

PARSHAT VAYISLACH
DECEMBER 6, 2014
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Last Sunday I had a very special privilege while I was in New York City for the day. I was the Chief Judge at the First Adult Bible Contest here in the United States. Twelve contestants, including one from Chicago, vied for three places in the International Adult Bible Contest to take place during Hanukkah in Israel.

Along with my two fellow judges it was my responsibility to ascertain whether the answers to the difficult questions that were posed to the contestants were correct. Luckily, I had the answers in front of me. I was extremely impressed by the deep knowledge that these individuals had of the Tanach, the Jewish Bible, and how they were able to answer these complex questions. In the morning they had a written test, and during the afternoon, when we were present on the judging panel, they had to respond to oral questions as well. In a very close competition, we were able to select the three individuals who are now privileged to go on to the International Contest.

The Bible, of course, serves as our national literature, the framework of the history of the Jewish people, and also the basis of much of our liturgy. It is a truly beloved book to us all. Being part of this endeavor impressed upon me once more the love Jews have for their literature and the importance of continuing to study it.

In our Torah reading of this morning, Jacob is ready for the major test of his life. He is returning to the Land of Canaan and knows that he must confront his brother Esau who has pledged to kill him. He prepares for that event by sending a message to Esau: "To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Laban and remained until now." Jacob then goes on to tell his brother that he is coming to meet him and hopes to gain his favor. The Hebrew states: "I stayed with Laban." Rashi, the renowned biblical commentator, suggests two interpretations of these words. The first is a simple explication of Jacob's statements: Jacob was merely a sojourner in Laban's house and hoped that Esau would show kindness to him. The second explanation that Rashi suggests follows a more midrashic understanding. As pointed out in our Etz Hayim Humash, the letters of the word "garti" are the same as "Taryag" with the numerical value of 613, recalling the 613 commandments of the Torah. Therefore, Rashi states: "Though I have sojourned with Laban, the wicked, I have observed the 613 commandments, and was not corrupted by him."

Now surely Rashi understood that there was no way that Jacob could perform all 613 commandments. First of all, this was a pre-Sinaitic event. The Torah had not yet been given to the Jewish people. Secondly, even if one believed that Jacob kept the commandments, many of the commandments need a Temple to be standing and are dependent upon one living in the land of Israel. Thus, what could Rashi's comment mean? The Hatam Sofer states that it is impossible for Rashi's comment to be taken literally. However, he writes that the commandments Jacob was able to do, he observed, and, those he was not able to do, he continued to hold dear so that one day he would be

able to perform them as well. In other words, Jacob had studied the commandments and knew their value.

This response too raises many questions. However, the Hatam Sofer's explanation gives us some food for thought. In the tractate of Sanhedrin there is a discussion concerning a particular aspect of Jewish law. The different views concern what kind of punishment will be meted upon an individual who has committed a certain transgression. The Rabbis debate the issue back and forth until Rabbi Joseph stated that since we do not have a Jewish court of law active at this time which can make the decision, what difference does it make whether we fix the halakha now? Perhaps we should wait until the days of the Messiah. Abaye answered: "If so, we should not study the laws of sacrifices as they are also only for the Messianic era." The Talmud then responds with these words: "Study and receive reward." In other words, while there may be no practical utility for this type of ruling, learning about it has its own merit. Being involved in Jewish study and studying even those aspects of Jewish law not incumbent upon Jews at this moment, brings us closer to Jewish tradition, allows us to learn more of our heritage, and involves all of us in Talmud Torah.

This message continues to motivate Jewish life. Whenever we study Biblical or Talmudic literature we find that some of laws seem out-of-date for our particular society. Yet, we don't simply discard the books or place them in a rare book attic, never to be picked up and studied. Instead, Talmud Torah is an essential part of our peoples' experience and it is our task to grow with the literature, to learn from it, to assimilate its values, to observe those laws which we can observe, and to exercise our minds, souls and hearts with those laws that are currently not incumbent upon us.

Jewish education is based not only on practical utility; it is also based on the growth of the mind, heart and soul in service of G-d and humanity. Studying the texts of our tradition allows us to grow in all these areas even if the laws don't have a practical purpose at a specific moment in time.

