

“Va’Yey’Shev and the Moves We Make”
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By
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Rabbis, Cantor, Officers, and Friends, I bid you all a Shabbat Shalom!

I want to thank Irv Kalb and the Beth Tfiloh Minyanaires for giving me the opportunity to deliver the sermon this Shabbos.

This morning’s sedra, Va’yey’shev, began as follows:

Va’yey’shev Ya’acov B’eretz Mih’gureh Ah’viv B’eretz Ca’na’an

“And Ya’acov settled (somewhere) in the land of Ca’na’an where his father (Yitzchak) had previously lived”, but the connotation of the word “**Mih’Gureh Ah’viv**” can have a broader interpretation. It could mean “where Yitzchak meandered” or “where Yitzchak had dealings. Basically, this simple sentence is deceptively inconsequential: Ya’acov decided to move in to the same area where his father (Yitzchak) had already resided, and undoubtedly had already created a network of interpersonal and business relationships. It’s understandable. If we were Ya’acov, or if we were Ya’acov’s parents, we would want him to have opportunities, to move into an area where he could be easily integrated and to be accepted and already have established good working relationships with his neighbors. And certainly, since God was with Ya’acov and Ya’acov was with his family one would think the move would be easy - without problem or obstacle. This sentence,

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conveys a sense of tranquility and composure, (and the Art Scroll Chumash indicates that Ya’acov sought tranquility in this move) a perfectly planned move, and a easy decision to do so. To paraphrase an old adage, ““What” you know will get you there, but “Who” you know will make it a whole lot easier, and faster! But, Rashi’s commentary takes exception to this view and reflects that the move is the difficult, end-result of the dysfunctional relationship between Ya’acov and his brother Esau. The concept of a simple move and resettlement by Ya’acov is anything but simple. Rashi is correct: Moves of any kind are difficult, and the decisions surrounding them, are really never simple.

I would like to share with you today two personal stories that reflect on the astuteness of Rashi’s observations.

My father¹ of blessed memory, Z”L (Hebrew abbreviation: Zichrono L’vracha [May His Memory Be For a Blessing]), grew up in a Shtetl in the far outskirts away from the city of Kiev in the

Ukraine. And his story may be typical of many similar experiences of your own parents or grandparents. The Shtetl's name was Radomyshl. The majority of the Russian immigrants with whom I have inquired about this town have either never heard of it or have great difficulty trying to remember it. There are photographs on the Web of a thriving town today, with modern streets and buildings. But, that was not the world my father knew. His streets were made of mud. His town was a small farming community. The neighbors were not just friends, but also family relations. The residents grew their wheat, their potatoes and onions, they made their wine, and they "schechted" their animals, all in accordance with their Jewish way of life. They were taught to believe that no matter what happened - God was with them all the time. It was a life that did intermix with the gentiles, but it was not a life as we see romanticized through the movies today. My father shared only a few stories with me as his memories were mostly unpleasant. He had a recurring nightmare of being caught by the authorities and forcibly returned to Russia and placed into the Russian Army. He told me of the unforgiving climate, the winter snows, and the freezing cold weather where they had nothing to eat. He told me of the anti-Semitism and the harshness and cruelty of the surrounding gentile world in which they lived, and the constant threats of violence. He told me of the Cossacks, and their murderous, plundering, destructive forays into their Shtetl. He told me that every person in the village had a job to perform when the Cossacks attacked. My father's task, as a very young boy, was to grab the Rabbi's baby and run into the forest. "Run into the forest and hide", he was directed. "Run as fast and as far as you can and hide with the baby. We'll find you when it's safe". I know he did this once, but I never asked him how many additional times he ran into the forest. It was a hard life. His father, my paternal grandfather² of blessed memory, Z"L, came to America in 1914. He was a very pious individual. He became a peddler, but not very successful. He was never able to raise the funds to bring his wife and children over to America. During the decade he was in America, even greater hardship befell my father's family in Russia. You see, as bad as things were following WWI and then the Russian Revolution, during the winter of 1919, my father's mother³ and his older brother⁴, both died of starvation, within two days of each other. Now, essentially parentless, my father and his three younger sisters^{5, 6, 7} were split up; the two youngest ones were placed in Catholic orphanages; my father and his next younger sister were apprenticed in different trades - all in different locations. The younger sisters loved the security of the Catholic orphanage. They were eating well. But my father faced a greater threat - he was overdue for his conscription into the Russian Army. My father's maternal grand-mother⁸, Z"L (Hebrew abbreviation: Zichrona L'vracha [May Her Memory Be For A Blessing]), who was in America⁷ - at some later time learned of her daughter's death and worrying about the grandchildren, raised enough money for the passage for my father and his sisters. My father realized that this was the answer to his

