

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter VIII: Vayishlach (Gen. 32:4–36:43)

Essay 6. The mercy of a father for his children

מדרש רבה "והוא עבר לפניהם", הָדָא הוּא דְכָתִיב "פָּרַחַם אָב עַל-בָּנָיִם" תְּנִי רַבִּי חֲזִיָּא פָּרַחַמֵּן שְׂבָאָבוֹת, וְאַיְזָהוּ רַחֲמֵן שְׂבָאָבוֹת ר' יְהוּדָה אֹמֵר זֶה אַבְרָהָם, אָמַר אַבְרָהָם "חֲלַלְתָּ לָּךְ מַעֲשֵׂת פְּדֻבָּר הַזֶּה". לֹא אָמַר יַעֲקֹב, "וְהוּא עָבַר לְפָנֵיהֶם", אָמַר טַב דִּיִּגַע בִּי וְלֹא בְהוֹן עִכ"ל. מִקְשִׁים הָעוֹלָם דְּבִשְׁלֵמָא לְלוֹי דְקָאֵמַר דִּיִּעְקֹב הוּא רַחֲמֵן עַל הַבָּנִים נִיחָא, אָמְנָם לֹר' יְהוּדָה דְאָמַר זֶה אַבְרָהָם מָה עָנָן זֶה לְזֶה וְהֵלֵא מַעֲשֵׂה דְסָדוֹם לֹא הָיוּ בָנָיו. וְהִיפָּהּ תּוֹאֵר תִּירַץ דְכָל שְׂפֹן הוּא, דָּאֵם עַל אֵלֶּה שְׂלֵא הָיוּ בָנָיו בְּקִשׁ עֲלֵיהֶם וְהִנֵּה רַחֲמֵן עֲלֵיהֶם, מִכָּל שְׂפֹן אֵילֵוּ הָיוּ בָנָיו.

There is a **Midrash Rabbah** on the verse describing the meeting between Jacob and Esau: **“He went on ahead of them** and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother.”¹

This is the meaning of what is written: “As a father has mercy upon [his] children, so has the L-rd shown mercy to those who fear Him.”² Rabbi Chiya taught: G-d’s mercy is like the most merciful of the patriarchs. Which is the most merciful of the patriarchs?

Rabbi Yehuda said: This is Abraham. Abraham said [regarding G-d’s plan to destroy Sodom]: **“Far be it from You to do a thing like this.”³**

Rabbi Levi said: [The most merciful of the patriarchs is] Jacob, [for when the verse said] “he went on ahead of them” [i.e., his family], he said, it is preferable that [Esau] harm me and not them.

- Gen. Rabbah 78:8

The world asks that granted, in explaining the verse, “As a father has mercy upon [his] children,” **it is fine for the Midrash to quote Rabbi Levi saying that Jacob was showing mercy on his children**, and to provide as proof the verse that Jacob went on ahead of his family. **But [regarding] the alternate view of Rabbi Yehuda saying Abraham was the most merciful, what is the connection between this** verse, “As a father has mercy upon [his] children and Sodom, as the incident with Sodom didn’t involve [Abraham’s] children. **The Yafeh To’ar⁴ resolves this,**

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¹ Gen. 33:3.

² Ps. 103:13.

³ Gen. 18:25.

⁴ Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac Ashkenazi Jaffe (1525–95), *Yafeh To’ar* (Venice 1597).

that if for these who were not his children, [Abraham] requested mercy upon them, even more so he would have acted thus if they had been his children.

ולדין נראה דלא קשי מידי, דאף מעשה דסדום היו נקראים בניו, שְהָרִי פֶּרֶשׁ רִשׁ"י על הפסוק "המכסה אני מאברהם", קראתי אותו "אב־המון גוים" ועקשיו אכרית את הבנים ולא אודיע לאב שהוא אוהבי עכ"ל. וְשִׁפִּיר מִיַּתִּי רְאֵהָ עַל הַפְּסוּק "כְּרַחֵם אֱב" מאברהם בסדום, שְהָרִי הָיוּ חֲשׁוּבִים בְּנָיו.

For us, it appears that [the question] is not difficult at all, for even in the incident of Sodom, they are called his children. That is, on the verse, “Now the L-rd had said, ‘Should I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,’”⁵ Rashi explained that G-d was saying: “I called him ‘father of a multitude of nations,’⁶ shall I now destroy the children without informing the father, who loves Me?”⁷ It’s fine that it’s bringing a proof on the verse “As a father has mercy upon [his] children” from Abraham regarding Sodom, for they were considered his children.

