Yeshivas Toras Moshe
ישיבת תורת משה
Rabbi Moshe Meiselman
Rosh Yeshiva

PARSHAS TOLDOS

תשפ"ז

Leaving with nothing

ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע וילך חרנה.

It's a very strange thing. When Avrohom Ovinu sent Eliezer to get a wife for Yitzchok, he made sure he went with all the appropriate money. Yitzchok was not a poor man either. But when Yaakov leaves, what does he have? He says, "כי במקלי עברתי את הירדן הזה" – nothing but his stick. He is penniless. Chazal tell us he was sent with money but the hashgochoh arranged that it was taken away.

When Avrohom Ovinu went down to Egypt, he stayed in inns along the way. People traveled on foot or by animal. Here is Yaakov Ovinu, walking from Be'er Sheva all the way to Choron with no money. It's a very long walk. And when he goes to sleep at night, he doesn't stay in an inn. He sleeps on the ground.

Now, Yaakov knows what his goal is. He is going to get married, and he hopes to be the one who will build Klal Yisroel. The Avos knew that Klal Yisroel would be founded through twelve children who would all remain faithful to the mesorah of Avrohom Ovinu. Avrohom had eight children, but only Yitzchok continued that mesorah. Yitzchok had two, but only Yaakov continued it. Yaakov is on his way to Choron, hoping that he will be zocheh to build this nation.

ויחלם והנה סלם מצב ארצה וראשו מגיע השמימה והנה מלאכי אלקים עלים וירדים בו.

There are a number of Midrashim about these malochim. They describe Yaakov seeing the future of Klal Yisroel. He sees malochim going up and coming down, up and down. But the final one goes up, and up, and up, until Hakodosh Boruch Hu tells him: I will bring him down. Yaakov is being shown the history of Klal Yisroel.

The Midrash gives three opinions about the stones Yaakov took. One says two stones; another says twelve. If they become one, Yaakov will know that he will deserve that his children will remain faithful and he will build Klal Yisroel. That is what is on his mind.

Then Hakodosh Boruch Hu speaks to him:

אני ה' אלקי אברהם אביך ואלקי יצחק הארץ אשר אתה שוכב עליה לך אתננה ולזרעך.

What is He telling him? Yitzchok gave Yaakov the mesorah, but that had to be ratified by Hakodosh Boruch Hu. Before Yaakov left for Choron, Yitzchok told him, "ויתן לך את ברכת אברהם". Now Hakodosh Boruch Hu is ratifying that brocho.

והיה זרעך כעפר הארץ ופרצת ימה וקדמה וצפנה ונגבה.

And then:

והנה אנכי עמך ושמרתיך בכל אשר תלך והשבתיך אל האדמה הזאת כי לא אעזבך עד אשר אם עשיתי את אשר דברתי לך.

Don't worry. I will take care of you. You may be penniless. You may have to walk all the way from Be'er Sheva to Choron. But I am with you, and I will bring you back.

A promise and a nisayon

Yaakov wakes up. He knows that Hakodosh Boruch Hu has given him a promise. But – there is a big "but." He knows that he has to deserve to receive it. There is no such thing as a free promise from Hakodosh Boruch Hu. No such thing.

There are different levels of bitachon. Yaakov is a novi. He has received a nevuoh, and he has to believe what Hakodosh Boruch Hu has told him about his future. Bitachon here means trusting that Hakodosh Boruch Hu is going to take care of him, even though everything around him seems to say otherwise. He is penniless, walking with nothing but his stick. Still, he knows he is going to be taken care of.

But something could go wrong. What could go wrong? He might not deserve it.

וידר יעקב נדר לאמר אם יהיה אלקים עמדי ושמרני בדרך הזה אשר אנכי הולך ונתן לי לחם לאכל ובגד ללבש.

Here, "im" means "when." When Hakodosh Boruch Hu will be with me. He is going to take care of me, and I am not asking for very much: bread to eat and clothing to wear. But then Yaakov says, "והיה ה' לי לאלקים". I have to maintain my emunah and my level in avodas Hashem, even in Lovon's house.

What does Yaakov understand? He is going through a nisayon. If he had money, perhaps he could get a wife and come back immediately, as Eliezer did. But no. He is going without a penny. That is part of Hakodosh Boruch Hu's plan. You are going to have to spend years in Lovon's house, make your fortune there, and remain on your level while you do it.

