

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Vayetzei

Destinations and Expectations

וַיִּשָּׂא יַעֲקֹב רַגְלָיו וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶרְצָה בְּנֵי קְדָם

Yaakov lifted his feet and went towards the land of those who dwell in the east (29:1)

In the beginning of the Parsha, Yaakov sets out to journey to Charan. On the way, he alights at the place of the Beis Hamikdash, where Hashem appears to him in a dream and promises to be with him and protect him wherever he will go. Yaakov awakes the following morning and continues on his journey.

It is interesting to note that the way in which the pasuk refers to his destination in this second pasuk differs somewhat from the way in which it was described initially. The pasuk at the beginning of the Parsha stated that, “וַיֵּלֶךְ חָרָנָה” – he went toward Charan.” Our pasuk, in contrast, states more generally that he journeyed east. What is behind this shift?

The Meshech Chochmah explains that when Yaakov began his journey, it was with Charan specifically in mind. He had no expectation of anything helpful or meaningful happening anywhere else other than the place where his family lived. With his hopes were pinned solely on Charan, that is what is mentioned as his place of destination. However, this perspective changed as a result of his dream where Hashem told him that he would be with him and protect him “wherever he would go.”

Now, his focus for success shifted. He no longer looked specifically at Charan as the place where he might find refuge and success. With Hashem’s protection accompanying him wherever he went, success could come from any source and in any location of Hashem’s choosing. This broader perspective is reflected in the second pasuk, where his destination no longer being identified as Charan; rather, he continued on his way, heading east in a more general sense, aware that Hashem’s salvation could come from anywhere.

The Day Lavan Went Home

וַיִּשָׁב לָבָן בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּנָּשֶׂק לְבָנָיו וּלְבָנוֹתָיו וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָהֶם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב לְבָן לְמָקוֹמוֹ

Lavan arose early in the morning; he kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them; then Lavan went and returned to his place (32:1)

The Meshech Chochmah explains that this pasuk at the end of our parsha, which appears merely to be describing an event – Lavan returning home – is actually a statement and summation of his character.

Let us consider: Yaakov lived in Lavan's house for twenty years. Many people have had their lives changed dramatically as result of a meaningful encounter with a tzaddik, however brief. With someone like Yaakov in his home for so many years, one can only imagine the transformational effect this would have on Lavan's outlook and behavior – surely, he would take leave of Yaakov a changed man!

In the event, the pasuk states that, having parted ways with Yaakov for good, Lavan simply "returned to his place." He continued living in exactly the same selfish, dishonest and devious way as he had before he ever met Yaakov. One could observe him returning home that day twenty years later, and never even guess that Yaakov had been there at all!

In contrast to this, the following pasuk states: "וַיֵּקֶב הַלֵּךְ לְדַרְכוֹ" – Yaakov went on his way." Yaakov continued on his path of spiritual growth, for tzaddikim continually rise from one level to another, as the Gemara states,¹ "תלמידי חכמים אין להם מנוחה לא בעולם הזה ולא" – Talmidei Chachamim have no rest, neither in this world nor in the next." In this vein, the pasuk proceeds to describe events that were in keeping with Yaakov's ever-increasing spiritual stature: "וַיִּפְגְּעוּ בּוֹ מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים" – Angels of God encountered him."

Seeing and Encountering

וַיֵּקֶב הַלֵּךְ לְדַרְכוֹ וַיִּפְגְּעוּ בּוֹ מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים. וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאָם מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים זֶה

And Yaakov went on his way, and angels of God encountered him. Yaakov said when he saw them, "This is a camp of God." (32:1-2)

What form did Yaakov's meeting with the angels take?

The Meshech Chochmah explains that an encounter with an angel can be in one of two ways:

- ▶ The angel assumes human form, in which case the person sees the angel with his eyes in the same way he would see another human being. An example of

¹ Berachos 64a.

this type is the angel who encountered Yosef in Parsha Vayeshev;² indeed, it is for this reason the angel there is referred to as “איש – a man,” for that is how he appeared.

- ▶ The angel retains his form as an angel, in which case the person sees him in a spiritual sense, through his higher faculties of perception.

How can we tell which of these two types of encounter Yaakov had?

- ▶ If the meeting is of the first type, then as with any physical encounter, the person would first see the angel from a distance and then “encounter,” i.e. meet him as the angel comes closer.
- ▶ If it is of the second type, there is no notion of the person seeing the angel before the latter actually appears to him, for it is a spiritual vision which begins with the encounter itself. The Meshech Chochmah cites earlier mefarshim who explain that it is this idea that Hagar expressed after experiencing her encounter with the angel in the desert,³ “הֲגַם הָלַם רָאִיתִי אַחֲרָי”³ – Did I indeed see [the angel] here after I saw [him]?” Since the angel’s appearance to Hagar was in a spiritual form, upon concluding the encounter, he disappeared; hence, that she did not “see him” depart “after having seen him” when he appeared to her.

In our case, the pasuk first states,⁴ “וַיִּפְגְּעוּ בּוֹ מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים – and angels of God encountered him,” and then states,⁵ “וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב כְּאִשֹּׁר רָאִים” – Yaakov said when he saw them.” The fact that Yaakov did not “see” the angels until they encountered him indicates that it was the second type of meeting. Indeed, it is for the reason the pasuk states that upon seeing them in this way, Yaakov said, “מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים זֶה” – This is a camp of God,” i.e. a Godly and spiritual assembly.

2 Bereishis 37:15.

3 Ibid. 16:13.

4 32:1.

5 Pasuk 2.