



BEREISHIT

Vayeitzei

First Jewish Weightlifter: The Power of Love and Tears

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FIRST JEWISH WEIGHTLIFTER: THE POWER OF LOVE AND TEARS

ABSTRACT

What is it with Jews and weightlifting? The two don't seem to come together. Jews are great at many things. They are a brilliant people. They have survived despite all odds. But when it comes to heavy lifting, well...

Yet, in this week's Torah portion we find that our great grandfather Jacob, thousands of years ago, demonstrated an incredible feat, lifting a weight that no one else was able to lift!

Why are we told this story? Who of us has not had to contend with the many heavy stones life presents us – the obstacles to find truth and integrity ... the hearts of stone and cynicism that many people develop ... the heavy burdens in our struggle for survival ... the hardships and setbacks that wear us down and don't allow us to access the wellspring within. But, nevertheless, we are charged with removing those stones and freeing the wellsprings of every soul that enters our sphere.

This sermon unpacks the personal message within this week's Torah reading, which recounts Jacob's journey from the holiness of Beersheva to the wrath of Charan, where with superhuman strength he pushes a giant stone from atop a well, and upon meeting Rachel – his future wife and the love of his life – he kisses her and weeps.

Jacob's journey is our journey. In the task of lifting the stones in our lives, we have at our disposal many tools – not the least of which is the power of tears and love.

As many of you know, I just returned from an exhilarating weekend with my fellow colleagues/shluchim at the annual Shluchim Conference in New York. Words elude me to describe the sheer power of celebrating together with over 5500 of our friends at the Kinus and banquet. We kissed and we wept together – and at that moment we all felt that nothing is impossible. I return here this week totally reenergized, empowered and transformed, and am committed – together with all of you – to carry this energy and strength into all that we do, ready to take on new initiatives and overcome any challenges, knowing that with love and empathy we can lift the heaviest stones.

Never underestimate what love and a few empathetic tears can accomplish...

1. Jewish Weight Lifting

What is it with Jews and weightlifting? The two don't seem to come together. Jews are great at many things. They are a brilliant people. They have survived despite all odds. But when it comes to heavy lifting, well...

At a circus, the strongman Hercules startles everyone with magnificent feats of strength, lifting hundreds of pounds over his head and putting a fist through a solid wall. For his final act, he takes a lemon and squeezes it. At first, the juice dribbles out quickly, then it slows down, and finally not a single drop comes out. The circus manager steps forward and says, "I will personally give anyone who can squeeze even one more drop from this lemon two thousand dollars." Two well-built men – clearly gentiles – step forward. Each one squeezes the lemon with all his might, but not a drop comes out.

"Does anyone else want to try?" the manager asks.

A short, puny man steps forward. People in the crowd snicker. The man picks up the lemon and squeezes. Juice gushes out. The manager is stunned. He steps forward with the cash, but as he hands the money over, he can't resist asking, "Who are you? What do you do?"

"Seymour Goldstein," the man replies. "I'm a fundraiser for the United Jewish Appeal."

That is one very unique type of strength. But ask Seymour to lift barbells, and he wouldn't even want to try.

A Jewish grandfather worked in a blacksmith shop when he was a boy, and he used to boast to his grandchildren how he had toughened himself up so he could stand the rigors of blacksmithing.

He said he would stand outside behind the house and, with a 5 pound potato sack in each hand, extend his arms straight out to his sides and hold them there as long as he could.

After a while he tried 10 pound potato sacks, then 50 pound potato sacks and

finally he got to where he could lift a 100 pound potato sack in each hand and hold his arms straight out for more than a full minute!

With deep admiration for their grandfather's weightlifting feat, his grandchildren asked him with open-eyed wonder: "Grandpa! Since you did all these exercises why do you look so weak and feeble?"

Grandpa meekly looked down, while Grandma answered: "Well, all was going well, until eventually one day grandpa tried putting some potatoes in the sacks..."

2. Heavy Lifting

And then when we finally do find a few Jews who can lift heavy loads, their brains don't match their brawn.

The town of Chelm decided to build a new synagogue. So, some strong, able-bodied men were sent to a mountaintop to gather heavy stones for the foundation. The men put the stones on their shoulders and trudged down the mountain to the town below. When they arrived, the town constable yelled, "Foolish men! You should have rolled the stones down the mountain!" The men agreed this was an excellent idea. So they turned around, and with the stones still on their shoulders, trudged back up the mountain, and rolled the stones back down again.

Is it possible that intelligence and strength are antithetical? That developed muscles inevitably also grow between one's ears?

The Chelm fools reflect one way some people deal with the heavy stones in their lives. Others simply avoid lifting any burdens. And yet others, just trudge along and struggle through life.

