

A Thought on Parashat Vayishlach 'Ancient Stories, Enduring Messages'

By Jeremy Richards

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



Before operating complex machinery it is sensible to follow a course of instruction, or, at the very least, to carefully study the manual. It is possible, of course, to take a trial and error approach, but this could result in harm coming to the machine, to the object being manufactured, or even to the operator. Extreme care and thoughtfulness, and perhaps the application of a little intelligence, common sense and relevant experience, may well lead to a successful outcome, with no adverse consequences, but there can be no assurance that this is guaranteed. True, the operator has free choice to take a chance at working the machinery without due preparation and training, but whether such would be the wisest of decisions is debatable. In short, to guarantee the desired positive and safe outcome it is not just sensible to engage in training, it is necessary, vital.

When we invoke the concept of 'מעשה אבות סימן לבנים' - 'The Actions of the Fathers are signs [lessons] for the Children,' we must think in terms of what we have said above. This means that the narratives which describe the actions of our Avot (Fathers) and Imahot (Mothers), our Biblical Ancestors, in so far as they are our guide to living well and wisely, constitute an indispensable set of guidelines that should be considered compulsory *careful* reading. To put it another way, to adopt practices from the Avot in an ad hoc and piecemeal fashion is to misinterpret the concept of 'מעשה אבות סימן לבנים'. Just as the safe and productive operation of complicated and potentially dangerous machinery demands deliberate and methodical training and study, so must living a wholesome, meaningful, Torah-true life necessitate purposeful study of the lives that are paradigms for our own. It would be reckless to pick and choose which safety instructions to follow in operating a lathe, and an arbitrary approach in respect of studying principles for living our very lives would be all the more irresponsible.

Now, if the narratives about our Avot and Imahot require deliberate, systematic study in order for us to determine how they can direct us in our own endeavours, it must follow that there is a deliberate, systematic orderliness in the way the stories of their lives appear in the Torah. Surely, a Divine guide to life must be no less carefully put together than a health and safety manual written with a human hand?

It follows, then, that 'מעשה אבות סימן לבנים' is likely a more complex principle than it is perhaps often conceived to be. For example, when we see Avraham welcoming guests to his multi-doored tent, and Rivkah drawing water for Eliezer and his camels, we rightly determine that these examples of righteous behaviour must serve as models for us to emulate. However, we must be careful not to see and treat

these actions as discrete, isolated incidences of exemplary conduct, taking them and learning from them on a superficial level. Rather, these individual actions point to the intrinsic nature and character of those who performed them. Beyond learning from Avraham merely to do particular acts of chessed, we are to become בעלי חסד - people who personify chessed - as did Avraham. And beyond following Rivkah's lead in exploiting specific opportunities to give selflessly, we are to become people, like Rivkah, in whom such behaviour is natural and instinctive.

Let us take this a step further. My life does not stand alone but interacts with the lives of my family, my friends, my colleagues and many other people with whom I come into contact. So, too, were the lives of the Avot and Imahot interwoven with each other's, and with those of various people whom they encountered. This is the next level of מעשה אבות. That is to say, learning from the lives of our Forebears will include finding meaning, merit and instruction also in the broader interplay of their interconnected relationships, as well as in single righteous actions they performed towards each other. The challenge, however, is in discovering and uncovering such meaning, and this is at the root of a question asked in this week's parashah by the Netivot Shalom (Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, 1911-2000).

The parashiot of Sefer Bereishit, writes the Netivot Shalom, teach us the ways of Hashem. However, as noted in the sefer 'Toldot Yaakov Yosef' (by Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polonne, 1710-1784), it seems as if the detailed episodes about Yaakov and Eisav in these parashiot, and in our current parashah in particular, do not relate to our own lives in any way at all. Nevertheless, continues the Netivot Shalom, the Torah is of eternal value and teaches every Jew how to live, so this parashah must indeed hold important messages. He proceeds to answer this question himself, by stating that the whole encounter of Yaakov and Eisav hints to the ongoing struggle each Jew faces with the יצר הרע (*Yetzer Hara*), the Evil Inclination, and that study of this parashah will provide a Jew with strategies for withstanding and surviving this battle.

Rabbi Berezovsky then explains how Yaakov Avinu found himself struggling and battling continually throughout his life. Even in the womb, before he had emerged into the world, Yaakov's struggle with Eisav had begun. We see this in the words, "ויתרוצצו הבנים בקרבה," "The boys struggled inside her" (Bereishit 25, 22). Later, there were the tensions regarding the בכורה (*Bechorah* - birthright) and the ברכות (*Berachot* - blessings), followed by twenty years of Yaakov living with his uncle Lavan, and with Lavan's constant cheating and lying. Upon leaving Lavan, Yaakov encountered Eisav coming towards him with 400 men, and then he found himself fighting with Eisav's מלאך, angel. The Netivot Shalom points out that we do not find this constant battling with the other Avot, Avraham and Yitzchak, for even though they certainly bore their own tests and challenges, they did not find their whole lifetimes to be one long struggle, as did Yaakov.

Yaakov was the greatest of the Avot, writes Rabbi Berezovsky, such that the B'nei *Yisrael* are named after him; and the Torah gave us all of these accounts of Yaakov's struggles in order to teach us that

each Jew is destined to live with constant struggles against negative forces, as did Yaakov, but will ultimately prevail and triumph upon emerging from them. We see this with Yaakov, whom, after his fight with the מלאך, was told that his name will from that time on be Yisrael, because he had “fought with Hashem and with men and had prevailed.” (Bereishit 32, 29)

The Netivot Shalom then proceeds to explain in great detail the particular negative forces that Yaakov encountered in his struggles with Lavan and Eisav respectively. In short, Lavan strives to uproot our אמונה, faith, which is the foundation upon which all spiritual connection rests. And Eisav is two aspects of the Yetzer Hara: the first appears as our *brother*, enticing us towards permitted desires - but infusing the permitted with טומאה, impurity, then the second appears as *Eisav*, drawing us to forbidden desires. Hence, עַשׂוֹ מִיַּד אֶחָיו - “Now deliver me from the hand of *my brother*, from the hand of *Eisav*.” (Bereishit 32,12)

And so we see, through studying the writings of such commentators as the Netivot Shalom, that careful - and sometimes deep - analysis of the Torah narratives enables us to perceive the relevance in those stories for our own lives. For example, we have now learnt from this parashah that the B’nei Yisrael – the children of Yaakov – must conquer the negative forces that we will inevitably face in our own lives just as our father Yaakov overcame his own spiritual trials against Eisav and Lavan.

Moreover, it is incumbent upon us to search for such personal relevance in the Torah’s narratives, and in doing so to discover the Torah’s timeless messages to us as individuals and as a nation. For within those enduring messages lies the Torah’s eternal value for all times and for all generations.



Wishing everyone much הצלחה and ברכה,

Jeremy