Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk** 

VAYISHLACH

The Cleansing

In Chapter 35 of the Book of B'reishit, the circle is closed. Ya'akov Avinu is returning to the site of his amazing vision of the Ladder (B'reishit 28: 10-22) which began his sojourn in the Exile. It was not a celebration.

This scenario begins with the issue which we will scrutinize this week, namely the disposal of idolatrous items within the encampment. Then they reach Beit El, but before any ceremony can happen, Devora dies. Who? Well, apparently the nursemaid of Rivka, who must have been very old, indeed. Some associate this event with the death of Rivka, his beloved mother, whose death otherwise isn't mentioned at all.

After a period of mourning or 'crying' (the place is named Alon-Bachot, Oak of Weeping), God appears to actually close the cycle of Ya'akov's travels, and declares: You, who were formerly called Ya'akov ... will be called Yisrael ... I am God Almighty, a nation, yea, an assembly of nations shall descend from you... (35:10-11).

Phew! With those grandiose blessings one might think that all the troubles are now behind our hero. But you'd be wrong, dead wrong. Then his beloved Rachel dies (verse 19). A tragedy Ya'akov carries with him until his death bed (48:7). This chapter (35) then ends with the death of Yitzchak (verse 28). Of course that death was at a ripe old age (180), but it does add to the persistent string of tragedies.

I have no great wisdom to impart about this unrelenting series of unfortunate events. But I do have some ideas to share about the beginning of this episode, the cleansing of the camp of idolatrous artifacts.

Where did these pagan items come from? The most commonly accepted answer is that the cache came from the plunder resulting from the sacking of Shechem. It probably included even everyday objects like clothes and household utensils which would be adorned with the images of these false deities.

But it could have included things the family brought with them from Charan, like the Terafim stolen by Rachel (31:19). Even though the verse claims that Ya'akov had no knowledge of this theft (verse 32), it's possible that he had some inkling that the Terafim were hidden amongst the family. He knew that he had cursed whoever had them, but now was, perhaps, the proper time to get rid of them along with any other idolatry.

Why was it so important to dispose of these items? Bear in mind that many authorities claim that these items had been nullified from their idolatrous nature and would have been technically permitted (Rabbeinu Bechaye). But the family was getting ready to sanctify themselves before God, and this seemed like a great preparation for that enterprise. Rabbeinu Bechaye states: This is implied in the words: 'let us arise and go to Bet-El.' He meant that he would offer a sacrifice to God. Yaakov concerned himself with the issue in Kohelet 4:17:, 'Be extremely careful (guard your foot) when you go to the House of the Lord... for many know nothing but to do wrong!'

Our efforts at Divine Service should always be pure and honest. Ya'akov was worried that the family might not be spiritually ready for the worship at Beit El.

So, perhaps, this procedure was akin to the actions taken by the Jews before Har Sinai and the amazing Revelation there. In the Mosad Rav Kook commentary, there is a suggestion that, perhaps, the family viewed the trip to Bet El as similar to ALIYA LAREGEL, going up to Yerushalayim for one of the pilgrimage festivals. That required a process of TAHARA.

Similarly, the Tiferet Shlomo offers that this was similar to the first celebration of Pesach in Egypt. At that time the Jews went through a process of leaving the SITRA ACHRA (dark side of the Force) before entering into the covenant by means of the KORBAN PESACH. He concludes: Prior to doing a Mitzva one must first 'remove alien gods'.

The Torah Temima suggests that this process demanded by Ya'akov Avinu was more akin to conversion. He then explains that the Mikve immersion by a convert isn't about becoming Jewish. It is more about leaving the TUM'A of idolatry behind. This is why it makes no difference whether the immersion takes place before or after the circumcision. It's about the departure from impurity rather than the entry into Judaism.

According to Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch the key to understanding Ya'akov Avinu's concerns is the Hebrew word NOCHRI. These idolatrous false gods are called 'foreign gods', ELOHEI HANEICHAR. It means anything foreign or different from Judaism. He goes on to explain that it's not an adjective; it's an abstract noun. It means 'foreignness'. Ya'akov was demanding that his family cast off everything foreign or alien to Avraham's covenant with the one, true God.

Ya'akov is returning to Eretz Yisrael, and knows that he must slough off every particle of filth which he

accumulated in the house of Lavan, the encounter with Eisav and the incident at Shechem. He's committing his version of Avraham Avinu's LECH L'CHA experience.

He's leaving behind everything from his experience in Exile. It's not the total newness which Avraham experienced, because Ya'akov grew up with monotheism. For Ya'akov, he's now Ya'akov version 2.1, now to be called Yisrael. Unlike his grandfather's experience, there are parts of his former self which will remain, hence he can still be called Ya'akov, at the proper times.

In a number of places (but primarily Talmud Shabbat 14b), the Sages discuss the TUM'A, the impurity of Chutz La'Aretz (TUMAT ERETZ HA'AMIM), the impurity of places outside the Land of Israel. Ya'akov's experience and new instructions are the stuff of making ALIYA. Coming to Eretz Yisrael should entail a CHESHBON HaNEFESH ('soul searching'). By this I don't mean financial or practical consideration (although they are important). I mean rearranging the furniture of our minds and souls.

Like Ya'akov Avinu, our Alter Zeidie, when we come home we should remove the dirt and outside influences we accumulated in the Diaspora. Our K'LITA, absorption, acclimation, will be that much more successful when we embrace the new reality of the Holy Land, stripped of the dross of exile. Welcome Home! 