Is there another way? Is there a way to lift a heavy heart, to unblock the impediments that block us from realizing our dreams and aspirations? What can we do to free ourselves from the oppressive forces in our lives that so often appear like insurmountable boulders which bury us alive?

3. Jewish Superman

Despite all the stereotypes of weak Jews and their limited physical strength and weightlifting, we find that our great grandfather Jacob, thousands of years ago, demonstrated an incredible feat of weight lifting, lifting a weight that no one else was able to lift!

In this week's Torah reading, we are told a very curious story that portrays our Patriarch Jacob as a kind of Jewish Superman.

Escaping the murderous rage of his brother Esau, Jacob leaves his home in Beersheva and heads east for Charan, his mother's hometown. There he is expected to take a wife and build a family. When he arrives within reach, he beholds a pasture, a well covered with a giant stone, and three flocks of sheep lying beside it, waiting to be watered, but the shepherds lounging nearby make no move to do so. Naturally, Jacob asks them:

"The day is still long. It's not yet time to bring the livestock together. Why not water the sheep and go on grazing?"

They answer him: "We can't until all the flocks have come together. All of us then roll the stone from the top

of the well. Only then can we water the sheep.”¹

While he is conversing with them, his cousin Rachel – who would become his wife and the love of his life – appears, herding the sheep of her father, the infamous Laban. Jacob looks at her, steps forward and single-handedly pushes off the stone from the top of the well – a stone which we have just been told takes a whole team of men to budge. He does it for her, so she can water her sheep.

Only then does he greet her – with a kiss ... and with tears.

4. Mystical Explanation

A curious story indeed. How did Jacob have the strength of so many men? And above all, why does the Torah find it important to tell us the story? What possible lesson can it contain for us in our lives today?

To make sense of it, we shall consult today the literature of the mystics who explain it as follows:

Jacob’s journey from Beersheba (in Israel) to the land of Charan in the East to build a family reflects every soul’s journey from the sublime heights (of the spiritual “seven fountains” – which is the meaning of Beersheba in Hebrew) to the darkest depths of this cruel and angry world (as represented by Charan, which means “wrath” in Hebrew).² The purpose of the soul’s radical descent is to build a family and transform the material universe into a Divine home.

It’s a tough order, because the soul within the body cannot be satisfied with just surviving life’s hardship. She must *transform* the darkness of the material world and turn it into light. She must plant seeds in the black dirt of the earth and coax it to yield beautiful fruits and wonderful children.

5. Water as Spiritual Energy

Note that the first thing Jacob sees as he approaches Charan is a “well in the field.” And this is a sudden and unexpected realization – the Torah verse reads: “*Behold*, a well in the field.”³ For even the fields of materialism are populated with wells of water, a symbol of divine knowledge and spiritual energy.

At that moment, Jacob understands that here he will find spiritual sustenance – even in this desert of materialism. And he does see, in fact, not just a body of water, but its source – a spring-fed well. He then knows that despite the aridness and emptiness around him, wellsprings are not far beneath the surface, waiting to be released in order to water the flocks.

¹ Genesis 29:7-8.

² Ohr HaChaim on the verse.

³ Genesis 29:2.

But the top of the well is covered with a large stone. The hard stony hearts of a world are driven by self-interest. The insensitive, selfish universe poses many hardships, challenging us with many questions and dilemmas that block us from accessing the water beneath.

A large stone indeed. Each of us knows how large this stone can be.

6. Nations of the World

But the problem doesn't end with the stone. The shepherds and their flocks of sheep represent the nations of the world who control the well-waters. The Divine sparks of spirituality embedded in the material universe are thus trapped, their powerful energy is most often used not to refine the world, but to enrich the few, and sometimes even to destroy life.

All the gifts of life – the forces of technology and human creativity – are blessings to be used for bettering our world, not just for self-interest. And this self-interest of the shepherds and their flocks – who only come together when they see the mutual benefits of working together – controls the energy of the world. Because they are driven by their own personal gains, they lack the power to lift the ego-driven “heavy stone” on their own. And even when they join forces to lift the stone and draw water, they replace the stone atop the well, not allowing others to benefit.

Thus, Jacob was confronted with a double challenge: the heavy stone and the shepherds who control the process.

7. The Angry Town

To confirm this fact, Jacob asks the shepherds: “From where do you come, brothers?”

“We are from Charan,” they reply.⁴

Ah yes, Charan – the place of wrath. What can you expect from people who identify themselves with anger? Angry people will use even their spiritual energy – as symbolized by water – to harm others.

Jacob continues: “Do you know Nachor's grandson, Laban?”

The shepherds reply: “We know him.”

“Is he at peace?”

⁴ Genesis 29:4.

“He is at peace!”

Hearing that, Jacob sadly understands that his uncle Laban is quite comfortable and doing well in this corrupt world. It will not be easy to confront Laban and his cohorts, who control the well and the stone blocking access to it.

