

# Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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## Chapter VI: Toldot (Gen. 25:19-28:9)

### Essay 16. Learning Torah is greater than honoring one's parents

**מגילה** סוף פרק קמ"א אמר ר' יצחק בר מרתא משמיה דרב גדול תלמוד תורה יותר מכבוד אב ואם, שכל י"ד שנים שהיה יעקב בבית עבר לא נענש עליהם וכו' עכ"ל. והקשה מהרש"א דלמה נענש גם על אותם כ"ב שנים והלא ברשות אביו ואמו הלה שם ובמצותן ומסתמא מחלו על כבודם. וכל המפרשים נתנו בזה טעמים לשבח, ולדין קושיא מעיקרא ליתא, שהרי יעקב לא ישב אצל לבן אלא מחמת היראה שהיתה לו ולאמו מעשו.

Tractate **Megillah, the end of the first chapter (16b):** “**Rabba said that Rav Yitzchak bar Shmuel bar Marta said in the name of Rav: Learning Torah is greater than honoring one’s father and mother, that for all those 14 years that our father Jacob spent in the house of Eber [learning Torah], he was not punished [for having neglected to honor his parents].**”<sup>1</sup> Tractate Megillah analyzes a number of verses and calculates that Jacob was away from home for a total of 36 years: 14 years learning Torah in the house of Eber, 20 years working for Laban, and another two years tarrying on his way home. Megillah 17a quotes a Baraita noting that just as Jacob was separated from Isaac for [the latter] 22 years, so Joseph would be separated from Jacob for 22 years. The implication is that Jacob was not punished for his 14 years in the house of Eber, but he was punished measure-for-measure for the 22 years additional years he was absent from Isaac.

**The Maharsha<sup>2</sup> questions why he was punished for the 22 years, for didn’t he go there, to Haran, with the permission of his father and his mother, and by their command, and presumably they forgave any slight to their honor by his absence.**

**All the commentators gave helpful reasons, and for us there is no difficulty from the outset, for Jacob only stayed with Laban because of his and his mother’s fear of Esau.** As it is written, “When the words of her older son Esau were reported to Rebecca, she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, ‘Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Now, my son, listen to me. Flee at once to Haran, to my brother Laban’ ” (Gen. 27:42-43).

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<sup>1</sup> Our modern Vilna edition omits the words “in the name of Rav,” but they are present in many of the older editions and manuscripts, per <https://bavli.genizah.org>. All editions include the words “Rabba said” and “bar Shmuel.”

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Eidels (1555–1631), Polish rabbi famous for his Talmud commentaries, Chiddushei Halachot and Chiddushei Agadot.

אָבֶל אָבִיו לֹא צִוָּה לֹו אֶלָּא לְלַקֵּחַ שָׁם וְלִיקַח לֹו מִשָּׁם אִשָּׁה כְּדִי שְׁלֹא יִקַּח מִבְּנוֹת כְּנָעַן. וְאִין הָכִי נָמִי שְׁהִיָּה כְּדַעְתּוֹ שִׁיחְזוֹר מִיָּד, וְאָף עַל פִּי שְׁרַבְקָה אִמְרָה לֹו "וְיִשְׁבֶּת עִמּוֹ יָמִים אֲהָדִים עַד אֲשֶׁר־תִּשְׁוֶב חַמַּת אַחִיךָ", הֲלֹא כְּשֶׁדִּבְרָה רַבְּקָה אֶל יִצְחָק עַל הַלִּיכַת יַעֲקֹב לֹא אִמְרָה לֹו אֶלָּא "קִצְתִּי בְּחַיֵּי מִפְּנֵי בְּנוֹת חַת", וְלֹא הִגִּידָה לֹו שְׁהִיָּתָה רוֹצֶה לְהַכְרִיחוֹ מִיִּרְאַת עֵשָׂו.

**But his father only commanded him to go there and to take a wife from there, in order that he not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.<sup>3</sup> It's indeed so that [Isaac] was thinking that [Jacob] would return immediately. Even though Jacob's mother, Rebecca, said to him, "Stay with him a few days, until your brother's fury subsides" (Gen. 27:44), when Rebecca spoke with Isaac about Jacob's trip, she only said to him, "I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?" (Gen. 27:46)? She didn't tell him that she wanted [Jacob] to flee out of fear of Esau.**

וְאִם כֵּן, יַעֲקֹב לֹא הִיָּה לֹו רְשׁוֹת מֵאָבִיו לְהִתְעַכֵּב שָׁם, וְאָף עַל פִּי שְׁהִיָּה לֹו צִוּוּי מֵאָמוֹ אִינוֹ מוֹעִיל פְּלוּם מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוּא וְאָמוֹ חֲטִיבִים בְּכִיבוֹד אָבִיו. וְאָף לְשׁוֹן הַבְּרִייתָא דְאִיתָא הַתָּם דְּנָקָא הָכִי, דְּתַנִּי יוֹסֵף פִּירֵשׁ מֵאָבִיו כ"ב שָׁנָה כְּשֶׁם שִׁיעֲקֹב פִּירֵשׁ מֵאָבִיו כ"ב שָׁנָה, דְּנָקָט אָבִיו דְּנָקָא, לְפִי שֶׁמֵאָמוֹ הִיָּה לֹו רְשׁוֹת לְהִתְעַכֵּב וּבִשְׁבִיל זֶה לֹא הִיָּה נֶעְנָשׁ.