אֵלָּא, אִי קִשְׁיָא, הָא קִשְׁיָא, אִיךְ נִרְאָה מִמְעֶשֶׂה אֲבִרְהָם בְּסֻדוֹם שִׁיְהִיָּה מְחַמֵּת רַחֲמָנוּת, וְהֵלָּא אֲבִרְהָם לֹא תָבַע אֵלָּא בְּמִדַּת מִשְׁפָּט, כְּדִכְתִּיב "חֲלֵלָה לָךְ מַעֲשֵׂת" וְכוּ' "לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע . . . הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ" וְכוּ'. וּבְדִקְדוּק אַחַר עַל הַפְּסוּק יְתוּרֵץ הַכֹּל, שְהָרִי אֲבִרְהָם לֹא תָבַע אֵלָּא מִמִּדַּת מִשְׁפָּט, וְהַמִּשְׁפָּט הוּא שֶׁהַצְּדִיק יִחְיֶה וְהַרָשָׁע יָמוּת, הַשִּׁיב לוֹ הַקַּב"ה "אִם־אֲמַצָּא בְּסֻדוֹם חַמְשִׁים צְדִיקִים . . . וְנִשְׂאֵתִי לְכָל־הַמָּקוֹם בְּעִבּוּרָם." וְכִי כֹּה הוּא הַדִּין שֶׁבְּשִׁבְלֵי הַצְּדִיק יִחְיֶה הַרָשָׁע, וְאִם אֲבִרְהָם תָּבַע שֶׁהַצְּדִיק לֹא יִהְיֶה כְּרָשָׁע מִצַּד מִדַּת הַמִּשְׁפָּט מִמִּילָא גִשְׁמַע שְׂאֵף הַרָשָׁע לֹא יוּכַל לְהִיּוֹת כְּצְדִיק.

Rather, if there is a difficulty, this is the difficulty: How does it appear from the incident of Abraham with Sodom that [his actions] would be done out of mercy, for didn't Abraham only make demands based upon the law, as it is written, “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”⁸ In another precise analysis on the verse, everything will be resolved, for Abraham did only make demands based upon the law, and per justice, the righteous man will live and the wicked man will die. The Holy One, Blessed be He, answered him, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.”⁹ But is this justice, that because of the presence of a righteous man, the wicked will live? If Abraham made demands that from the viewpoint of justice, the righteous should not be [punished with death] like the wicked, it sounds like if one followed the same application of justice, that even the wicked should not be [rewarded with life] like the righteous.

⁵ Gen. 18:17.

⁶ Gen. 17:5.

⁷ Rashi on Gen. 18:17.

⁸ Gen. 18:25.

⁹ Gen. 18:26.

אֵלָא וְדַאי צָרִיךְ לִזְמַר דְּבִשְׁלָמָא אִם הַצְדִּיק יָמוּת עִם הַרְשָׁע אִז אִין מִשְׁפֵּט אַבְל אִם הַרְשָׁע יִחְיֶה עִם הַצְדִּיק אִז יֵשׁ מִשְׁפֵּט, לְפִי שְׁלֵגְבֵי מְדוּתָיו שֶׁל הַקַּב"ה כְּתִיב "וְרַחֲמֵי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֲרַחֲמֶם". וּפִירְשׁוּ רַב"ל אֶף עַל פִּי שְׂאִינוּ הֶגְוֵן אֶף עַל פִּי שְׂאִינוּ כְּדַאי, וְכִשְׁתַּבַּע אַבְרָהָם מֵהַקַּב"ה שְׂאִינוּ מִשְׁפֵּט לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם רְשָׁע, עַל כְּרַחֲמֵךְ לִזְמַר שְׁתַּבִּיעַתוֹ נִמְי הַיְהוָה שְׂאִם יֵשׁ צְדִיקִים שְׂיִהְיוּ נִיצוּלִים אֶף הַרְשָׁעִים וְלִפִּי מִדְּתוֹ תִּירֵץ לוֹ הַקַּב"ה "אִם־אֶמְצָא בְּסֹדֶם" וְכוּ', וְלִכּוֹן שְׁפִיר קְאָמַר ר' יְהוּדָה "כְּרַחֲמֶם אָב" זֶה אַבְרָהָם, שְׁתַּבַּע שְׁהַקַּב"ה יִרַחֲמֶם עָלֵיהֶם אֶף עַל פִּי שְׂאִינֶם הֶגְוִינִים אִם יִמְצָאוּ עִמָּהֶם צְדִיקִים.

