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You're Always Worthy of God's Love and Protection

In this week's Torah portion Jacob hears that Eisav, his wicked brother, is coming after him and "Jacob became very frightened"(32:8). Why would Jacob become frightened if God had previously told him that He would protect him in his journey back to Israel?

Famous Torah commentaries *Da'as Zekeinim* and *Malbim* offer a beautiful insight into why Jacob was scared. They suggest that Jacob recognized

that he was scared and that itself scared him! The fact that Jacob felt scared even though God told Jacob that He would protect him reflected a lack of *emunah*, faith in God. The recognition of his lack of total trust in God is what scared him.

Other commentaries suggest that Jacob was scared because while God offered protection to Jacob, maybe Jacob had done something to lose the merit of being protected. We see that whether or not the fear was justified, it did propel Jacob to pray to God, and that God did indeed protect Jacob. What does all this mean?

Lesson:

Taken together, these ideas reflect feelings that are often ruminating in our own minds. God loves us, protects us, keeps us alive on a moment-to-moment basis and yet so much of our thoughts (and surely our subconscious mind) are occupied with fear, worry, and anxiety. God only wants to shower us with the best of everything, and keep us happy, healthy and safe. He brought us into existence and sustains us every moment. Why then do we have so many doubts and fears that are constantly running in the back of our minds?

Like Jacob, we often feel that perhaps we are not worthy of God's protection. We think that we messed up, we sinned, we're not being the best we can be, etc. and therefore we're not worthy of God's love and protection, God forbid. However, God's love for us does not work that way. His love for us is not dependent upon us – it is only dependent upon God and His unbridled, unconditional, infinite love for us. There is

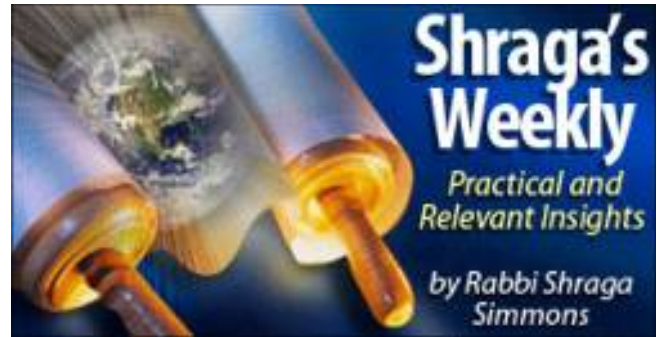
nothing that we can or could do to disrupt that love.

Just as a parent does not love a child any less for failing an exam, God does not love us any less when we mess up. We are no less protected or loved by God when we pass our tests or when we do not.

When we recognize that God loves us and wants to protect us, and we cling strongly to that belief, then no matter what situations we are faced with, we can confidently rely on God to help us. The knowledge that God loves us, is there for us, and that God wants to help us in every situation will help eliminate the fear in our minds and hearts. It will help us cling to God and give us the *emunah*, faith in God, necessary to guide us through even objectively scary situations.

We can learn from Jacob that while we embrace our human emotions, fear being one of them, we can combat it with the knowledge that God loves us more than our hearts have the capacity to love and nothing – not our sins or mistakes – can change that.

Exercise: Think of an area of your life or situation where you feel like you are on your own because of decisions that you made. Bring God into that space, ask Him for help and know He will help you because He loves you.



The Value of Life

This week's parsha finds Jacob crossing the Jabbok River into Israel. Besides a family of 15, Jacob's entourage includes a slew of servants, plus large herds of goats, camels, donkeys and cattle.

After sending everyone safely across the river, the Torah says that "Jacob remained alone" (Genesis 32:25). According to the Talmud (Chullin 91a) Jacob was alone because he "forgot some small earthenware jugs and returned to retrieve them."

This is difficult to understand. Jacob is an extremely wealthy man, yet risking another trip across the river to retrieve some dime-a-dozen jugs! That's makes about as much sense as Bill Gates making a special trip across town to pick up a quarter he'd dropped.

Jacob lived with the understanding that all his possessions were given by God for a purpose. To Jacob, the fact that these jugs were inexpensive was of no consequence. In his eyes they were precious jewels, brimming with potential.

Intrinsic Value

In the Torah account of creation, God commands the earth to produce "fruit trees that produce fruit" (*Aitz pri oseh pri* – Genesis 1:11). The verse could

have simply said "trees that produce fruit" – why the redundant "FRUIT trees that produce fruit?"

The commentators explain that God wanted not only the tree to produce fruit, but also that the wood itself should be "fruity." The wood is not intended merely as a means to an end, but has intrinsic value in and of itself.

So too everything in our world.

Rabbi Azriel Tauber explains the following metaphor: Imagine that I'm thirsty, so a friend brings me water in a paper cup. I drink the water and throw out the cup.

