

Good Shabbos, everyone.

Mazel Tov to Max and Sophia Liskovich on the occasion of the *Bar Mitzva* of their son, Shlomo. Mazel Tov also to his grandparents, Alexander and Irina Liskovich and Dr. Allan and Karen Zarembski. May you have much *nachas* from Shlomo and all your children and grandchildren.

Thank you to the *drasha* sponsors:

- David Neuman, in memory of his wife, Celia Neuman, whose *yahrtzeit* is the 13th of Kislev. May her *neshama* have an *aliya*.
- Hillel and Dena Soclof, in memory of Hillel's brother, Alan Soclof, Eliyahu ben R. Avraham Abba, whose *yahrtzeit* was the 7th of Kislev. May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.

May the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health.

This past Thursday, Mr. Aaron Feuerstein, who became known as the “*Mensch* of Malden Mills” passed away at the advanced age of 95. On December 11, 1995, Malden Mills, the textile factory he owned in Lawrence, Massachusetts, caught on fire, causing one of the largest blazes in Massachusetts history. Three days later, most of the plant's 1,400 workers lined up to receive their paychecks, figuring these might be their last from Malden Mills. Mr. Feuerstein showed up and personally handed out paychecks and holiday bonuses and then announced an even greater gift: He would immediately reopen as much of the plant as he could, replace the buildings that had burned and continue to pay the workers for a month — a promise he later extended twice. At the time, the *Boston Globe* said he explained after the fire that he was guided by Jewish tradition. “*When all is moral chaos, this is the time for you to be a mensch.*” What a tremendous *kiddush Hashem*! May his memory be a blessing.

This lesson—to be a mensch when facing moral chaos—is a lesson that we learn from Yaakov Avinu when he leaves the warm and protective cocoon of his parents' home heads towards the moral chaos in the house of Lavan. ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע וילך חרנה, *Yaakov left Beer Sheva and went towards Charan*.

Why does the Torah tell us both that he **left** Beer Sheva and also that he **went** to Charan? Many interpretations are given...most famously **Rashi**, who discusses the void left on a place when great people take leave...something I believe is true when a man like Mr. Feuerstein--who made so significant a Kiddush Hashem--passes away.

רש"י בראשית כח: ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע - לא היה צריך לכתוב אלא וילך יעקב חרנה, ולמה הזכיר יציאתו, אלא מגיד שיציאת צדיק מן המקום עושה רושם

But this morning, I would like to suggest another interpretation. The Torah is teaching us that Yaakov would be encountering a brand-new challenge, different from what he had encountered until this point in his life. That led him to the courageous decision that he needed to learn a different way of thinking about things, that he needed new skills and a new outlook to survive in *galus*, with difficult and challenging people, and foreign concepts and values. And that is precisely why he went to study in Yeshivas Shem V'Ever for 14 years.

Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky wonders about this decision...which seemingly was against the wishes of his parents. His parents had sent him to Charan. What gave him the right to make a 14-year detour? And consider that he was 63 years old. According to Chazal, he had studied Torah with his grandfather, Avraham, until age 15, and then, according to the Rambam, with his father, Yitzchak, for the next 48 years. In that case, what was the pressing need to study for another 14 years? Especially at the expense of *kibbud av va'em*? Rav Yaakov suggests that the Torah outlook he learned with Avraham and Yitzchak was different from the issues he would now face—it was pure and wholesome, but it did not include the lessons necessary to deal with a culture like Charan and with people like Lavan. He was now looking for practical rabbinic training, or a Beis Mussar, so to speak.

