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**Parashat VaYishlach**

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## STRIVING WITH THE DIVINE AND WITH MAN

by *Rabbi Joel Grossman*

In Parashat VaYishlach, immediately after its description of Yaakov's preparations for a battle with Esav, the Torah describes Yaakov's brawl with a nameless man. In his commentary, Rashi cites the Midrash Rabbah and identifies the man as the "Saro Shel Eisav," the guardian angel of Esav (BeReishit 32:25 s.v. VaYei'aveik Ish Imo). Immediately following their fight, Yaakov demands a blessing from the angel, and in response, the angel states, "Lo Yaakov Yei'ameir Od Shimcha Ki Im Yisrael, Ki Sarita Im Elokim VeIm Anashim VaTuchal," "Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have striven with the Divine and with man and have overcome" (BeReishit 32:29).

Rav Moshe Feinstein, in his work *Darash Moshe*, points out that Yaakov Avinu is notified of his name change on two different occasions by two separate sources. His first notification comes from the angel, as described in the aforementioned Pasuk. Additionally, Yaakov is notified by Hashem Himself three Perakim later. There, Hashem states, "Lo Yikarei Shimcha Od Yaakov, Ki Im Yisrael Yihyeh Shemecha," "Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but Yisrael shall be your name" (35:10).

There is an interesting difference between the two occasions of Yaakov's name change. When the angel informs Yaakov of his new name, it also gives him a reason: "Ki Sarita Im Elokim VeIm Anashim VaTuchal," "For you have striven with the Divine and with man and have overcome." On the other hand, no reason is given by Hashem during Yaakov's second renaming. What is the significance of this difference between the two Pesukim? What did the angel mean by "striven"? What exactly did Yaakov do to deserve his new name?

A person is faced with many challenges in life. It is his duty to meet those trials and maintain his faith and fear of Hashem. These challenges fall into two categories. First, there are the personal struggles, which we all have within ourselves. However, there is another type of challenge which is sometimes even more difficult to face—the generational challenge not to be swayed by those who try to dissuade others from following the Mitzvot of the Torah. This second challenge is something we constantly face, and with great effort, BeEzrat Hashem, defeat.

When the angel tells Yaakov the reason for his renaming, it essentially states that in the past, Yaakov was successful in his triumph over both of these challenges. The "divine" in the Pasuk refers to the Yeitzer HaRa, evil inclination, while "man" refers to the various people who tried to stop Yaakov from performing Mitzvot. That is the reason why the angel tells Yaakov he is worthy to have his name changed to Yisrael.

Hashem, on the other hand, is not speaking about the past. He is assuring Yaakov that future generations will also be worthy of the name "Yisrael," that they will be people who will not give in to the

Yeitzer HaRa and the outward pressures of society. The name "Yisrael" to Yaakov is a way of saying that for all time, anyone who "strives" will be guaranteed to "overcome."

How do we defeat the Yeitzer HaRa? The Gemara in Kiddushin 30b states that whenever the Yeitzer HaRa strikes, a person should go to the Beit Midrash, where he will have the ability to defeat it. Talmud Torah enables a person to overcome the Yeitzer HaRa. I personally witnessed Rav Moshe Feinstein learn Mishnayot while wrapping up his Tefillin after davening. When I asked him why he was learning at that moment, he responded that "if Yochanan HaKohen could go into the Holy of Holies for eighty years and at the end of his life become a non-believer, then it could happen to me as well." In order to be deserving of the name "Yisrael," we need to maintain our connection with Hashem, and we need to internalize the centrality of Talmud Torah.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE JEWISH GRANDPARENT<sup>1</sup>

by *Yehoshua Kanarek ('19)*

After leaving the house of Lavan, Yaakov Avinu encounters his brother Eisav for the first time since fleeing his home. Yaakov sends messengers to inform Eisav "Im Lavan Garti, VaEichar Ad Attah," "I have lived with Lavan and lingered until now" (BeReishit 32:5). Rashi (ad. loc. s.v. Garti) comments that this missive contains a secret message: "Im Lavan HaRasha Garti, VeTaryag Mitzvot Shamarti," "I lived with the wicked Lavan, yet I kept all 613 Mitzvot." The Gematriya of the word "Garti" is 613 ("Taryag"), the number of the Mitzvot in the Torah. The hidden message is that although Yaakov has been living with Lavan for the last two decades, he has not been negatively influenced by the environment. Through his message, Yaakov is effectively warning Eisav that this Zechut will protect Yaakov from any harm Eisav may wish to do to him.