Now let's say that I'm wandering in the desert and dying of thirst. I lift my eyes to Heaven and say, "God – I'm dying – please make a miracle and send water!" Lo and behold, a hand reaches down from Heaven and gives me water in a paper cup. I drink the water... but what about the cup? I'm not going to throw it away – a cup from Heaven is a great souvenir! Surely God could have sent the water in any number of ways – by making it rain, or creating an oasis, or simply opening my mouth and pouring the water in. The fact that God included a paper cup says that He not only wanted me to have the water, but wanted me to have the cup as well.

To Be a Tzaddik

We've all heard the term "tzaddik" – a perfectly righteous person. But what defines a tzaddik? Good deeds? Pious behavior? Indeed, these are attributes. But what truly defines the tzaddik is looking at every possession and situation in life as coming directly from God. In that way, all of life is deeply meaningful.

This outlook is emphasized again in our parsha when, after 20 years apart, Jacob is reunited with his twin brother Esav. In describing their state of affairs, Esav says: "I have a lot." Jacob says, "I have everything." (Genesis 33:9-11)

The difference is subtle, but in fact speaks volumes. Esav is saying: "I have a lot..." but I sure could use more! Whereas Jacob is saying: "According to my part in God's grand eternal plan, I have everything – exactly as I need."

Our lives are filled with so many objects, people and ideas. What is the value of each? If we only open our eyes and focus, we can discover the deeper meaning and purpose of everything as a special gift from God.

Disposable Life?

Modern society is plagued by a disease called "Disposability." We have forgotten the principle that "everything has value." When a toaster breaks, we buy a new one. When a shirt tears, we get a new one.

How does "disposability" affect the overall value society places on life? How does this impact environmental conservation? How does this impact violent crime? How do we subconsciously carry this into our relationships? When a marriage is dull, do we get a new one?

In Deuteronomy 20:19, the Torah commands us not to cut down fruit trees. This extrapolates to a general prohibition against being wasteful, called "Bal Tash'chit." Just as in the Garden of Eden, the fruit tree represents that which has intrinsic value – a principle which applies to all of life.

Life is ordered exactly the way it's supposed to be. Take stock of your tools – your talents, ideas, friends and resources. Explore their deeper meaning and purpose. Be grateful for all that you have. Don't be so quick to throw it away. Actualize the full beauty and potential of this and every moment.



Formula for Survival

Jacob's strategy for his reunion with his brother Esau was to divide his family: "If Esau comes to the one camp and strikes it down, then the remaining camp shall survive." [1] Jacob's foresight was meant to save at least part of his family in case Esau attacked.

Thus, Jacob laid the foundation for one of the principles that would ensure Jewish survival during our turbulent, painful years of exile. We see the pattern of sunset and sunrise throughout our history; following are just two examples for us to ponder:

As the First Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the great Jewish community of Babylon (where the Talmud was arranged) was born. Many centuries later, as the sun set upon European

Jewry, it rose in America and Israel. Our forefather Jacob laid the foundation well, for no matter what our enemies sought to do, their plans came to naught. *Am Yisrael Chai!* - The Jewish nation lives! "*Al tira* - Do not fear sudden terror or the holocaust of the wicked when it comes." [2] "Plan a conspiracy and it will be annulled; speak your piece and it shall not stand, for God is with us." [3]

A MESSAGE FOR TODAY FROM OUR FOREFATHER JACOB

Every occurrence, every word in the Torah is a message to us today. It is written, "*Maaseh Avos siman l'banim.*" Indeed, the Torah is the blueprint of the future, so if we wish to understand our contemporary world and know how we may best respond to the many challenges that confront us, we need only delve into the *parashah*.

Jacob is the Patriarch who foreshadows the exile. The pain and the extraordinary suffering that we have endured throughout the millennia in all the lands of our dispersion were all experienced by him. Jacob taught us how to respond to the terror of the night when we are overwhelmed by feelings of loneliness and fear. It was not by coincidence that Jacob is the composer of *Maariv* (the evening prayer service). He showed us how to illuminate the darkness with words that emanate from our hearts. He taught us that even in the most difficult moments, when all appears to be lost, we are never to give up, but we must turn to God in heartfelt prayer.

The Patriarch Jacob prayed not only for himself, but also for us, who followed him many generations later. When Jacob looked up and saw

Esau coming, he also saw the Inquisitions, the pogroms, the Holocaust, and he begged for mercy. God heard his prayers, and promised that we, the Jewish people, would forever survive. As King David wrote, "May Hashem answer you on the day of distress; may *the Name of the God of Jacob* make you impregnable." [4]

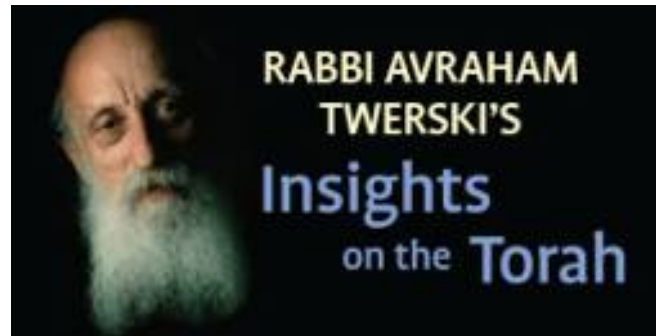
A LESSON FOR SURVIVAL - RECOGNIZING THE TRAP

