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Singing in Battle

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1.

WHAT YAAKOV WOULD SAY

On the verse,¹ “He {Yaakov} lay down {to sleep} in that place,” the midrash comments:² “*Here* he lay down, but for the entire fourteen years that he was secluded in the academy of Ever, he did not lie down {to sleep}.” The midrash then quotes a second view: “*Here* he lay down, but for the twenty years that he spent in the house of Lavan, he did not lay down” (as it says,³ “My sleep drifted from my eyes”).

Further on, the midrash continues:

And what would he say? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says, “The fifteen *Shir HaMaalos*⁴ in the Book of *Tehillim*.” What is the reason {behind this opinion}? {For the verse there states},⁵ “A song of ascents, by David. Were it not for Hashem Who was with us — let Yisrael declare now!”: {This refers to} Yisrael the Elder (our forefather Yaakov). Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman says, “He would recite the entire Book of *Tehillim*.” What is the reason? {For the verse states},⁶ “You are the Holy One, enthroned upon the praises of Yisrael”: {This refers to} Yisrael the Elder.

The plain meaning of the question, “What would he say?” cannot be, “With what was Yaakov engaged while in Lavan’s house?”

After all, it says explicitly that Yaakov tended to Lavan’s sheep with all his energy.⁷ In fact {he worked} “by day... {and} by night...; my sleep drifted from my eyes.”

Rather, the question of the midrash is: What did Yaakov recite (pray or learn) in order to overcome the hardships while in Charan and Lavan’s house?

¹ *Bereishis* 28:11.

² *Bereishis Rabbah*, sec. 68, par. 11; see also *Bereishis Rabbah*, sec. 74, par. 11.

³ *Bereishis* 31:40.

⁴ {*Tehillim* ch. 120-134; these fifteen successive chapters are often grouped as they all start similarly with words “*Shir HaMaalos*...” — “A song of ascents....”}

⁵ *Tehillim* 124:1.

⁶ *Tehillim* 22:4.

⁷ *Bereishis* 31:6; so much so that a practical law is learned from Yaakov — a worker “is obligated to work with all his might” (*Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Sechirus*,” ch. 13, par. 7; *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Choshen Mishpat*,” end of ch. 337; Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Choshen Mishpat*,” *Hilchos She’eilah uSechirus*, ch. 20).

During his stay in Lavan's house, Yaakov was in exile. He had departed his father Yitzchak's house to go to Lavan's house — and while there, he was busy with {tending to} “Lavan's sheep.”⁸

{This affected Yaakov} to the extent that his stay in Lavan's house caused him a decline in {spiritual} stature⁹ — Rashi¹⁰ remarks that Yaakov said, “If he {Lavan} comes to deceive me, I, too, will be his brother in deception,” intimating that, seemingly, Yaakov would be as cunning as Lavan.¹¹

In light of all these troubles experienced by Yaakov, the question arises: How could Yaakov have survived and endured this exile? To do so, surely, he would have used “the voice is the voice of Yaakov.”¹² His “voice” had the power to neutralize the “hands” of his adversaries and anyone who opposed Yaakov and his values, as taught by our Sages.¹³ The question is {therefore asked}: “What would he say?” {How did he use his “voice” to neutralize his opponents?}

Regarding this question, the midrash answers: He would recite “the fifteen *Shir HaMaalos* in the Book of *Tehillim*” or “the entire Book of *Tehillim*.” This is what gave Yaakov the resilience to persevere throughout his exile.

2.

FIFTEEN CHAPTERS AND FIFTEEN YEARS

However, we still need to clarify: According to the view that “he would recite the entire Book of *Tehillim*,” the relevance of this recitation to Yaakov during the period “that he spent in the house of Lavan” is well understood. Since

⁸ Note that the Hebrew word for sheep, “*tzon*” is a cognate of “*yetziah*,” meaning, “departure” (from that which Yaakov represents — holiness [*Torah Or*, “*Vayeitzei*,” 23c; *Toras Chaim*, “*Vayeitzei*,” 38b; “*Vayishlach*,” 39c ff.]).

⁹ Similar to what is described regarding Avraham (*Bereishis* 12:11), “And it occurred as he was approaching Egypt...” (see the teaching of the *Baal Shem Tov* on this — quoted in *Maor Einayim*, end of *parshas “Shemos”*).