Rather, it should surely be said that if the righteous man dies with the wicked man, then there is no justice, but if the wicked man lives with the righteous man, then there is justice. This is according to what is written about the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He, “and I will show mercy to whom I show mercy.”¹⁰ The rabbis of blessed memory explained, that G-d may choose to show mercy to someone even though that he is not worthy, even though he’s not deserving. Thus, when Abraham asserted to the Holy One, Blessed be He, that it’s not justice to kill the righteous man with the wicked man, you must necessarily say that this claim of Abraham is also that if there are righteous men present, that even the wicked ones should be saved. Because of his attribute of mercy, the Holy One, Blessed be He, replied to him, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous, within the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” Therefore, it’s fine that Rabbi Yehuda said, “ ‘As a father has mercy upon [his] children,’ this is Abraham,” for he claimed that the Holy One, Blessed be He, should have mercy upon them even if they were not deserving, it He would find some righteous among them.

וְעַדִּין צָרִיךְ לְדַקְדַּק בְּמַאי פְּלִיגִי, וּמַאי נִפְקָא מִינָה אִם "כְּרַחֲמֶם אָב" יְהוָה נְאָמַר עַל אַבְרָהָם אוֹ עַל יַעֲקֹב. וְיֵשׁ לִזְמַר דְּר' יְהוּדָה לֹא בְּעֵי לְמִילָף מִיַּעֲקֹב, דְּשְׂאִנֵּי הָתָם שְׁהַבְּנִים הָיוּ נִקְיִים מְכַל חַטָּא שְׁהָרִי רוּבָם כְּכוּלָם עַדִּין לֹא הִגִּיעוּ לְעוֹנַת חַיִּיב מִצְוֹת דְּהִינּוּ לִי"ג שָׁנִים, וְאִם יֵשׁ לְתַלוּת אֵיזָה חַטָּא אִינוּ אֵלָא בְּיַעֲקֹב, כְּמוֹ שְׁפָרַשׁ רַש"י, לְכַף אֲנִי יִרְא, שְׂמָא מִשְׁהַבְּטָחַת[נ] יִנְתַּלְקַלְתִּי בְּחַטָּא וְכוּ', וּמִשּׁוּם הַכִּי מִן הַדִּין הָיָה "לְפָנֵיהֶם" כְּדִי שְׂלֹא יִכּוּוּ בְּגַחְלָתוֹ, וְלֹא מוּכַח מֵהַכָּא דְּמִשּׁוּם רַחֲמֵנוּת עֲשָׂה כּוּ, וְלִכּוֹן הִבִּיא רַאֲיָה מֵאַבְרָהָם.

We still need to check what they disagree about, and what difference it makes if “as a father has mercy” would be said about Abraham or about Jacob. It can be said that Rabbi Yehuda didn’t want to learn from Jacob that G-d is merciful to those who fear Him, for it is different there, for the sons of Jacob were free from all sin, as most of them had not reached the time when one is liable for the commandments, which is 13 years of age. If one can attribute some sin, it is only upon Jacob, as Rashi explained, “For this reason, I am afraid: Perhaps since You made these promises to me to keep me safe, I have become depraved by sin, and this may cause me to be delivered into Esau’s power.”¹¹ Because of this belief, that the sin was his own fault and not those of his sons, according to the justice [Jacob] went “ahead of them,” in order that they wouldn’t be burned by his coals, i.e., harmed on his account. It’s not proven from here that he acted thus because of mercy, as perhaps it was only the just thing to do, because he considered himself responsible for any harm that might occur. Therefore, [Rabbi Yehuda] brings a proof from Abraham.

¹⁰ Ex. 33:19.

¹¹ Rashi on Gen. 32:11.