Upon confronting Esau, Jacob cried out, "Rescue me, please, *from the hand* of my brother, from the *hand of Esau*...." [5] Our Rabbis discuss the meaning of these two hands, and the meaning of "my brother ... Esau." After all, Jacob had no other brother, and we know that nothing is redundant in the Torah, so why did Jacob use these apparently repetitive phrases? Our Sages explain that the Patriarch is teaching us a lesson for survival. Esau will confront us in two different guises: There are times when he will extend to us the hand of a brother in friendship, and in so doing, will attempt to destroy us through assimilation; there are times when he will attack us with Esau's hand, the ruthless hand of oppression.

Esau greets Jacob with a kiss, but the word "kiss" is dotted; the Sages teach us that the kiss was really a bite. [6] What seemed to be an act of friendship on Esau's part disguised a threat to Jacob's life. The Midrash tells us that God, in His infinite mercy, changed Jacob's neck into a pillar of marble, thereby preventing Esau from injuring his brother. While we must be vigilant in regard to both hands of Esau, Jacob feared the hand of friendship more, pleading first for rescue from the

hand of his brother. The danger from the hand of Esau is clear; it attempts to destroy our very lives, but the brother's hand, the hand of friendship, is the more dangerous, for when that hand is outstretched, we may be taken unawares, and can, God forbid, lose our identity, our heritage, our very Jewishness. The hand of friendship can make it very easy to forget that we stood at Sinai and are bound to God by an eternal covenant. So let us treasure the awesomeness of our survival and protect our identity, our Torah, our Judaism with vigilance and love.

1. Genesis 32:9.
2. Proverbs 3:25.
3. Isaiah 8:10.
4. Psalms 20:2.
5. Genesis 32:12.
6. *Ibid.* 33:4.



A Key to Self-Esteem

Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn (32:25)

The Midrash states that the person who attacked Jacob was the guardian angel of Esau. The commentaries add that this angel represents the yetzer hara, the prime spiritual force of evil that wished to vanquish Jacob and his descendants.

The rabbi of Slonim interprets this verse to provide us with an important lesson. He points out that the Hebrew word *vayivoser* – was left – can also mean “to be superfluous,” and the message of the verse is that Jacob felt that he was superfluous when he was alone, isolated and detached from others.

The Psalmist says, “For I have said that the world is built upon *chesed* (loving-kindness).” The Chassidic writings interpret this verse as a reason for Creation. Although we cannot have any concept into the essence of the Divine attributes, we are told that God created the world because “it is in the nature of the good to do good” and without a world, there would be no recipients for God's goodness.

We are supposed to emulate the Divine attributes, and the foremost obligation of man is to do *chesed*. But *chesed* cannot be done in a vacuum. The phrase, “God said ‘It is not good that man be alone,’ ” (Genesis 2:18) means not only that a person should not be without a spouse, but also that “there can be no goodness when man is alone.” Goodness requires that there be a relationship, a recipient of one's *chesed*. Inasmuch as the purpose of creation was for man to emulate God in doing *chesed*, failure or the inability to do *chesed* leaves a person unfulfilled.

In my writings on self-esteem (*Angels Don't Leave Footprints*) I pointed out that we value things for one of two reasons: (1) they are functional or (2) they are ornamental. If you have a grandfather clock whose mechanism breaks down, you may keep it as a handsome piece of furniture. If your can-opener no longer works,

you discard it. Since it has no esthetic component, it has no value if it is not functional.

On what basis can a person have a sense of self-worth? Few people are so handsome as to be ornamental, and even those who are exceptionally handsome lose their beauty as they grow old. Man's true worth is in his function, and inasmuch as a major function of man is to do *chesed*, the inability or failure to do *chesed* deprives a person of a source of self-esteem.

One of the tactics of the yetzer hara is to crush a person by depriving him of the ability to do *chesed*. The person who is isolated from others and cannot give of himself to others may lose his sense of self-worth. My years of working with people who are addicted to drugs or alcohol has convinced me that one of the factors that lead to addiction is self-centeredness. One recovered alcoholic expressed it this way: “I could look up at people or I could look down my nose at them. They were either far above me or beneath me, but I never felt that I belonged. Alcohol gave me the feeling that I belonged.” This person escaped from the distress of isolation via the anesthetic effects of alcohol.

Feeling that one does not belong causes a person to feel superfluous. The rabbi of Slonim found this message in the verse which he translated as, “Jacob felt superfluous because he was alone.” The low self-esteem and depression incident to isolation renders a person vulnerable to the attack of the yetzer hara.

Doing *chesed* is not only a great mitzvah, but it also helps a person to have a sense of worthiness and self-esteem.