To build Klal Yisroel, being the "איש תם יושב אהלים" is no longer enough. Yaakov is leaving the sheltered environment of Yitzchok Ovinu's beis midrash. That level has to become so much a part of him that he can spend twenty years in Lovon's house and still be the same Yaakov Ovinu when he leaves.

וכל אשר תתן לי עשר אעשרנו לך.

If I survive that nisayon, I will deserve the brocho. And the brocho Hakodosh Boruch Hu gave Avrohom Ovinu is tremendous.

Following Hashem into the desert

Now, this is a very deep statement about bitachon and where hishtadlus belongs. When Hakodosh Boruch Hu gives a directive, bitachon can demand that you act contrary to everything around you.

Take Klal Yisroel leaving Egypt on the way to Eretz Yisroel. That is probably the ultimate statement of bitachon. They assemble in Raamses, coming from all over Egypt overnight – a tremendous nes. Raamses is in the eastern part of the Nile Delta. For those of you who know a little geography, going up along the coast would take them toward Eretz Yisroel. Instead, Hakodosh Boruch Hu directs them toward the desert.

What is this all about? Klal Yisroel must be wondering to themselves. But that's the way it is – no questions. Then He tells them, "וישובו" – turn back. They are being sent in directions that seem to make no sense at all. But Hakodosh Boruch Hu told them what to do, and that is what they are going to do. What's going to be? If I follow His directives, it will be good.

That takes tremendous bitachon. Where are they going? Into a desert. As far as they can see, they are going nowhere.

לכתך אחרי במדבר בארץ לא זרועה.

They have no idea what Hakodosh Boruch Hu's plan is. But there, by Pi Hachiros and Baal Tzefon, are the treasures Yosef Hatzaddik had gathered – an amazing amount of gold and silver. Hakodosh Boruch Hu had promised Avrohom, "ואחרי כן יצאו ברכש גדול". They thought the wealth they took out of Egypt was the fulfillment of that promise. Compared to what was still waiting for them, it was nothing.

And then they are facing the sea, with Pharaoh coming after them. What do they do? Hakodosh Boruch Hu tells them to go forward into the sea. You have to take that step. In the zechus of their bitachon, the sea splits. By the time they leave the Yam Suf, they are massively wealthy.

What is happening here? When Hakodosh Boruch Hu gives a directive, you let Him be in charge. Bitachon means: I am in His hands. Nothing else determines what will happen to me.

When they were leaving Egypt, Moshe Rabbeinu urged them to take the silver and gold. Hakodosh Boruch Hu did not want Avrohom Ovinu to have a complaint that the servitude had been fulfilled but the promise of wealth had not. Even for those seven days! Klal Yisroel had no idea how much more was coming. They could have walked away with what they

already had, and that could have been their rechush godol. But through their bitachon, there was so much more.

Now come back to Yaakov. Yitzchok sent him to get a wife. He also has to wait for Eisov to calm down. He is penniless. What's going to be? Hakodosh Boruch Hu tells him, "Don't worry. I'm taking care of you." And Yaakov's response is: Yes, that You will take care of me, I know. But I have to deserve it.

What did Klal Yisroel do? They followed Hashem into the sea, up to their noses, without knowing how they would survive. What did Yaakov have to do? Remain Yaakov Ovinu in every circumstance.

What bitachon does and does not mean

Maaseh ovos siman labonim. What does that mean in our lives? Think of the Jews who came from Eastern Europe to America, to the West, to freedom. All of a sudden, they faced a nisayon called Shabbos. If I keep Shabbos, what is going to be with parnossoh? Earning a living seemed to require chillul Shabbos.

There were those who understood: Hakodosh Boruch Hu tells me to keep Shabbos, so I have to keep Shabbos. That's the way it is. Those people, boruch Hashem, were rewarded. Not everyone was able to stand up to the nisayon. Yes, Hakodosh Boruch Hu rewards bitachon. But you have to deserve it.

Some people have a strange idea of bitachon. "I have bitachon that when I come home tonight, I'll check my bank account and discover that somebody put ten million dollars into it. Wonderful!" So I say, "Bitachon, bitachon, bitachon." Bitachon? Who am I to think that I am worthy, that Hakodosh Boruch Hu has to give me ten million dollars?

Bitachon means that Hakodosh Boruch Hu tells me what to do and I accept it without questioning. Sometimes it means anovoh. Sometimes it means keeping Shabbos. Sometimes it means doing other things that are difficult. I have to do what He demands of me.

There is a very interesting passage in the sefer Emunah U'bitachon, cited as the Ramban's, based on the posuk:

בטח בה' ועשה טוב שכן ארץ ורעה אמונה.

