

## A Thought on Parashat Vayeitzei 'Torah of Eternal Value and Relevance'

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In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



At every level of Torah observance, Jewish people would find it very strange, to put it mildly, to live without the familiar daily, weekly, monthly, annual practices which define us as recipients and guardians of our ancient laws and traditions. At one end of the spectrum, a sudden absence of daily routines such as davening, Daf Yomi and other shiurim, Tehillim groups and the weekly Shabbat rush would come as an enormous shock to the system. The unanticipated void would be hard to get used to, and harder to fill. Perhaps some would feel an initial sense of relief, even liberation, with alarm clocks set for later times on weekdays, and two-day weekends making short getaways an attractive possibility; but for many, the inevitable sense of spiritual loss would set in before long, and the soul would pine for a return to the familiar sights, sounds and smells of religious Jewish life, of life lived Jewishly. The same would be true along the length of the spectrum. Those whose Jewish observance is to attend shul every Shabbat and on the Chagim would miss it terribly and long for its return; others would mainly miss the joy of Chanukah and Pesach with the family, and the solemnity and nostalgia of the Yamim Nora'im.

Upon reflection, it seems remarkable that what we have said above should indeed be the case. In the highly developed, relentlessly technological, religiously materialistic 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it is a wonder that any of us at all still cling to beliefs and practices which date back millennia to a world unimaginably different from our own. Yet, we do. How can this be so? Are we living dual lives, tenaciously hanging on to an irrelevant past, while also proudly flying the flag of modernity? Of course, some critics argue just that; but the truth is very different.

There are those who assert that our ancient religious practices belong in the distant past, that there is no place for primitive superstitious customs in the all-enlightened reality of the Internet generation. This is argued by many both within and without our ranks. The truth is, living an observant Jewish life is both possible in the modern world and more necessary today than ever before. Moreover, the very fact that many Jews all over the globe - from one end of the religious spectrum to the other - happily combine Jewish living with full engagement in modern life, in which four-year-olds are more familiar with swiping a finger across an Apple than biting into one, attests to the fact that they are not living a contradiction. Their cry, in fact, is that Judaism gives them purpose, Shabbat gives them focus, mitzvot provide structure, and Torah affords spiritual nourishment.

If you think about it, if living a life of Torah and mitzvot had a limited shelf life, then Judaism would certainly already have been out of date even one hundred years after we stood at Har Sinai. A few

years ago I saw a full set of Encyclopaedia Britannica sitting in a builder's skip, covered in dust and waiting to be dumped. This spectacle stopped me in my tracks, and anyone who has a love for such books and respects the knowledge they contain would have recoiled at such a sight.

The reality is, though, that with the advent of regularly updated websites such books no longer have the honoured place in the home that they once had. Knowledge is nowadays perceived as constantly changing. Digital media has grown that perception and continues to feed it. A book, sadly, is considered to be past its shelf life, literally, even a day after it is printed. Of course, the soul of the book can go online, as has the Britannica, but it's just not the same, is it?

Not so the Torah. The Torah is Divine, and so of eternal value and eternal relevance. You would not have expected the original 1768 edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica to have still been very useful in 1868, only one hundred years after its birth. The Torah, on the other hand, was given to us over 3300 years ago, and it is still very much alive, and will still be so 3300 years into the distant future.

Now, we have thus far argued the case for the Torah's vitality down through the generations. At this point, however, we shall explore a related idea which adds a dimension to our discussion.

At the beginning of this week's sidrah we learn that, after Yaakov arranged the rocks around his head, "he lay down (to sleep) in that place." (Bereishit 28:11) Rashi explains that, "ההוא" - "that place" - has the effect of limiting the meaning. That is, he lay down to sleep in *that* place, but in another place he did not lie down to sleep. Rashi (citing a midrash) then proceeds to inform us that it was for the duration of the fourteen years that Yaakov spent with Eiver, "בבית עבר", that he did not sleep, because for that whole period he was involved in Torah study: "שהיה עוסק בתורה." Rashi previously referred to this period of fourteen years at the end of Parashat Toldot. There, Rashi notes that, after receiving his blessings from his father, Yitzchak, Yaakov interrupted his journey to Lavan in order to hide in the house of Eiver for fourteen years to learn Torah with him. In addition, Rashi points out that Yaakov was not punished for those fourteen years, for being unable to do the mitzvah of כיבוד אב (honouring his father by going to Lavan as instructed) because he was learning Torah during that time, whereas for the remaining twenty-two years that Yaakov was away from home he was punished through Yosef's twenty-two years away from home in Mitzrayim, during which time Yosef was similarly unable to honour his father, Yaakov.

