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## Lifting Your Heart and Your Feet

In this week's Torah portion, Jacob flees from his murderous and wicked brother, Esau, and runs to his mother's brother, Lavan, to find a wife. However, Lavan's home is not necessarily a safe haven as Lavan is known for being wicked as well. Jacob's life is in danger and he is understandably frightened.

Later, he sleeps at Mount Moriah and has a dream where God tells him, "Behold, I am with you; I

will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this soil; for I will not forsake you until I will have done what I have spoken about you" (28:15). Jacob wakes up, recognizes how holy this place is, sets up a pillar, and takes a vow to God to tithe whatever God will give him.

Interestingly, the next verse says that "Jacob lifted his feet, and went toward the land of the easterners." The Torah uses this interesting phrase of "lifted his feet" to tell us that Jacob went towards Lavan's home. Nothing in the Torah is arbitrary or extra. The Torah could have simply said that "Jacob went"; what is the deeper meaning of the phrase "lifted his feet"?

Lesson:

When we think of someone who is excited about something, we think of them skipping off to do the task at hand. When kids hear there is candy – no one is walking slowly! They're not dragging their feet but rather running and skipping. What changed from Jacob being frightened to being excited so much that he is practically running now to Lavan's home?

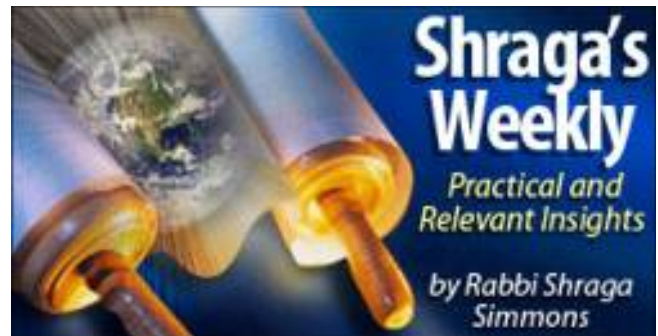
Rashi, a famous Torah commentary, tells us that "at the good tidings of the prophecy assuring him of God's protection, his heart *lifted his feet* and he felt very light as he continued on his way." After hearing that God is with Jacob and going help him and protect him, the fear that was once weighing Jacob down dissipated and was replaced with confidence and excitement.

We all have things that weigh us down: worries, fear, anxiety, different situations, etc. What if, however, just like Jacob, God came to us and told

us, “I am with you, my dear child. I know you’re scared about this, but I’m here with you. I’m going to protect you and your family and will never forsake you. I will return you in good health and condition and you have nothing to fear.” How would we see the situation differently? How would we react toward the situation? Would more of your days be spent “lifting your feet” at what we have in front of us if you knew that God is with you and you’re going to be successful?

Fortunately, God does tell us that He is always with us, always loves us no matter what, and always wants the very best for us. When we find ourselves in situations where we are dragging our feet, we can infuse some confidence and faith in God in our hearts, knowing that God is here with us, just like with Jacob, which will in turn cause our hearts to lift our feet with confidence, joy, and happiness.

Exercise: When we find ourselves in a situation where we are dragging our feet, infuse some confidence and faith in God in our hearts. Hear God telling you that He is with you and you will be successful!



### The Greatest Achievement

In this week's parsha, Jacob sets off to his Uncle Lavan's town to find a wife. When Jacob arrives and meets his cousin Rachel, he decides that this is the one for him. Jacob is so enthralled with the shidduch ("match"), that he agrees to work a full seven years for Uncle Lavan before earning the right to marry Rachel. In fact, the Torah reports that Jacob's excitement was so great that the seven years "seemed to him like only a few days" (Genesis 29:20).

The appointed day finally arrives, and Lavan invites the entire town to the wedding festivities. Everyone is celebrating - everyone except for Rachel's older sister, Leah, who has remained single with her fate undecided. Jacob, not known to be naïve (recall how he cleverly wrested the birthright away from his brother Esav), suspects that Lavan might covertly try to marry off his older daughter Leah that night instead.

Since brides traditionally wear a veil covering her face, Jacob arranges a "secret password" to guarantee it will in fact be his beloved Rachel under the chuppah.

