as a traditional children's birthday party. While exercise at home can achieve great results, for an avid gym goer, it can be hard to muster the same enthusiasm without the high tech machines and atmosphere of others around you.

The question for many then becomes is it worth pursuing these attempts at achieving what we used to take for granted even though unobtainable? Is there any point in asking friends to drive by the house if I won't actually get a chance to celebrate with them properly? Is there any point in trying to exercise, if I won't be able to reach the levels that I have previously?

The *Parsha* begins with the encounter between *Yaakov* and *Esav*. When they finally meet, the Torah tells us that each of *Yaakov's* wives came with their children and bowed in front of *Esav* as a demonstration of respect.. Regarding *Bilhah*, *Zilpah* and *Leah*, the Torah records how the mothers presented themselves first and were followed by their children. However, regarding *Rachel*, we see that her son *Yosef* is mentioned first, indicating that he presented himself in front of *Esav* before *Rachel*. *Rashi* explains that *Yosef* deliberately stepped in front of his mother saying to himself “אָמִי יִפֶּת תֹּאֲרַר, שְׁמָא יִתְלֶה בָּהּ עֵינָיו אוֹתוֹ רָשָׁע” - My mother is beautiful, perhaps that evil person will lay his eyes on her”, with evil intentions. In order to prevent this from happening, *Yosef* stood in front of his mother to “prevent *Eisav* gazing at her”. *Rashi* in *Parashat Vayechi* adds that when standing before *Eisav*, *Yosef* made himself as big as he could to block as much of *Rachel* as

possible, and as a reward, *HaShem* promised him that he would merit to be ‘big’ in that he would achieve greatness.

Rabbi Yissachar Frand points out regarding this episode that *Yosef* at this time was a very young child, no older than six years old and it is very likely that even by making himself ‘big’, he would still be far from tall enough to fully block *Rachel*’s body from *Esav*’s gaze. Rabbi Frand suggests that at best, *Yosef* would have come up to his mother’s hip so how does going in front of her actually help his cause? In addition, Rabbi Frand assumes that *Yosef* could only stand in front of his mother for a short time and at some point, *Esav* would still end up looking at *Rachel*! Therefore, what exactly was *Yosef* able to accomplish? His efforts seem to be noble but ultimately fruitless.

The answer is found in the fundamental principle, that there are many situations in life where it is impossible to achieve the desired result or perfection, however this does not mean that one should not try at all. With the correct intentions, one should do whatever they can, and whether or not they completely fulfil their goal is not in their control. *Yosef*, even at a very young age understood this and was greatly rewarded for his actions. Rabbi Frand explains *Yosef*’s attitude as, “Granted, my accomplishments may be minimal – it will be only for a minute or two, it may only be a partial blocking – but it is already worth it. “A half of a loaf is better than no loaf.” Even for that small amount of accomplishment, it was worth making the effort.”

While we are all familiar with the dictum of Rabbi Tarfon

לֹא עֲלֶיךָ הַמְלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה - it is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it (Pirkei Avot 2:16), we often forget to apply it in our daily lives. Due to our new reality we are not always able to achieve the desired result based on what was expected pre-Covid-19, however that does not mean that attempting is futile. A drive-by birthday is not as exciting as a magic show and moonbounce yet nonetheless can live long in the memory of a child who feels special and appreciated. Exercising alone at home may not have the same impact as the state of the art elliptical with the motivation of a personal trainer, but the psychological boost of not giving up as well as the physical benefits are undeniable.

Whether it is celebrating moments, keeping up with friends and family or maintaining and rejuvenating our spiritual connection, we cannot afford to allow ourselves to give up simply because we won't be able to achieve perfection or even reach levels that we used to achieve. We must follow the example of *Yosef* when something is important to us, even if it seems unattainable, it is imperative that we do all we can and 'make ourselves big'.

Shabbat Shalom