אָמַנְם לְוֵי סְבִירָא לִיה דְּאֶדְרַבָּא דְּנֻקָּא מִשּׁוּם רַחֲמָנוּת עֲשֵׂה כֵן לְעִבּוֹר לְפָנֵיהֶם, לְפִי שְׁהִיוּ הֵם בְּסַכְנָה יוֹתֵר מִמֶּנּוּ, וְנִלְיָף לָהּ מִדְּקָתִיב "פְּוֹיָבוֹא וְהַפְּנִי אִם עַל־בְּנִים", דְּמָהוּ "אִם עַל־בְּנִים", אֲלָא וְדָאֵי שְׁמַע מִינָהּ שְׁיַעֲקֹב הָיָה מְתִירָא פֶּן יְבוֹא עֲשׂוֹ וְיִמִּית לָאָה וּבְנֵיהָ, לְפִי שְׁהָעוֹלָם הָיוּ אוֹמְרִים שְׁנֵי בְּנִים יֵשׁ לָהּ לְרַבְּקָה וּשְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת יֵשׁ לוֹ לְלֵבָן, הַגְּדוֹלָה לְגְדוֹל, וְהַקְּטָנָה לְקָטָן. וְאִם כֵּן לָאָה הָיְתָה מְזוּמָּנֶת לְעֲשׂוֹ, אֲלָא שְׁלֵא נְתַרְצָתָהּ בּוֹ שְׁהִיתָה בּוֹכָה תְּמִיד כְּמוֹ שְׁאָמְרוּ ז"ל עַל "וַעֲיַנִּי לָאָה רַכּוֹת", וּבְדָאֵי שְׁעֲשׂוֹ הָיָה לוֹ כְּעַם עַמָּה.

However, Rabbi Levi is of the opinion that to the contrary, it is specifically because of mercy that [Jacob] acted thus to go on ahead of them, because they were in greater danger than he was. This is derived from what is written: “Deliver me, I pray Thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and strike me down, the mother with the children.”¹² For what is the meaning of “the mother with the children,” rather certainly we hear from this that Jacob was afraid lest Esau would come to kill Leah and her sons. Why would Esau do that? Because the world had said, “Rebecca has two sons, and Laban has two daughters. The eldest [daughter] should be for the eldest [son], and the younger [daughter] should be for the younger [son].” If so, Leah was designated for Esau, but she didn’t want him, as she was crying always, as [the rabbis] of blessed memory said on the verse, “Leah had weak eyes,”¹³ and certainly Esau was angry with her for having rejected him.

וְנָהוּ "פְּוֹיָבוֹא וְהַפְּנִי" דְּנֻקָּא "אִם עַל־בְּנִים" דְּהֵינּוּ לָאָה וּבְנֵיהָ, וְאֶפְלוּ הָכִי "עִבֵּר לְפָנֵיהֶם" וְאָמַר מוֹטָב דִּיגַע בֵּי וְלֵא בְּהוֹן, שְׁמַע מִינָהּ שְׁמִשּׁוּם רַחֲמָנוּת עֲשֵׂה כֵן, וְגְדוֹל רַחֲמָנוּת זֶה מְאוֹתוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם, וְעוֹד שְׁאוֹתוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם לֹא הָיָה אֲלָא לְהַצִּיל אֶת סְדוֹם מִהָעוֹנֶשׁ שְׁנִגְזַר עֲלֵיהֶם בְּבֵית דִּין שֶׁל מַעֲלָה, וְאוֹתוֹ שֶׁל יַעֲקֹב הָיָה לְהַצִּיל אֶת בְּנָיו מִרוֹגְזוֹ שֶׁל עֲשׂוֹ. נִמְצָא שְׁכַפְשָׁאֻמַר הַפְּתוּב "כְּרַחֵם אֲב" וְכו' "רַחֵם ה'" וְכו' לְדַעַת ר' לְוֵי רְצוֹנוֹ לומר שְׁהַקְּב"ה מְצִיל אֶת יְרָאֵיו אִף מִיַּד אוֹיְבֵיהֶם שְׁהֵם בְּעַלֵּי בְּחִירָה, שְׁהוּא חִידוּשׁ גְּדוֹל.

This is the meaning of “lest he come and strike me down,” not a direct attack on Jacob, but specifically “the mother with the children,” an attack on Jacob’s wife and children. Despite this fact that he wasn’t the primary target, “he went on ahead of them,” and he said, it is preferable that he harm me and not them. We hear from this that it was because of mercy that he acted thus, and this mercy is greater than that of Abraham.

Also, that mercy of Abraham was only to save Sodom from the punishment that was decreed upon them from the Heavenly court. In contrast, that mercy of Jacob was to save his children from the anger of Esau, a human being. It’s found that when Scripture said, “As a father has compassion for his children, so the L-rd has compassion for those who fear Him,” that according to Rabbi Levi, it means that the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves those who fear Him even from the hand of their human enemies, who have free will. This is a great novelty, that G-d will (at times) interfere with the desire of our enemies to harm us.

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¹² Gen. 32:11.

¹³ Gen. 29:17; Bava Batra 123a.