Picture the scene: Hundreds of guests have arrived. The caterer, band and photographer are



## Vayetzei (Genesis 28:10-32:3)

*basic compendium*

all ready and positioned. Jacob stands expectantly under the chuppah and... here comes the bride! Because she is veiled, nobody knows that Lavan had pulled the old switcheroo - and it's really Leah in the wedding dress!

What would we expect to happen next? When Jacob asks the bride for the secret password, Leah would be standing there dumbfounded. With the ruse confirmed, Jacob would lift the veil and reveal Lavan's deceit. The crowd would gasp as, disgraced, Leah runs from the room crying.

But that's not the way it worked out. Instead, when Leah arrived under the chuppah, she gave the correct password. Why? Because Rachel, knowing what a terrible embarrassment her sister would suffer if the ruse were to be revealed at that moment, told Leah what to say. In order to spare embarrassment, Rachel was actually willing to give up the husband she'd waited patiently for seven years! (see Talmud, Megillah 13b)

Imagine being engaged to be married, but due to circumstances scheduling the wedding seven years in advance. Finally the great day arrives. Would you ever consider giving it all up to spare someone from embarrassment?

Rachel achieved greatness because she was willing to do just that.

### **Biblical Ethics**

The Torah has built-in laws to safeguard the principle of not embarrassing anyone:

- In the times of the Holy Temple, offerings brought for serious transgressions were processed in a nondescript location, so that

onlookers were not able to identify the specific reason why the offering was being brought. (Leviticus 6:18; Talmud - Sotah 32b).

- Similarly, when a person confesses their mistakes (as we do on Yom Kippur), it should be done in a way that is not audible to others.
- In the laws of damages, one person can sue another not only for physical damages, but for emotional distress as well - specifically for the pain of embarrassment. (Maimonides, Laws of Damages 3:1, 3:7)
- In listing the levels of charity, one of the highest degrees is when neither the giver nor the receiver knows each other's identity. This minimizes any embarrassment the poor person may feel. (Maimonides, Laws of Tzedakah 10:7-14)
- In the story of biblical Bilaam and his talking donkey, an angel slays the donkey so that it won't be a continuing source of embarrassment to Bilaam. The Torah even demands sensitivity to an evil person! (Numbers 22:33 with Rashi, Midrash Bamidbar Rabba).
- When being called up to the Torah for an Aliyah, a person should publicly chant the verses himself. However, since many are unable to read properly, the Sages mandated that one person be appointed to read for everyone, to avoid embarrassment for those who cannot read for themselves.

The Talmud goes so far as to say that embarrassing another publicly is comparable to murder. Blushing is caused by blood rushing to

the spot, causing the face to turn red; the blood then drains, causing the face to turn white. "Draining another's blood" is an act which resembles murder. On a deeper level, embarrassment can "kill" a person emotionally.

### **Rachel's Reward**

The Midrash (Genesis Rabba 82:10 and Pesikta Eichah Rabbasi 24) describes how Jacob buried Rachel alongside the road in Bethlehem, not in Hebron like the other patriarchs. He foresaw how the Jews would pass by Bethlehem on their way to exile, and wished that Rachel would sense their anguish and pray for them.

A thousand years later, the Jews erected an idol in the Holy Temple, and God sought to destroy Jerusalem. The souls of the Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs pleaded with God to spare the Jews from permanent exile. In exchange for God's assurance, Abraham offered all the merit of having brought monotheism to the world. But God said that would not suffice. Isaac pleaded with God in the merit of his willingness to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah; that too was rejected as insufficient. Jacob, Moses and others presented their merits - but none would suffice.

Rachel's soul then presented itself before God. "Master of the Universe," she began, "I waited seven years to marry my beloved Jacob. When the wedding day finally arrived, my father schemed to switch me with Leah. I realized that she would be put to shame, so I had compassion and gave her the password. I overcame my own feelings and was not jealous. I allowed a competitor into my home. So if I was able to do it, then all the

more so You, God, should not be strict about the idolatrous 'competitor' in Your home."