¹⁰ Rashi on *Bereishis* 29:12.

¹¹ See *Sefer HaMaamarim* 5670, p. 73; note as well *Maamar Padah BeShalom* 5668 and 5703.

¹² {*Bereishis* 27:22. This verse is explained homiletically as describing the individual strengths of Yaakov and Eisav: Yaakov and his descendents use their voice in study and prayer, whereas Eisav and his descendents use their hands to wage war.}

¹³ *Bereishis Rabbah*, sec. 65, par. 20.

his circumstances presumably did not allow him to study Torah in depth (in any event, not at the level {at which he studied} while “secluded in the academy of Ever”), he {instead} extolled Hashem’s praises, {particularly} those praises for which one receives a reward, similar to {the reward for studying¹⁴ the tractates of} *Negaim* and¹⁵ *Ohalos*.¹⁶ However, what special significance do “the **fifteen Shir HaMaalos** in the Book of *Tehillim*” have, concerning Yaakov’s situation in Lavan’s house?

This can be clarified by prefacing with what is cited by the *Chida*,¹⁷ “{King} David recited the fifteen *Shir HaMaalos* corresponding to the fifteen years that {all three of} our forefathers were alive together.”

[Avraham lived for “one hundred years, seventy years, and five years,”¹⁸ Yitzchak was born when Avraham was “one hundred years old,”¹⁹ and Yaakov was born when Yitzchak was “sixty years old.”²⁰ Based on these numbers, it turns out there were “fifteen years in which our forefathers were alive together.”]

On this basis, we can say that Yaakov recited the “the fifteen *Shir HaMaalos* in the Book of *Tehillim*” to invoke the merit of our forefathers Avraham and Yitzchak (as well). Meaning, in addition to Yaakov’s own strengths and merits, he also drew upon the strengths of Avraham and Yitzchak. It was specifically through this {invocation of the strengths of Avraham and Yitzchak} that Yaakov could persevere through the hardships in Lavan’s house. This is in accord with what Yaakov himself {later} said, {that he would not have survived}: “Had not the G-d of my father — the G-d of **Avraham** and the Fear of **Yitzchak** — been with me....”²¹

¹⁴ {Although the Book of *Tehillim* consists of praises and supplicatory prayer, its recitation is considered Torah study since the Book of *Tehillim* is one of the books of *Tanach*.}

¹⁵ {Studying these tractates is challenging, and one receives great reward for engaging with them.}

¹⁶ *Midrash Shocher Tov*, ch. 1; *Yalkut Shimoni*, “*Tehillim*,” *remez* 613.

¹⁷ In his commentary *Yosef Tehillos* on *Tehillim*, ch. 120.

¹⁸ *Bereishis* 25:7.

¹⁹ *Bereishis* 21:5.

²⁰ *Bereishis* 25:26.

²¹ *Bereishis* 31:42. Note that the verse from which the midrash (above fn. 2) derived that Yaakov would say the “fifteen *Shir HaMaalos*” is, “**Had not for** Hashem been with us — let **Yisrael** declare now” {*Tehillim* 124:1}, which is similar to “**Had not...** the G-d of Avraham...” (See the *Rashash* on *Bereishis Rabbah*, sec. 68, *ibid*).

3.

MILITARY STRATEGY TO COMBAT EXILE

The reason Yaakov needed to secure the merits of all the forefathers to prevail over the ordeals inflicted by Lavan may be understood by considering the strategy expounded {in *Chassidus*}²² concerning how to triumph in the war against the evil inclination, in general. This strategy is derived from an actual war fought during the lifetime of the Alter Rebbe.²³

Generally, the method in “military tactical formations” is that “each side arranges their troops into three camps. One camp takes up the center position... the other two camps {take positions} to the right and left. The opposing side also arranges themselves in three similar camps. The two sides then engage in battle against each other.”

Military success (in the war that took place during that period) was achieved when “his three camps” were all strategically concentrated against just one of the enemy’s camps {at a time}. “In this way, they would surely be victorious.”