8. Rachel, a Symbol of *Malchut*-Dignity

But Jacob is reassured when the shepherds inform him that Laban’s daughter, Rachel is coming with the sheep.

For Rachel represents the spiritual beauty of the soul which is concealed in the material world. In Kabbalistic terms, Rachel is the supernal attribute of nobility/dignity (*malchut*), which remains hidden within each of us, waiting to be released and revealed.

Note how the shepherds announce her arrival: “*Behold*, here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep.”⁵ Here again, this word “behold” is used, denoting revelation. Suddenly, unexpectedly, in this G-d forsaken place, Rachel appears, leading the sheep.

9. Thirsty Flocks

Jacob then asks the shepherds (these leaders of the world): “The day is still long. It’s not yet time to bring the livestock together. Why not water the sheep and go on grazing?”

He is prodding them to nourish their thirsty flocks, to direct their energy toward spreading goodness and kindness in their environment.

“The day is still long.” Day is the time of light. Night is the time of darkness. If it was night and you were overcome by darkness and confusion, it would be quite understandable why you couldn’t water the flocks. But we are in middle of the day, the light is shining and we live in a world of freedom and prosperity. Why not use these gifts to “water the sheep?”

The shepherds, however, reply, to Jacob’s dismay, “We can’t until all the flocks have come together. Only then can we roll the stone from the top of the well and water the sheep.”

Even during the daylight, in good times, these materially-driven leaders cannot remove the “large stone” that blocks the spirit within, unless they are joined in common and mutual self-interest.

⁵ Genesis 29:6.

10. Not All is Lost

But not all is lost, because Rachel arrives.

At this juncture the Torah pointedly states: “Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she was the shepherdess.”⁶

It is worth noting that the others present there – though we assume they were shepherds – are never identified as such. Only Rachel is specifically and pointedly described with this title.

She is *malchut*, and she is leading the sheep to water. Her arrival reassures Jacob because he recognizes within her the nobility, dignity and spirituality are indeed present in this wrathful and corrupt place – even if trapped and concealed.

The realization that she is trapped in Charan by Laban evokes the profound empathy of Jacob.

This in turn empowers Jacob to do the impossible and roll the giant stone from the top of the well, to open the waters to the thirsty sheep.

With deep compassion, Jacob kisses Rachel and weeps.

11. Archetypes

Jacob and Rachel are archetypes and what happens between illuminates and affects our state here on earth.

Our souls, too, are trapped in our physical bodies in the exile of this universe which conceals all things spiritual and sublime.⁷ The Divine spark of the soul is in effect trapped in the narrow confines of our mundane existence, causing a profound state of spiritual and existential dissonance. The trauma of exile only worsens when we become enmeshed in narcissistic behavior and destructive patterns, which further displace our Divine soul, and, by extension, the soul’s Divine source.⁸

Rachel personifies this spiritual exile of *malchut*. This is why she paid such a high price by dying in childbirth – to be interred in a lonely wayside grave in order to bear witness to the suffering of her children. As long as her children are wandering and oppressed, Rachel cannot find any final rest and remains with them “on the road.” As the Prophet Jeremiah so poignantly said (quoting G-d): “A voice is heard in Ramah, deep lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel weeps for her children and refuses to be comforted.”⁹

⁶ Genesis 29:9.

⁷ Tanya, chapter 45.

⁸ This causes the “Exile of the *Shechinah*.”

⁹ Jeremiah 31:15.

12. Jacob's Role

And what is Jacob's role in this process?

Jacob represents compassion (*tiferet*). He arouses empathy for the soul's traumatic descent into the material universe – and his tears awaken the exiled soul from its displacement.

This is the meaning of the Torah verse, “And Jacob kissed Rachel and lifted up his voice and wept.”¹⁰

Jacob – with his supernal attribute of Divine compassion – arouses great compassion for Rachel, the source of all souls.

He lifts his voice up ... to the fount of the Higher Mercies, to the source of the Thirteen Divine Attributes of Compassion.

And he weeps to awaken and draw from there abundant compassion upon all the souls and upon their source ... in order to raise them from their exile and to unite them in the higher unity of the Divine light.

This union is represented by the kiss. As it is written in the *Song of Songs*: “Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth,”¹¹ in reference to the union of man with the word of G-d.

Thus we learn that by our mortal actions through our observance of G-d's commandments – in particular through the practice of charity and loving-kindness -- we unite with Divine action.¹²

13. Emulating Jacob

Simply put, Jacob's cry and kiss is a method that we can all employ when are faced with challenges which have the power to awaken us from spiritual slumber.

