

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Vayishlach

“AND THE GIFT PASSED BEFORE HIM (YAAKOV)” (BEREISHIS 32:22)

YAAKOV AVINU PREPARED himself for the encounter with his hostile brother Esav in three ways: One, he sent an elaborate gift to assuage Esav’s anger; two, he prayed to Hashem; three, he ensured the survival of at least half his family (in the event of war) by dividing them into two groups. After Yaakov assembled the flocks of cattle for the gift, the Torah relates that they, “Passed before him (lit. before his face).” The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 76:8) interprets this phrase as an expression of anger or pain, and states very succinctly, “[Yaakov], too, was in pain.” Rashi (ibid.) explains the “pain”: “Even though he was giving the present, Yaakov was in anguish that it was necessary for him to do all this.”

What was Yaakov agonizing about?

What was Yaakov agonizing about? The monetary assets he was losing? It is hard to believe that Yaakov would feel bad about using his money to appease his brother’s wrath. On a previous occasion Yaakov had willingly given all his money to Elifaz, Esav’s son (Rashi, Bereishis 29:11). Why was Yaakov now in such pain?

Yaakov was not concerned with his own money, pride or honor. There was a much greater honor that was being besmirched – the honor of a *tzadik* and the Torah he represents. When a *tzadik* lowers himself before a *rasha*, it is a catastrophe, a perversion of truth. Despite the need to appease Esav, and despite Yaakov’s own humility, he was acutely aware of the desecration of *kavod haTorah* this gift represented and mourned in his heart even as he sent it.

Even more revealing is the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 563) where the prophet Chavakuk voices a complaint to Hashem, “Nevuchadnetzar, the defiled and uncircumcised, crowns Tzidkiyahu and robes the holy and pious Daniel in purple? The defiled and uncircumcised Achashveirosh dresses the saintly Mordechai [in royal garments]? Pharaoh crowns the holy and pious Yosef? How can it be that you permit a *rasha* to crown a *tzadik* – it is a perversion of justice?!”

The Torah and its leaders are intrinsically dignified and royal

Not only is it a tragedy when a *tzadik* lowers himself before a *rasha*, as in Yaakov’s case, it is a tragedy even when a *rasha* **honors** the *tzadik*. The dignity of the Torah is sullied by the mere implication that a *tzadik* needs to be elevated by the impure and dishonorable *rasha*. The Torah and its leaders are intrinsically dignified and royal. The most lavish praise and honor that secular rulers provide only serve to demean a *tzadik*, whose stature is worlds beyond them.

Whenever “honor” is bestowed upon Torah institutions, a Torah leader or even a Torah-observant Jew, by a politician or a government official, the event is greeted with applause from many Jews, “We’ve done it – now we are recognized and important!” Yaakov Avinu would have mourned. The prophet Chavakuk would have complained bitterly, “Does a Torah Jew needs the approval of a secular official? Torah and its adherents are inherently and infinitely more prestigious.”

The Torah we study and obey elevates us

Are we cognizant of the transcendent dignity of the Torah, and of our own greatness as the chosen people? The Torah that we study and obey elevates us head and shoulders above the masses. Let us not lower ourselves to the standards of society and stoop to seek their approval and acceptance. The more Torah we learn and *mitzvos* we perform, the more honored and regal we become. As the princely sons and daughters of the King of kings, we should view ourselves accordingly, and act in a manner befitting our noble and royal stature.