From here, we can learn to act similarly regarding the spiritual war in the battle against the evil inclination: To defeat the evil inclination, a person needs to arouse “all of the three emotions of *kedushah* (love, fear, and compassion) against only one emotion of *kelipah*²⁴ {at a time}. In this way, the three will vanquish {the targeted emotion of *kelipah*} and be victorious.”²⁵

Therefore, the “fifteen *Shir HaMaalos*,” which “correspond to the fifteen years that our forefathers lived together,” are needed to survive and withstand exile. —

²² In a *maamar* by the Tzemach Tzedek — reproduced in *HaTomim*, issue 3 [120a {in the published book}].

²³ {During the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), Frederick II of Prussia was known to use the “oblique order,” the military tactic described below, with great success.}

²⁴ {Lit., “shell,” a term used to describe the forces of evil and negativity which conceal the light of G-dliness.}

²⁵ In the *maamar* above by the Tzemach Tzedek (and similarly in *Likkutei Torah*, “*Devarim*,” 5a): “This is the explanation of the verse (*Bereishis* 29:3), ‘All the flocks would gather’ — which represent love, fear, and compassion in *kedushah* — only then, ‘they would roll the stone from atop the mouth of the well.’”

The three forefathers parallel the three emotions of *kedushah* — love, fear and compassion.²⁶ When all three forefathers are in unison — when a person rallies together all three emotions of *kedushah* — he then has the power to withstand all the ordeals of exile and to neutralize them.

4.

FIFTEEN IN CHASSIDUS

On this basis, we may say that there is a hint (according to the approach of Chassidus) and nuance in the number “**fifteen** *Shir HaMaalos*” (and “**fifteen** years that our forefathers lived together”):

The number fifteen alludes to the first two letters of the name *Havayah*²⁷ — *yud* and *hei* (which added together have the numerical value of fifteen).²⁸ The difference between *yud-hei* and *vav-hei* is that the letters *vav-hei* represent the *middos*²⁹ (and *malchus*).³⁰ The letters *yud-hei* represent the *mochin*³¹ (*yud* — *chochmah*,³² *hei* — *binah*³³).³⁴

This is the mystical idea behind the “fifteen years our forefathers lived together”: For all three emotions³⁵ to exist simultaneously (in a revealed state) — “the forefathers living together” — the light of *mochin* (*yud-hei*) needs to

²⁶ *Likkutei Torah*, “*Emor*” 35c; et al.

²⁷ {The four-letter Name of Hashem, *yud-hei-vav-hei*, is described in Chassidus as incorporating and embodying all of the ten Divine attributes.}

²⁸ See *Or HaTorah*, “*Vaeschanan*,” p. 116: “the fifteen *Shir HaMaalos* that Yaakov would say ... to draw down the level of *yud-hei*.”

²⁹ {The six divine emotive attributes of “*chessed* — kindness,” “*gevurah* — severity,” “*tiferes* — splendor,” “*netzach* — victory,” “*hod* — glory,” and “*yesod* — foundation.”}

³⁰ {The Divine attribute of “sovereignty” that acts as the culmination and expression of the previous six emotive attributes.}

³¹ {The Divine intellectual attributes.}

³² {The Divine attribute of “wisdom” and source of all the other attributes.}

³³ {The Divine attribute of “understanding.”}

³⁴ *Iggeres HaTeshuvah* ch. 4 (94b ff).

³⁵ {The three archetypal emotive attributes of *chessed*, *gevurah*, and *tiferes* are associated with the three emotions of love, fear, and compassion respectively.}

illuminate the *middos*. Since *mochin* are beyond the sort of division found in the *middos*, they can cause the *middos* to become integrated and coexist.³⁶

5.

SONGS OF JOY

However, this {explanation} is seemingly inadequate:

Each of the fifteen *Shir HaMaalos* in the book of *Tehillim* is called a “**shir**” — a **song**. A “*shir*” is associated with joy; how, then, could Yaakov have recited the “**Shir HaMaalos**,” a **song**, while in a state of exile?³⁷ It is indeed true that in these chapters, “My salvation” — the strength given {by Hashem} to prevail through this exile — is discussed. Yet, how could Yaakov have been joyful (a state fit for the recitation of songs [in line with the teaching of our Rabbis, “one only recites a song over wine,”³⁸]) while residing in Charan — a place that provoked “the *charon af*, the wrath of Hashem” — and in Lavan’s house?³⁹