**If so, Jacob did not have permission from his father to linger there, and even though he had a command from his mother, it does not help, because he and his mother must both honor his father.<sup>4</sup> Even the language of the Baraita brought there in Megillah 17a supports this, that Joseph was away from his father for 22 years, just as Jacob was away from his father for 22 years. I.e., as noted above, that Jacob was punished for his absence of 22 years from Isaac, by having his favorite son, Joseph, being absent from him for 22 years. [The Baraita] states "his father" specifically, rather than mentioning that Jacob was away from both parents, because he had permission from his mother to linger there in Haran, and because of this he was not punished for failing to respect his mother. He was only punished for failing to respect his father.**

וְעוֹד יֵשׁ לֹו מֵר שְׁלֹא דִי שְׁבָאֵלוֹ הַכ"ב שָׁנָה לֹא קָיָם מִצְוַת כְּבוֹד לְאָבִיו אֶלָּא אֲדַרְבָּא זְלוֹל בְּכַבוֹדוֹ, שְׁהָרִי עַל מַה שֶׁפִּרֵּשׁ רַש"י בְּפֶרֶשׁת וַיִּשְׁלַח, "גְּרַתִּי" לֹא נֶעֱשִׂיתִי שֶׁר וְחָשׁוֹב אֶלָּא גֵר. אִינְדָּה כְּדָאִי לְשׁוֹא אוֹתִי עַל הַבְּרָכוֹת וְכו' שְׁבִרְכֵנִי "הָיָה גְבִיר" לֹא נִתְקַיְמָה בִּי. הַקּוֹשֶׁה הַשְּׁפִתִי חֲכָמִים שְׁנָהוּ כְּמוֹ זְלוֹל בְּכַבוֹד אָבִיו לֹו מֵר שֶׁהַבְּרָכוֹת שְׁלוֹ, שְׁהִיָּה אָדָם גְּדוֹל, לֹא יִתְקַיְמוּ וְעִי"שׁ.

**It can be said that it's not enough that in those 22 years, he did not fulfill the mitzvah of honoring one's father, but rather to the contrary, he disregarded his honor, for we have what Rashi interpreted in parshat Vayishlach (Gen. 32:5). Rashi interpreted, "I stayed with Laban until now": I have become neither a prince nor other person of importance, but merely**

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 28:1-2.  
<sup>4</sup> Kiddushin 31a: "The son of one widow asked Rabbi Eliezer: Father says, 'Give me water to drink', and Mother says, 'Give me water to drink,' which of them [should I honor] first? He said to him: Set [aside] the honor of your mother, and perform the honor of your father, as you and your mother are [both] obligated in the honor of your father. He came before Rabbi Yehoshua and [asked him the same question], he said this [same answer] to him."

a foreigner. It is not worth your while to hate me on account of the blessings of your father who blessed me, ‘Be master over your brethren’ (Gen. 27:29), for it has not been fulfilled in me.” The Siftei Chachamim,<sup>5</sup> in the name of the Gur Aryeh,<sup>6</sup> questions this, that this was a disparagement of the honor of his father, who was a great man, to say that his blessings would not be fulfilled, and see there.

ואף אנו נאמר שכל עוד שיעקב נתעַבב בבית לבן פדי שעשו לא יתקנו זהו זלזול בברכות של אביו, שהרי אם הברכות שלו ראיות להתקיים אי אפשר שעשו יתקנו והיה לו לתזור, שבנדאי הברכות של יצחק לא היו חוזרות ריקם. וזה יהיה הטעם שרבקה לא רצתה לומר ליצחק טעם זה על שליחות יעקב לחרו, מפני שבזה היתה מזלזלת בכבודו של יצחק, ומשום הכי אמרה "קצתי בחיי" וכו'.

We can also say that as long as Jacob delayed in Laban’s house so that Esau would not kill him, this disparaged the blessings of his father, for if his blessings are fit to be realized, it’s impossible that Esau would kill him, and he should return home. For certainly the blessings of Isaac would not prove ineffective. This would be the reason that Rebecca did not want to tell Isaac the reason for sending Jacob to Haran, because doing so would be a disparagement of the honor of Isaac, and because of this, she said, “I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?”

