

certainly would not have pronounced the curse. Sadly, the curse took effect, catalyzing (in some way) Rachel's untimely death. Every word that exits our mouth must be carefully weighed. One never knows... We find this occurring a number of times in Tanach. One notable instance occurred when the brothers returned from Egypt and related to their father, Yaakov *Avinu*, the troubles that the Egyptian viceroy had caused them. Imagine, had Yaakov issued a curse against this Jew-hating pagan (not knowing that, indeed, it was none other than his own son, Yosef), his curse might have been the catalyst for the Egyptian viceroy's death!

Horav Yitzchak Eliyahu Landau, zl, was a brilliant and pious *gaon*, who was a contemporary of *Horav Chaim Volozhiner, zl*. Unfortunately, he was not blessed with biological offspring. One day, the son of *Horav Itzele Volozhiner (Rav Chaim's son)* became seriously ill. *Rav Itzele* was beside himself in fear for his son's life. His father said to him, "*Halevai* (if only) *Rav Yitzchak Eliyahu* would experience your pain. Sadly, he has no children." The child's condition worsened, and he passed away.

Meanwhile, *Rav Yitzchak Eliyahu* was appointed *Rav* in Zaskowitz, a small town which bordered on *Vohozhin*. In due time, the change of *makom*, place, engendered a change in his *mazel*, fortune, and he and his wife were blessed with a son. When the child reached the age that *Rav Itzele's* son had become ill, this child, too, became gravely ill, and, in a short time, was on the verge of death.

When *Rav Yitzchak Eliyahu* heard about *Rav Chaim's* remark (years earlier) to *Rav Itzele*, he became overwhelmed with concern. He sat the entire night by his son's bedside, praying, pleading, beseeching Hashem to spare his child. He added, "This is not what *Rav Chaim* meant when he remarked to his son that *Rav Yitzchak Eliyahu* would have been pleased with your worry. He did not wish me to have a child that would become ill. He meant that I, too, should become a father! Please, Hashem, spare my child!" The child lived. One never knows the effect of the words that leave his mouth.

On a positive side, **Horav Shimon Pincus, zl**, relates that, prior to the *bar-mitzvah* of one of his sons, he was blessed with a daughter. The obvious question was: Should he make a separate *kiddush*, celebration, or, rather, merge the *bar-mitzvah* with the *kiddush* for his daughter. It would be economical both from an economic and time perspective.

After giving the matter some thought, he came to the conclusion that he should make two separate affairs. He conjectured: The idea of a *kiddush* is based upon the words of *Yitzchak Avinu* prior to sending *Eisav* to bring back for him *matamim*, delicacies, which he had been used to eating. The joy incurred as a result of eating those delicacies would create a spiritual bond between the two (father and son), thereby increasing the efficacy of the blessings. Likewise, when one celebrates a milestone joyous occasion in the company of good friends, satiated with food and drink, the blessing of *mazel tov* and the various good wishes that are articulated by the guests

represent a powerful force of benediction. This is the power of the Jewish "word."

In the *Sefer Bais Elokim*, the **Mabit** (*Horav Yeshaya D. Trani*) writes that the power of a blessing uttered by a Jew is similar to that of a prayer. Thus, the power of a multitude of people all issuing a blessing, constitutes an incredible prayer on behalf of the newborn infant for whom the *kiddush* is being rendered.

Likewise, when one Jew blesses another on *Rosh Hashanah* night with the well-known, *L'shanah Tovah Tikaseivu*, "You shall be inscribed for a good year," it is a compelling merit for the individual who is the recipient of the blessing. We should never take a Jew's blessing for granted.

Va'ani Tefillah

דעת חונן לאדם דעת – Atah chonein l'adam daas. You favor man with knowledge.

Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 115:a) explains why this blessing (unlike the rest of the weekday *Shemoneh Eisrai* blessings) begins with a declaration (*Atah chonein*; You favor man with knowledge) instead of with an immediate request, as in the case with the other blessings. In order to ask, to petition, to pray – one requires *daas*, knowledge, common sense, understanding. Otherwise, he does not know what to ask for (or, if I may add, have the ability to appreciate what he receives). **Horav Baruch Sorotzkin, zl**, would say concerning the *pasuk: Re'eh!* See! *Anochi nosein lifneichem hayom*, "I present before you today – *brachah u'klalah*, a blessing and a curse." The Torah uses the word "see" because, oftentimes, we are blessed and we either do not realize it or refuse to look at it objectively in order to see the blessing. Without *daas*, we are limited in prayer and (even more) limited in our ability to pay gratitude.