Immediately, God's compassion was aroused. He said, "Don't cry over the exile, Rachel. For your sake I will return the children of Israel to their homeland once again." (see Jeremiah, chapter 31)

### **Plain Folk, Great Deeds**

In the Western world, the "big" achievements typically get all the attention. Politicians, celebrities, and business tycoons are splashed on magazine covers and glorified as symbols of power and influence.

That is a distortion of reality. Because if you ask 100 people to name the greatest influence in their life, chances are none will mention an Olympic gold medallist or a U.S. President. The most common response is parents and teachers. They have molded and shaped who we are - not because of any dramatic, life-changing discoveries, but because they consistently demonstrated care and compassion.

This is the lesson that God is teaching us by accepting Rachel's prayer above all the others.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the leader of 20th century American Jewry, was picked up by a student to take him to an appointment. The driver helped Rabbi Feinstein into the car, then closed the door. Upon arriving to his destination, Rabbi Feinstein was greeted by another student who noticed that his hand was crushed and bleeding. "What happened?" he asked. Rabbi Feinstein explained: "The driver closed my hand in the door, but I didn't say anything so not to embarrass him."

In life, we inherit many things from our ancestors: medical conditions, hair color, wealth. We inherit spiritual DNA as well. When Rachel exhibited character beyond the bounds of human expectation, that genetic coding is ingrained for all eternity, giving us the innate potential to rise to those heights. Our task is to actualize that into reality.



## Recognizing the Truth

In this week's *parashah* we discover how we might best develop our spiritual potential and find more meaning in our lives. The Torah tells us that upon the advice of his parents, Jacob departs from the land of Israel and travels toward the city of Haran in search of his life partner. And then the passage continues, "*Vayifga bamakom* – He encountered "The Place.""[1] This very unusual usage of the word *makom* (place) teaches us that on his way to Haran, Jacob realized that he had neglected to stop at the Temple Mount where his father and grandfather had prayed, and to rectify his mistake; he immediately turned around to return to the site of the future *Beis HaMikdash*.

To appreciate the awesomeness of this, just try to imagine how you would react upon returning

from Israel, drained and exhausted, having survived a terrorist attack (just as Jacob had narrowly escaped Esau's son's murderous intent). While waiting for your luggage at J.F.K. you suddenly realize that you had neglected to pray at the Western Wall. Would you make an immediate about-face and go back, especially in view of the fact that Hamas and company were lying in wait for you, just as Esau and his clan were in Jacob's case?

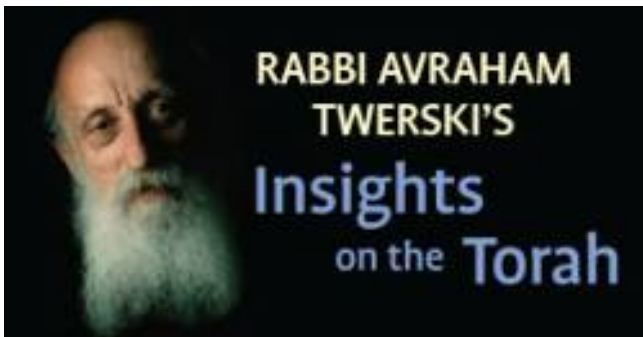
Jacob's attribute was *emes* (truth), and above all, he was committed to the pursuit of that truth, even if it meant undertaking an arduous and hazardous journey, and even if it meant admitting his mistakes. We can appreciate the awesome strength of Jacob's character when we contrast his reaction to that of his brother Esau. In last week's *parashah*, Esau sold his birthright for a pot of beans, but his arrogance would not allow him to admit that he had acted foolishly and impetuously; therefore, instead of doing *teshuvah* (repentance), he became further embedded in lies and spurned his birthright by expressing contempt for it.[2]

The ability to recognize one's mistakes and shortcomings is what elevates a person. It's not so much the mistakes that we make that condemn us, but how we react to them that counts, and that is the meaning of *teshuvah*. When God sees that we are determined to embark upon His path, then He meets us more than halfway, comes to our aid, and performs miracles on our behalf. Thus, as soon as Jacob admitted to his mistake and expressed his desire to return, God shortened his journey and the Temple Mount actually appeared before him: he encountered *The Place*. It is this

ability to admit the *emes*, recognize one's mistakes, and do *teshuvah* that distinguishes the great among our people.