When it comes to "aseh tov," doing good, have bitachon. If a person has a goal in avodas Hashem and sincerely pursues it, putting in all the hishtadlus he can, with bitachon that he will be able to achieve it, he will achieve it.

What sort of hishtadlus are we talking about? You put in the work to accomplish something in avodas Hashem. You put in your time, maintain what you are supposed to maintain, and keep working at it. Guaranteed, Hakodosh Boruch Hu will help you do it.

But when it comes to day-to-day life – will I get ten million dollars in my bank account, or won't I? – there are no such guarantees. Yes, I have emunah. I believe Hakodosh Boruch Hu runs the world. That does not mean I have a promise of the particular result I want.

He did not give up

There is a myth among people who do not want to learn Torah: "Not everyone is cut out for it. Not everyone was made that way." I always quote the Rambam at the end of the fourth perek of Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah. He says that everyone can learn Torah.

I was thinking the other day: this is Toras Moshe's forty-fifth year. One of the weakest boys I ever had in the yeshiva was a sweet, wonderful boy with a tremendous desire to learn. He barely survived shiur aleph. At the end of the first year, we said, "There is no way we can move him up." We gave him a whole explanation – a whole lamdonus – because we didn't want him to feel bad about being in shiur aleph again.

Okay. At the end of the second year, still nothing. What am I going to do with this boy? And he says, "Rabbi, I want to hit the top!" After three or four years here in shiur aleph, he went back to the States.

I try to keep in contact with my alumni over the years and find out what is happening with them. Where is he today? A meishiv in a yeshiva in New Jersey. He didn't give up. He made it.

I have countless stories like that. I am talking about boys who were much weaker than anyone in this room. But they pushed, and they pushed, and they made it.

"בטח בה' ועשה טוב". I have seen it in many areas. People have a single-minded goal in avodas Hashem, and they go at it. Hakodosh Boruch Hu sets up the circumstances so they can do it. That is where bitachon and hishtadlus go together.

Remaining Yaakov in Lovon's house

Yaakov puts in his hishtadlus. But on his return to Eretz Canaan, after the encounter with Lovon, he is about to meet Eisov, and the Torah says:

ויירא יעקב מאד ויצר לו.

Why is he nervous? He has a promise from Hakodosh Boruch Hu! Chazal tell us: shema yigrom hacheit – perhaps a cheit will affect the outcome. That is exactly what he understood at the beginning: "והיה ה' לי לאלקים". I have to remain what I am supposed to be.

Hakodosh Boruch Hu tested him in countless ways. He is working for a thief, a swindler. Are you going to maintain your absolute honesty there? In the middle of all the dishonesty in Lovon's house, will you remain honest? That was a tremendous nisayon. Yaakov is emes. Can he remain Yaakov?

In the end, the Torah tells us, "ויבא יעקב שלם עיר שכם". Sholeim. And he sends Eisov the message that Chazal explain:

עם לבן גרתי ותרי"ג מצות שמרתי.

Lovon had no influence on me. I kept the mitzvos. I remained who I was.

Chazal say something else, and this is very important:

שלם בתורתו שלא שכח תלמודו בבית לבן.

He had been learning in Yitzchok's house. Now he is a shepherd, working morning and night, in the heat and in the cold. But he keeps learning. He does not forget his Torah. He keeps the mitzvos. He acts as though he is still in Yitzchok Ovinu's house. He survives.

Now, perhaps that is only because he is Yaakov Ovinu?

The Ohr HaChaim Hakodosh says something very interesting in Parshas Acharei Mos. The Torah tells us:

כמעשה ארץ מצרים אשר ישבתם בה לא תעשו וכמעשה ארץ כנען אשר אני מביא אתכם שמה לא תעשו.

Every word in the Torah counts. We know they lived in Egypt, and we know they are going to Canaan. Why does the Torah have to say, "where you lived" and "where I am bringing you"?

The Ohr HaChaim explains: you lived in a corrupt society. That does not excuse you from being what you are supposed to be. You are going into another corrupt society. That is not an excuse to become like them either. You have the ability to remain yourself. But you have to want to remain yourself.

When Klal Yisroel came to Moav, with Bnos Moav, suddenly there was a big fad: Peor. One of the most disgusting forms of avodoh zoroh you can imagine. But that was the "in thing." When people want to do the "in thing," look where it can take them.

No. You can be who you are, wherever you are. This is not a lesson only for Yaakov Ovinu. He spent twenty years in Beis Lovon and remained Yaakov down to the finest detail. He was always concerned: am I doing it right? Am I not doing it right? He kept pushing himself, and he succeeded.