In loving memory of
our father and grandfather
on his yahrtzeit

אלהינו בן פרץ ז"ל

נפטר י"א כסלו תשנ"ט

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Parashas Vayetzei

תשע"ז

פרשת ויצא

TORAH THOUGHTS ON THE PARSHA

ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע וילך חרנה

And Yaakov went out from Be'er Sheva and went to Charan. (28:10)

In a well-known statement, *Rashi* teaches that the departure of a *tzaddik* from a community leaves a void. When the righteous person is in town, he comprises its glory, beauty and glow. When he leaves, its glory, beauty and glow leave with him. This is derived from the word, *Vayetzei* (Yaakov), and "he (Yaakov) went out (from Be'er Sheva)." It is not necessary to write his point of departure. That is obvious, since he had been there until this point. All that is required for the reader to know is his destination – unless his departure creates a void. The question is: although, undoubtedly, Yaakov's departure from Be'er Sheva impacted the community, what about Yitzchak and Rivkah? They were both holy people who remained in Be'er Sheva. Yaakov was one out of three. *Rashi* seems to be ignoring the fact that these two giants remained in Be'er Sheva. Simply, we must say that each and every *tzaddik* contributes to a community's beauty. While two *tzaddikim* remain, the presence of one less holy person leaves an impressionable void.

Horav Gedaliah Shorr, zl (quoted by *Horav Yisrael Belsky, zl*), offers another explanation which provides us with a window on how to survive spiritually in a world whose moral compass is antithetical to Torah dictate. The *Rosh Yeshivah* made this observation at a time when the entire world was focused on the moon landing. It was a sensational moment in history, as man finally conquered space. Did he really, however, conquer it? Nothing about the moon had changed – it was still not human-friendly. Indeed, the only reason the astronauts were able to maneuver and survive in its hostile environment was that they brought a "mini-earth" with them: oxygen and food upon which to subsist. They brought pressurized spacesuits, weighted boots, and a whole array of scientific data-collecting devices, just for the short time that they would be there; without their complex life-support systems, they certainly would have died.

In other words, the astronauts brought earth up to the moon. This is exactly what Yaakov *Avinu* was compelled to do if he were to survive in the spiritually hostile environment of Charan. The members of Rivkah's family were idol worshippers. Her brother was the paragon of a swindler. How could Yaakov maintain his spiritual status quo in such a place? Only if he brought Be'er Sheva's *hod*, glory; *hadar*, beauty; and *ziv*, glow,

with him. Yaakov's body was in Charan, but his mind was ensconced in Be'er Sheva.

This is what *Rashi* means when he writes that when Yaakov left, he took the city's *hod*, *hadar* and *ziv* with him. He had to! Thus, he was able to build a spiritual cocoon around himself, so that he could survive Lavan's spiritual onslaught. As a result, Be'er Sheva was left devoid of these qualities.

Is it any better in our lives, when we leave the protection of our homes, our *shuls*, our *yeshivos* and enter the secular world that surrounds us? While I will not identify exactly how the secular world differs from our lifestyle, because this *dvar Torah* is read by a vast audience, everyone has his or her opinion concerning what defines "secular" and what dictates "modern"; therefore, it is best left unsaid. Nonetheless, we must maintain a semblance of vigilance in our relationship with the outside world in order to protect ourselves and our children. We must monitor this exposure by "wearing" the proper protective gear, so that the far-ranging effects of contemporary secular society does not leave us spiritually traumatized.

ויפגוע במקום וילך שם כי בא השמש

He encountered the place and spent the night there because the sun had set. (28:11)

Rashi explains that this "place" was none other than *Har HaMoriah*, the site where Avraham *Avinu* had bound *Yitzchak Avinu* on the Altar of the *Akeidah*. This was also the future site of the *Bais Hamikdash*. *Chazal* interpret this "encounter" to mean "he prayed." Yaakov *Avinu's* encounter was not with a geographical location, but rather, with Hashem. Why did the *pasuk* not simply state that he prayed? What is the significance of the word, encounter, and what is its relationship to prayer?

