

# Vayeitzei: Down One, Up Two

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

The Torah portion of *Vayeitzei* begins by relating how Yaakov descended from *Eretz Yisrael* and traveled to Charan — a locale so spiritually depraved that its very name indicates that it had aroused G-d's ire<sup>1</sup> (Charan coming from the root *charon*, or anger).

Yaakov's descent to Charan was for the purpose of a subsequent ascent. This ascent was composed of three distinct elements:

Yaakov lived for more than 20 years in the evil Lavan's home, in the nefarious land of Charan. He nevertheless remained unaffected by his environment, eventually leaving Charan untainted by sin.<sup>2</sup> Yaakov was thereby elevated to a much higher level than he had achieved prior to his descent.

This ascent is somewhat like the superior quality that a *baal teshuvah*, a penitent, enjoys over a righteous individual, a *tzaddik*, in that the penitent tasted the forbidden fruit of sin, and was still able to "remove himself from it and surmount his evil inclination."<sup>3</sup>

Another element of Yaakov's ascent was that it was specifically in Charan that he fulfilled the command to "be fruitful and multiply," bringing forth the Twelve Tribes of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Yaakov's labor with Lavan's sheep during his 20 years in Charan resulted in his refining and elevating the sparks of holiness found in the sheep. Yaakov was thereby so elevated that the verse describes him as "becoming tremendously wealthy."<sup>5</sup>

Since "the actions of the Patriarchs serve as a sign and inspiration for their progeny," it follows that Yaakov's departure from *Eretz Yisrael* and sojourn in Charan is reflected in the spiritual service of all Jews.

Thus the *Or HaChayim* explains<sup>6</sup> that Yaakov's journey alludes to the descent of the soul within the body. This descent, too, is for the sake of a subsequent ascent. Here as well, the same three aspects apply:

Prior to the soul's descent, it is at the level of a *tzaddik*. By clothing itself in a body and natural soul — entities that conceal and obscure G-dliness — and nevertheless succeeding in performing its service of Torah study and *mitzvos*, the soul acquires the quality of a *baal teshuvah*.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, by descending within a body the soul is able to fulfill the command to "be fruitful and multiply," as well as fulfilling Torah and *mitzvos* in general.

Furthermore, through its service with physical matter, the soul transforms this world into a dwelling place fit for G-d. This causes the soul to achieve a much higher spiritual level than it had previously enjoyed.

Transforming the world into a dwelling for G-d can be accomplished in one of two ways: either by studying Torah and using physical objects for the performance of *mitzvos*, or by “Knowing G-d in all your ways,”<sup>8</sup> and seeing that “All your actions should be for the sake of Heaven.”<sup>9</sup> This second kind of service implies that even a person’s interactions with physical matter for mundane purposes such as eating and sleeping are done with spiritual intent.

In a sense, there is a superior quality to the latter form of spiritual service with regard to making the world itself a domicile for G-d. For when even a person’s mundane activities are conducted “for the sake of Heaven,” then the dwelling place for G-d is accomplished in even the hindmost portions of this physical world.<sup>10</sup>

This superior quality in utilizing mundane and permissible matters “for the sake of Heaven,” is also true with regard to the ascent to the level of *baal teshuvah*, the ascent that the soul accomplishes by its descent into this world.

For when a Jew performs a *mitzvah*, even if that *mitzvah* is performed only after first overwhelming the evil inclination, once the *mitzvah* is actually accomplished, the person’s evil inclination is greatly weakened. There is then revealed the person’s true desire: that deep down, “every Jew desires to perform all the *mitzvos*.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, when it comes to the actual performance of a *mitzvah*, this is done entirely out of a Jew’s inner will and desire, and as such the person’s evil inclination has no part in its performance. As a result, the performance of a *mitzvah* is in the manner of “*tzaddik*” rather than “*baal teshuvah*.”

But when an individual “knows G-d” in all his or her *personal* (permissible) ways, so that they too are done “for the sake of heaven,” then this involves the person in his entirety, inasmuch as the performance of his mundane activities stems from his natural soul and its bodily desires.<sup>12</sup> As such, the person’s service is on the loftier level of a *baal teshuvah*.

Based on *Likkutei Sichos* , Vol. XV, pp. 244-246.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Commentary of *Rashi* , conclusion of Torah portion *Noach*.
2. See *Rashi* , *Bereishis* 28:21; see also *Rashi, ibid.*, 32:5.
3. *Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah* 7:4.
4. See *Vayikra Rabbah* 36:5; see also *Pesachim* 56a; *Sifri, Devarim* 6:4.
5. *Bereishis* 30:43; see also *Torah Or*, p. 23c, *et al.*
6. *Bereishis* 28:14.
7. *Likkutei Torah* , *Balak*, p. 73a; Discourse titled *U'Mayon 5706*.
8. *Mishlei* 3:6; *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim*, section 231.
9. *Avos* 2:12.
10. See *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. VIII, p. 108ff., and sources cited there.
11. *Rambam, Hilchos Geirushin* conclusion of chapter 2.

12. See *Tanya* , beginning of chapter 7. See also *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. XX, p. 334 and footnotes *ibid*.

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