

Vayislach

Assimilation, Our Forefathers, and the Answer

We are all very concerned about whether or not there will be any Jews left in America in 50 years. The statistics do not look too promising. With a 52 percent national intermarriage rate, with a falling birth rate, and with an aging population (the average mean age of the Jewish community is 49+), it seems that inevitably the number of Jews in America will diminish severely in the years ahead. We need a critical mass of Jews in order to support Jewish life in America. When the Jewish population falls beneath a certain level, it will be very hard to maintain all the Jewish institutions and services which we all take for granted.

This concern about Jewish survival is nothing new. In the recent past, we have mainly had to contend with threats from without. We have mainly had to contend with Nazis and other enemies who wanted literally to wipe us off from the face of the earth. Thank G-d, in America we are not faced with that external threat, but we are faced with an internal threat, the desertion of Judaism by large numbers of our young people. It no longer seems necessary to many Jews to remain Jews. Being Jewish does not, according to them, serve any purpose. They are not going to deny that they are Jews, but Jewishness and Judaism mean nothing to them. They know that they are Jewish, but the fact that they are Jewish does not define their life style or their purpose in life. Being Jewish does not demand anything from them. This internal threat, too, to Jewish survival is not new.

In fact, it began with Avraham Ovinu, with Abraham, our father. Abraham had 8 children, but only one of them remained Jewish. Abraham had a child with Hagar named Ishmael, a child with Sarah named Yitzchak and, after Sarah died, Abraham remarried and had 6 children with Ketura. Yitzchak had 2 children, Yaacov and Esau. Only one of them remained Jewish. Yaacov had 13 children, 12 boys and 1 girl, and they all remained Jewish. That's why we are known as the children of Israel because Yaacov's other name was Israel. We are not known as the children of Abraham because not all of Abraham's children remained Jews. We are not known as the children of Yitzchak because not all his children remained Jews, but we are known as the children of Israel because all of his children remained

Jews.

This point is illustrated in a *Medrash* which states that when Yaacov was on his deathbed, he gathered all his children together and he said, "Tell me, what do you believe?" All his children said together, "Hear, Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is one." We all know that the *Shma* is the basic declaration of the Jewish faith. What is not generally known is that this is not a prayer directed to G-d. It was a statement directed to Yaacov and is now a statement directed to the rest of the Jewish people in which we state that we believe that G-d is our personal G-d and that G-d is one, which means that we recognize that we are bound to follow the will of G-d to live moral and just lives and that G-d listens to our prayers granting those that He thinks are in our best interests. When Yaacov heard his children cite the *Shma*, he was overcome with joy, and he said out loud, "Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever." He was thankful to G-d for the fact that all his children remained Jews, Jews not only in name, but also in faith.

Why, though, was it that Yaacov was able to keep all his children Jewish when Avraham and Yitzchak could not? The rabbis tell us that the reason why we have 3 fathers in our religion is because each of them had a unique approach to reach G-d. Avraham found G-d through science. He observed how the sun could not be G-d since it is obscured by the clouds and sets at night. The clouds could not be G-d because the wind blew them away, etc. Through Avraham's study of nature, he was able to reach an understanding that there was only one G-d. He also knew that the way you could get close to G-d was by doing deeds of kindness. Therefore, he laid the cornerstone of Judaism by stressing the fact that "*Chesed*," "kindness," must be the basis of all religion. The only problem with Avraham's approach to religion was that it could lead many people to feel that religion is only something you do for the other fellow but you, yourself, gain nothing from it. Avraham is known as "*Har*," which in Hebrew means "a mountain, a beacon." He was the trailblazer.

Yitzchak, on the other hand, the rabbis say, found G-d through personal experience. When he was bound on the altar, he had a personal mystical experience of G-d. He is known in Hebrew as "*Sadeh*," which means "field." A field produces crops only when the seed is planted deep in it.

His religious experience was internal and deep. He personally gained a lot from his religion. He, of course, continued the belief of his father that religion must be based on kindness, but he added they mystical and personal level to it. The problem with this type of religious approach is that many times you can be so inwardly directed that you do not see what is happening around you. You fail to be sensitive to the external challenges and changes which surround you.

Yaacov, the rabbis teach us, found G-d in the study of history and in the events of his own life. That's the way the rabbis interpret the dream of Yaacov's ladder. They interpret it to mean that Yaacov had a vision of the whole history of mankind, how the guardian angels of each nation went up and then down on the ladder until eventually world history would end in the Messianic redemption. Yaacov's religious approach, the rabbis say, was truth. It was not enough for him to believe that the basis of religion must be (1) the doing of deeds of kindness; (2) the giving of meaning and purpose to life, but it must also be; (3) true. It cannot be based on a lie. Yaacov knew from his study of history and the events of his own personal life that Judaism was true. In order for Judaism to survive and be able to be passed on to future generations, it must be based on kindness, give us an inner purpose, and reflect reality, be true.