The kings of Israel descended from Judah because he had the strength of character to openly admit that he erred. In this same vein, his descendant, David, conceded to Nathan the Prophet, "I have sinned to Hashem."<sup>[3]</sup> Those words of David have inspired people throughout the centuries. In these difficult times, when we are challenged to examine our lives, we would do well to follow the example of Jacob, Judah, and David and summon the courage to say, "I was wrong – I will learn from my mistakes! I will do *teshuvah* and do my share to make the world a better place." And if we do, we can hope that God will make miracles for us, miracles to ease our paths even as He did for Jacob "and we too will encounter *The Place*."

1. Gen. 28:11.
2. *Ibid.* 25:34.
3. II Samuel 12:13.



### When Years Seem like a Few Days

*He (Jacob) said, "Look, the day is still long; it is not yet time to bring*

*the livestock in; water the flock and go on grazing" (Genesis, 29:7).*

Jacob was rather harsh in reprimanding the shepherds. Wasn't it obvious that the stone covering the well was so massive that it required many men to move it? The Rabbi of Gur (Imrei Emes) said that Jacob was aware of this, but that he rebuked them for not trying to move it. But is it not possible that they had in fact tried but could not move it? Yes, but just because they failed once, why were they not trying again? But how did Jacob know that they had not tried repeatedly? Was his rebuke justified?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch sheds light on this episode by asking, why was it necessary to cover the well with so massive a stone? Could they not have covered it with something not quite as heavy? He answers that the shepherds were suspicious of one another, and feared that a lighter cover would enable one of them to uncover the well on his own and take an unfair share of the water for his flock. In order to prevent this, they made it impossible to have access to the water unless they were all present.

Jacob understood this, and reasoned that people who had no trust in one another were likely to be indolent and not exert themselves. Traits are infectious. Trust and diligence are likely to go hand in hand, as are distrust and sloth. Jacob knew that they had not even tried to uncover the well.

Even in a competitive world, we should have faith that what God decreed for us to have cannot be taken from us. Begrudging other people's success because we may think that it comes at our

expense is a contemptible character trait, and unless we rid ourselves of this trait, it may affect other aspects of our character.

Character traits are not likely to exist in isolation. True faith in God and to *fargin* others (be happy for someone else's good fortune) tend to go together.

*So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him a few days because of his love for her (29:20)*

Some of the commentaries note that this appears to be the reverse of what we usually experience. Being separated from someone one loves makes each day of separation feel like an eternity. How could it be that Jacob's love for Rachel made seven years seem like but a few days?

I am indebted to one of my patients for an insight into this verse. This young man was recovering from an addiction to alcohol. He had become dependent on alcohol, and the thought that he could never drink again was intolerable. When he joined the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, he was told not to focus on the rest of his life, but to deal with just this day. "It is not impossible for you to abstain from drinking just today, is it? Then focus only on what you must do today. There is nothing you can do today about tomorrow's sobriety, so there is no point in contemplating it."

I have found this principle in the works of *mussar*. The *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) says, "What point is there in trying to observe all the Torah prohibitions? There is no way you can do

so for the rest of your life. You are certain to violate Torah in quest of your desires. Why fight a losing battle? Why struggle and deny yourself so many pleasures when you are doomed to fail at it? You might as well just give in now." The response to the *yetzer hara* should be, "I do not have to deal with the rest of my life today. I know that today I can withstand temptation, and that is all I am concerned with. When tomorrow comes, I'll deal with that challenge then."

The literal translation of the verse above is not "they seemed to him a few days." The Hebrew word *achadim* means "single days." The delay of seven years would have been very difficult to manage. Jacob, therefore, did not think of seven years, but took each day as it came. He could tolerate the deprivation *today*, and that was all that was necessary.

This is an important lesson for us. It is commonplace for people to make "New Year's resolutions," and these are soon broken. The reason for this is that a year is too great a task to undertake. One should resolve, "I will not lose my temper *today*," or "I will not smoke *today*" or "I will adhere to my diet *today*." Reducing challenges to smaller segments of time makes them much more manageable.

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