prayers. It was an opportunity, perhaps the last opportunity they would have to escape: from a post-revolution Russia that had not improved their lives, from the tyranny and the anti-semitic violence of the mobs, from the shackles of being a Jew confined to the Shtetl, and an escape from serving in the new Russian People's Army. More than anything, just as Ya'akov had God and family in their move, this was an opportunity for my father and his sisters to reunite with their father and to be together again as a family. But he still had to convince each sister to go with him. They were all afraid of the move ahead. My father was about 19 years old, his youngest sister, about 12 or 13 years old. They had no idea of what lay ahead for them. They knew those muddy roads, they knew where to run into those familiar forests to hide. How could they possibly leave the only remaining family members they knew? A few Aunts, uncles, and cousins? And for my father, he was to never to see again that young woman with whom he had become enamored and who he thought he would marry and to whom he pledged he would wait for. **Va'Yey'shayv Ya'akov** ? An easy tranquil move? Hardly. They were kids - on a dangerous trip – into an unknown and strange world they didn't understand- and with only Yiddish and Russian as their language to communicate. They faced unscrupulous journey-men, scammers, and thieves. My Dad had to avoid any officers or police or officials who might question his not being in the Army. My Dad had to get the youngest sisters to beg for food when they ran out. They had Yiddishkeit and God but they needed to reunite with family. And I believe it was a miracle that they made it out alive and together, but also for another reason that no one could anticipate. You see, 18 years later, in the summer of 1941 - as Hitler reneged on his war-time pact with Stalin, he attacked Russia with 3,000,000 men, along an 1800 mile perimeter on three major attack fronts, - Stalingrad, Moscow and Kiev. Repelled in Stalingrad and being fought to a draw in Moscow, Hitler ordered those forces southward to combine with the Southern attack in the Ukraine. The Ukraine was what he wanted anyway, and in the advance on the area of Kiev, the German war machine exterminated every living human being in its path. In the year 2000, while Rena and I were living in Connecticut, I was given the opportunity to chaperone our Solomon Schechter Day School's 8th grade trip to Israel. On the day that we visited Yad Va'Shem we began by exploring the Valley of the Communities, an excavated, canyon-like tomb, below-ground-level, that from the heights above, gives a physical image of the map of Europe and Russia. We started, by chance, at the Kiev obelisk and as I looked up I saw permanently chiseled into side of the canyon's wall a list of the communities that were decimated entirely by the Nazis, and at the top of the list was the name of my father's town, Radomyshl. I was stunned. So few individuals remember this place but at least Yad Vashem has insured that Radomyshl will never be forgotten. Yad Va'Shem has the names of 1,408 Jewish individuals who died as a result of the Nazi massacre of the Shetl's population - the surnames of my father's family, Usherenko, among them. And

so I know, that despite all the hardship, through the efforts of my father's grandmother, and with God's help, my father and his sisters made their seemingly-impossible move to America.

