

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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Chapter VII: Vavetzei (Gen. 28:10-32:3)

Essay 20. Discipline and encouragement of a wife and child

מדרש "וניקם יעקב וישא את-בניו ואת-נשיו" וכו', אומר ר' יוחנן כתיב "לב חכם לימינו ולב כסיל לשמאלו". "לב חכם לימינו" זה יעקב "וישא את-בניו ואת-נשיו", "ולב כסיל לשמאלו" זה עשו "וניקח עשו את-נשיו . . . ואת-בנותיו" וכו' עכ"ל. צריך ביאור מה ענין פסוק זה ד"לב חכם" לכאן.

There is a **midrash** (Gen. Rabbah 74:5): “**Jacob rose, and lifted up his children and wives upon camels**’ (Gen. 31:17). **Rabbi Yochanan said: It is written, ‘A wise man’s heart [tends] toward the right hand, a fool’s heart [tends] toward the left hand’** (Eccl. 10:2). [I.e., a wise man is more likely to have the good inclination, while a fool is more likely to have an evil inclination.] **‘A wise man’s heart [tends] toward the right hand,’ this is Jacob, [he] lifted up his children and his wives.’ ‘A fool’s heart [tends] toward the left hand,’ this is Esau, ‘Esau took his wives, his sons, and his daughters, and all the members of his household, his cattle and all his livestock, and all the property that he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land because of his brother Jacob.’** (Gen. 36:6).”

This requires investigation what relevance this verse Gen. 31:17 has to the verse, “A wise man’s heart.”

ויש לומר דאיתא בגמרא יצר תינוק אשה תהא שמאל דוחה וימין מקרבת. ואשה פרש רש"י ו"ל להרבות עמה תשמיש. ויעקב היה דוחה בשמאל, "וישא את-בניו", ואחר כך מקרבן בימין, ו"את-נשיו" וכו', אמנם עשו לא היה דוחה כל עקר.

It can be said that it’s brought in a Gemara: “It is taught [in a Baraita] that Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: [Regarding man’s] inclination, [the] child, [and the] woman, the left hand should repulse [them] and the right [hand should] draw them near.”¹ Regarding man’s inclination, his impulses, he should not reject them entirely, but should channel them for the good. Regarding a child or wife who sins, he should discipline or reprove them, and not immediately draw them too near him, lest they lead him to sin. But on the other hand, he should not be too strict with them, lest he cause them to abandon the path of righteousness. Rather, he should try to help them also channel their evil inclination in a positive direction. **Rashi, of blessed memory, interprets** the word “inclination” in this context as **“to have more marital relations with her.”**

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¹ Sanhedrin 107b; Sotah 47a.

That is, one should push away the evil inclination to overindulge in marital relations, but should then pull it back the urge with the right hand, with holiness, to engage in marital relations at the appropriate times. Sanhedrin 64a relates that the men of the Great Assembly “prayed for mercy concerning the inclination for sin.” As a result, no chicken laid an egg for three days. They realized that the world could not survive with no inclination, so they instead prayed that it should be tempered.²

Jacob repulsed with his left hand, “and lifted up [וַיִּשָּׂא] [va’yisa] his children,” and afterward drew them near. “And his wives,” etc. That is, the word *va’yisa* can have many meanings, including, “lift up,” “to take,” “to take away,” etc. Thus, it can be interpreted as, “He took away his children, i.e. repulsed them gently if they sinned, but then drew them back warmly, so that they would understand that it was wrong to follow their evil inclination, but he wouldn’t be so strict as to chase them away. He did the same with his wives. **However, Esau didn’t repulse them at all.** The parallel text for Esau doesn’t include the word *va’yisa*, so the implication here is that he didn’t reprove his children or wives for their sins.

אי נמי בדרך אחרת, כתב השלקחן ערוך אורח חיים (סימן ר"מ סעיף ט"ו) שאין לשמש ביום יציאה לדרך, והמגן אברהם כתב עליו שאילו הם דברי הרמב"ם לא מצד הדין אלא מצד חקמת הרפואה עכ"ל. ואם כן ביום יציאת יעקב לדרך הרחיק נפשו, ונהו "לב חכם לימינו", אמנם עשו לא חש לרפואה זו וקרבים ונהו "לב כסיל לשמאלו".

Alternatively, in another way, the Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim (siman 240, se’if 15), says that one should not engage in marital relations on a day that he’s setting out on the road for a journey. The Magen Avraham³ writes (se’if katan 39) on this matter that these are the words of the Rambam,⁴ [and] they are not brought from the standpoint of law but rather from the standpoint of the wisdom of healing, as the Rambam was a renowned physician. If so, on the day that Jacob set out on the road, he distanced his wives, and this is the meaning of, “A wise man’s heart [tends] toward the right hand.” However, Esau wasn’t worried about this remedy and he drew [his wives] near, and this is the meaning of, “a fool’s heart [tends] toward the left hand.”

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² Our text of Rashi in the Vilna edition of Sotah 47a reads: “‘The inclination’—Of marital relations, we should bring it near with the right hand, so that “being fruitful and multiplying” won’t be cut off. Similarly, [regarding the] child, one [should act gently toward him] lest he flee and lose himself; and [regarding] the woman, who is easily influenced, and if he shall chase her away, she will go out [and find] a bad influence.”

³ Rabbi Abraham Abele Gombiner (c. 1635–82), Polish rabbi and Talmudist. His most famous work was Magen Avraham (Dyhernfurth, 1692), a commentary on the Orach Chayim section of the Shulchan Aruch.

⁴ See Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 4:19, “Doctors of medicine said: One in a thousand die of other diseases, and the rest of the thousand from overindulgence of sex. Therefore, must man be careful in this matter, if he desires to lead a good life. He should not yield to an urge save if his body be in good health and exceedingly vigorous . . . [N]either on the day of blood-letting nor on the day of departing for or returning from a journey; neither preceding nor following all these.”