Interestingly enough, the Torah mentions later in the Parashah (35:2) that Yaakov Avinu tells his children to remove all the idols from their midst. This is a very strange incident, as one would have thought that the children of Yaakov would not be involved in idolatry. This is especially true in light of the aforementioned Midrash that Rashi quotes, in which he explains that Yaakov Avinu was not negatively influenced by Lavan's presence. Nevertheless, the simple reading of the Pasuk seems to imply that the sons of Yaakov were negatively impacted by the influence of Lavan, and were in possession of Avodah Zarah.

There is yet another strange incident mentioned later on in the Parashah. The Torah suddenly tells us that Devorah, Rivkah's [childhood] nursemaid, dies. Rashi (35:8. s.v. VaTamot Devorah) comments that this incident is actually an allusion to the death of Rivkah, as her death is not mentioned elsewhere in the Torah.

Perhaps these two seemingly random occurrences are connected to one another. While Yaakov certainly did everything in his power to teach his children about Judaism, there was one thing he could not provide for them: Jewish grandparents. Without the positive influence of their grandparents, Yitzchak and Rivkah, Yaakov's

<sup>1</sup> This Devar Torah is based on an idea of Rav Daniel Fridman, Sgan Rosh HaYeshiva of TABC.

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children fell under the influence of Avodah Zarah, which is why Yaakov is forced to confront them about the issue. This would explain why Devorah's death is mentioned. If, in fact, her death alludes to the absence of Rivkah and her influence, it makes sense why it is mentioned only a few Pesukim after the incident of the idolatry. The idea being emphasized is that Rivkah, who would have provided the positive influence of a Jewish grandparent, was sorely missing in the lives of Yaakov's children. This is why Rivkah's name is mentioned here in connection with her nursemaid's death; the Torah is trying to emphasize the importance of the influence of Jewish grandparents.

This same idea appears in explaining the Midrash (BeReishit Rabbah 70:12) which says that Yaakov arrived at the house of Lavan completely empty-handed. Why did Yaakov arrive without any wealth? Another Midrash (Devarim Rabbah 2:20) states that Eliphaz, Eisav's son, had come across Yaakov and had been ordered by his father to kill him. Instead of killing Yaakov Avinu, as Eliphaz wished to do, Eliphaz took all of his wealth, which was nearly as good as killing him in his eyes, for a poor person is considered dead (Nedarim 64b). Why didn't Eliphaz kill Yaakov anyway? What was the purpose of making Yaakov *like* a dead man and not *actually* a dead man? Rashi (BeReishit 29:11 s.v. VaYeivk) answers that it was due to the influence of his grandfather Yitzchak. Eliphaz, despite being raised by Eisav, had also grown up in the presence of a righteous grandfather. Eliphaz couldn't kill Yaakov, for doing so would disappoint his grandfather; the influence of his grandfather prevented him from committing a terrible crime.

Just as the presence of Yitzchak influenced Eliphaz to refrain from bloodshed, the absence of the Jewish grandparent in the lives of Yaakov's children made a tremendous impact in the negative sense. While the influence of the father is certainly very important, having the influence of the grandparents connects one to the Mesorah of the Jewish people, and it is critically important to remember how that can impact the lives of our children.

## KINDNESS TO ANIMALS

by Eitan Leff ('18)

Where do we learn that we need to be kind to animals, and why do we need to be kind to animals? Do animals have significant lives, or do they just exist to serve humans? Do we learn something from being merciful to animals?

Let us start with sources of kindness to animals. There are numerous proofs in Tanach and Torah SheBeAl Peh that teach kindness to animals. In our Parashah, the Pasuk states, "*VeYaakov Nasa Succotah, VaYiven Lo Bayit UL'Mikneihu Asah Succot; Al Kein Kara Sheim HaMakom Succot,*" "Yaakov traveled to Succot, and he built a house for himself and booths for his cattle; therefore, he named the place Succot" (BeReishit 33:17). This is the first time since Noah it is explicitly written that someone is kind to animals.

Other examples of kindness to animals in the Torah include the Mitzvah that if someone sees his enemy's donkey struggling with its burden, he must stop what he is doing and help his enemy unload the donkey (Shemot 23:5), as well as the Mitzvah not to muzzle an ox while it is threshing (Devarim 25:4). The Midrash Rabbah on Shemot 2:2 says that once, one of Moshe's sheep ran away to get a drink, and when Moshe caught up to it, he said: "I didn't realize that you were running because you were thirsty. Now you must be tired!" Moshe proceeded to carry the sheep all the way back to the group. In

both Berachot 40a and Gittin 62b, the Gemara teaches that it is forbidden for a person to eat before feeding his animals. All of these are proofs that humans are required to be kind to animals.