The explanation: Our forefather Yaakov’s descent to Lavan’s house was for the sake of the ensuing ascent — so that later, it would be said of Yaakov that “the man became exceedingly prosperous.”⁴⁰ Since Yaakov **saw** the intended goal of his descent (he saw the ascent that would later unfold), he could recite “**Shir HaMaalos**” even while still in Lavan’s house.⁴¹

³⁶ {The objectivity characteristic of intellect does not allow emotions to run unchecked and, therefore, can allow more than one emotion to be expressed at a time.}

³⁷ This question also concerns the second view (“he would recite the entire book of *Tehillim*”) as the context of the book of *Tehillim* is “songs of Yisrael.” See Rashi, beg. of *Tehillim*: “This book was composed with ten expressions of song, with conducting, with melody, with musical accompaniment, with song, etc.”

³⁸ *Berachos* 35a. {It is only fitting to sing in times of intense joy, such as during the Temple service when pouring the wine libations.}

³⁹ Rashi on *Bereishis* 11:32.

⁴⁰ *Bereishis* 30:43; see *Torah Or* and *Toras Chaim* cited above (fn. 7 in the original).

⁴¹ Note the statement of our Sages (*Makkos* 24b) that upon seeing the magnitude of {the Temple’s} destruction and exile, Rabbi Akiva **laughed**. We have explained (*Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 19, p. 67 ff.) the reason for his actions, as he, in particular, perceived within the extremity of exile the ensuing elevation through the redemption. Note from the *Arizal’s* writings that Rabbi Akiva was a reincarnation (and shares the same letters in his name as that) of Yaakov (see *Seder HaDoros*, “Rabbi Akiva,” ch. 11).

6.

SINGING IN BATTLE

In every matter, its underlying message is emphasized by its beginning and start specifically. Likewise, this principle applies to our discussion. The ascent that comes by way of the descent into exile is underscored in the very first of the “fifteen *Shir HaMaalos*”:⁴²

The closing and concluding verse of the first *Shir HaMaalos* (for “everything follows the conclusion”)⁴³ is, “I am at peace, but when I speak, they are for war.”⁴⁴ — Meaning that although {the Psalmist} desires peace, nevertheless, “they come to wage war with me.”⁴⁵ This (spiritual) assault is the concealment and distortion of {G-dliness that is brought on by} exile, and particularly the trials and temptations that impede and obstruct a person from serving Hashem, and {instead} “come to wage war” against him.

And by saying “*Shir HaMaalos* — A song of ascents” while asserting that “they are for war,” the greatness of the ascent resulting from the war is emphasized.

The explanation: A Jew is not permitted to place himself, or even allow himself to wind up, in challenging circumstances. On the contrary, a person must petition Hashem:⁴⁶ “Do not bring us... into temptation.” He, therefore, declares, “I am at peace.” He hopes to accomplish his *avodah*⁴⁷ peacefully (disassociated from any sort of war or temptation).

Nevertheless, since an elevation arises especially from facing wars and temptations, Hashem sometimes arranges that “they come to wage war with me.” “They” (in the plural — {referring to} “This physical world... which is called

⁴² {*Tehillim* 120.}

⁴³ *Berachos* 12a.

⁴⁴ {*Tehillim* 120:7}

⁴⁵ Rashi, ad loc.

⁴⁶ *Berachos* 60b {recited daily in the morning blessings.}

⁴⁷ {Divine service.}

‘a public domain’ {a domain of plurality}”⁴⁸ includes those who come to battle and disrupt a person from *avodas Hashem*.

And concerning this, the Psalmist declares, “A song of ascents”: Not only do these trials not disrupt his *avodas Hashem* nor weaken his *avodah* in any way; on the contrary, they elicit from him additional strength and courage, with more passion and power. This will lead a person to a state conducive to “*shir*.”

7.

ASCENT WITHIN EXILE ITSELF

Every idea in the Torah contains an eternal lesson. Therefore, it is understood that all the above serves as a relevant lesson for the entire duration of exile, especially for our generation — {which has experienced} the hardships of exile — and the generation of *ikvesa deMeshicha*.⁴⁹

When a person contemplates the doubled and redoubled darkness that exists in the generation of *ikvesa deMeshicha* to such an extent that even according to Torah’s standards,⁵⁰ there is room to ask,⁵¹ “From where will my salvation come?,” he may fall into despair, G-d forbid.