My story, L'Havdil (Hebrew translation: to make a sharp distinction), is very different, without the hardship or difficulty experienced by my father, but equally pertinent. My parents raised us in what was then called a 'centrist-orthodox' home. It was American but with all the Jewish ritual and tradition and very Zionist. The '67 War galvanized the Jewish community. "Our boys are 'over there'" was the slogan they used to raise community money for Israel in a short period of time. And I wanted to go 'over there' too. The concept of making Aliyah, of moving to Israel was compelling to me. I wanted to see if I could live in Israel just as the Israelis. So I went to Israel, in the 70's, and I worked as a research assistant at the Ma'Abada Ya'Mit, the Ocean Research Institute in Eilat. But, almost immediately my co-workers questioned my Jewish traditions, Kashrut, and going to shul. "You're not religious like the Haredim in Israel" they would say to me. "Do you really believe that God resides in the Universe?", "Do you really believe that the world was created in six days?", "Do you really believe that God sent down ten Plagues?" The truth of the matter is my Jewish traditions and Kashrut were as important to me then as they are to me now. I never found them to be an obstacle to being a Jew in America. I accept the miraculous events described in the Bible. As a scientist, and as an observant Jew, I can accept the perspectives that I can gain from both vantage points, but I separate my professional life from my spiritual life.

I decided not make aliyah. Ya'akov had God and family. I had my Yiddishkeit and God but I needed my family back in America. I realized that this was a move I could not make alone.

Va'Yey'Shey Ya'Akov? Was it a simple decision not to make aliyah? No. Not for me then. I loved Israel. But, being together with family was more important.

"How do we decide to make the moves we make, and the decisions we arrive at"? Remember the other old adage that goes "Opportunity knocks once"?. I have never believed that old saying. God gives us multiple opportunities. The question is "can we recognize an opportunity when it is presented to us?" and can we make the right decision about that opportunity?. There are no absolute answers but I think our tradition gives us two big clues as to how we can struggle with this dilemma. In the morning tfilah, at the moment we finish fitting the "Rosh" of the tfillin on our heads, we recite the following meditation:

"U-mey-Khach-Mat-Khah El-Elyon Ta-A-Tzill Ah-lie U-mi-Bi-Nat-Khah T-Vi-Nei-Ni".

Translated, it is a plea to God, and it means, "Instill in me the enormity of your Wisdom and share with me your Understanding". And then we pray to God beginning with a singularly unique prayer that has

two interpretations, the more unusual of which is far more intriguing to me: **“A’sher Na’tan L’Sechvi Vina, L’Hav’chin Beyn Yom U’Ven Laila”**.

It means: “We praise you because you gave the lowly rooster the smidgen of understanding to know the difference between the day and the night”. And consider this: if God can do that for a little rooster, just think what God can do for me, and for you, when he shares with us his Wisdom and Understanding. After all, does it really matter where God resides in the Universe as long as He is in our hearts, our minds, and our homes?

We are given choices and we take chances. We are given opportunities but there are options. There are no simple moves or decisions in life. But, my opinion is, the moves and decisions we do make are made better with a sense of God in our lives.

Ha’Shem I’Ma’Chem... May God Be With You.

Shabbat Shalom.

Post-Script: Bessie Schneider, my father’s grandmother, was present in America prior to a few of her children. Bessie had at least 8 children. As adults, many had come to America and began bringing over their own families. Bessie’s children brought their mother over to America as her husband, Shlomo, had died in 1909.

In tribute to their memories, Z”L (Hebrew abbreviation: Zichronam L’vracha, May their memories be for a blessing). ¹Samuel N. (Ushurenko) Rank [Simcha ben R’ Naftuleh]. ²Nathan (Ushurenko) Rank [Naftuleh ben R’ Shmuel]. ³Yocheved (Gutlansky) Ushurenko [Yocheved bat Shlomo]. ⁴Pinchus Ushurenko [Pinchus ben R’ Naftuleh]. ⁵Adell (Ushurenko) (Rank) Balter [Hudell bat R’ Naftuleh]. ⁶Sylvia (Ushurenko) (Rank) Crystal [Sima bat R’ Naftuleh]. ⁷Rivka (Ushurenko) Rank [Rivka bat R’ Naftuleh]. ⁸Bessie (Wenowsky) (Gutlansky) Schneider [Batsheva bat R. Yosef]