Various terms express *tefillah*, prayer; *pegia*, encountering, is one. I think that *pegia* refers to a prayer in which the focus is not on the words, but rather, on the encounter: one feels and acts like he is in the Presence of G-d. One is unaware of his surroundings, in the sense that he feels entirely alone with the Creator. He has no need for words. The individual's presence is totally subjugated, with no need for external validation; he is withdrawn from the surroundings, but completely focused on Hashem. That is *pegia*. It does not mean that one is alone; rather, it means that one feels himself alone – with Hashem. He achieves total self-abnegation, almost spent, withdrawn from the

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present and thrust into a far-off encounter with G-d – only with G-d. He feels utter trepidation, overwhelming awe, because he is “here” – in the presence of Hashem. He becomes one (so to speak) with Hashem. This is *pegia* – encounter.

Why so subdued? Where is the enthusiasm? The solemnity and sober-sided feeling of the encounter reflect a certain form of prayer. Perhaps it is prayer when one has nothing else – meaning, he is spent, having articulated and cried out his heart. He is utterly subdued, with nowhere to go. This is it. He is full-face with Hashem. Words are not necessary. Indeed, he has no words. Hashem knows the words. We provide the emotion. That is *pegia*.

Yaakov *Avinu* “encountered” Hashem as the sun set. *Chazal* teach that he initiated *Tefillas Arvis*, the evening prayer. It is night, the end of the day – the end of the road. Regardless how bleak, how dark, how black – one needs to pray. That is the only way. Yaakov’s life was filled with adversity. Yet, he never gave in; he never gave up. He prayed and taught his descendants that – regardless of the circumstances – one must pray. Indeed, the only medium that is effective is prayer.

At times, all one must do is be honest with Hashem – sort of tell it like it is, open up and pray with integrity. All too often, we promise and promise, but our promises are based on contingencies. We give our word, as long as everything goes our way. Integrity in prayer means realizing that our only avenue of salvation is Hashem. He is not our last resort. He is our only resort.

The following story underscores this idea. A Jewish lawyer, himself non-observant, arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* and asked to see **Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl**. Apparently, his wife was gravely ill, and he sought a blessing for her recovery. The *Maggid* replied, “I will bless you, but I want you to know that your personal prayer on behalf of your wife has greater efficacy.”

The lawyer said, “I cannot speak with G-d!” *Rav* Sholom was quite taken aback with this declaration. First, he was “impressed” by the straightforwardness. Second, he wondered why. “After all,” he asked, “you cannot speak with Hashem? You are a lawyer. Speaking is the staple of your profession.”

The man explained. “*Rebbe*, I am a non-practicing Jew. For my entire life, I have maintained my distance from Torah and *mitzvah* observance. I had only one daughter that was born to us after quite a few years of marriage. She became very ill at the age of three to the point that one day the doctor called me to the hospital, ‘You must come immediately. Your daughter is in the last few hours of her short life.’

“I was shaken beyond belief. I immediately took a taxi to the hospital, where I went straight to its chapel. I opened up the Ark and began to weep bitterly, ‘Hashem,’ I cried out, ‘I have never once asked You for a thing. Now, I have one request. My baby is dying. She is my only child for whom I waited for years. I plead with You to heal her. I promise that if You heal her, I will never ask You for another thing!’ As soon as I concluded my prayer, I ran up to the ICU to discover that a miracle had occurred. My daughter’s situation had turned around. She was on the road to recovery.

“Now you see why I cannot pray to Hashem. I gave Him my word, and I will not go back on my word.”

Hashem listened to this Jew because he spoke sincerely from the heart. He made a promise which, from his uneducated background, manifested total integrity. He kept his word, not realizing that Hashem wants to hear from us – all of the time.

**וַיִּרְא וַיֹּאמֶר מִה נִוְרָא הַמְקוּם הַזֶּה אִין זֶה כִּי אִם בֵּית אֱלֹקִים הוּא
שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם**

And he became frightened and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the Abode of G-d, and this is the gate of the Heaven!” (28:17)

It was the 28th day of *Sivan* 1930; the crowd gathered to partake in the *chanukas ha’bayis*, dedication, of *Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin*. While it was not the first *yeshiva* in Poland, it was the most innovative. This was truly an auspicious occasion. The **Gerrer Rebbe, zl**, the *Imrei Emes*, was given the honor of addressing the assemblage. He quoted the above *pasuk*, asking why a redundancy of the word *zeh*, this, occurs: *zeh Bais Elokim v’zeh Shaar ha’Shomayim*; “**This** is the Abode of G-d; **this** is the gate of the Heavens.” He cited **the Baal Shem Tov, zl**, who explained this *pasuk* based on a statement of *Chazal* in the *Talmud Shabbos* 31b. *Chaval al d’les lei darta v’tara l’darta avid*, “Woe (what a waste it is) for he who does not have a courtyard, yet makes a gate for his courtyard.” *Rashi* explains that the Torah is the gateway through which one enters to avail himself of *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven. Therefore, it is incumbent that fear of Heaven should precede the study of Torah. Yaakov *Avinu* studied Torah for fourteen years (after leaving home). Now, he has arrived at this holy site (*Har HaMoriah*), where he was privy to a Divine vision, experiencing the dream of the ladder with Hashem sitting on top. The Patriarch said, “**This** place **is** the Abode of G-d. The other *zeh*, place, the *yeshiva* of Shem and Ever where I studied Torah for fourteen years, was merely the gateway to prepare me for *yiraas Shomayim*.”

