



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת וישב תשע"א

Parshas Vayeishev 5771

FAIR WEATHER CONVERTS

“And Ya’akov settled in the land of his father’s sojournings.”

This is the seemingly innocuous opening verse of this week’s *parshah*.

From Chazal it is clear that there is much more here than meets the eye. Apparently, the verse refers to a situation when things took a tragic turn from Ya’akov’s original plans.

At this point, Ya’akov was looking for little more than some peace. Having spent a good part of his life so far either on the run from mortal enemies, or engulfed by some other tribulation, he anticipated that now, things would finally be different. As he settled down in Eretz Yisrael, he hoped to attain a measure of tranquilly.

But this was not to be. The Medrash relates that whereas Ya’akov hoped to dwell peacefully now, he was confronted, instead, with the tragedy concerning Yosef, his son. (*Rashi, Bereishis 37:1*).

Much ink has been spilled by the great commentators in an attempt to explain this seemingly difficult passage. What, exactly, was “wrong” with Ya’akov’s wish; is it really unreasonable to desire tranquility, especially after so many years of suffering?

In the vibrant and multi-faceted world of Torah scholarship, there are numerous ways of addressing a given issue. There’s the philosophically-oriented approach; others emphasize the *Kabbalistic* point of view; and some focus on the more academic/*halachic* aspects of the matter at hand. The issue of Ya’akov’s thwarted plans is no different. Previously (*Mishnas Chayim, parshas Vayeishev, 5769*), we presented the lucid approach of the Alshich, who explored the esoteric and philosophical underpinnings behind this statement of Chazal. A completely different tack is taken by the great genius R’ Yonasan Eibschutz (*Amudei*

Yehonasan, parshas Vayeishev), following a more *pilpulistic* approach (a methodical conglomeration of components, yielding a novel resolution).

By way of introduction, R’ Yonasan broaches a somewhat different and unexpected subject.

THE RIGHT CONDITIONS

An important *halachah* emerges from the discussion surrounding a Mishnah in Yevamos (2:8), which states:

הַנִּטְעָן עַל... הַעוֹבְדֵת כּוֹכְבִים וְנִתְגַּיְרָה, הֲרִי זֶה לֹא יִכְנוֹס.

“Rumors circulate regarding a relationship between a particular Jew and gentile woman; and then, the woman converts. The Jew (who was the subject of the rumors) should not marry her.”

The Mishnah is speaking of situation where a Jew (for purposes of our discussion, let’s call him “Shmeryl”), becomes the focus of reports of improper associations regarding a non-Jewish woman (“Jane”). The twist in the plot occurs when Jane decides to become a Jew. According to the Mishnah, Shmeryl should not proceed to marry Jane, as doing so would lend credence to the pre-existing rumors.

The ensuing discussion in the Gemara (*Ibid. 24b*) raises some salient points. The Mishnah proscribed only Shmeryl from marrying Jane; but she is available for any other potential suitors. Apparently, then, her conversion was valid; despite the fact that, in all probability, it was undertaken for ulterior motives (in the hope of marrying Shmeryl). Although she converted not from a sincere yearning to serve Hashem, but for matrimonial reasons, the conversion is *not* disqualified, and Jane is now a proper Jewess.

The Gemara qualifies this matter: although the

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conversion is a *good* conversion, it's not a *great* conversion. In other words, we initially seek to prevent a conversion which appears to stem from ulterior reasons. If, somehow or other, the conversion procedure was completed, it is considered to be valid – after the fact.

There are ramifications to this idea aside from the textbook case of a gentile who is courting a Jew and “suddenly” develops an interest in converting. The Gemara (*ibid.*) lists certain historical periods wherein converts to Judaism are categorically denied, such as during the reign of Shlomo Hamelech (King Solomon) and during the future Messianic era. Those are times marked by great success and transcendency for the Jewish people. Consequently, the motives of potential converts are automatically suspect. Instead of a culmination of a spiritual quest, their act of conversion seems more like an attempt to join up with the “winning team” and share in the glory.

It is when the Jewish experience is one of subordination and suffering that a pristine conversion is more viable. Thus we find, for example, that as part of the conversion process, the candidate is asked, “Aren't you aware that, nowadays, the Jews are downtrodden, pursued, harried, and subject to persecution?” A potential convert who is willing to bind his fate to the Jewish people despite such knowledge has demonstrated real sincerity (*Rambam, Hilchos Issurei Bi'ah, 13:1*).

IN HIS FATHERS' FOOTSTEPS

This discussion contains great relevancy for the *Avos* (Forefathers). Quoting from yet another Medrash, R' Yonasan explains that producing converts was a major life-mission of both Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. (Conditions of that early era differed greatly from today; whereas current practice is to refrain from overt proselytizing activity, the *Avos* operated in a framework where Hashem's Will dictated that they actively engage in “spreading the Word.”)

In fact, this aspect of Ya'akov's mission is alluded to in the very *passuk* with which we began.

“And Ya'akov dwelled in the land of his father's (Yitzchak's) sojourning (*megurei*).” While this

word (*מְגוּרֵי*) is rendered “sojourning,” the Medrash – focusing on its root of *גר* – perceives a reference to yet another meaning, namely, *גְּרִיט* (conversion). In other words, the verse is telling us that Ya'akov settled in the land, aiming to continue his father's noble work of attracting converts.

And here is where an issue arises. We began with the Medrash's comment to the beginning of this verse, stating that Ya'akov hoped to settle in the land in tranquility. This seems to clash with the other Midrashic statement – that Ya'akov was gearing up to make converts. As we have learned, sincere conversion is possible only at a time when the Jewish population is beset with troubles; a time of peace precludes pristine motives.

So if Ya'akov wanted to produce real converts, he could not “dwell in peace”; by default, his wish to undertake a conversion campaign *necessitated* a backdrop of travails.

And so – to facilitate this crucial aspect of Ya'akov's mission, and to provide the necessary conditions – “he was confronted with the trial of Yosef.”

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