

Vayishlach 5771, 2010:

How to Live in Galut (the Diaspora)

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Many of us are familiar with the well-known expression: “*Maaseh Avot siman l’banim*” (“the actions of our Patriarchs prefigure the actions of their children”). One of the earliest expressions of this thought is found in *Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Lech Lecha*, section nine: “Rebbe Yehoshuah d’Sachinan said: ‘The Holy One Blessed be He gave Avraham a sign that everything that happened to him would happen to his children.’” A prime example of this principle occurs when *Avraham Avinu* (Our Father Abraham) declared to the Hittites: “I am a sojourner (*ger*) and an inhabitant with you. Give me burial property with you, so that I may bury my dead from before me.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 23:4 this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). So, too, in the second verse of our *parasha* Yaakov says: “... So shall you say to my master to Esau, thus said your servant Jacob, ‘I have sojourned (*garti*) with Laban, and I have tarried until now.’” (*Sefer Bereishit*, 32:5) Avraham described himself as a *ger*, since the Land of Israel did not yet belong to him and he was thereby unable to have a complete connection thereto. Following in his grandfather’s footsteps, Yaakov said he had merely sojourned (*garti*) with Lavan, since he had dwelt for 20 years outside of *Eretz Yisrael* and thereby felt existentially disconnected from its essence and spiritual power.

Let us now analyze Yaakov's statement of "*Im Lavan garti*" ("I have sojourned with Laban") in greater depth. Rashi's (1040-1105) comment on this phrase is quite famous: "*V'taryag mitzvot shamarti*" ("Nonetheless, I kept all of the 613 Biblical Commandments)." My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993, known as "the Rav" by his students and followers) explained Rashi's statement in the following manner:

Jacob stayed with Laban for 20 years, enough time to settle down and become a citizen of Haran and to consider himself a veteran resident of Haran. He should have said, "*Im Lavan yashavti*, I settled with Laban," but he said *garti*, sojourned...

The Rav explained Yaakov's seemingly strange choice of the term "*garti*" by suggesting that Yaakov:

... felt a stranger in Haran, the way his son Joseph later felt a stranger in Egypt. [Another example of "*Maaseh Avot siman l'banim*"] He had not assimilated; he had not integrated himself into Laban's society and community; he had not accepted their morals, their code of ethics, their lifestyle. He sojourned in Haran for a long time, yet he preserved his moral identity, his commitment to the G-d of Abraham, his commitment to the way of life that the G-d of Abraham sanctioned, his commitment to the Promised Land. All those commitments, and many more, were not affected at all. Jacob was as dedicated at the end of his 20 years servitude in Laban's house as he was the first night he spent on the cold stones in Bethel... (*Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukah*, pages 162-163, brackets my own)

Allow me to explicate Rav Soloveitchik's cogent analysis of *Yaakov Avinu's* behavior and attitude while living in Haran:

1. In a certain positive sense, Yaakov felt like, and saw himself as, a stranger in Haran. His beloved son, Yosef, later emulated him in this feeling during his time in Egypt.
2. Although Yaakov had spent 20 long years in Haran, he refused to assimilate or integrate himself into Lavan's society and community.
3. Yaakov's morals, ethics, and lifestyle remained unsullied by his sojourn in Haran. In a word, "he preserved his moral identity."

4. Yaakov, as befitted his sterling reputation and strength of character, forever remained an “*ish tam yosheiv ohelim*” (“the perfect man who dwelt in the tents of Torah”). Thus, “his commitment to the G-d of Abraham, his commitment to the way of life that the G-d of Abraham sanctioned” remained as strong as when Hashem had visited him in the famous vision of the night wherein the angels ascended and descended the ladder leading to Heaven.
5. Yaakov continued to long for *Eretz Yisrael* and the *kedushah* (holiness) it represented. Thus, his “commitment to the Promised Land” remained unabated.

I believe that we can learn a great deal from Rabbi Soloveitchik’s vignette of *Yaakov Avinu* (Our patriarch Yaakov). In my estimation, Yaakov emerges as the teacher and exemplar par excellence as to how we ought to live in the Diaspora (*galut*). Yes, we unquestionably face myriad challenges that ceaselessly attack the very basis of who we are and what we believe. Yes, the call of secular culture and values is a powerful one. Each and every day we are bombarded with the powerful allure and glitter of the larger society in which we live. Yet, like *Yaakov Avinu*, and perhaps precisely because of the trail he so proudly blazed, we can overcome the enticements of secular society and rise to ever greater spiritual heights. With a profound G-d consciousness, coupled with an unswerving commitment, we can join Yaakov in his recognition of the Almighty’s presence – even when we live in *galut*. With Hashem’s help, and our most concerted efforts, may this be so. “*V’chane yihi ratzon.*”

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: rdbe718@gmail.com.