In the *Torah* portion *Vayislach* we also learn how Yaacov differed from Avraham and Yitzchak in how he handled his children. When Avraham had a dispute with his children, he just sent them away. He said, "Here is a present. Do what you want. I will go my way, and you will go your way." That's what he did with Ishmael, and that is also what he did with his 6 sons by Ketura. He felt that it was no use trying to communicate with them or deal with them. He just forgot about them. He would, of course, be there for them if they ever really needed him, like he was for Lot after he sent him away, but he really did not have much contact with them after he sent them away. He wrote them off.

Yitzchak, on the other hand, had the exact opposite approach. He was so immersed in his personal quest for G-d and in his mystical contemplations that he could see no evil in his children. Anything they wanted to do was okay with him. He could not believe that they would do anything immoral or unjust. He just could not believe that his son, Esau, was any-

thing more than an upstanding human being. This, unfortunately, is the way many Jews feel in America. No matter what my child does, it is okay. He should just be happy.

Yaacov, on the other hand, had an altogether different approach. As the *Talmud* says, a person is supposed to push away wayward children with the left hand, but bring them close with the right hand. Yaacov saw his children's faults. He was not blind to them, and he criticized them for these faults, but he did not reject them. He held them close. After Reuven sinned by tampering with his bed, he did not reject him, but he did reprimand him. When Shimon and Levi did wrong by taking out their vengeance on a whole city because of the rape of their sister, Dena, he did not approve what they did, but reprimanded them. In fact, he felt so strongly about what they did that he even reprimanded them for this on his death-bed, but he never rejected them. He loved them in spite of their faults, but he made them know that he expected them to correct these faults and not to repeat them.

We learn something similar to this when we learn how Aaron was to enter the holy of holies once a year. We learn about his entering the holy of holies after the death of his two sons, Nodov and Avihu. Aaron, too, had not taught his two older sons how to correctly behave in the world and, therefore, they perished on the day of the dedication of the Temple when they brought strange fire. The *Torah* tells Aaron, "*B'Zos*, with this you are supposed to enter the holy of holies." And what was in the holy of holies? The cherubim who were in the shape of two children, were in the holy of holies. They were part of the ark cover for the *Ten Commandments*. The rabbis explain that when the *Torah* says, "*B'Zos*," it means that Aaron was to enter the holy of holies with the qualities of *Zos*. And what are these qualities of *Zos*? The rabbis say they are described by the three letters "*Zayin*," "*Aleph*," and "*Tof*," of the word "*Zos*." Everything you teach your children must be based on the *Ten Commandments*, but you must teach them more. You must teach them about what "*Zayin*" stands for, "*Zevac*," "the importance of sacrificing for Jewish ideals," and the importance of "*Zochor*," of "remembering the Jewish past and remembering the redemption which we Jews want to bring to the world." When we teach our children, we must teach them about what the "*Aleph*" stands for,

“Ahava”, “love,” and “Or,” “intellectual light,” and “Emunah,” “faith.” We must teach them what the “Tof” stands for, “Torah,” which means that we must show them how the ideas of the Torah conform to the truths of human nature and of nature, itself, and we must teach them “Terumah,” “how to give of themselves to others and to their community.” It is only when we enter with these things that we can be successful in transmitting our heritage to our children. Yaacov was successful with his children because he never rejected them. He always loved them, and he always reached out to them, but he also reproved them when they acted wrongly. He taught them about the importance of sacrificing. He taught them with love and with intellectual light and with faith, and he also showed them the truth of the Torah and the importance of contributing your time and your energy to your community and to your fellow man. He taught them that Judaism is based on helping others, but that this is not all that there is to Judaism. Judaism is also based on personal closeness to G-d and, what’s more, it is true.

Unfortunately, in our day our children are not getting this message. Too many of them are just being told that Judaism is just a nice set of folkways. It is not really true, and it has nothing unique to teach the world. It is not worth sacrificing for. Others teach that Judaism’s only message is that we have to help others, but that no individual can find within it spirituality, closeness to G-d, or meaning in life. We must demonstrate to our children how Judaism is not only nice and wonderful, but also true and spiritually uplifting.

