

Main Identity

From: <JoshHoff@aol.com>
 To: <JoshHuff@aol.com>
 Sent: Wednesday, November 25, 2009 9:39 AM
 Subject: Netvort: parshas Vayeitzei, 5770

The Truth of the Matter
 By Rabbi Joshua (truthfully known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In the beginning of parshas Vayeitzei, we learn of Ya'akov's flight from Eisav, and his overnight stay at the future site of the Temple in Yerushalayim. When he reached that site, he did not realize where he was, and, being tired, went to sleep and had a prophetic vision. Before retiring, however, he took some stones from that spot and placed them around his head. Upon waking and realizing that he was in a holy place, he took the stone, set it up as a pillar, and made a vow that when he would return from the house of Lavan, which was his current destination, he would dedicate the stone as a pillar where he would worship God. Much has been written about the stone used for this pillar. For example, Rashi mentions a midrash which says that Ya'akov originally took twelve stones and placed them around his head, and they coalesced and formed one stone. This process, according to the midrash, symbolized the fact that, before he returned, Ya'akov would have twelve sons, who would constitute the twelve tribes, and these tribes would, ideally, work together as a unit, even though each one had a different task to fulfill within the future Jewish nation.

I would like to focus on a different midrash, mentioned by the Ramban, which says that the twelve stones were taken from the altar upon which Avraham brought Yitzchak for the akeidah. What was the significance of the akeidah for Ya'akov at that time, when he was fleeing from Eisav and on his way to the house of Lavan? On a basic level we can suggest that since the altar that was used for the akeidah was right there where he stopped to sleep, anyway, he wanted the great merit of Avraham's devotion to God displayed there to assist him in the challenging days ahead, I believe, however, we can find a more intrinsic connection between the episode of the akeidah and Ya'akov's forthcoming encounter with Lavan.

The test of the akeidah was specifically geared to Avraham who exemplified the trait of chesed his entire life. Rabbi Menachem Racanati, the thirteenth century kabbalist, wrote that Avraham was continually refining this trait, and that the tests he underwent were meant to fine-tune the chesed that he did. Perhaps we can suggest that the test involved in the akeidah was meant to teach Avraham that it is God who defines what chesed is, and that sometimes what a person thinks is chesed is not chesed at all. We find, for example, that King Shaul let the king of Amaleik, Agag, live after his defeat in battle, against the instructions of Shmuel. even though Shmuel killed Agag the next day, in that one night that Agag remained alive he was able to generate the birth of Haman in the future. The rabbi's remark about this that kindness shown to cruel people is actually cruelty. While the case of the akeidah is obviously different, the message to Avraham was that it is God who determines what is considered kindness and what is not.

Perhaps for this reason, according to Rabeinu Yonah, the akeidah was not the last of Avraham's test. Rather, it was Avraham's need to purchase Sarah's burial plot, even though God had promised him all of the land. The rabbis tell us that the ultimate form of chesed is that which one does for someone who has already died, because he cannot anticipate receiving any reward from the recipient. Before Avraham could undergo this test in which he would perform the ultimate act of chesed, he had to absorb the message that God determines when chesed is appropriate and when it is not appropriate. In any case, the akeidah was a test of Avraham's trait of chesed, in that he was asked to do something that seemed to contradict his entire life's work in this realm. In the prayer that some before the morning service, after reading the section of the akeidah, God is asked to consider the merit of Avraham, who overpowered his trait of mercy at the akeidah, and, in that merit, He should overpower His anger and have mercy on His nation, and in turn deliver them from their troubles. The message of this prayer is that what Avraham did at the akeidah was to act against what was, for him, the kind thing to do, so that this test, as well as his other tests, was meant to refine his approach to chesed.

In a similar way, then, Ya'akov's experience at Lavan's house was meant to test the trait which Ya'akov exemplified, which was that of tiferes, which is a balancing of chesed, or kindness, and din, or justice. Ya'akov's trait is also known as 'emes,' or truth, perhaps because the proper balancing of the two traits results in truth. Lavan, on the other hand, was characterized as a

deceiver, as we find in the way he handled Ya'akov's marriages to Leah and Rachel. Ya'akov was thus being tested in the very area in which he excelled. On the one hand, he generally dealt with Lavan's deceptions by working for him with complete integrity and with total dedication to his job. On the other hand, he told Rachel, before their marriage, that if Lavan wanted to deceive him, he was his brother in deception (see Rashi to Bereishis, 29:11). The Talmud tells us that it is, in fact, permissible, under certain conditions, to say something that does not, ostensibly, conform to the truth, in order to maintain peace, and we find that God Himself, Whose seal is truth, altered what Sarah said in regard to Avraham when she heard the angels' announcement that she would give birth, in order to maintain peace between husband and wife. Perhaps the message here is that under certain circumstances, the definition of truth is not what we may think it to be, just as, in the case of Avraham at the akeidah, the definition of chesed is not always what we think it should be. Perhaps, then, this was the message that Ya'akov needed to reinforce on his way to the house of Lavan, where he would begin to build the Jewish nation.

Partial Netvort archives are available at <http://www.yucs.org/heights/torah/bysubject/>

In addition, archives from 5764-5768 are now available at yeshivasbrisk.freesevers.com/netvort.html

To subscribe to Netvort, send a message with subject line subscribe, to Netvort@aol.com. To unsubscribe, send message with subject line unsubscribe.