

Parashat Toldot 5774, 2013:

The Greatness of Yaakov Avinu

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Yaakov Avinu (our patriarch Jacob) is described in this week's *parasha* (25:27) as "*ish tam yosheiv ohelim*" ("a complete individual who dwelt in tents"). I have translated the first two words of this phrase according to the *Targum Onkelos* (approximately 110 CE). This, however, is by no means the only way our sages interpreted the expression "*ish tam*." Before I present other opinions as to how it may be understood, it is fascinating to note that another individual in Tanach is given this appellation, namely, Iyov (Job). At the very beginning of *Sefer Iyov*, Iyov is described in the following manner: "*Ish hayah b'ereetz Utz Iyov shmo, v'hayah haish hahu tam v'yashar vira Elokim v'sar m'ra*." ("There was a man in the land of Utz and Iyov was his name, and that man was complete, honest, held G-d in awe, and removed himself from evil.") True, Yaakov was one of the greatest spiritual giants of all time and the progenitor of our people. In stark contrast, Iyov failed to live up to his full potential by remaining silent when Pharaoh presented his nefarious plans to try to destroy our nation (*Talmud Bavli, Sotah*, 11a). Nonetheless, "*ish tam*" seems to connote the idea of honesty, awe of Hashem, and the desire to flee from evil, since that is the context wherein the term appears in reference to Iyov.

Rashi (1040-1105) explains "*ish tam*" by contrasting Yaakov to Eisav. In his view, Eisav should be seen as the hunter who "captured wild animals and birds with his bow." He

explains that Eisav did this with people as well, by ensnaring them with his duplicitous and dishonest words. In contrast, Yaakov was inexpert in the art of treachery. Instead, he spoke directly and forthrightly and said what was on his mind. The Abarbanel (1437-1508) explains “*ish tam*” in a similar vein when he states: “...but Yaakov was an *ish tam* who was not very sharp in the sense that he was neither a master of treachery nor a man of the field” [analogous to the idea in our own time of being “street smart”].

The Midrash known as *Tanna De-Vei Eliyahu* (approximately ninth century CE) explains our term based upon a creative analysis of the well-known phrase found in the last paragraph of the *Shma*: “*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,” *Bamidbar* 15:38) The Midrash explains that the word “*l’dorotom*” can be read without *nekudot* (vowels) as “*l’dor tam*.” Upon stating this suggestion, it continues and says: “...and there is no other referent for the word *tam* other than Yaakov since the verse states: ‘...and Yaakov was complete.’ This means he never practiced [literally “he was *tam* from”] violently stealing, illicit physical relations, and murder.” It is important to note that this, too, is an indirect comparison to Eisav. *Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra*, 16b in its explanation of *Bereishit* 25:29, clearly indicates that these are precisely the activities in which Eisav had been engaged when he met Yaakov upon his return from the field.

The portrait of Yaakov that emerges from this Midrash, and the views of the above-cited commentators, is that of a near-perfect individual who personified honesty, spoke with heartfelt and total integrity, and abhorred the heinous behaviors of his brother. This

image is underscored when we examine the final two words of our phrase, “*yosheiv ohelim*.” What exactly were these tents? What was Hashem communicating to us by adding this to Yaakov’s description? The answers to these questions are both diverse and fascinating, and reveal as much about the commentator as they do about Yaakov’s persona.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1817-1893) in his *Haamek Davar*, opines that these were the “tents” of Torah and *Tefilah* (prayer). In a word, Yaakov was a budding *talmid chacham* (Torah scholar) who was steeped in Torah study and the art of prayer. As such, he was surely fitting to become *Avinu* and the founder of the Jewish people. This interpretation reflects the Netziv’s intellectual heritage, namely; the Lithuanian tradition of the Vilna Gaon (Rav Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, 1720-1797).

The Sforno (Rabbi Ovadiah ben Yaakov of Bologna, Italy, 1470-1550) was a true Jewish Renaissance man. He was a master of Torah analysis, philosophy, mathematics, and philology, and a respected physician. Little wonder then, that he interprets “*yosheiv ohelim*” in two very different ways. The first, perhaps representing his grasp of the culture of his time, is that these “*ohelim*” are to be taken at face value. That is, they were literally tents and the kind of structures that shepherders of his day used. The Sforno’s second approach reveals his spiritual orientation. In this instance, “*ohelim*” are to be viewed as places for intellectual and spiritual speculation in order to apprehend Hashem’s glory and to be sanctified thereby.

Rashi's approach shows his vast knowledge and creative use of Midrashic texts. In his view, these "*ohelim*" were none other than the study halls of Shem and Aver. It is important to recognize that when Rashi utilizes a Midrash he feels that it represents the *peshat* i.e., the direct meaning of the verse. According to this perspective, by mastering the unique *masorot* (traditions) of these two teachers, Yaakov was able to become an authentic Torah scholar. Therefore, for Rashi, Yaakov, as an *ish tam*, was able to achieve such heights of honest and direct communication precisely because his entire worldview was based upon the principles and axioms of our holy Torah.

Given the above, I would like to suggest that in some ways "*ish tam*" is actually modified by the expression "*yosheiv ohelim*," even though the latter is a noun rather than an adjective. In other words, when taken together, "*ish tam yosheiv ohelim*" becomes a complete description of the young Yaakov *Avinu*. Moreover, it gives us a glimpse of understanding as to why and how he was able to maintain his spiritual greatness even in the midst of Lavan's hostile, fraudulent, and corrupt household. Yaakov was the embodiment of Torah, prayer, honesty, and intellectual integrity. As a result, nothing could dissuade him from the truth of his convictions and the certainty of the moral rectitude of his actions.

May Hashem enable us to emulate Yaakov *Avinu* as we struggle to know, and do, what is right according to our holy Torah. Moreover, like Yaakov's son, Yosef, during his greatest test with Potiphar's wife (*Sefer Bereishit* 39:7-13), may we ever merit to have Yaakov's image "appear before us" as we confront the daily challenges of our lives.

V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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