Now that we know we need to be kind to animals, we are left with a simple question: Why? In Rav Natan Slifkin's book *Man and Beast*, he presents three answers. First, animals have a right to live, second, Hashem does not like seeing His creations being hurt, and third, humans have a responsibility to act compassionately to Hashem's creations.

Rav Slifkin says that animals have a right to live, but are the lives of animals actually significant? The Midrash BeReishit Rabbah (33:1) relates a story in which Alexander the Great came to watch King Ketzia judge. A case arose in which a person had sold a piece of land to another person, but there was a treasure in the land. The buyer wanted to give the treasure back in honesty, but the seller did not want it back because he had already sold the land and everything in it. King Ketzia said the children of the two litigants should marry each other so the treasure would be shared. Alexander said that in his country, the people would be put to death and the treasure would go to the state treasury.

Upon hearing that the litigants would be put to death in Alexander the Great's land, King Ketzia asked Alexander: "Does it rain in your land? Does the sun shine on your land? Are there cattle in your land?" Alexander the Great answered yes to all the questions. King Ketzia said: "It is not in *your* merit that the rain falls and the sun shines. It is in the cattle's merit." This shows that the lives of animals are significant and can affect the world.

Another proof that animals have significant lives is that Hashem refuses to kill the city of Nineveh because He says, "Now should I not take pity on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left, and many animals as well?" (Yonah 4:11). The Radak (ibid.) explains that animals have neither reward nor punishment, so they deserve to live, not to die.

On the other hand, the Ramban believes that animals were created solely for humans, and their lives have no independent significance. He bases this assertion on the Pasuk, "*Ki Nefesh HaBasar BaDam Hi, VaAni Netativ Lachem Al HaMizbei'ach Lechapeir Al Nafshoteichem, Ki HaDam Hu BaNefesh Yechapeir,*" "For the soul of flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to atone for your souls, because blood atones for the soul" (VaYikra 17:11). Ramban interprets this Pasuk to mean that Hashem created animals only to satisfy the human need for atonement, because humans are the only beings that recognize Hashem. In addition, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 108a) asks: "If man sinned [in the generation of the Flood and therefore deserved to be destroyed], how did the animals sin? [To answer this question,] a parable was taught in the name of Rabi Yehoshua ben Karcha: A man prepared a Chuppah and many types of food for his son's wedding. However, his son died [before the wedding], and the man stood and destroyed the Chuppah, saying, 'I only did it for my son; now that he is dead, why do I need the Chuppah?' So too, Hashem said, 'I only created the animals and beasts for man; now that man has sinned, why do I need the animals and beasts?'" This Gemara seems to indicate that animals live only for the sake of man.

So do animals have significant lives or not? A compromise is that animals have significant lives, but their lives are not as important as the lives of humans. The Midrash Tanchuma (BeReishit 6) states if a person is on a ship during a storm and needs to throw things overboard to save his life and the lives of the other people on the ship, it is permissible to throw animals off the ship if they are the only things left on the ship other than people. From here we see that a human's life takes precedence over an animal's, but an animal's life takes precedence over inanimate objects.



Ashkenazic tradition despite his Sephardic ancestry. Rav Hershel Schachter similarly rules that if someone was raised in a non-Chassidic community, he need not practice Chassidic Minhagim even if his paternal grandfather was Chassidic (see Beit Yitzchak 39:520). Indeed, most Modern Orthodox Ashkenazic Jews pronounce Hebrew differently than their European paternal forebears.<sup>6</sup>

We must emphasize that, exceptional situations notwithstanding, it is imperative to follow the practices of one's family and community (see, for example, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 468:4 and Mishnah Berurah *ibid.* 14). In fact, Rav Ovadia Yosef would likely disagree with Rav Eliashiv's ruling for this very reason, especially if the son lived in Eretz Yisrael. Rav Ovadia (Teshuvot Yabi'a Omer 6, Orach Chayim 10:4 and Teshuvot Yechaveh Da'at 5:33; see also Teshuvot Yabi'a Omer 5, Orach Chayim 37) laments the choice of Ashkenazic Jews in Israel to maintain their Ashkenazic practices instead of acknowledging that the Rambam and Rav Yosef Karo are the Halachic authorities of Eretz Yisrael. Though he reluctantly yields to the Israeli Ashkenazim's adherence to their traditional customs, he instructed anyone of Sephardic origin who lives in Israel to follow Sephardic practice.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Rav Ovadia Yosef and Rav Shlomo Amar*

