

# “The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

<http://www.alexisrael.org/parshadiscussion> . <https://www.facebook.com/parshadiscussion/>

## Vayetze: Materialism - “Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear”

Here we are, between Black Friday and Channukah; 'Tis the season to buy things that, quite honestly, many of us simply don't need! I am not denying that gifts are a way of spreading the love between family and friends, but sometimes, the commercial focus becomes excessive and overwhelming. In this regard, some lines from the parasha offer some balance, and food for thought.



After the dream of the ladder, Yaakov responds with a vow, or maybe a prayer of sorts:

“If God will be with me and will guard me on my journey,  
**and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear,**  
and I return to my father's house in peace,  
then the Lord shall be my God,  
and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house...” (28:20-21)

Rabbeinu Bachai (1255-1340, Spain) focuses upon the phrase “Bread to eat and clothing to wear”:

This is what the pious request of God; they request essentials and not luxuries. It is well known that the human pursuit of indulgent and inessential commodities is a source of grave aggravation, and thus any God-fearing person should be happy with his portion and should be satisfied with little, and not go after extravagances...<sup>i</sup>

Rabbeinu Bachai then continues with a fascinating observation:

“The natural order reflects divine wisdom in that that God provides his creations with their essentials; that which is more fundamental is in greater and more ready supply, and that which is non-essential is rare and in short supply.

Precious stones and expensive jewels are an uncommon natural commodity and are rarely in the possession of people; this is so because people can certainly live without them. But food, which is more essential, is in greater supply... Water is more essential still – a person can live without food for several days, but not fluids – and hence water is more readily available common than food ... and air which is even more indispensable than water ... a person cannot function even momentarily without air - there is no place which lacks air ... so you see that the most vital substances are the most prevalent because God, in his great wisdom, organized nature to provide the essentials for his creations. And therefore, Jacob asked only for the essentials: Bread to eat, and clothing to wear”.<sup>ii</sup>

So please discuss around the table:

- Are we too materialistic around this time of year?

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- Do you agree that God has organized his world that the essential things are the easiest found?
- Do you buy things you don't really need? Do you have items cluttering your room that you do not need or use? Why do we do this? Is it a problematic habit? Why?
- Is it human nature, or advertising and the like that drive the need to shop on a regular basis?
- What would a life of “modesty” or “making good with little” – הסתפקות במועט - look like in this regard?

## Some further thoughts:

In the lines with which we began this study, we mention Yaakov's modest request: “Bread to eat and clothing to wear.” Yaakov was indeed penniless at that time and aware of his financial vulnerability. As we read in next week's parsha, he reflects back on his journey to Lavan saying:

“I crossed the Jordan [on my journey to Lavan] bearing [only] my staff” (32:11)

But Yaakov spends much of our parasha working assiduously to ensure his financial status until he becomes a wealthy man.

“So the man [Jacob] grew exceedingly prosperous, and came to own large flocks, maidservants and menservants, camels and asses.” (30:43)

Laban's house is an opportunity not only for Yaakov to marry and start a family, but for Yaakov to get rich. When he meets Rachel, it is not only Rachel that he notices, but the sheep:

Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Lavan, **and the flock of his uncle Lavan** (29:10)

When Yaakov returns from Lavan, he informs his brother:

‘To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Lavan and remained until now; <sup>6</sup>I have acquired cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves; and I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favor.’” (32:5-6)

Material acquisitions are highly significant to Yaakov!

And yet, that wealth is the cause of jealousy and resentment from Lavan's family; it is the impetus for Yaakov to leave Lavan:

<sup>1</sup>Now he heard the things that Lavan's sons were saying: “Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from that which was our father's he has built up all this wealth.” <sup>2</sup>Jacob also saw that Lavan's manner toward him was not as it had been in the past... <sup>17</sup>Thereupon Jacob put his children and wives on camels; <sup>18</sup>and he drove off all his livestock and all the wealth that he had amassed, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. (31:1-18)

A question that I have wondered regarding Yaakov is whether his financial comfort and wealth serves him well, or whether possibly, it diverts his attention from his covenantal mission?

Interestingly, while Yaakov is escaping Esau in the middle of the night, he does not merely try to escape with his family, but he insists on taking his wealth:

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<sup>23</sup>That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>24</sup>After taking them across the stream, **he sent across all his possessions.**<sup>25</sup>Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. (32:23-25)

Why was Yaakov “left alone”? Because he was gathering his wealth. Rashi adds: “He forgot some **small jars**, and he went back to get them.”

Why is Yaakov so attached to his material goods? Is this something that repeatedly causes him grief?

Shabbat Shalom

For a piece I wrote regarding Yitzchak’s wealth and poverty, see:

<http://thinkingtorah.blogspot.com/2006/11/parashat-toldot-was-yitzchak-poor.html>

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<sup>i</sup> ונתן לי לחם לאכול ובגד ללבוש. זאת שאלת הצדיקים מאת השם, לא ישאלו המותרות רק הדבר ההכרחי בלבד שא"א לו לאדם שיחיה בלעדיו. ובידוע כי נטיית אדם אחר בקשת המותרות הוא גורם לו מהומות רבות, ועל כן כל איש ירא את השם ראוי לו שיהיה שמח בחלקו ושיסתפק במעט, ושלא יתאוה המותרות, וייטב לבו ביראת השם, הוא שאמר שלמה המע"ה: (משלי טו, טז) "טוב מעט ביראת ה' מאוצר רב ומהומה בו"

<sup>ii</sup> " . וכבר אנו רואים לעין בסדר העולם והנהגתו שהיא בחכמה עמוקה ונפלאה שהקב"ה מזמין לבריותיו וממציא להם הדבר ההכרחי, ומה שהוא מוכרח יותר הוא מצוי יותר, ומה שאינו מוכרח כל כך אינו מצוי כל כך. כענין המרגליות ומיני אבנים יקרות שאינן מצויות כל כך בעולם ואינם תחת יד כל אדם לפי שאינם מוכרות כל כך, שהרי הבריות יכולין לחיות זולתן, אבל המזון שהוא מוכרח יותר מן המרגליות הוא יותר מצוי מן המרגליות, שהרי תמצא התבואה והמזון בשוקים וברחובות מה שלא תמצא המרגליות, והמים שהם מוכרחים יותר מהמזון שהרעב יכול אדם לסבלו שנים וג' ימים, ולא כן הצמא, כי אפילו זמן מועט לא יכול אדם לסבול, ע"כ המים מצוים יותר מן המזון כי תמצאם בכל מקום במדינות ואפילו בדרכים, והאוויר שהוא יותר מוכרח מן המים, שהרי חשק הצמא יוכל אדם לסבול מיל אחד או פרסה אחת, אבל בלי האוויר לא יוכל אדם ולא כל חי להתקיים אפילו רגע, ע"כ הוא מצוי יותר שלא תמצא מקום ריק מן האוויר ואפילו במקום שהכותל עומד שם האויר. והא למדת שהדברים המוכרחים הם מצויים יותר בעולם, כי הקדוש ברוך הוא בחכמתו הגדולה סדר את עולמו בהן והזמין לבריותיו.