

## Yaakov was left alone. (32:25)

*Chazal* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 77) quote the *pasuk* in *Devarim* (32:25), *Ein ka'Keil Yeshurun, rocheiv Shomayim b'ezarecha, u'v'gaavaso shechakim*; "O, Yeshurun, there is none like G-d, riding through the heavens to help you, and in His majesty through the upper heights." *Chazal* teach, "There is none like G-d, and who is like G-d? Yeshurun, the most pleasant and praiseworthy (straight and upright), pursuing their lives in undeviating duty." (When a Jew achieves the level of Yeshurun in complete devotion to Hashem, he becomes "G-d-like," achieving a level in this world that has no peer.) The *Midrash* concludes, "Who is like G-d? Yisrael Sabba (grandfather/Patriarch Yisrael/Yaakov, as it is written, "*Vinisgav Hashem asher levado*, 'None but Hashem will be exalted in that day' (*Yeshayah* 2:17). For, concerning Yaakov, it is also written, *Vayivaser Yaakov levado*; 'Yaakov was left alone.'"

*Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl*, explains that *Chazal* are teaching us a vital principle concerning our *avodas ha'kodesh*, service to Hashem. One who reads the story of Yaakov *Avinu* remaining alone might think that our Patriarch was alone because no one remained with him. *Chazal* intimate that this was not the case. *Levado*, alone, independent of others, disregarding peer pressure, is the loftiest level that one can (and should) achieve. Indeed, *Chazal* teach that the *levado* of Yaakov was similar to the *levado* of Hashem. Yaakov personified the ability to be alone, to be distinct, independent, connected and clinging only to Hashem, regardless of what the rest of the world thinks, says or does. This is the opposite of Eisav who was a man of the field, ownerless, irresponsible, open to everyone.

The *Tanna* in *Pirkei Avos* (4:1) asks: *Eizehu gibor*, "Who is strong?" *Ha'koveish es yitzro*, "He who conquers/quells his (evil) inclination." The *Tanna* teaches us that a true *gibor*, strong person, is one who is alone, whose adversary is within him: his inclination. He stands alone, uninfluenced by external pressure, in complete devotion to Hashem, acting on his own, without peer pressure, but doing what is appropriate to achieve. This is what he strives to do. He will settle for nothing less and will not allow anything or anyone to stand in the way of his relationship with Hashem. Such a person is a true *gibor*.

Such a person, a "*levado Jew*" is unique. It means, first and foremost, that one is true to himself. He serves Hashem with neither fear of public judgment, nor yearning for public acclaim. While being yourself seems obvious, our world, sadly, does not work this way. We tend to stifle our authentic selves in order to fit in with the crowd. Thus, we suppress our creativity, ingenuity and self-awareness, thereby diminishing our spiritual potential and hampering our relationship with Hashem. This is what we termed a lack of spiritual integrity, of spiritual authenticity. While at first to swim against the tide is difficult, the rewards of self-awareness, self-worth, self-confidence – all of which allow one to seek and achieve higher goals – are not only well-worth the effort, but they will ultimately engender a happier, more creative self, an individual who is true to his own identity.

*Horav Aharon Kotler, zl*, travelled to the United States from Kletsk, Belarus, to raise badly needed

funds for his *yeshivah*. He traveled to various Jewish communities (there were not many prior to World War I) to meet Jews who would listen and open their wallets to help his students. Somehow, he erred and ended up in a small city, far from the larger Jewish circles. He sought a place to spend *Shabbos*. He did some research and discovered that, indeed, this city was host to a very small Jewish community. While its members were biologically Jewish, their religious observance was far from commendable. The meat that passed the barometer of *kashrus* supervision was not acceptable. There was one positive caveat: the *rav* of the community was a *yarei Shomayim*, G-d-fearing, Torah scholar of repute. There was one problem, however: the *rav* did not associate in any way with his members. He remained secluded in his house, refusing to leave even to attend services in the local *shul*. He was a total recluse.

When Rav Aharon realized that *Shabbos* was quickly approaching, he decided that he would pay the *rav* a visit. Perhaps the *rav* would invite him for *Shabbos*. He knocked on the door and finally the *rav* answered. He asked if he could host him for *Shabbos*. The *rav* refused sternly, "No." Rav Aharon did not know what to do. On the one hand, he could not take a chance on eating spuriously kosher meat; on the other hand, he could not fast the entire *Shabbos*. He decided to knock again. This time, he would reveal his identity. Perhaps the *rav* would change his mind.

"My name is Aharon Kotler, and I serve as the *Rosh Yeshivah* of the *yeshivah* in Kletsk. I have no place to spend *Shabbos*. Will you please provide me with hospitality?"

The *rav* replied, "You claim to be a *Rosh Yeshivah*. I will ask you five questions (in *halachah*). If you reply correctly, I will know that you tell the truth." Rav Aharon was an extraordinary genius, having earned a reputation even then as a peerless *talmid chacham*. He related that the questions were extremely difficult. He was able to answer one of the questions only because he had once visited a community and learned in its *bais hamedrash*. While there, he opened up a *sefer* and noticed this question, and the author's brilliant solution. He related it to the *rav*. The remaining four questions, he was able to answer despite the fact that their source was in obscure passages in *Talmud Yerushalmi*, which were not his focal point in Torah study. Nonetheless, he passed the test and spent a wonderful, spiritually-elevated *Shabbos* with the *rav*. They passed the time studying and speaking together concerning Torah-related topics. Indeed, Rav Aharon was greatly impressed by the *rav's* encyclopedic knowledge of *shas*, the entire *Talmud*.

During *Shalosh Seudos*, the closing *Shabbos* meal, Rav Aharon asked the *rav* why he had chosen this isolationist approach to Judaism. He had no interaction whatsoever with anyone. The *rav* replied, "I was compelled to leave the European *shtetel* for America. My goal was to find employment such that I could sustain myself while I pursue my Torah studies. After speaking to the leaders of the community, I gathered that *kashrus* was not part of their religious agenda. They observed what they wanted (which was very little). When I visited the *shul*, I realized that speed was much more important than quality. It was all about money. Get to work as early as possible in order to garner a few more pennies. I understand that I had little choice concerning what to do, if I were to survive spiritually in the community. This is why I live in total seclusion. No one sees me,

so no one can disturb me.” *L’vado*, alone. He had no relationship with his employers: “I learn here; I *daven* here; I eat and sleep here. I have no interaction with anyone in the community. Thus, I plead with Hashem that He should grant me the ability to live as a Torah Jew. To achieve this plateau, it is incumbent that I remain isolated from everyone. This is my only protection.”