האבות היו יושבים בישיבה ומרביצים תורה לכל הבא אליהם להסתופף בנחלתם. בבית מדרשם של האבות למדו תורה במדרגה הגדולה ביותר של אמונה ועבודת השם, מחוסנים לגמרי מהסביבה בחוץ ולא מושפעים ממנה כלל... לא כן היה אצל שם ועבר. שם, בנו של נח שנפלט מדור המבול, ניצל לא רק ממי המבול אלא גם מסביבתם של אנשי דור המבול ומהשחתתם. עבר נולד וחי בימי דור ההפלגה אלא שרצו לבנות מגדל וראשו בשמים כדי למרוד בהקב"ה, אבל הוא לא נסחף עמהם ונשאר בצדקתו. רק שם ועבר שרידים מדורות ומסביבות מושחתים, ולא אברהם ויצחק, היו יכולים ללמד ליעקב תורה הנצרכה לו כדי שיוכל להשאר בתמתו בסביבתו של לבן איש מודחת ורשע. ... ולכן היה יעקב צריך לקלוט בתוכו סוגיות שונות איך לשבת בסביבה של רשעים ורמאים ואעפ"כ להחזיק בתום ויושר, ולזה הוצרך לבית מדרשו של שם ועבר...כי שם הנסיונות אחרים וההלכות שונות, וכדמצינו שבעל חפץ חיים ז"ל חיבר משנה ברורה לכל ישראל ושלחן ערוך אחר לאנשי הבצא בספר מחנה ישראל.

Shem V'Ever came from different backgrounds and experiences than Avraham and Yitzchak. Shem, the son of Noach, lived through the *Mabul*, the most corrupt generation in world history. Ever lived through the Dor Haflaga, a movement of people who actively rebelled against Hashem, but he did not get swept up in peer pressure. Shem V'Ever had a worldview and life lessons to teach Yaakov as he entered a new frontier...to help him hold onto his *temimus* and *yashrus* purity and an upright values and worldview.

Yaakov's ability to withstand peer pressure is noteworthy because, as the **Rambam** teaches in *Hilchos De'os 6:1*, it is the nature of a human being to be influenced by his environment.

רמב"ם הלכות דעות פרק ו הלכה א: דרך ברייתו של אדם להיות נמשך בדעותיו ובמעשיו אחר ריעיו וחבריו ונוהג כמנהג אנשי מדינתו, לפיכך צריך אדם להתחבר לצדיקים ולישב אצל החכמים תמיד כדי שילמוד ממעשיהם, ויתרחק מן הרשעים ההולכים בחשך כדי שלא ילמוד ממעשיהם, הוא ששלמה אומר הולך את חכמים יחכם ורועה כסילים ירוע, ואומר אשרי האיש וגו'

It is a natural tendency of man to be influenced in his ideas and conduct by his fellows and associates, and to follow the usage of the people of his state. Therefore, it is necessary for man to be in the company of the righteous, and to sit near the wise, in order to learn from their conduct, and to distance himself from the evil-doers who follow the path of darkness, in order not to learn from their conduct; for of such Solomon said: "He that walks with wise men shall be wise; but the companion of fools shall smart for it."

The lessons learned in Yeshivas Shem V'Ever would help form the persona known as "Yisrael," the man who was willing to struggle to keep his values and integrity, even in the most corrupt of cultures and homes.

In the *haftara* this morning, we read the Navi Hoshea's summary and description of our Parsha.

הושע יב:יג. וַיִּבְרַח יַעֲקֹב שְׂדֵה אָרָם וַיַּעֲבֹד יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאִשָּׁה וּבְאִשָּׁה שָׁמֶר:

Then Yaakov had to flee to the land of Aram; There Yisrael worked for a wife, For a wife he had to guard.

The use of both names is puzzling because Yaakov would not be named Yisrael until later (Parshas Vayishlach). When he worked for Lavan and kept Taryag Mitzvos, he was still only Yaakov. The **Gemara in Brachos 7a** teaches that a name describes one's identity and essence ...and I believe the Navi Hoshea's message is that it was earlier in the house of Lavan where Yaakov built upon the lessons he learned in Yeshivas Shem V'Ever and began to form the new identity of Yisrael. It was in those moments of challenge, and crisis—when he struggled and remained *yashar*...upright and honest, and true to his undiluted values--that he solidified his new persona of "Yisrael."

חומת אנך ירמיהו פרק יח:והדברים ק"ו לשם ישראל אשר בנו לפי פשוטו ישר עם אל.

The **Chid"א** writes that the name "Yisrael" comes from language *Yashar im Kel*---to be honest and straight with Hashem.

