

Vayetze. The Value of Self-Doubt

Yaakov leaves home to escape Esau, to find a wife. Filled with past fears, and trepidation for the future, God appears to him in the famous vision of the ladder with a message of reassurance. God promises:



“I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (28:15)

Jacob woke up and took the stone that he had put under his head and “**stood it up** as a pillar and poured oil **on the top** of it. He might have been trying to symbolize the ladder that “**stood** on earth with **its top** in reaching the heavens.” He makes a vow to God:

“If God is with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making...”

If? Really? God had promised to protect Yaakov! Why is Yaakov doubting God’s assurance?

Ramban suggests that he is not doubting God; he is doubting himself:

“The reason for this conditional statement is that he was concerned that שׂמא יגרום החטא he might sin [and become unworthy of God’s promise]. Similarly, Rav Huna in the name of Rav Acha: From here we understand that there are no assurances to a tzaddik in this world (Bereshit Rabba 76:2).”

Yaakov is thinking that God’s promises will only be valid as long as he remains true to God. But who can be assured that they will remain firm in faith and action? What if he or she falls short? What if he or she fails to live up to his ideals?

This is an unpopular mindset today. In the modern world, we are taught to believe in ourselves. When I put the word “self-doubt” into Google, it returned with “13 ways to overcome self-doubt” and “Deal with self-doubt and trust yourself again” and “When self-doubt consumes you.” Today, we are not permitted to doubt ourselves.

And of course Judaism does promote a sense of self-worth and mission. But Judaism also promotes a mindset of self-critique, of an awareness that we sin, that we have a tendency to mess up, and to be less than our best selves.

David Brookes writes that the concern that a person might sin is:

“not to say that you have some black depraved stain on your heart. It is to say that, like the rest of us, you have some perversity in your nature. We want to do one thing, but we end up doing another. We want what we should not want. None of us wants to be hear-hearted but sometimes we are. None of us wants to self-deceive, but we rationalize all the time... We really

do have dappled souls ... The person involved in the struggle against sin understands that each day is filled with moral occasions.” (The Road to Character pgs 54-55) ⁱ

Thinking about this mindset, I am reminded of the Mishna in Avot:

“Hillel said: Do not trust in yourself until the day of your death” (Avot 2:4)

But why not trust yourself? After all, we are all good people. In fact, Hillel adds:

“Do not say something that cannot be understood, assuming that in the end it will be understood.

Do not say: I will study when I have the opportunity; perhaps you will not have the opportunity.” (ibid)

What these aphorisms have in common is that they relate to the corrosive effect of time:

1. Even if you are firm in mission earlier in life, do not assume you will retain your high standards; do not trust yourself to the day you die.
2. Do not assume that a teaching will become clearer as time passes, because it might remain misunderstood for ever – the passage of time sometimes obscures more than it clarifies.
3. And lastly, don't imagine you will find time to study Torah. Learn now, because you can; other things might arise later.

A person must not rely on the past. Each day anew a person is presented with moral and religious challenges, and must be on guard and ensure that his or her actions will be correct, meaningful and worthy. Because we are only human. Like Jacob, we always have a choice.

Please discuss:

- Did Yaakov doubt God or himself?
- What is the reason, according to Ramban, for Yaakov's self-doubt?
- Why does Hillel advise us not “trust” ourselves as long as we live? What is there not to trust?
- Is this view pessimistic or realistic? IS it paranoid or is it empowering?
- What do you take out of this teaching for your life?

Shabbat Shalom!

ⁱ See also “Why you can't trust yourself” <https://markmanson.net/trust>