

Little Things, Big Differences

Category: Bereishis, Vayetzei

Rachel's act of kindness saved the Jewish people forever. But was it really so special?

The Little Guys

Last week, I got back from the International Shluchim Convention.

At the convention, I met many shluchim from all kinds of tiny and forgotten places. I met my cousin who's now going out on shlichus to a small town no one heard of. There, G-d-willing, he will be the Rebbe's representative until the coming of the Moshiach. Until then, it looks like no one will hear of him and no one will give him awards. He'll sit there in his corner finding individual Jews to put on tefillin with, or perhaps convince a little girl to light Shabbos candles, and so on with all sorts of small activities. I felt bad for him and the hundreds of shluchim like him.

Understandably, there are the big, strong and famous among the shluchim, who delegate millions of dollars and have many shluchim working for them. Everyone listens to and honors them. They are asked to speak everywhere. They're described as saviors of the Jewish nation in newspapers and in books.

But the majority of shluchim are not like that. Most don't have such success. You never see or hear from them. They have no chance of being heard even once, and I feel bad for them. Then I remembered a story from the Midrash connected to this week's Torah portion.

Rachel's Sensitivity

In Midrash Eichah, the Sages tell us that when the Jews sinned with idol worship during the First Temple Era, a heavenly decree of annihilation came forth against them. Along came the souls of the Patriarchs to plead for mercy for their sons and to find some merit for them so that they, and the Temple, wouldn't be destroyed because of their sins.

Abraham delivered the opening argument by saying: “Master of the Universe! At 100 you gave me a son. When he intellectually matured and became a 37-year-old man, you told me to sacrifice him before You, and I did not take pity on him—and You’re not going to remember that and take pity on Your sons?!”

Yitzchok then said: “Master of the Universe! When Father said to me, ‘G-d will show the sheep for the sacrifice,’ I did not hinder at Your words and I willingly let myself be bound upon the altar—and You’re not going to remember that and take pity on Your sons?!”

Now here is where we get to our week’s Torah portion:

Yaakov then spoke up and said: “Master of the Universe! Did I not live with Lavan for 20 years? And when I left his home, I was accosted by the evil Esav who wanted to murder my children, and I sacrificed my life for them! And now, they have been handed to their enemies after I raised them and bore the pain of parenting for them—and You’re not going to have pity on my sons?!”

Finally, Moshe Rabbeinu — Moses himself, the greatest Jew who ever lived — spoke up and said: “Master of the Universe! I didn’t serve as a faithful shepherd of Israel for 40 years, running ahead of them in the desert like a horse, for you to not take pity on them now that they’re being exiled!”

Each one came forth and recounted their own merits before G-d. But G-d did not reply to them until the soul of our Matriarch Rochel came forth and mentioned the very story we read in the Torah this week. She said: “G-d, You know clearly that Your servant Yaakov had extra love for me and worked seven years for me, and when our marriage date came, my father schemed to switch me with my sister—and I had pity on my sister that she not be subjected to humiliation, and so I gave her the secret signs I had given my groom so he’d think it was me...”

Immediately, the Midrash tells us, G-d’s Mercies were stirred and He said, “Because of you, Rochel, I will return Israel to their place.” That’s why, the Midrash tells us, there is a verse that states, “Hold back your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears... your sons will return to their borders.”

Why Was She Special

How did Rochel merit more than Avraham, Moshe Rabbeinu and all the other Patriarchs? How did her merit save her people?

Avraham and Yitzchok, for their part, cited the Akeidah, the Binding upon the

Altar. What could be a stronger, more dramatic example of self-sacrifice than that?

Moshe Rabbeinu, the redeemer of Israel, was the consummate faithful servant — who better to come before G-d with complaints than him? And so on and so forth with all the Patriarchs.

Nevertheless, only Rochel's argument was heard. Why? Because Rochel helped her sister. This act of compassion towards a sister who was a victim is what influenced G-d, standing the test more than all the great deeds of the Akeidah and the deeds of the Patriarchs.

This is an example of Judaism's approach towards the little things. Sometimes it is specifically the little things, the discreet and hidden things, the unimportant things that seemingly no one knows about and that no one will ever know. It is specifically these types of acts that fulfill the highest mission more than the famous and prominent deeds.

We find a similar example in Avraham Avinu's life. When the three guests who looked like Arabs came to him and Avraham exerted himself in the mitzvah of welcoming guests, the Talmud tells us (Tractate Bava Metzia 86b) that in the merit of this simple mitzvah that Avraham toiled in, tending to three anonymous transients who worshiped their own feet's dust, the nation of Israel merited to many good things. "In the merit of three guests, they merited three Patriarchs; in the merit of the butter and milk Avraham served, they merited the manna; in the merit of Avraham standing over them, they merited to the Clouds of Glory; and in the merit of Avraham's offering 'a little water,' they merited the Well of Miriam," the Talmud says.

The True Heroes

We see that in Judaism, it's not only the great act of heroism that wows everybody, the act that leaves generations standing in awe wondering how they could ever aspire to such a level of might and sacrifice, like the Akeidah. Judaism is built on lesser things too—little day-to-day things.

I remember how the Rebbe once spoke about this explicitly, saying that a shliach's purpose is not to revolutionize the world but just the opposite—to come to his little city and convince one Jew to put on tefillin and a second Jew to put up a mezuzah. Why? Because Judaism is built upon simple acts by ordinary people who together form this thing called Am Yisrael (the Nation of Israel) or Klal Yisroel (the Jewish Community), comprised of Jewish individuals, who together unite the whole Jewish world from the furthest corners and the smallest towns of the world.

People often complain to me, "I'm wasting my time—I don't feel that I make a difference." I especially hear this from housewives who raise children but don't feel accomplished. The truth, however, is that it's just the opposite—teaching a Jewish kid to say "Shema," making sure he goes to school, teaching him to invite guests and teaching him to give in to his little sister when she wants something... these are the acts that are just as important as Avraham's Akeida.