The Avos were called *yesharim*, upright people, because they kept Torah values before they were commanded to do so, from an innate understanding of right and wrong, and a strong commitment to obey their moral compass at all times, even in challenging situations. What was his essential character trait? ויעקב איש תם יושב אהלים. He was pure and complete. But that was while he was in his righteous home and Yeshiva. But real *temimus* extends even to situations of moral confusion. The first time that word "tam"

appears is when the Torah introduces us to Noach נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו, Noach, a *tzadik*, a righteous man, a *tamim*, a wholesome person, in his generations.

The **Ibn Ezra** raises a grammatical concern about this Pasuk—why is the word בדורותיו in his generations—in the plural, instead of בדורו in his generation—in the singular?

אבן עזרא בראשית פרק ו פסוק ט בדורותיו. בדורו בעת המבול, ובדורות שהיו אחריו,

He answers that Noach lived in two distinct time periods—the generation before the *mabul*, and the generation after the *mabul*. These very different time periods presented very distinct sets of challenges—but he rose to the occasion and achieved the same level of righteousness in both eras.

How did he accomplish this feat? How did Noach remain a *tzadik* while facing two completely different sets of challenges—first, the challenge of maintaining his principles while living among the most corrupt society and culture that ever existed, and, then, the challenge of facing a new world alone—and attempting to rebuild?

I believe the answer is that his righteousness was **genuine**—it came from internal conviction. It was not just an empty façade—not just a veneer with little depth or meaning. Not simply things he did. The values he stood for were real. Thus, he was able to deal with all the varied external challenges that came his way. The **Ibn Ezra** describes Noach's character בלבנו. תמים In his heart, he was pure—it was real. And no matter where he found himself, his adherence to his internal convictions helped him survive the challenge. How does one accomplish this? It begins with conviction and is reinforced with practice. So, too with Yaakov Avinu. He leaves his parents' home in Beer Sheva and stops in Yeshivas Shem V'Ever, as he runs to his Uncle Lavan in Charan. What is the first thing the Torah explicitly points out about his departure? The first thing he does is sleep. ויפגע במקום וילן שם כי בא השמש ויקח מאבני המקום וישם מראשותיו

This seems a bit strange that the Torah goes out of its way to report about his sleep. Everyone sleeps. Why was it important to record the fact that Yaakov slept at that time. What is the Torah is teaching us? The message is in that while he slept, according to Chazal, he dreamed about Torah. ויקץ יקב משנתו אל תקרי משנתו, אלא ממשנתו

The **Abarbanel** writes that Yaakov had thought he could attain great spiritual heights, only in holy places and only when surrounded by holy people.

אברבנאל בראשית פרק כז: ספר הכתוב שהקיץ יעקב משנתו משתומם כשעה חדא ושער בנפשו שדבר גדול נראה לו בחלומו ולכן אמר אכן יש י' במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי רוצה לומר אני הייתי חושב שלא תמצא קדושה ודבקות השגחה אלא במקום שיהיו אנשים אנשי חיל ירא אלקים כאלו תאמר באר שבע מצד אבי שיושב שמה

Until now, Yaakov had attained great spiritual heights in holy places. Now, for the first time in his life, he was on his own without any support, and he was pleasantly surprised to come to understand that his success in finding G-d was not limited by his location and surroundings. He found that he was capable of finding G-d wherever he went. At that moment, Yaakov Avinu learned an important lesson about spirituality.

If spirituality is real and fully internalized, we do not need any specific surroundings to encounter G-d.

ויאמר אכן יש ה' במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי:

He was expressing his realization that, wherever he went, he could successfully find G-d.

He thought he could be a *tam* while he was *yoshev ohalom*, in Yeshiva—but the values he had learned were a part of him—he had become a source of spirituality. That earned him the name Yisrael—Yashar im Kel.

But how did this happen? How was Yaakov prepared to find Hashem to a spiritual desert? It begins with genuine *midos*. But it also requires practice. The **Sefer HaChinuch** in Mitzva 16 writes that Judaism is focused on repetition. It helps us internalize the message of Torah.

