

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

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How might we describe Yaakov's frame of mind when, in the face of his brother Eisav's hatred, he is forced to leave his parents' home and save his life?

The Torah tells us that as evening approached, Yaakov "encountered the place" (28:11) and fearful of the dangers of the night, surrounded himself with a protective wall of stones. He then experiences his memorable dream of the ladder, "set up on the ground and its top reaching the heaven". When Yaakov awakes, he remarks in wonderment: "Indeed, the Lord is in this place and I did not know" (28:16). How are we to understand this statement? Why would Yaakov even entertain the possibility that Gd was not everywhere?

Based in part upon the insightful comments of the HaK'tav V'haKabala (R' Yaakov Mecklinburg, 18-19th c.) and the Oznayim LaTorah (R' Zalman Sorotzkin, 19-20th c.), the following drama unfolds.

Yaakov was fleeing the wrath of his brother. He had earlier engaged in a major subterfuge to wrest the blessings of the first born from Eisav. True, the deception was done upon the urging of his mother Rivka, but we may assume that Yaakov, the ISH TAM, the man of deep ethical sensitivity, was assailed by the guilt nevertheless. Moreover, according to the Midrash (D'varim

Rabba 2:20), Yaakov was robbed penniless by Elifaz, the eldest son of Eisav, leaving him destitute. And, if this tormenting insecurity was not enough, he was heading toward a strange land where his uncle, Lavan, had an appalling reputation as a malicious trickster and fraud.

Yaakov was terribly lonely, scared and shadowed by a fearful unknown. Back in Be'er Sheva, in the comfort and spiritual security of his righteous parents, Yaakov, the "dweller of tents", felt secure and safe. In his religiously serene sunshine surroundings, he sought out Gd in tranquility, eager to discover divine verities and thrilling at the challenge of scaling greater spiritual heights.

But now, his life had suddenly turned, swallowed up by a dark foreboding cloud. Night was quickly descending upon him and, while never doubting Gd's existence, perhaps Yaakov felt that at this moment, HaShem was far away, distant, in another "place". A "place" that much later, the prophet would identify with Gd's withdrawal from man (see Yechezkel 3:12). Had Gd abandoned him, forgotten about him?

And then, the dream, and with that startling revelation, one of Judaism's most important and vital lessons is divulged to Yaakov. To wit: that very often, HaShem is to be found in the whirlwind, in the terror of the night, in the black misery of an afflicted soul. (Iyov 38:1).

Here is how Rav Soloveitchik understood what was disclosed to Yaakov on that exalted night.

"Gd's revelation at times of crisis, from the depths of despair and distress, is a basic principle in Judaism. Sometimes, Gd does not reveal Himself to the contented soul; He reveals Himself to the mute soul, battered by weariness and exertion ... Sometimes, He does not reveal Himself to the rational individual, but to one who is confused about life, who is bankrupt and has lost track of his world ... Even the most spiritually elevated members of the Jewish people first encountered their Lord at a time of raging fear, helplessness, or distraction, when they were not anticipating such an encounter and were thoroughly surprised by it. Yaakov comes close to his Gd in a nocturnal dream, while sleeping on cold stones ...

"Judaism has firmly established the halachic principle that even when man confronts the unchangeable evil decree coming from Gd - even when his rejected prayers are thrown back in his face - he must see Gd and conjoin with Him, in spite of the tragedy that weighs him down" (Chumash, Mesorat HaRav, B'reishit, pp. 213-15).

When Yaakov awakes, he discovers that the "place" which appeared empty of Gd was, in fact, suffused with His Presence. Indeed, Gd is every place, omnipresent! He is with us in our moments of joy and He is equally close to us when we suffer. Indeed, the Midrash tells us (B'reishit

Rabba 68:10) allegorically, on a play of words (KI VA = KAVA) describing the ominous sunset closing in upon Yaakov, that there are times that HaShem shuts the lights, as it were, so that He might talk to us in private intimacy. How true are the words of the Psalmist: "I [Gd] am with him in his affliction" (91:15).

And so, with that powerful existential truth in hand, Yaakov "lifts up his feet and heads off to the land of the easterners" (29:1). Rashi, quoting the Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 70:8), comments that Yaakov became light-footed, "his heart lifted his feet" and he confidently strode off to meet his destiny (see also Radak ad loc).

Were all his problems resolved? Did his worries disappear? Did some miracle occur to rescue Yaakov from his many anxieties? Of course not. Yaakov's trouble-filled life would continue, more painful challenges awaited, frustrating setbacks to deal with, more sorrow and distress. Indeed, he would later confess to Pharoah that "few and bad have been the days of my life" (47:9). And yet, Yaakov never forgot the lesson he learned on that lonely night. He not only perseveres, but later, wrestles with his demons, and overcomes to emerge triumphant, earning the glorious name of Yisrael, signifying this greatest of victories.

And who can know if precisely in confronting these very difficult challenges lie the seeds of a person's potential greatness. The Ba'al HaTurim

(28:12) avers that sometimes dreaming of angels comes after one has been thrown to the ground (see B'reishit Rabba 68:4), slapped in the face by some cruel, nonsensical fate.

In every life, "a little rain must fall", sometimes a lot. But when that happens, as it will, remember, as Yaakov's life revealed, that HaShem forsakes us never. As the popular aphorism has it, "If He brought us to it, He will see us through it." And more, in sustaining that faith, stamina and courage, the terrible storm will yield a sunshine of wonderful and great vistas and destinies fulfilled.