By pondering on the radical descent of the soul into a cruel world we can arouse a profound sense of compassion for the trapped soul. How sad it is to see a gentle soul, descend from its loftiest heights, to the nethermost depths of selfish existence, and sometimes be destroyed in the process.

We see that it works, for Jacob's compassion empowers Rachel to stand strong with her exiled children. And ultimately Rachel's tears prevail. As G-d promises through the Prophet Jeremiah:

“Your work will be rewarded, and they [your children] will return from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future. Your children will return to their own borders.”¹³

¹⁰ Genesis 29:11.

¹¹ Song of Songs 1:2.

¹² The next section is based on Tanya chapter 45.

¹³ Jeremiah 31:16-17.

14. Our Journey

We all must travel on Jacob's journey, for his journey is our journey.

Every one of our souls was sent to this earth to do exactly what our forefather Jacob did – to build a family, spread light, transform the farthest corners of the earth into a Divine home, offering warmth and comfort to all those living and passing through their land.

Life presents us with many stones – they are the obstacles and impediments to find truth and integrity ... the hearts of stone and cynicism that many people develop ... the heavy burdens in our struggle for survival that take up so much of our time and overwhelm us and don't allow us to hear our higher calling ... the hardships and setbacks that wear us down and don't allow us to access the wellspring within. But, nevertheless, we are charged with removing those stones and freeing the wellsprings of every soul that enters our sphere.

We must do this with unwavering belief and total devotion to our mission, emulating our father Jacob.

We are responsible to reveal the "Rachel" within everyone we meet, and the "well" within every aspect of our material lives. Just like our father Jacob.

And we are blessed with the protection promised to Jacob by G-d:

"I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go and bring you back to this land. I will not turn aside from you until I have fully kept this promise to you."¹⁴

15. Our Tears

And just like Jacob wept for the trapped souls, we too must cry now for the darkness that all of us can often fall into. Our tears will arouse great compassion that will evoke an unprecedented flow of Divine blessings. Tears have the power to melt even the hardest stone.

When we see people struggling and life difficulties, we ought to become more compassionate people, kinder, gentler, nicer to each other. We ought to do away with our petty rivalries, envies, insecurities and plain inertia which divides us. We should lift ourselves to a higher standard. That is our calling today.

As Rabbi Avraham Altmann, the chief rabbi of Trier, Germany, who perished in Auschwitz advised: "If no one hears the silent cry of the humiliated, the powerless, hidden victims, the Jew must hear it; that is the noble ethical significance of 'Hear O Israel.'"¹⁵

¹⁴ Genesis 28:15.

¹⁵ Full translation of Rabbi Altmann's discourse on Shema Israel is included in Jewish Values in Jungian Psychology by Rabbi Levi Meier, New York: University Press of America, 1991, chapter 3.

We face today many fears and uncertainties. People, including the leaders of our world, driven by their own interests, have contributed to creating a climate of volatility that is weakening the spirits and demoralizing the hearts of the world's citizens. Large stones indeed are covering the beauty within this world. Even when lifted, it usually is not to free the spirit, but for personal gain.

We are left with no option but to revive the Jacob within us all. Despite the heaviness of the task, it is only the power of Jacob's faith – and his ability to perceive the beauty of Rachel and the potent wellspring beneath the earth – that will allow us to eliminate all the large stones burdening society today.

The Holy Arizal says¹⁶ that the large stone covering the well refers to the big questions and dilemmas we struggle with. Jacob's rolling the stone off the well represents the indefatigable resources of the soul that lifts and shatters the greatest obstacles with its persistent pursuit of clarity and truth. And that is a sign of the end of days.¹⁷

As [many of] you know, I just returned from an exhilarating weekend with my fellow colleagues/shluchim at the annual Shluchim Conference in New York. Words elude me to describe the sheer power of celebrating together with over 5500 of our friends at the Kinus and banquet. We kissed and we wept together – and at that moment we all felt that nothing is impossible. I return here this week totally reenergized, empowered and transformed, and am committed – together with all of you – to carry this energy and strength into all that we do, ready to take on new initiatives and overcome any challenges, knowing that with love and empathy we can lift the heaviest stones.

The various talks delivered at the conference all captured the essential responsibility of each and every one of us – to love and care about every Jew, and to empower every person we meet to live up to their greatest potential.

When Jacob our forefather lifted the stone off the well, and did so with love and empathy, he instilled in all of us the power to lift the layers that conceal the deep reservoirs within every soul. And with our love and tears for our fellow's soul, we too can remove all obstacles and finally bring personal and global redemption with the end of galut.

May that end be now. Amen.

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16 Sefer Halikkutim on this week's Parsha, Vayeitzei.

17 Yaakov is so named because he grasped the eikev (heel) of Esau. Eikev alludes to ikvesa de'meshicha, the heels of Moshiach, meaning the days just before – on the heels – of the Messianic age.