



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת וישב תשס"ט • Parshas Vayeishev 5769

THE BIGGEST “BANG” FOR YOUR BUCK

PEACE NOW?

Ya'akov Avinu's career of hardships spanned many years. He was forced to leave his parents' home, fleeing for his life from his wicked and vengeful brother; he spent many years of backbreaking labor, working for his unscrupulous and conniving uncle, Lavan; his wife died in childbirth; and, at the end of last week's *parshah*, he completed a tumultuous sojourn in Shechem, where the misconduct of the city's nobles precipitated a bloodbath. In any event, the beginning of this week's *parshah* finds Ya'akov Avinu at home with his family in Eretz Yisrael, finally settling down to a peaceful “retirement.”

Or so he thought. In short order, Ya'akov Avinu was faced with one of the most difficult challenges in his life: the disappearance of his favored son, Yosef, which plunged the patriarch into a decades-long state of mourning.

What is particularly surprising about this tragic turn of events is the apparent cause. *Chazal* seem to state that the calamity occurred *specifically* because Ya'akov hoped to live out the remainder of his years in tranquility. Rashi (*Bereishis* 37:2) quotes the Midrash which states:

“Ya'akov desired to (finally) dwell in peace. Instead, the tragedy involving his son Yosef was visited upon him. Hashem states: ‘A life of eternal ecstasy awaits the righteous in the World to Come. Is that insufficient for them? Must they desire to live peacefully in this world as well?’”

At first glance, this statement of *Chazal* may seem perplexing. Was there something inherently wrong with Ya'akov's desire to finally experience some peace and quiet? He had been through quite a bit already; was his request really so outlandish, to the extent that he deserved such a severe punishment?

Furthermore, it would seem that Ya'akov certainly had a basis for his request, as we see from the Mishnah in Pe'ah (1:1):

אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פרוותיהן בעולם הזה וְהִקְרָן קִימָת לֹו לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא. כְּבוֹד אָב וְאִם, וְגִמְלוֹת חֲסִדִים, וְהַבָּאת שְׁלוֹם בֵּין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ וְתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה כְּנֶגֶד כָּלֵם.

“Certain *mitzvos* have a ‘double-reward’ quality. One who performs them enjoys the ‘fruits’ (dividends) of the *mitzvah* in this world, while the principal reward remains untouched and designated for the World to Come. They include: honoring parents, acts of kindness, bringing peace between man and his fellow, and – greatest of all – Torah study.”

Ya'akov, as we know, was a complete *tzaddik*, certainly proficient in all of these areas. Specifically, the Torah attributes to him the quality of a “tent-dweller” (*Bereishis* 25:27), meaning that he excelled in Torah study (tent referring to the *beis hamedrash*). As far as the Mishnah is concerned, then, the reward due him is not limited to the Afterlife. True, the *principal* is, but the by-products of the principal investment are there for the taking, to be enjoyed in this world. Why couldn't Ya'akov Avinu enjoy the abundant fruits of his *mitzvos* in this world by living a serene life? Aren't these *peiros* (fruits) intended for this very purpose, as the Mishnah implies?

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MAKING SMART CHOICES

Consider the value of a lottery ticket. Let us say that a certain individual possesses the winning ticket of a mega-million-dollar lottery. Now, the ticket may possess value in its own right; as a straight-edged piece of cardboard, it could be useful for underlining a particularly noteworthy (albeit short) passage in a book or some other publication. On the other hand, a strong case could be made *against* merely holding on to it for such a purpose. After all, if you hand it in to the lottery-commission people, they will give you a few hundred million dollars.

Taking a somewhat nuanced approach to our Mishnah, the Alshich (*Bereishis 37:1*) explains the issue at hand in a similar vein. Technically speaking, it is true; regarding the aforementioned *mitzvos*, the Mishnah did outline two areas of

reward to be enjoyed in both worlds: the principal in the World to Come, and the “fruits,” or the dividends in this world. However, the right to enjoy these fruits of labor in this world essentially applies only to ordinary people. For the righteous – the most beloved to Hashem on account of their exemplary dedication to Him – Hashem has other ideas. Why “use up” the *peiros* on the temporal and fleeting pleasures of this world? The *peiros* would be put to much better use if held over for the World to Come. In this way, not only will the *tzaddik* have a substantial store of merit from his principal reward, but he will be able to convert his untouched *peiros* into an even greater share of eternal reward.

As Chazal tell us (*Avos 4:17*), “Experiencing the pleasure of the World to Come for one moment is greater than all of the combined pleasures of this world.” Indeed, claiming the stake for one’s *peiros* in this world is analogous to someone who won’t give up his winning lottery ticket because he wants to use it as a bookmark. While bookmarks can be sort of useful, the benefit one receives by redeeming his ticket far exceeds that of a bookmark by astronomical proportions.

This, explains the Alshich, is the true meaning of the seemingly puzzling Midrash referenced above. Did Ya’akov Avinu deserve such a harsh punishment just for desiring some peace and quiet to enjoy the fruits of his spiritual labor? The answer is that the ensuing tragic events that befell him – as difficult as they were – were really not a punishment. As explained above, Hashem wants the righteous to receive the maximum reward possible. And so Hashem told Ya’akov that He could not bear to let him “spend” his *peiros* on tranquility in this world. It would be preferable and much more beneficial to Ya’akov himself if he would hold off and wait for Olam Haba to redeem his “ticket.” This way, instead of temporary and limited relief, the reward would be of an infinitely better quality – literally.

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