Fill up before the desert

Rabbosai, this is all of life. You are in yeshiva now. Sometimes, when I speak to people before they come to yeshiva, I tell them the following story:

I'll never forget driving my family from Chicago to Los Angeles. We came to the Mojave Desert. I had never seen a desert like that. There was a sign: last gas station. It was going to be a long way to the next one. I looked at my gas tank. About two-thirds full. I hesitated. Probably enough.

My wife said, "Fill up, fill up, fill up." Okay. As a good husband – I listened to my wife.

Then we drove mile after mile after mile. On the side of the road were the people who hadn't filled up. And there was somebody driving around selling them gas at who knows what exorbitant price.

You go out into the world, and it is a big desert out there. Full of everything you can imagine. No matter what you do, you are going to be

part of that world. Yeshiva is the time to fill up, to prepare for the desert. Once you are out there, you have to maintain who you are, what you are, and what you are about.

Maaseh ovos siman labonim means that Yaakov Ovinu gave us these kochos hanefesh. Where do we get the inner strength to survive in different environments and still know who we are? From the Avos. We have that ability. But there are things we have to do to bring it out. We have to fill up.

What did Yaakov do? In the midst of everything else, he kept his learning. He did everything he could to make sure that, mentally, he was still back in Yitzchok Ovinu's house.

Keeping Yaakov Ovinu in front of you

Yosef went down to Egypt as a seventeen-year-old boy. Just imagine. Today, we would say he needs a whole team of twenty therapists to get over the trauma. His brothers rejected him. They sold him into slavery. All the things people point to as reasons they cannot deal with life. Here is a seventeen-year-old slave, facing all those nisyonos.

What kept him going? Three things. First, "שם שמים שגור בפיו". He constantly spoke about Hakodosh Boruch Hu. Whatever was happening, he knew Hakodosh Boruch Hu was managing it. That was his bitachon.

Second, he kept learning Torah. When the brothers returned and told Yaakov that the monster of a man they had been dealing with in Egypt was Yosef, imagine Yaakov's reaction: that is my Yosef? Then, Yosef sent the wagons: "וירא את העגלות". Chazal explain that Yosef sent a message to Yaakov through the agolos: remember the last sugya we learned together, egloh arufoh? I am still learning the Torah I learned with you.

And third, "דמות דיוקנו של אביו". He kept the image of Yaakov Ovinu in front of him.

Yaakov had to survive in Beis Lovon. Yosef received those kochos from Yaakov, and we receive them from Yaakov too. But survival takes ongoing shemiroh. You have to do things that keep the presence of Hakodosh Boruch Hu right in front of you.

I remember a very wealthy person whom I had helped become frum when I lived in Los Angeles. I called him to ask if I could see him about supporting the yeshiva. He left work, and I came to his house. I said, "I'm sorry to disturb you in the middle of the working day."

He told me, "Listen, you're doing me a favor. In the middle of the day, in the middle of a deal, I can be an absolute animal. Then somebody knocks on the door collecting for a yeshiva or a school, and I have to say a vort on the parsha. I come back to who I am."

Another time, I met someone on a flight to New York. He said, "Come to my office. I'll try to help your yeshiva." I went to his office and saw a picture of his rosh yeshiva on his desk. I asked, "Why do you have it there?" He said, "In the middle of the day, when I'm doing business, he reminds me: behave!"

A person can survive. But he has to enter that environment knowing that he wants to survive, that he has to remain different. And he has to do something about it. Yaakov went to the yeshiva of Shem v'Ever and sat and learned. Yosef did not have the opportunity to go to a special yeshiva before he was thrown into the world, so he kept learning what he had learned with his father. He kept his father's image in front of him.

That is Yaakov Ovinu's story of bitachon. He knew that if he followed what Hakodosh Boruch Hu demanded of him, he would come back. He made the maximum effort to do it. And he came back very wealthy and was protected from Eisov. But it took twenty years of surviving in Beis Lovon to deserve that.

Yes, there was a promise. But he had to deserve it. He had to have bitachon, and he had to survive Beis Lovon without forgetting who he was. "תרי"ג מצות שמרתי". I did not change. I did not start making compromises.

That is the lesson for all of us. We have the kochos hanefesh. We received them from Yaakov Ovinu. But we have to do what Yaakov Ovinu did: make the maximum effort. Wherever you go, you have the kochos to survive as a ben Torah.