

VAYEITZEI (GENESIS 28:10-32:3)

The Gift of Life

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Jacob was on the road. Pursued by his angry brother Esau, he left his family in Canaan and headed out toward Charan. Charan was his mother's hometown, and his parents had sent him there to find a bride.

He found her. She was his cousin. Her name was Rachel.

The story began similarly to the time that Abraham's servant Eliezer had come seeking a wife for Isaac. Eliezer had arrived at a well on the outskirts of town. Jacob did the same. Eliezer saw the water from the well miraculously rising toward Rebecca. Jacob rolled a stone off the cover of the well, and the water gushed out of the well. Just as a Heavenly sign had identified Jacob's mother, he now saw an omen that he had found his wife.

The similarity, however, ends here. What was Eliezer's reaction to meeting Rebecca? ... *the man took a gold ring...and two bracelets on her arms...* (Genesis, 24:22) What was Jacob's reaction to meeting Rachel? ...*he raised his voice and wept.* (Ibid, 29:12)

Rashi explains why Jacob cried: Eliezer had come laden with gifts for Rebecca and her family. Jacob, on the other hand came with nothing but a walking stick. His nephew Eliphaz had confiscated all his possessions.

The Midrash tells us that Esau sent his son Eliphaz on a mission to kill Jacob. Eliphaz caught up with Jacob, but now had a dilemma; how could he kill his uncle? How could he accommodate his father's wishes without committing a terrible sin? Jacob proposed a "compromise." By taking everything Jacob owned, he would technically be "killing" him, because, as our Sages tell us, (Nedarim, 64b) "A poor person is considered as dead."

Jacob cried because he had nothing to give Rachel. He cried because when his nephew took his possessions, in a sense, he took his very life.

At first glance, we find Jacob's reaction surprising. After all, isn't spirituality more important than money? Don't we usually view a Tzaddik, a righteous person as one who eschews material possessions? In fact, Jacob had asked G-d to provide him with ...*bread to eat and clothing to wear.* (Ibid, 28:23) All

Jacob desired was the barest of minimums – a shirt on his back and a simple meal. Why suddenly the tears?

Let us consider the statement of the Talmud, that a poor person is considered as dead. Isn't that a bit extreme? Not really. G-d told Moses to return to Egypt "...because the men who are trying to kill you have died." In fact, Dathan and Abiram, the subjects of that discussion, were alive and well, continuing to harass Moses after the Exodus. The reason they are referred to as dead is because they had lost all of their money. (Rashi)

With a loss of money comes loss of power and prestige. With poverty comes a loss of self-esteem. G-d was telling Moses, "These guys are no longer a threat to you. They're broke!"

Jacob's tears were not for himself. If I want to live an ascetic lifestyle, that's my business. But I have no right to expect others to live by that standard. Jacob wanted nothing for himself. But how could he come to the future mother of Israel empty-handed? How could he give her nothing?!

It is good for us to learn to be satisfied with little. But we must always consider the other guy. Do we know what it means to be penniless? Can we begin to fathom the depths of pain and frustration of the poor? Do we know the shame and embarrassment of people who are unable to provide for their families?

There are so many good causes out there, crying to us for help. The Torah requires us to give at least a tenth of our money away. Jacob himself, when asking G-d for bread and clothes, pledged to give away a tenth of whatever he would receive.

Giving away a few dollars won't kill us. But it might just give life to a dead man.

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz