

VAYECHI (GENESIS 47:28-50:26)

Promises, Promises

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

"Please do me a favor." "Sure, I'll be happy to." "Swear to me that you'll do it." "What do you mean, 'swear to me,' don't you trust me? I just told you that I'll do it! If I said I'm going to do it, that means I'm going to do it!"

Jacob was making a deathbed request of his son Joseph. Jacob had lived a long life, and it was time to pre-arrange his funeral. The Egyptians held Jacob in high esteem, and the last thing he wanted was to end up under a pyramid. He asked Joseph to carry him back to the Land of Canaan. He wanted to be buried with his ancestors and his wife Leah in Hebron.

Joseph was his father's primary student and disciple. He had demonstrated his dedication to Jacob and his teachings. Joseph would do anything to fulfill his father's wishes. Therefore, it's somewhat surprising that Jacob didn't seem to trust his son:

"Do not bury me in Egypt. When I will lie with my ancestors, carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their grave." He (Joseph) said, "I will do as you say." 'Swear to me,' he (Jacob) said. So he swore to him..."
(Genesis, 47:30-31)

Why does Jacob treat his son with suspicion? Surely he knew that Joseph would go to the ends of the earth to fulfill the wishes of his beloved father. Why was it necessary for Joseph to back up his commitment with an oath?

The Ramban -- Nachmanides writes: "Jacob did not suspect that his righteous beloved son would violate the command of his father...Rather, he did it to reinforce the plan in the eyes of the Pharaoh. Perhaps...he would tell him (Joseph), 'send your brothers to bring him there,' or the Pharaoh might want the prophet (Jacob) to be buried in his land. Therefore, Jacob asked Joseph to swear, because it wouldn't be proper to ask Joseph to violate his oath..."

(This interpretation is borne out by the Pharaoh's eventual statement to Joseph, *"Go up and bury your father AS YOU SWORE TO HIM."* (50:6) Rashi explains that the only reason the Pharaoh permitted Joseph to bring his father's body to Canaan for burial was that he had sworn to do so.)

In other words, the Ramban is explaining that Jacob's reason for insisting on an oath from Joseph was in order to give Joseph the leverage he would need to get the king's permission. It was purely a technicality.

Or was it? The Ramban continues his commentary: "...also, Joseph would need to try harder due to his vow..."

At first glance the Ramban's commentary seems to be contradictory. First he says that Joseph would certainly follow his father's orders even without a sworn commitment. Then he says that the purpose of the vow was to make him try harder to fulfill that commitment. What's going on? Did Jacob trust Joseph or not??

The Ramban's message is that it is important to give oneself an incentive to do the right thing. True, Joseph was a loyal son who would fulfill his father's wishes. However, he would still try even harder if the commitment were backed up by a promise.

My first full time job was teaching elementary school in Tucson, Arizona. Classroom discipline was not one of my strengths. At the advice of a Chassidic educator with a PhD in behavioral psychology, I instituted a point system. Positive behavior was rewarded with stars. Receiving a certain number of stars earned the student an ice cream cone at the end of the week. Of course, my big, tough, eighth grade boys ridiculed the system. However, after not receiving ice cream on Friday #1, they made sure to get their acts together in time for Friday #2!

Some of the "purists" among the parents objected to my incentive program. "They should behave in class because it's the right thing to do. They should study and behave because that is what is expected of them, not for the ice cream!"

The behavioral psychologist responded with a question. How many of those parents who objected to seeing their children being "bribed" would go to work without the motivation of a paycheck?!

Tens of thousands of Jews throughout the world participate in the "Daf Yomi" ("Page-a-Day") program. Over the course of seven and a half years, these people study through the entire Babylonian Talmud. The incentive of being part of a massive program keeps them studying, even on those days when they might otherwise feel too busy to do so.

I have a friend who comes to my home every morning at 5:30 to study Talmud for an hour. The reason I get up so early to study is that it is important; I would study even if he didn't come. But if I didn't expect his knock on the door in the morning, would I be as likely to get up that early? And if I didn't know that he would challenge anything I say while we study, might I be tempted to be a bit superficial in my analysis of what we are studying?

We are human beings. Just the fact that we SHOULD do something doesn't automatically mean that we will. Sometimes we need to take the first step to force ourselves in the right direction. The fact is that it is best to do the right thing for the RIGHT reason. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't attempt to motivate ourselves with "ulterior motives." (See last year's message, "Kindness and Truth".)

How about those 10 or 15 pounds that you know you should lose and "someday" will? Would signing up for Weight Watchers today give you the impetus to finally take off the weight? How about calling your best friend and making an appointment to walk together three times a week, no excuses? Or, how about participating in a weekly (or daily!) Torah class?

I personally don't celebrate December 31/January 1. For us, the New Year began three and a half months ago. But when it comes to making resolutions, now's as good a time as any!

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

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