

Fear the Merits of a Wicked Man

PARSHA INSIGHTS - VAYISHLACH (5758)

FOUR HUNDRED HOSTILE MEN DID NOT SCARE YAACOV

Yaacov was returning from the land of Aram to Canaan. He had tried to make peace with his brother, Aisav, but he was told by his messengers that Aisav was headed toward him with an army of 400 men (32:7). After taking some strategic precautions, Yaacov began doing what every Jew must do in situations of anxiety- *davening* [praying]. “Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Aisav. I am afraid of **him (oso)**, for **he** can come and kill us all - mothers and children alike” (32:12).

The *Ksav Sofer* notices something strange. Yaacov stated that he was afraid of “him” - of Aisav. What about Aisav’s ARMY, which was also marching toward him with bloodshed in mind? Yaacov never expressed any fear about this ominous situation. It must be that Yaacov did not fear them. Why did he only dread his encounter with AISAV?

Based on the *Midrash Rabba* on our *parsha* [Torah portion](76:2), the *Ksav Sofer* makes a powerful remark. Yaacov was not at all afraid of human beings. Rather, the *ZECHUYOS* [MERITS] which Aisav might have possessed - these caused great trepidation for Yaacov. “Yaacov was frightened of Aisav, who had in his hand the *mitzvah* [commandment/good deed] of *kibud av v’aim* [honor your father and mother]”, states the *Ksav Sofer*. Yaacov felt no anxiety regarding the army of 400 men who accompanied Aisav, but he WAS concerned about Aisav himself, because of his *mitzvah* merit. Remember, for the last years, Yaacov had been living in Aram, marrying Rachel and Leah, and building the *shevatim* [tribes] of Yisroel. All this time, Aisav did have an advantage over him, namely, the *mitzvah* of being near home to honor Yitzchok, plus the merit of living in *Eretz Yisroel* [the Land of Israel] - Canaan. It was this that instilled Yaacov with fear. Using the *Midrash*, the *Ksav Sofer* explains Yaavo’s terminology, “because I am afraid of HIM, lest HE (himself, with his *zechuyos*) come and kill us...”

In order to follow through with this idea, we must consult the *Oznaim L’Torah* in next week’s *Parshas* [Torah portion of] *Vayaishev*. That *parsha* begins by recounting a latter part of Yaacov’s life, when he resided once again in Canaan. This was after Rachel died giving birth to the youngest of the *shevatim*, Binyamin, which occurred in our *parsha* (35:18). The *pasuk* [verse] at the start of *Vayaishev* tells us that Yaacov dwelt in the land where his fathers had lived, in the land of Canaan. Again, this was happening AFTER he finished establishing the twelve *shevatim* of Yisroel. What is the message? We will discover that it is connected to the theme we began with, that Aisav DID have a *mitzvah* advantage over Yaacov until Yaacov moved back to Canaan. In fact, Aisav had to his name TWO *mitzvos* [commandments], which Yaacov was unable to fulfill for awhile. As you already know, those two *mitzvos* are *kibud av* (being close to Yitzchok to serve him, albeit for ulterior motives) and *yishuv ha’aretz* [living in the Land] of *Eretz Yisroel*. When Yaacov returned to Canaan, he regained these two, but Aisav simultaneously rejected them.

Based on this, let us explore the words of Rav Zalman Sorotzkin on 37:1. While Yaacov was in Padan Aram establishing his family of *shevatim*, Aisav had the edge over him in the two above mentioned *mitzvos* - *kibud av* and *yishuv ha’aretz*. But the Torah informs us: No one should believe that Aisav remained devout in these deeds right until the day of his death. “And Aisav took his wives, sons, daughters, and all the members of his household, plus his herds, all his livestock, and all his property which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and he went to (dwell in another) land, because of Yaacov his brother... and Aisav dwelt in Har Seir; Aisav is (the father of the nation of) Edom” (36:6-8). *Oznaim L’Torah* remarks that Aisav forsook *kibud av* and *yishuv Eretz Yisroel* (Canaan), the only two *mitzvos* to his name, because the *yaitzer hora* [evil inclination] demands “perfection” when it comes to doing evil and neglect of *mitzvah* observance. Once a person has fallen into the clutches of wicked behavior, the evil inclination will give him no rest until he becomes more and more entrenched in that decadent lifestyle. The *yaitzer hora* insists that NO *mitzvos* remain with a person, if such a dreadful goal is within his reach, as in the case of Aisav.

Yaacov, on the other hand, was lacking ONLY these two *mitzvos* while he lived near Lavan in Aram. Therefore, once he had fathered the twelve *shevatim*, he completed his nearly perfect record of *mitzvah* observance

by returning to the Holy Land AND regaining the opportunity to honor his parents in person. Thus, the two “missing *mitzvos*” were again fulfilled by him.

Incidentally, Rav Sorotzkin reminds us of something very crucial. Yaacov’s original trip to Aram to marry Leah (and Rachel) was upon the command of his parents (*Toldos* 27:43 and 28:2)! So, in a sense, he was not even missing the *mitzvos* of *kibud av* and *yishuv ha’aretz* during this time. (Therefore, there was not really any reason for him to fear Aisav’s merits over him.) I would like to add that at worst, the EXTRA time he spent there might have been some sort of violation of *kibud av*, as we see in *Rabainu B’chaya* on 28:5. There, this early commentary remarks that even though Yaacov left Canaan upon the directive of his parents, so they were obviously “*mochel*” [forgiven] him the *mitzvah* of honoring them in person, he might have been punished later because he tarried too long in Aram. You see, they might have intended that he simply marry Leah and return right away, states *Rabainu B’chaya*. He felt it appropriate to marry Rachel INSTEAD, even though she was younger than Leah, and this ended up occupying many years, causing him to be away from his parents for awhile. That is why Yaacov was punished later by suffering the temporary loss of Yosef for twenty-two years, the same number he himself stayed away “unnecessarily” from his parents. (This *Rabainu B’chaya* is also quoted by the *Sifsai Chachamim* on 37:34, but a misprint in the *Maor Chumash* - a rare occurrence - cites it as being on 28:1; it is actually on 28:5.)

The bottom line is, however, that Yaacov DID regain the *mitzvah* of honoring his parents, plus he began living again in Israel. Despite his expectation to do so while on his way back from Aram to *Eretz Yisroel* (Canaan), he feared Aisav. Why? We explained above, using the words of the *Midrash* and *Ksav Sofer’s* interpretation, that Aisav’s advantage over him during the years past instilled him with trepidation. Yaacov’s lack of fulfillment of *kibud av* and *yishuv ha’aretz* frightened him.

From all this, we get a glimpse at the righteousness of Yaacov *Avinu* [Jacob our forefather]. People did not scare him; *mitzvos* were foremost in his mind. He was concerned that perhaps Hashem would favor his wicked brother in a confrontation **because his brother had two *mitzvos* to his name, which Yaacov had temporarily put on hold.** We can all benefit from *mitzvah* merit to sanctify our lives in this world and the next, and to protect us from adversaries. Let us gather as many *mitzvos* as we possibly can, always keeping in mind our purpose in the world.

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