

## So Yisrael set out with all that he had and he came to Beer Sheva. (46:1)

*Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 94:4)* explain that Yaakov *Avinu* went to Beer Sheva to cut down cedar trees which his grandfather, Avraham *Avinu*, had planted there. Apparently, Avraham knew that the *karshei haMishkan*, bars that comprised the walls of the *Mishkan*, would be made of wood. He planted in preparation for that auspicious day. Knowing that he would die in Egypt and that his descendants would build a Sanctuary in the wilderness, Yaakov, therefore, went to cut these trees (and transplanted them in Egypt), so that, when his descendants would leave, they would take the trees along with them.

This is all good and well. Avraham planted, Yaakov cut down and replanted, so that the Patriarch of the Jewish people would have prepared the wood for his descendants. What about his emotions? He was going to meet his long-lost son after twenty-two years of separation, during which he was led to believe that Yosef was dead. He now knew that, not only was Yosef alive, but he was viceroy of Egypt! Rather than run post haste to Egypt to embrace his son, he took a hiatus to pick up wood which would not be used for two-hundred years! How are we to understand this?

*Horav Yaakov Kaminetzky, zl*, offers a practical explanation. Our Patriarch was acutely aware of the moral turpitude that characterized Egyptian culture. He knew that, over a period of two-hundred years, his descendants might very well fall prey to the allure of such a morally bankrupt society. In order to imbue them with hope for a liberation from this filth and provide them with inspiration for a better, holier life, he transplanted the trees that Avraham had originally planted as a tangible source of inspiration and hope, thus facilitating their ability to remain true to their heritage and destiny.

Remembering one's past, knowing that he/she is connected to a glorious heritage, can make the difference in one's life. A well-known vignette occurred concerning *Horav Meir, zl, m'Premishlan*, which may be applied here. The *Rebbe* would immerse himself in a *mikveh* that was situated atop a snow-covered mountain. Despite his advanced age, the *Rebbe* would sprint up the mountain with ease. His aide, however, although much younger, had difficulty keeping up, due to his numerous slips and falls. He asked the *Rebbe*, "How is it that the *Rebbe* walks so steadily, without slipping, while I cannot stop falling?" The *Premishalner* replied, "He who is bound to the One Above will not fall down."

Simply, this means that one who places his trust in Hashem has nothing to fear. He is connected. Perhaps we may supplement this analogy further. One who is connected to the past does not stumble. He is firmly anchored in tradition, in a heritage that spans thousands of years and encompasses the Patriarchs and the greatest Torah luminaries throughout the generations. The individual who is slipping, the one who should be concerned, is the one who has no past to hold onto: no past, and, thus, no future.

We can derive a profound lesson from Yaakov's actions. He taught his future generations that a Jew has priorities. Torah is our priority. Therefore, even if a father has waited longingly for twenty-two years to see if his son was alive, only to discover that indeed he was alive and thriving in Egypt, he sets his priority. We will have a *Mishkan* one day (two hundred years later), and we must prepare for it. Perhaps wait a few months, reunite with Yosef and then travel to Beer Sheva. No! The children must know what is important, what comes first.

I cite a popular maxim, "What don't we do for family?" This means that we often go to great lengths and make significant sacrifices to provide support for family. Time, effort, financial assistance, emotional support, all dedicated to ensure the well-being of family members. When a family member has an emotional or spiritual challenge, we are present without questions. One thing, however, that we do not do even for family: Compromise our religious beliefs and commitments. This was Yaakov's message to his children: "Yes, I want to see Yosef. I have waited so long for this moment, but something is even more important than Yosef: Hashem – we will build a Sanctuary for Him, for which we will require wood. Yaakov *Avinu* was a loving father, but he was also a loving son: to Hashem. The transcendental values of eternity guided his life.

Going back as far as Avraham *Avinu* and the *Akeidas Yitzchak*, parents have, at times, been confronted with the challenge of navigating the delicate balance between their strict religious beliefs and their parental love for a child who decides to take a different path from the one in which he was raised. While parents deeply love their children, their commitment to maintaining their spiritual values takes precedence. Veritably, when a child sees that his/her parents adhere to their values, it shows that they are principled people. This will evoke his/her respect.

Although we do not compromise our religious beliefs to acquiesce to a son or daughter who has difficulty accepting demands on his/her life, as parents we must always "leave the light on" and welcome the return of a child with loving embrace. Not all are so fortunate. The following story, which I wrote in a much earlier *Peninim*, is timeless and inspiring.