{He should then reflect on} the lesson of the above discussion: The descent of the Jewish people into exile (analogous to the theme of the verse, “Yaakov departed... and went to Charan”)⁵² is for the sake of the ensuing ascent, so that there be the “superiority of light over {lit., ‘from’} darkness” and “the superiority of wisdom over {lit., ‘from’} folly.”⁵³ Therefore, one needs {that which is described

⁴⁸ *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 33 (43a).

⁴⁹ {Lit., “the heels of Moshiach”; the generation living immediately before Moshiach’s arrival.}

⁵⁰ {Generally, the nature of Torah is absolute clarity, as seen from the description, “Torah is light.” When doubt is expressed in Torah itself, this underscores the severity of the concealment of G-dly light.}

⁵¹ *Tehillim* 121:1 {in {the second} “*Shir HaMaalos*”}; see *Bereishis Rabbah*, sec. 68, par. 2.

⁵² {*Bereishis* 28:10;} see *Zohar*, sec. 1, 147a: “{Rabbi Yossi} considers this verse as a reference to exile.” *Zohar* 23b (cited in *Or HaTorah*, “*Bereishis*,” 854a); *Bereishis Rabah*, sec. 68, par. 13; and *Shnei Luchos HaBris* (292b): “Yaakov’s departure also hints at exile”; see there.

⁵³ *Koheles* 2:13.

further in the verse}, “I lift up my eyes.”⁵⁴ A person needs to perceive (by **lifting up** his eyes) the intended goal of exile — the ascent that will materialize by the future redemption.⁵⁵ Then, he will remain unfazed by the darkness of exile. On the contrary, his mood will be one of forthright joy {even while still in exile} — {he will be able to declare} “*Shir HaMaalos*.”

[Heaven forbid that one should say that a person must be happy about his condition in exile or think that it is appropriate for a Jew to be in such a setting. Exile embodies the idea of “darkness” and “folly,” etc., and a Jew in exile — as the Torah of Truth clearly and openly asserts — is a “child who has been banished from his Father’s table.”⁵⁶ And if the child feels or claims otherwise, the intensity of the darkness and lowliness of his exile becomes more evident. A person only needs to contemplate the inner purpose of exile — that of {revealing the} “superiority of light from darkness” and the “superiority of wisdom from folly.”]

In this way, the answer (to the query, “*me’ayin*’ — from where will my salvation come?”) will be revealed by and discerned in the question itself — according to its inner meaning,⁵⁷ that the “salvation” is drawn from the level of “*ayin*” {lit., “nothing”} — a level that cannot be grasped, as it is beyond understanding and comprehension, etc., and beyond “names.”⁵⁸

And this salvation will also be drawn into the continuum of Creation where it will be revealed and efficacious — “My salvation is from Hashem, the Maker of heaven and earth”⁵⁹ — even into heaven and earth, literally.

— From a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Vayera*, 5740 (1980)

⁵⁴ *Tehillim* 121:1.

⁵⁵ Note *Tanchuma*, “*Toldos*,” ch. 14: “I raise my eyes to the mountains,’ ...this refers to Mashiach ben David.”

⁵⁶ *Berachos* 3a: “Happy is the king {who is praised}... {how great is the pain} of the father... {woe} to the children...”

⁵⁷ See *Likkutei Torah*, “*Bemidbar*,” 51a (from *Zohar*, sec. 3, 129a) — that the level of “*ayin*” is even higher than the name *Havayah*. See also *Likkutei Torah*, “*Shemini Atzeres*,” 90b, in explanation of “*me’ayin*’ — from where will my salvation come?”

⁵⁸ {The word used in the verse meaning “from where,” “*me’ayin*,” can also be read to mean “from *ayin*” or “from nothing.” In other words, “From nothing my salvation comes.” Chassidus explains *ayin* as referencing such a high level of G-dliness beyond any form of comprehension or description. Therefore, this level is not given any name but is simply termed “nothing.” Such a level could only be revealed within a person’s reality by way of an irregularity, such as by overcoming trials and tribulations that call forth and reveal one’s inner strength.}

⁵⁹ *Tehillim* 121:2; see *Likkutei Torah*, “*Shemini Atzeres*,” *ibid.* {Hashem is portrayed in this verse in a capacity relating to the existence of heaven and earth.}