Although I am unaware of Hacham Ovadia addressing this particular issue in his voluminous writings or in his son's writings, I am aware of two situations in which Rav Ovadia in practice ruled that once a Sepharadi, always a Sepharadi. Rav Shlomo Amar told me the following story when he visited Teaneck's Congregation Shaarei Orah on Shabbat Nachamu of 5777:

A young man whose father was a Persian Jew and mother was a Yemenite Jew was raised in his mother's predominantly Yemenite neighborhood. His maternal grandfather had a large influence upon him and trained him to pray and read Torah in the distinctive Yemenite style. Upon reaching the age of maturity, he posed a question to Rav Amar as to whether he was permitted to follow the practice of his mother's family or whether he must adopt the more general Sephardic practice of his father and his family. Rav Amar referred the young man to Hacham Ovadia who instructed the young man to abandon Yemenite practice and change to his father's family practices. Rav Amar relates that the young man followed Rav Ovadia's ruling despite the considerable difficulty involved in making this transition.

The current president of Congregation Shaarei Orah in Teaneck, Mr. Joshua Murad, relates a similar story. Mr. Murad was raised in the overwhelmingly Ashkenazic Jewish section of the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. Both the synagogue and Yeshivot he attended were Ashkenazic, and despite his father's Sephardic origin, Mr. Murad practiced Ashkenazic Halachah from A to Z. During his year of study in Israel when he was eighteen years of age, Mr. Murad had the opportunity to meet Rav Ovadia Yosef. Mr. Murad asked Rav Ovadia if he was obligated to return to his ancestral Sephardic practices. Mr. Murad reports that Hacham Ovadia insisted that he must "Machazir Atarah LeYoshenah," "Restore the crown to its original luster," and fully observe Halachah in accordance with Sephardic tradition. I am delighted to report that Mr. Murad is very proud to be an enthusiastic follower of Rav

Ovadia's ruling, to the extent that he currently serves as the devoted lay leader of the Teaneck Sephardic congregation.

Rav Amar fully subscribes to Rav Yosef's approach. Interestingly, he told me that even if a Sephardic Jew never attends Sephardic services<sup>8</sup> and even neglects the venerated Sephardic Halachah to recite Selichot beginning from the second day of Elul, he is still entitled to eat Kitniyot on Pesach. I had thought that if a Sephardic Jew does not observe the stringent Sephardic practices, he loses his right to follow the lenient Sephardic practices. Rav Amar clarified that although he acts improperly in regards to the stringent practices, he remains a Sephardic Jew and is entitled to observe Sephardic leniencies. Similarly, Rav Ben Zion Abba Shaul rules (Or LeTzion, volume one) that a Ba'al Teshuvah of Sephardic origin should follow Sephardic standards, even if his father did not observe Torah law.

#### *Conclusion*

Rav Amar concluded his ruling by telling me that a non-Jew may convert to Judaism, but a Sephardic Jew may not change to Ashkenazic practice. Presumably, Rav Amar would not permit an Ashkenazic Jew to change to Sephardic practice. However, it seems that an Ashkenazic Jew who wishes to make this change is permitted to do so according to the view of Rav Eliashiv. In any event, any change in ancestral practice should not be taken lightly. Adopting a course of action which deviates from centuries of family practice and has profound impact on future generations must be contemplated with the utmost of care and sober consideration.

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*This publication contains Torah matter and should be treated accordingly.*

<sup>6</sup> For example, Ashkenazic Modern Orthodox Jews do not pronounce Hebrew in the Chassidic style despite their Chassidic ancestry. This is an example of community practice prevailing over family custom. For a discussion of how to resolve conflicts between community and family customs, see Rav Zalman Nechemia Goldberg's Darchei HaPsak (p. 24 note 44).

<sup>7</sup> For a defense of the Ashkenazic Jews in Israel retaining their Minhagim, see Chazon Ish (Shevi'it 23:5), Rav Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky's Ir HaKodesh VeHaMikdash (3:24), Pe'at HaShulchan (3:11), and Rav Elyakim (Getsel) Ellinson's Ish VeIshto (pp. 24-25 note 31).

<sup>8</sup> Rav Amar clarified that his ruling applies even if Sephardic services are readily available to him and he never participates in these services.