The *Rebbe* continued, “The *yeshiva* is an impressive edifice. *Yehi ratzon*, may it be the will of the Creator, that it should be both: the gate to the courtyard; and the courtyard. The students who toil in Torah should, likewise, be engendered with *yiraas Shomayim*.”

וַיֹּאמֶר גַּם אֵת רַחַל מְלֵאָה

He loved Rachel even more than Leah. (29:30)

Obviously, the interpretation of this *pasuk* contains more than meets the eye. This is not a romantic tale. This *pasuk* is laden with profound meaning. First and foremost, when the Torah writes that Yaakov *Avinu*’s love for Rachel *Imeinu* was greater than the love he had for Leah *Imeinu*, it certainly is not referring to an emotional attraction. I came across an interpretation by **Horav Moshe Leib Sassover, zl**, which I find especially meaningful. He quotes the well-known and often-used *pasuk*, *Tachas asher lo avadita es Hashem Elokecha b’simchah u’b’tuv lev*, “Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, amid gladness and goodness of heart” (*Devarim* 28:47). *Klal Yisrael*’s lack of joy in serving Hashem is the catalyst for its ultimate punishment. They serve, but they are not excited, enthusiastic, filled with joy. As a rule, joy is a powerful barometer that indicates one’s love for a person, endeavor, organization. If one drags his feet, it shows that he is neither happy, nor does he care for what he is doing.

Joy reflects a greater and stronger love of something than do tears. *Chazal* teach that *Shaarei demaos lo ninalu*, “The gates of tears are never closed” (*Bava Metzia* 59a). One’s tearful entreaty will always penetrate the Heavenly Gates. Joy, however, breaks down, shatters, the gate; nothing stands in the way of joy. In other words, for tears to ascend and penetrate the Heavenly Throne, the gates must be opened. Joy is able to pass even

through a closed gate.

Leah *Imeinu* merited her place in the Matriarchal hierarchy as a result of her weeping: *V’eini Leah ramos*, “Leah’s eyes were tender” (*Bereishis* 29:17). *Chazal* attribute the tenderness of Leah’s eyes to her incessant weeping, pleading with Hashem that she not be compelled to marry Eisav. People would say that Rivkah had two sons, and Lavan had two daughters. The elder daughter (Leah) would be married to the elder son (Eisav). So, Leah had a reason to weep. This is what is meant that Yaakov loved Rachel even more than Leah. Rachel achieved through joy what Leah accomplished through her weeping.

Chazal teach, *Shaarei demaos lo ninalu*, “The gates of tears are not closed” (*Bereishis* 32b). The **Yehudi Hakadosh, zl**, was wont to say, “If the gates would indeed be closed, the tears would not be able to enter. Tears are (usually) the result of a depressed feeling, thus, they find it difficult to penetrate a sealed door. With joy, however, one can make a hole (and penetrate) even through a closed door.”

Ostensibly, the advantage of living a life filled with joy is obvious. Serving Hashem amidst joy is the way one manifests his profound love for the *mitzvah*. What about taking joy to the next level, such as in the most solemn and difficult moments of life: imbuing the process of death, the closing moments of life, with joy? This is the most remarkable test. I think it is a powerful indicator of a life that one has lived with “no regrets,” a life of satisfaction, of gladness, a life totally connected with Hashem. The following vignette, which describes the last hours and final moments of the life of a giant of Torah, the founder of *Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin* and the initiator of the *Daf HaYomi*, **Horav Meir Shapiro, zl**, is something to read over and over, allowing it to guide our lives. It shows how a person should live – and die; more importantly, however, it demonstrates the sublimity of the human psyche and indicates the heights that it can reach.

