

Parashat Toldot 5782, 2021:

With Ya'akov as Our Guide

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Chana bat Sarah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Ya'akov Avinu is described in our *parasha* (25:27) as “*ish tam yosheiv ohelim*” (“a complete individual who dwelt in tents.” (Translation, *Targum Onkelos*) Rashi (1040-1105) helps us understand this phrase by contrasting Ya'akov to Eisav. In his view, Eisav was a hunter who “captured wild animals and birds with his bow,” and ensnared people with duplicitous words. In contrast, Ya'akov, who spoke directly and forthrightly, was inexpert in the art of treachery. The Abarbanel (1437-1508) explains “*ish tam*” in a similar vein: “...but Ya'akov was an *ish tam* who was not very sharp in the sense that he was neither a master of deceit nor a man of the field.”

The *Midrash Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu* (ninth century CE) bases its analysis of our phrase upon a creative interpretation of a *pasuk* found in the last paragraph of the *Shema*: “*v'asu l'hem tzitzit al kanfei vigdehihem l'dorotom*” (“...and the Jewish people will make fringes for themselves on the corners of their garments throughout their generations.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 15:38) It suggests that “*l'dorotom*” can be read without vowels as, “*l'dor tam*.” In addition, it maintains: “... there can be no other referent for the word *tam* other than Ya'akov, since the verse states: ‘...and Ya'akov was complete.’ This means that he never

participated in acts of violent stealing, illicit physical relations, and murder.” It is important to note that this interpretation constitutes an indirect comparison to Eisav who, as *Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra* indicates, engaged in these exact actions prior to meeting Ya’akov and selling his birthright to him. (16b)

The portrait of Ya’akov that emerges from these sources is one of a nearly flawless individual who personified honesty, spoke with total integrity and abhorred his brother’s pernicious behaviors. This image is underscored when we examine the final two words of our phrase, “*yosheiv ohelim.*” What exactly were these tents? What was the Torah communicating to us by adding this to Ya’akov’s description? The answers to these questions are both diverse and fascinating and reveal as much about the commentator as they do about Ya’akov.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1817-1893), in his work, *Ha’emek Davar*, opines that these *ohelim* were “tents” of Torah and *Tefilah*, that is, Ya’akov was a young *talmid chacham* who was steeped in Torah study and the art of heartfelt prayer. As such, he was surely fitting to become the founder of the Jewish people. This interpretation clearly reflects the Netziv’s Lithuanian intellectual heritage.

The Sforno (Rabbi Ovadiah ben Ya’akov, 1470-1550), a true Jewish Renaissance man who mastered Torah analysis, philosophy, mathematics, philology and medical science, interprets “*yosheiv ohelim*” in two very different ways. The first, perhaps representing his grasp of the animal husbandry of his time, posits that these *ohelim* are to be taken at face value as the tents and other structures used by shepherders of his day. The second

approach, revealing the Sforno's spiritual orientation, views *ohelim* as centers for intellectual and spiritual speculation to enable the apprehension of Hashem's glory and thereby become sanctified.

Rashi's understanding of the term, *ohelim*, demonstrates his creative use of midrashic texts. In his view, these *ohelim* were none other than the study halls of Shem and Aver. By mastering the unique *massorot* (traditions) of these scholars, Ya'akov was able to become a true *talmid chacham*. With his worldview based entirely upon thorough knowledge of the principles and axioms of our holy Torah, Ya'akov was transformed into an *ish tam*.

In my estimation, *ish tam* is directly modified by the expression "*yosheiv ohelim*." Even though the latter is a noun, rather than an adjective, when taken together, *ish tam yosheiv ohelim* becomes a complete description of the young *Ya'akov Avinu*. This perspective enables us to understand how Ya'akov was able to maintain his spiritual greatness, even in the midst of Lavan's hostile and corrupt household. As the embodiment of Torah and honesty, nothing could dissuade him from the truth of his convictions and the rectitude of his actions.

Chazal teach us that Ya'akov's face appeared to Yosef during his great trial with the wife of Potiphar (*Sefer Bereishit* 39:7-13). Just as Yosef was guided by the vision of his father, may *Ya'akov Avinu*'s image ever appear before us, and serve as our guide when we confront the many challenges of our lives. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)