אלא דעדיין קשה דאין זה זלזול כלל בכבודו של יצחק, דהא קיימא לו היכא דשכים הניקא אין סומכין על הנס. ויעקב לא היה ראוי ליענש כלל, שהרי מוכרח במעשיו היה לברוח מפני סכנת נפשו שלא יתקנו עשו. ואיך תיסק אדעתין שיענש אף על י"ד שנים בבית עבר? ואיך מוכח נמי מהכא דגדול תלמוד תורה, ומפל שפן לפי מה שכתב מהרש"א שלאחר י"ד שנים נתקררה דעתו של עשו וכו'?

But it is still difficult to say that it is at all a disregarding of the honor of Isaac, for don’t we say, “In a place where danger is commonplace, we shouldn’t rely upon a miracle”?<sup>7</sup> Jacob did not deserve to be punished at all, for he was compelled by his actions to flee from the danger to his life, so that Esau would not kill him. How would it enter your mind that he would be punished for the 14 years in the house of Eber learning Torah? How is it also proven from here, that he wasn’t punished for those 14 years, that learning Torah is great. In any event, according to what the Maharsha wrote, after 14 years, Esau’s emotions cooled down, so it does at least make sense that Jacob was punished for the following 22 years.

<sup>5</sup> Shabbetai Bass (1641–1718), author of the Siftei Chachamim (composed c. 1660–80), a supercommentary on Rashi.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (d. 1609) (“Maharal of Prague”), Gur Aryeh al haTorah (Prague 1578), a supercommentary on Rashi.

<sup>7</sup> Pesachim 8b.

וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּיִשְׁבֵּי הַיְשִׁיבָה הַזֶּה, וְשָׁהָה לֹא בֵּית הַמְדַרְשׁ כְּמוֹ שְׁהָיָה לְעֵבֶר. וּמִפְּנֵי פֶחַד עֵשָׂו, הָיָה יָכוֹל לְהַטְמִין עַצְמוֹ בְּבֵית מְדַרְשׁוֹ שֶׁל יִצְחָק אָבִיו, וְשֶׁבְּדַאי עֵשָׂו לֹא יִמְיָחֵנוּ שָׁם, כְּמוֹ שְׁנִטְמָן בְּבֵית מְדַרְשׁוֹ שֶׁל עֵבֶר, וְהָיָה מְרוֹיֵחַ אֶף מִצְנוֹת כְּבוֹד אָב. וּמִשּׁוֹם הַכִּי, סָלְקָא דְעֵתָהּ שְׁהָיָה רְאוּי לְעוֹנֵשׁ. וְהָא דְלֹא נְעֻנְשׁ, מִשּׁוֹם דְּאִי נְמִי הָיָה הוֹלֵךְ שָׁם סוּף סוּף לֹא הָיָה יָכוֹל לְקַיֵּים מִצְנוֹת כְּבוֹד אָב, שְׁהָרִי הַתְּלַמוּד תּוֹרָה גְּדוֹל מְכַבֵּד אָב, וְאִין לֹא רְשוּת לְהַפְסִיק מְלִימוּדוֹ בְּשִׁבְלֵי לְקַיֵּים מִצְנוֹת אָבִיו וְאִמוֹ, וְלֹא הָיָה מוֹעִיל כְּלוּם לְמִצְנוֹת אָבִיו וְאִמוֹ, וּמוֹכַח שֶׁפִּיר מְכַאן דְּתְלַמוּד תּוֹרָה גְּדוֹל מְכַבֵּד אָב וְאִם.

**It can be said that it's said in tractate Yoma (28b) and it's also brought by the Maharsha there, that our father Isaac was old and was sitting in Yeshiva, that he had a study hall as Eber had. Because of the fear of Esau, [Jacob] could have hidden himself in the study hall of his father Isaac, for surely [Esau] wouldn't have put him to death there, just as he would be safe from Esau while hidden in the study hall of Eber.**

**Also, if he had learned in his father's study hall, instead of going to the study hall of Eber, [Jacob] would have profited also from the mitzvah of honoring one's father, as he would have been living near to him and would have had time to serve him. Because of that, because he instead left and went to learn with Eber, it might enter your mind that he would be deserving of punishment. But he wasn't punished, because if he had gone there, to his father's study hall, in the end he would not have been able to fulfill the mitzvah of honoring one's father. For learning Torah is greater than honoring one's father, and he would not have had permission to stop his learning in order to fulfill the mitzvah of honoring his father and his mother; and thus we see that going to his father's study hall would not have benefited him at all in the mitzvah of honoring his father and mother.**

**It's nicely proven from here that learning Torah is greater than the honor of one's father and mother.**

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