ועתה בני אם בינה שמעה זאת, והטה אזנך ושמע, אלמדך להועיל בתורה ובמצוות. **דע כי האדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו. ולבו וכל מחשבותיו תמיד אחר מעשיו שהוא עושה בהם, אם טוב ואם רע,**

You must know, that Man is affected by his actions, and his heart and all his thoughts always follow after the actions that he does, whether good or bad

ועל כן אמרו חכמים זכרונם לברכה [מכות דף כ"ג ע"ב] רצה המקום לזכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצוות, כדי להתפייס בהן כל מחשבותינו ולהיות בהן כל עסקינו, להטיב לנו באחריתנו, כי מתוך הפעולות הטובות אנחנו נפעלים להיות טובים וזוכים לחיי עד. ורמזו זכרונם לברכה על זה באמנם [מנחות דף מ"ג ע"ב] כל מי שיש לו מזוזה בפתחו וציצית בבגדו ותפלין בראשו מובטח לו שלא יחטא, לפי שאלו מצוות תמידיות ונפעל בהן תמיד.

And the Sages of blessed memory said about this: (Makos 23b) "God wanted to grant merits to Israel, therefore he gave them many laws and commandments", to occupy all of our thoughts and all our deeds, to benefit us at our end [i.e. in the world to come]. Because from the good actions we are acted upon to be good and we merit eternal life. And the Sages hinted at this (Menachos 43b), with their statement that everyone who has a Mezuzah on his door, Tzitzis on his garment and Tefillin on his head, he is promised that he shall not sin, for these are constant Mitzvot, and he is constantly acted upon by them.

Years of making good choices in the presence of his holy parents, reinforced by another 14 years in Yeshivas Shem V'Ever, defined the character of Yaakov Avinu, until he was able to retain that level of spirituality in the most corrupt society.

Several years ago, our shul had the *zechus* to host **R' Yosef Mendelevitch**. He told us his heroic and courageous story as a refusenik in the Soviet Gulag. In his autobiography, ***Unbroken Spirit: A Heroic Story Of Faith, Courage and Survival***, he writes that when he was sent to a Soviet prison, among his most precious possessions was a small Rinat Yisrael *siddur* he smuggled in. He barely knew how to read Hebrew and certainly did not know the words of the prayers, but the *siddur* was his connection to God, and he consequently lived in constant fear that the *siddur* would be discovered and destroyed.

He writes: *Then I hit upon an idea. I would copy the prayer book into an inconspicuous notebook. I volunteered that night for the night shift, knowing that when I returned in the morning the barracks would be empty, giving me a few precious hours while everyone else was at work to do the copying. This I did eagerly, knowing that in the case of a search, I wouldn't stand a chance. After several weeks of my new daily ritual, I finished copying out the daytime prayers, and began to pray properly. Still, I feared that notebooks full of Hebrew letters might draw undue attention, so I copied the prayers once more, this time to small pieces of paper that, like my vocabulary words, I could hide in matchboxes. I copied out two sets of prayers like this, wrapping the matchboxes in plastic and burying them. **And then something surprising happened. I discovered that I knew the prayers by heart – that, in all this covert copying, the words had become a part of me. The discovery felt like I had acquired another freedom; I could now pray anytime, anywhere, whether it be at work or in solitary confinement. Prayer could never again be taken from me.** This is the secret to life. We are faced with so many challenges—which take on so many forms in so many different situations. To survive, we need **real** values and we need to fortify ourselves. We must be ready for challenges that we face outside the safe spaces of shul and the Beis Medrash.*

But there is one more thing Yaakov teaches us. When we are first introduced to him, we are told he is an **איש** תם יושב אהלים. **Rav Moshe Feinstein** writes that to be a true and genuine *tam*, one first must be an *ish*, a *mensch*. That ensures that the values are real and enduring.

איש צדיק תמים. נראה לומר דכתבה תורה התואר "איש" לומר רק כשהוא איש בדעת ובהשכל שייך לומר עליו תוארים דצדיק תמים, אבל כשהוא צדיק תמים כשאינו איש, דהיינו שהוא שלא בדעת, אין לתארו בתוארים אלו שנקל להתפתות.

The greatest legacy of Yaakov Avinu is what Mr. Feuerstein taught us as well... ***When all is moral chaos, this is the time for you to be a mensch.*** May we all do our best to live courageously with moral clarity, as we continue to live in the chaos of this long *galus*. May we be zoche together see the coming of *Mashiach* and a return to *Yerushalayim Habenuya... bimhera viyamenu... amen.*