In the last few months, I have been involved in two important initiatives on behalf of Jewish education throughout the world. The first is a Government of Israel Initiative together with World Jewry represented by the Jewish Agency for Israel. Its purpose is to strengthen Jewish identity specifically in the Diaspora and solidify the connection between World Jewry and Israel. In particular, the Initiative is to take responsibility for the Jewish life spectrum between the ages of 12 to 35 for "unaffiliated" young people in the Diaspora. As per the agreement, over the period of a number of years the government of the State of Israel is to put in \$100M into the Initiative which is to be matched through fundraising by Diaspora Jewry and then matched again through fees for services and other possible fundraising apparatus. The Initiative came from the Prime Minister of the State of Israel and, over the last number of months, we have been hammering out some of its details. Sitting on the executive of the Jewish Agency, I have been a member of what is known as the Committee of Six negotiating on behalf of the Jewish Agency with the government to ensure that the Initiative can be broad, inclusive and effective.

Many possible activities have been suggested. In particular, two programs have been put on the table in the hope that they can be funded by the Initiative. One concerns Jewish young adults and Israel engagement through immersive experiences. Currently Birthright and MASA Israel journey bring roughly 50,000 young Jews each year to Israel. It is hoped that through this Initiative we can grow that number and allow it to serve as a catalyst for young people to advance their Jewish journeys. Statistics have shown that a trip to Israel can be a positive Jewish identity experience for young Jewish adults and with proper follow-up and involvement in other Jewish experiences, participation in Jewish life, including Aliyah, are all possible.

We have also learned that the campuses today are a place of conflict for Jewish students. Those who are enemies of the State of Israel have expended enormous energy in attempting to strike at the support for Israel's academic institutions and to gain the hearts and minds of young Jews. Thus, another initiative involves working with our Jewish students on campus in order to nurture their Jewish identity, maximize their connections to Israel and the Jewish people, increase their Jewish knowledge and literacy, and connect them to young Israelis in the State of Israel.

The negotiations have not yet seen fruit. Some of that is caused by the internal turmoil in Israeli coalition government politics. However, I am very hopeful that this initiative will be embraced and will show the Jewish world that growth in Jewish knowledge will promote Jewish pride, identity, and involvement.

The second initiative emanates from a conference that I attended here in Chicago sponsored by the World Zionist Organization and the iCenter, an Israel education hub based here in Chicago. Two years ago, we met in this city to discuss the importance of Israel education as a basis for Jews embracing Israel as a central focus of their lives. 140 educators with diverse backgrounds from Israel and 15 countries met again this past July in Jerusalem. While rockets were coming down upon Israel, we continued to meet to stress the importance of continuing Jewish and Israel education as a crucial ingredient of support for an Israel in crisis.

Two weeks ago, both in New York and in Chicago, smaller groups, this time of United States educators, met once more to delineate the programs that the WZO and the Israeli government are interested in implementing. These include the training of the Israel educators, a toolbox to teach Israel on many different levels within our communities, Israel education advocacy in summer camps and on campus, and new paradigms for Israel education. Again, much of this is still in the planning stage, but I hope that these plans will come to fruition and make a significant impression on Jewish education in the macro sense, and on Israel education, in the micro.

Saadia Gaon wrote: "The Jewish nation is a nation only by virtue of the Torah." The Torah, the Jewish Bible, Jewish learning, Jewish education, continues to serve as the basis for our identity as a faith community and a people. While circumstances may have changed from Biblical times and the Talmudic era, it is our continuing task to study Torah, heed its words, teach its precepts, and follow its instructions. That task is a sacred

one and is no less important today than it was many generations ago. If we want people involved in Jewish life in the future, we must teach them Torah. If we want people to advocate on behalf of the State of Israel, we must educate them as to why the State of Israel is so important to our very existence as a people. If we want a generation of committed Jews in this country, we must commit ourselves to the continuing support of Jewish educational endeavors even as we, ourselves, as adults, continue to study and to grow in our Judaism. In fact, there is no better model for a child than to see his/her parent, his/her grandparent, his/her uncle and aunt, continue to study and grow as a Jew. That makes much more of an impression upon them than whatever a Rabbi, a Jewish educator, or a Prime Minister of Israel, can say.

I believe Rashi's comment, although it cannot be taken seriously, suggests that Jacob kept his tradition close to him even though he was 20 years in a foreign land as a sojourner in Laban's home. By doing so, he was able to create a family and eventually a people which was dedicated not only to its physical survival, but to its growth and success. We are all the Children of Israel, we are all Jacob's descendants. It is our task, as well, to keep that tradition close to our hearts, to learn of it, grow with it, observe it, and bequeath it to the generations that follow. Let us commit ourselves to this sacred task.