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, in "Emet L'Yaakov," writes that Yaakov was learning in the yeshiva of Sheim and Eiver for those fourteen years. The question that must be addressed is, why was Yaakov not punished for those fourteen years of not honouring his father, whereas for his other twenty-two years away from home he was punished? It could be, suggests Rav Kamenetzky, that for some reason those years with Sheim and Eiver were so necessary for Yaakov's spiritual development that they outweighed his obligations towards his parents. Indeed, this explanation is given in Massechet Megillah 16b, where the Gemara states that the fact that Yaakov was not punished for those fourteen years teaches us that Torah learning is greater than honouring one's parents:

"גדול תלמוד תורה יותר מכיבוד אב ואם שכל אותן שנים שהיה יעקב אבינו בבית אבר לא נאנש וכו' "

Rav Kamenetzky is surprised by this, however. He points out that, at the time that Yaakov left his home in Be'er Sheva to go to Lavan he was 63 years of age. He had learnt Torah with his grandfather, Avraham, until the age of fifteen, and for the remaining years he had learnt in the yeshiva of his father, Yitzchak (Rambam, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:3). Why, then, asks Rav Kamenetzky, did Yaakov now have such a great need to divert himself from his father's instruction to go to Lavan and delay his journey for fourteen years in the yeshiva of Sheim va'Eiver? Furthermore, asks Rav Kamenetzky, even if Yaakov were indeed to have enjoyed additional spiritual growth during those years, how would that have in any way exempted him from the mitzvah of כיבוד אב ואם - honouring his parents? He compares the episode to a parable of a man who instructs his son to go to buy him something from a shop. The boy decides on his way to the shop that he would like to spend some time learning Torah in the local beit midrash, and does just that. Is this the right time for sitting down to learn? The Halachah, states the Emet L'Yaakov, is that Torah learning is 'pushed off' by any mitzvah that can not be done by anyone else at the time. The boy should therefore have marched directly to the shop and back, without delaying himself in the beit midrash.

Rav Kamenetzky proceeds to explain that, in fact, it was indeed necessary for Yaakov to spend those years in the yeshiva of Sheim va'Eiver. The reason for this was that their Torah was of a very different nature from the Torah of Avraham and Yitzchak. That is, the style and flavour of their Torah teaching was altogether different. The Avot taught Torah that was of an exalted spiritual nature and completely unaffected by the debased and immoral influences in the world that surrounded their holy family home, a home which shielded and sheltered the Avot from the world around them. The Torah of Sheim and Eiver was different. Sheim, the son of Noach, had survived the Generation of the Flood, the דור המבול - not merely the flood waters, but also the destructive influences of the people of that generation. Eiver had lived in the Generation of the Dispersion - the דור הפלגה - which had attempted to build a tower to the very heavens in order to challenge הקב"ה, Himself. Eiver, however, had not succumbed to their ways, and had remained righteous.

Only these two, who were survivors of those evil generations, could teach Yaakov the kind of Torah that would enable him to hold on to his simple purity and righteousness in Lavan's home and surroundings.

Rav Kamenetzky says we can now see that Yaakov certainly needed to spend those years under the tutelage of Sheim and Eiver *in order to fulfil the will of his parents*, for Yitzchak and Rivkah would not have wanted Yaakov to go to Lavan if he could not emerge at the end of his stay able to proclaim, נעם "I lived with the wicked Lavan and kept the 613 mitzvot and I did not learn from his wicked ways." (Bereishit 32:5, Rashi)

Entering the beit midrash of Sheim va'Eiver, then, was vital if Yaakov was going to properly fulfil the wishes of his parents, and it was an integral element in his **כִּיבוֹד אָב וְאָם**, honouring his parents, rather than a violation of it.

The Emet L'Yaakov then fine tunes the parable in light of what we have said: this situation was, in fact, comparable to a father who instructs his son to buy him a lulav and etrog for Sukkot. The boy, realising he does not know enough about the laws of the Arba'ah Minim, stops off at the beit midrash on the way in order to learn the relevant halachot. Would we suggest, asks Rav Yaakov, that this boy is not fulfilling the wishes of his father? No! He is fulfilling his father's wishes in the best possible way! Moreover, were he not to have refreshed his knowledge of the halachot, he could not have properly fulfilled his father's wishes at all.

The same was true of Yaakov Avinu. Without the special preparation of learning the Torah of Sheim va'Eiver, which would equip him for spiritual survival among cheats and liars, Yaakov could not properly have fulfilled his father's wishes.

Extending this theme further, Rabbi Kamenetzky draws our attention to a fascinating Rashi in Parashat Vayeishev. Rashi teaches us (on the words, "בן זקונים" Bereishit 37:3) that Yaakov taught Yosef everything he had learnt from Sheim and Eiver. Yosef needed "the Torah of Galut (the Diaspora), the Torah of Sheim va'Eiver," explains Reb Yaakov, because it was upon him that the yoke of preparing the way for his brothers' descent to Mitzrayim was to fall. Yaakov transmitted 'תורת הגלות, תורת שם ואבר' only to Yosef; the rest of the brothers received only 'תורת האבות' - 'the Torah of the Avot.' Moreover, just as there is 'Torat HaGalut,' writes Reb Yaakov, there is, of course, 'Torat Eretz Yisrael.' Each has emphases, nuances and halachot pertaining to the environment in which it is to be applied, and to the particular challenges of living in that environment.

Finally, Rav Kamenetzky reminds us that the saintly Chafetz Chaim wrote the halachah sefer 'Mishnah Berurah' (on the Shulchan Aruch) for all of Klal Yisrael, and the sefer, 'Machaneh Yisrael' for those in the armed forces.

We began our discussion by building a case for the Torah's relevance throughout the millennia and in all generations. We have now seen that, even within a single age, Torah can be lived and applied in differing ways, in order to suit the prevailing circumstances.



Wishing everyone הצלחה and ברכה,

Jeremy