On Tuesday, the fourth of *Cheshvan* 5695 (1934), the *Rosh Yeshiva*, *Rav* Meir Shapiro, did not appear on time for his early morning *shiur*, lecture. This was highly unusual, since, normally, he was the first one to arrive. As the minutes passed, they realized that something was amiss. Their concern became stronger when he did not attend *Shacharis*, morning prayer service. *Rav* Meir was not merely a *Rosh Yeshiva*. Although he had not been blessed with his own biological children, the students of the *yeshiva* were his sons – and they felt he was their father. After *davening* they went to his home to inquire why he had not been to *davening*. They discovered him lying in bed with a bad cold. The doctor who was at his bedside said there was no reason for concern. The *Rosh Yeshiva* simply had a bad case of the flu.

The following day, *Rav* Meir’s condition worsened; a swelling had developed in his throat, impeding his ability to breathe properly. Other doctors were summoned to his bedside, but they, too, concurred with his primary physician. There was no reason for concern. In a few days, the *Rosh Yeshiva* would be up and about. *Rav* Meir’s body did not seem to agree with the doctor’s prognosis. With each hour, he became significantly weaker. The doctors, nonetheless, felt that he would bounce back and recover.

Late Thursday night, it was evident that the doctors were grossly mistaken. It was clear that their beloved *Rebbe* had but minutes to live. On a piece of paper, he wrote an instruction to his *talmidim* standing around his bedside, “Everyone should drink *l’chaim*!” Immediately, a bottle and cups appeared, and the

bachurim drank *l’chaim*.

As weak as he was, *Rav* Meir stretched out his hand and shook the hand of each and every student. After this, he motioned that they should sing one of his *niggunim*, tunes, to the words, *Becha batchu Avoseinu* (“In You did our ancestors trust”). In the middle of the song, he beckoned to them to form a circle around his bed, and then, on a scrap of paper, he wrote his last words: “*Rak b’simchah* – only with joy.” This was his final epistle.

The students danced around his bed singing and crying. In the middle lay *Rav* Meir, his august countenance shining like an angel. With his hand, he beckoned them to go faster, to sing louder, until suddenly, he gave a shudder and his holy *neshamah*, soul, ascended Heavenward to meet the holy *Tanaaim* and *Amoraim* who were surely waiting to greet him.

As I write this, I attempt to imagine the scene. It must have been the most remarkable experience, as true joy overcame sadness, reality overshadowed illusion. To achieve such a death, one has to have lived such a life: “*Rak b’simchah* – only with joy!”

**הִבָּה לִי בָנִים וְאִם אֵין מִתָּה אֲנִי... וַיַּחַר אֶף יַעֲקֹב בְּרַחַל וַיֹּאמֶר
הֲחַח אֱלֹקִים אֲנִי
“Give me children – otherwise I am dead.” Yaakov’s
anger flared up at Rachel, and he said, “Am I instead
of G-d?” (30:1,2)**

Ramban says that, undoubtedly, Yaakov *Avinu* prayed for Rachel *Imeinu*. He admonished her for wrongly implying that a *tzaddik*, righteous person, has the power to “coerce” Hashem to respond to his wish. Thus, when Rachel saw that relying on Yaakov’s prayer was not an option, she prayed herself to the One Who listens and responds – Hashem.

The *Avnei Nezer* of Sochatchov was a brilliant *Gaon* who hardly ever left his home. He was constantly involved in Torah – either studying or teaching. One day he announced to his students that he was attending the *Bris* of the son of a simple tailor who had asked him to serve as *sandek*, hold the infant during the circumcision. When asked why he was making such an exception, he explained, “This Jew had sanctified the Name of Heaven. Thus, he deserves that I attend the celebration. He came to me and said, ‘Fifteen years have passed since my wedding, and Hashem has helped me. Now I am fortunate to usher my son into the covenant of Avraham *Avinu*. I ask the venerable *Rebbe* to honor our *simchah*!’

“When I heard these words I decided that I must attend. How often have I heard individuals say, ‘I was helped in Gur; I was helped in Kotzk; I was helped in Radzmin’? I never hear a person declare, ‘I was helped by Hashem!’ Finally, today, I hear the tailor announce, ‘Hashem has helped me!’ I must attend the *simchah* of a Jew who attributes salvation to its true Source.”

**עַם אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא אֶת אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא יַחֲיֶה... וְלֹא יֵדַע יַעֲקֹב כִּי רַחַל
גּוֹבְחִים
With whomever you find your gods, he shall not live...
Now Yaakov did not know that Rachel had stolen
them. (31:32)**

Yaakov *Avinu* uttered the curse, because he suspected that one of the pagan servants had stolen the *teraphim*. Had he known that it was Rachel *Imeinu* who had taken them, he