The following letter was penned by a young man, who, due to his father's love and forbearance, returned "home." Not everyone is as fortunate; the father's refusal to give up on his son catalyzed the change.

"Until a few years ago, I did not take anything seriously. I was not like the rest of my class. Having graduated from *yeshivah* high school, I was undecided what to do. I was neither interested in continuing my Jewish education, nor was I ready to begin college right away. I thought I would just drift around for a while and then get a job.

"My parents were obviously not very pleased with my decision, but, at that point, what my parents wanted did not carry much weight in my life. Regrettably, during this time, I fell in with a group of like-minded fellows who were not Orthodox. At first, I figured that they would not influence me, but I was dead wrong. It did not take long before I became like them: no interest in Judaism. *Shabbos*

and *kashrus* became something in my past. Indeed, my entire life became a haze: no direction, no meaning, no value.

“My parents were devastated. While they did not expect me to become a rabbi, they certainly did not expect this. As well as having destroyed my life, I was on the way to destroying my family as well. It got to the point that, due to the adverse influence I was having on my younger siblings, my father asked me to leave the house. When I moved out, I said some cruel and vicious things to my father. I can remember him standing silently by the door, with my mother crying at his side.

“Looking back, I realize that what I thought I saw in them as weakness was actually incredible strength of character. A year went by, during which I had no contact with anyone in my family. I missed them very much, but I was afraid that, if I contacted them, it would be viewed as weakness on my part.

“One morning, I was shocked to find my father standing outside the door to my apartment building. He looked at me with tired, worn eyes and asked if we could talk. I was stubborn and obnoxious. I only nodded. We walked to a corner coffee shop where we sat down to talk. My father opened up. He said that everyone missed me and that, despite my absence, I had been on their hearts and minds every moment. I saw the hurt in his eyes – eyes that had long ago stopped crying – because he had no more tears. He told me how my mother agonized over what had happened, blaming herself for not having been there for me. Why did he come? He came because he had one last request – no lecture, just one last favor. He wanted me to drive with him to Monsey, New York, to recite *Tehillim* at the grave of a certain *tzaddik*. I looked at him incredulously, and then he began to cry. Bitter tears streamed down his face as he asked me to please grant him this one request. As far removed as I was from *Yiddishkeit*, I was still moved by his request.

“I told my father that that day was impossible, because I had plans to go with my friends to Atlantic City that night. I would go with him another time. He reached across the table and took my hands in his, looking at me with his tear-streaked sad face. He said nothing – just stared and wept. I felt my own eyes begin to water, and – rather than have him see me cry – I just agreed to meet him later that day.

“I made the necessary apologies to my friends. Atlantic City would have to wait. Later that day, I drove with my father up to the cemetery in Monsey. We did not talk much during the trip. I remember getting out of the car with my father and walking over to one of the graves. He placed some rocks on top of the grave and gave me a *Tehillim*. Anybody who walked by would have seen a bizarre sight: my father – standing there in his long black frock, a black hat perched on his head; and me – with my leather bomber jacket and jeans. We did not stay long. Ten minutes is all it took, and soon we were on our way back. We talked as much on the return trip as on the way in – very little.

“My father dropped me off and walked me to my apartment building. I will never forget the words

he told me that day. He said that, regardless of what had occurred between us and no matter what might happen in the future, I was always going to be his son, and he would always love me. I was emotionally moved by his words, but I did not manifest the spiritual inspiration that he had hoped would occur that day. I shook my head at his words, and we parted company.

“The next morning, I woke up to some shocking news. On their return trip from Atlantic City, my friends were involved in a head-on collision with a tractor-trailer rig. They did not survive the accident. Had I not gone with my father that day, I would have been in that car.

“As I write this letter, I am overwhelmed with emotion. I made a *Bris* for my *bechor*, firstborn, today. My father was *sandek*, and, as he held my son on his lap, our eyes met, and we smiled. It was as if we had finally reached the end of a long arduous journey.

“We have never talked about that trip to the cemetery, nor did I ever tell my father about my friends’ untimely death. I just walked home that evening and was welcomed with open arms. No questions asked, no accusations, no answers. I just know that, sitting here late at night with my infant son in my arms, I will try to be the father to him that my father was to me.”