We in America today can successfully transmit Judaism to our children. There is an answer to the problem of intermarriage and assimilation. We know the answer. A study of the graduates of Ramaz, a modern orthodox high school in New York, revealed that 97 percent of its graduates married Jews; only 3 percent intermarried. The education the students receive at Ramaz allows them to fully participate in the world, but it also makes them proud Jews, Jews who do not want to Assimilate or intermarry. Yes, it is true Jewish education costs a lot of money, but if your child were physically sick, wouldn’t you take him to the best doctor around, even if it cost a fortune? The same should hold true when your child is spiritually sick. We must send our children to educational institutions which will pro-

tect them spiritually.

In this bulletin, you will find a brochure celebrating the Hebrew Academy's 25th Anniversary. I hope that you will all respond generously to the appeal in it. The Hebrew Academy in our community is doing what Ramaz is doing and has done in the upper east side of New York. The Hebrew Academy is essential to the preservation of Judaism in Houston. Not only has it produced the highest percentage of any school in the city of National Merit Scholars, but it has already in its 25 years produced a group of committed Jews who not only excel in their chosen professions, but who also readily support all Jewish institutions, live Jewish lives and, more importantly, marry Jews and do not want to assimilate. Let us all hope and pray that soon when we ask all our Jewish children in America, as Yaacov asked his children, "What do you believe and what type of life are you going to lead?" they will all answer, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is one." I hope that you will all do your part to help make this dream come true by contributing to the Hebrew Academy.

Being Jewish Is More a Positive than Negative Experience

When Rachel dies, she gives birth to her son, Benjamin. It was giving birth to Benjamin which caused her death. When he was born, she turned and said, "Call him 'Ben Oni'," which in Aramaic can mean "the son of my sorrow" or "the son of my strength." But Jacob did not call his son Ben Oni. Instead, in Hebrew, he called him "Benyamin," which means "the son of my right hand, the son of strength." Jacob did not want to give a sad name to his son. This would, of course, make his son feel guilty all his life that it was he who killed his mother. There is also something deeper in this, though.

We are Jews, not for negative reasons, but for positive reasons. It is true that 48 prophets and 7 prophetesses were not able to do what Haman was able to do. Haman, by his evil decree, was able to cement Jewish unity and galvanize the Jews to be better Jews, just as Hitler, when he arose, too, showed the Jews of this era what anti-Semitism means, and he forced us to organize and protect ourselves and become better Jews. There are negative reasons to be Jews. We do not want negative reasons to be Jews. We

want positive reasons to be Jews. We are Jews because of the wonderful way of life Judaism gives us, because of the wonderful ethics and morality and rituals we have. We are Jews, and we should be Jews because of positive experiences. It is true that there will be negative experiences. Rachel was really right. We have ambivalence in life. To be a Jew means to open yourself up for suffering, but it also means to open yourself up for blessing and joy.

Jacob wanted to stress this latter point, that we should always be proud we are Jews because of the great things that Judaism gives each of us in our personal lives.

The Need for Relationships and Self-Respect

Self-respect is the theme of much of this sedra. Jacob confronts his brother, Esau. The night before he confronts him he wrestles with the guardian of Esau and bests him. He is given a new name of Israel. He need fear no man or person. But then the next morning when he does meet Esau, the *Torah* says he bowed down seven times. The rabbis don't like this.

They say because Jacob bowed down seven times, Esau was to have seven kings before Israel had one. They also say that other untold calamities came upon the Jewish people because of this.

Jacob should not have groveled before his brother. He should have had more self-respect if the relationship was to be real and lasting. If one person in the relationship is completely giving to the point of losing his self-respect, the relationship will still break because the taker will lose interest and the giver will feel completely put upon.

Jacob had no relationship with his brother after this. Esau wanted to accompany him, but Jacob didn't want him to. He gave him an excuse. Esau went his way and Jacob his. On the other hand, we must be giving in a relationship and recognize we need each other.

Jacob made the opposite mistake. After he left Esau, he thought that he was "*shalem*," which means "whole." He didn't need other relationships. He didn't go see his father in Chevron. But he was wrong.

Nobody is whole; we all are growing. In this life we all have to struggle.

Jacob thought that he was *shalem*, but he wasn't. Terrible things happened to his family. Dena was raped. The brothers took their vengeance. Jacob then was told he had to go to Beth El. He had to have a relationship which was giving which showed that he needed others but he had to do it without losing his self-respect. All relationships demand the same delicate balance.

I'm reminded of the story about the Englishman, Frenchman, and Aggie who came before the firing squad. The Englishman cried out, "Earthquake" and was able to escape. The Frenchman called "Flood" and was able to escape. The Aggie yelled out "Fire" and you know what happened.