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Perhaps Peace and Quiet Are Overrated

By Yossi Ives

What does it take for a man to get some peace and quiet?

Isaiah famously declared, "There is no peace for the wicked,"[1] but the Sages said, "The righteous have no rest."[2] Job stated definitively that "man was born to toil."[3] So, whether you are righteous or wicked, or somewhere in between, don't expect peace! Perhaps peace and quiet is overrated? It seems so, because when Jacob sought a tranquil life, things started to get even more intense.

After working for his unscrupulous uncle and father-in-law Laban for 20 years, "Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's sojourning, in the land of Canaan."[4] Tired of being a temporary resident, Jacob resolved to settle down and enjoy a normal life. But that was not to be:

> No sooner had Jacob sought to dwell in tranquility, that the troubles of Joseph sprang upon him. The righteous seek to dwell in tranquility. Said the Holy One, blessed is He [G-d], "What is prepared for the righteous in the world to come is not sufficient for them, but they seek [also] to dwell in tranquility in this world?!"[5]

Indeed, the Biblical narrative continues by outlining the troubles Jacob faced with his most beloved son Joseph. It began with a conflict between Joseph and his brothers, and the famous dreams he related to them. The story continues with the brothers conspiring to kill Joseph, settling instead on selling him into slavery. Jacob mourned Joseph for 20 years, believing him dead, until being joyfully reunited with him in his old age.

Rather than the blissful tranquility he wished for, Jacob suffered decades of grief.

Was Jacob Wrong?

The impression given is that Jacob was handed an extra dose of grief as a lesson for wanting a quiet life. Apparently, as a righteous person, Jacob should have known that it is inappropriate to seek tranquility.

In that case, how do we explain the wording in the passage from Rashi we just cited: "The righteous seek to dwell in tranquility"? Rashi seems to be saying that aspiring to a quiet life is something that righteous people do as a matter of course. But, if indeed this is the wrong way, how does it make sense that it would be the normal practice of righteous people?

Yes, even a righteous person can occasionally falter. But Rashi is not saying that this is a mistake that some righteous people make, but the goal of all or most righteous people. By virtue of being righteous, would they

not be expected to pursue that which is right? How does it make sense to say that righteous people have a common tendency to want something that is unrighteous?

Blame it on Satan?

The Midrash has a slightly different version of this same teaching: "When the righteous dwell in tranquility ... Satan arrives and instigates against them ..."[6]

Satan isn't known for his friendly nature, and it would not be surprising if he instigated against the righteous. But Rashi leaves Satan out of the picture, and says that it is "the Holy One, blessed is He" who objects to the desire for quietude. So, why would the righteous keep doing something that G-d finds objectionable?

Peace as a Means

The Rebbe offers a refreshing new take on Rashi's teaching, which also provides valuable guidance for life.

Jacob was not merely looking to have an easy life, with physical comforts and no practical challenges. Rather, he wanted to be spared all the distractions they bring, so that he could dedicate himself to spiritual pursuits.

Rightly so, this is the habit of all righteous people. They want to devote all of their attention to reaching higher levels of scholarship and prayer, without turmoil and disruption getting in their way. As Maimonides wrote, "that is the reason that all of Israel, along with its prophets and scholars, longed for the messianic era ... that they be left in peace by governments that prevent them from applying themselves properly to the pursuit of Torah and mitzvot. So that they may find calmness and increase their knowledge."[7]

All Jacob wanted was to be left in peace and quiet to pursue his higher goals. This is completely normal for people of the spirit. They wish to be spared the drama and complexity of the material world, so they can grow in their piety and nobility.

The Time Wasn't Ripe

So why was Jacob's wish denied? Why was his aspiration not fulfilled? And why was life quickly made difficult for him?

G-d's answer to Jacob was not "No," but "Not yet!" It is noble to want to seek tranquility, but only at the right time.

In fact, Jacob did ultimately achieve his long-awaited tranquility. He enjoyed 17 peaceful years in Egypt under the care of his beloved son, Joseph, but in order to attain that level of peacefulness he needed to experience the travails that preceded it. It wasn't simply a matter of waiting his turn. Rather, everything he went through prepared him for the eventual state of peace he reached at the end. And the level of peace he reached as a result was far greater than what he could have achieved initially.

Jacob was content with a basic modicum of peace, but G-d had something much bigger in store for him. Jacob was shooting too low. He was looking to attain the level of happiness that he was capable of understanding at the time, but G-d knew of a level of satisfaction that Jacob couldn't yet imagine.

It was as if G-d was saying to Jacob: "Don't worry, you will get your peaceful, undisturbed life, but you are not ready yet. When it comes, it will be the ultimate in peacefulness. For now, there are some challenges you need to face and overcome."

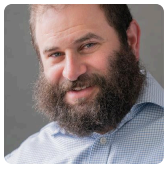
Herein lies the lesson for our lives too. It is right that we should aspire to a life devoid of troubles, in which we are free to devote ourselves to higher pursuits. But we must remember that struggles are sent to try us for a reason. Life's challenges are not a punishment, but a means to help us reach our full potential.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Isaiah 48:22.
2. Talmud, Berachot 64a.
3. Job 5:7.
4. Genesis 37:1.
5. Rashi Ibid.
6. Midrash Rabba, Genesis 84:3.
7. Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuva 10:9.



By Yossi Ives

Yossi Ives is the rabbi of Cong. Ahavas Yisrael of Pomona, N.Y. He is founder and is Chief Executive of Tag International Development, a charitable organization that focuses on sharing Israeli expertise with developing countries. Yossi holds a PhD. in Coaching Psychology and is a qualified life coach who specializes in relationship coaching. He is the author of several books, mainly on mysticism and psychology.

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