



## משאלת לב The Heart's Desire

### ■ Yaakov's Vow

As the weekly Torah portion of Vayetze begins, Yaakov Avinu is running away to Haran to find a wife and escape from Esav. He stops to sleep for the night, and dreams an amazing dream: He sees a ladder connecting the earth with the heavens, angels of G-d ascending and descending, and the entire scene crowned by these Divine words:

וְהִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי עֹמֵד וְשֹׁמְרֵתִיךָ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ אֶל הָאָדָמָה הַזֹּאת  
כִּי לֹא אֶעְזָבְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם עָשִׂיתִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ.

*I will be with you and protect you wherever you go, and I will return you to this land. For I shall not leave you until I have fulfilled my promise to you.* (B'reshit 28, 15)

Yaakov awakens from his dream, in total awe of what he has been shown. With the abrupt and excited realization that he is standing at the “*gates of heaven*” (verse 17), he turns to G-d in prayer and makes the following vow:

אִם יְהִי אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי וְשֹׁמְרֵנִי בַדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ וְנָתַן לִי לֶחֶם  
לֶאֱכֹל וּבִגְד לְלַבֵּשׁ, וְשָׁבְתִי בְשָׁלוֹם אֶל בֵּית אָבִי וְהָיָה ה' לִי לֵאלֹהִים.

*If G-d will be with me and will protect me along my journey, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and I return safely to my father's house, and Hashem will be my G-d – then...*

וְהָאֶבֶן הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַתִּי מִצְבָּה יְהִי בֵּית אֱלֹהִים  
וְכָל אֲשֶׁר תִּתֶּן לִי עֹשֶׂר אֶעֱשֶׂרְנוּ לָךְ.

*this stone that I have placed as a monument will be a House of G-d, and all that You give me, I will tithe to You.* (verses 20-22)

Let us compare Hashem's promise and Yaakov's subsequent vow:

G-d said: *I will be with you,*

Yaakov said: *If G-d will be with me...*

G-d said: *I will protect you wherever you go,*

Yaakov said: *if G-d will protect me along my journey...*

G-d said: *For I shall not leave you,*

Yaakov said: *if G-d will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear...*

G-d said: *I will return you to this land*

Yaakov said: *If I return safely to my father's house...*

Yaakov repeats G-d's promise to him nearly word for word, with the addition of the word "*if*". Hashem has just promised Yaakov a series of benefits, and he says, "*If* you fulfill Your word..." Does Yaakov harbor doubts as to whether Hashem can or will fulfill his promise? Does he not know that G-d's word is true and everlasting?

To truly understand Yaakov's prayer, we must delve into the following, far-reaching question: Is there a limit to the extent of abundance and goodness for which we may ask in our prayers? May we ask Him for anything in the world, or is there a point at which our requests are considered chutzpah?

The answer can be found in the Psalm we recite every Thursday as the *Shir Shel Yom*, the Song of the Day: הִרְחֹב פִּי וַאֲמַלְאֵהוּ, ***Open your mouth wide and I will fill it*** (Psalms 81,11). This special expression means that G-d Himself turns to us and says: "Ask of Me anything your heart desires; don't skimp and don't be bashful, and I will fulfill your desires." We need not hesitate when making requests of G-d.

But on the other hand, we have evidence that King David himself, the author of Psalms, took a different approach in his own prayers. After receiving a Divine promise that his kingdom over Israel would remain forever in his family, and would never be upstaged by another as happened to his predecessor Sha'ul, David thanks G-d and prays as follows: "***May Your servant be blessed forever from Your blessing***" (Shmuel II 7,29). This is a request of great modesty and humility, as if to say: Would that I be blessed at least "***from Your blessing***" – even if only a small portion thereof.

The same approach is found in the beginning of this same prayer, when King David came before Hashem and said: "***Who am I, G-d, and what is my***

*family, that You have brought me to this point?"* (verse 18) That is to say: "By what merit do I deserve such an exalted promise, when I know myself that I am not deserving of it?" We thus learn from King David to approach G-d with great modesty and humility, with the recognition of how small we are, and not make unlimited requests. Most obviously, G-d's ability is totally unlimited and unrestricted, but for our own character development, it is crucial that we distance ourselves from arrogance and the desire to acquire more and more.

The contradiction between these approaches is thus quite apparent, and leaves us unsure as to whether we may ask for all our desires. The Talmud (B'rachot 50a) explains that the true measure of what we may ask for is whether the request is for material gains, or for spiritual acquisitions. We must be modest in our materialistic requests, while our spiritual petitions need not be restricted.

But why is this? Why is it that for this-worldly requests, we must restrain our desires, while when it comes to spirituality, we may be bold and even brazen?

### ■ A Sensitive Heart

To answer this question, let us skip to the prophetic dream of one who had just become King of Israel: "*Hashem appeared to Solomon in a night vision, and said, 'Ask: what shall I give you?'*" (Kings I 3,5)

Here was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! Anything the King of Israel wanted was in reach, by express offer of the Creator of the World! The reader is now left in suspense: What will he ask for? Here is Shlomo's response:

וְנָתַתָּ לַעֲבָדְךָ לֵב שֹׁמֵעַ לְשֹׁפֵט אֶת עַמֶּךָ...

*Would that You give your servant a sensitive,  
hearing heart to judge Your nation...* (verse 9)

King Shlomo asks for nothing less than a deep, sensitive wisdom, which he will be able to use for the purpose of leading the Nation of Israel with true justice. Hashem's reaction follows immediately, with explanation: "*Since you... did not ask for long life, nor riches, nor victory in war, but just for wisdom in order to do justice, therefore:*"

הִנֵּה עָשִׂיתִי כְּדַבְּרֶךָ הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי לָךְ לֵב חָכָם וְנָבוֹן... וְגַם אֲשֶׁר לֹא שָׁאַלְתָּ  
נָתַתִּי לָךְ, גַּם עֹשֶׁר גַּם כְּבוֹד... וְאִם תֵּלֵךְ בְּדַרְכֵי לְשׁוֹמֵר חֻקֵּי וּמִצְוֹתַי כְּאֲשֶׁר  
הָלַךְ דָּוִיד אָבִיךָ וְהֶאֱרַכְתִּי אֶת יָמֶיךָ.

*I have done as you asked: I have given you wisdom... And I have also given you that which you did not request – riches and honor as well... And if you walk in My ways and keep My laws as your father David did, I will grant you long life as well.”* (verses 12-14)

Hashem's response is certainly a very positive one, yet it arouses many questions:

1. Why did King Shlomo's request for wisdom find such favor in G-d's eyes?
2. Would it have been wrong of him to ask for long life, riches or honor? Is not victory in war an existential national need?
3. By asking for wisdom, wasn't Shlomo also secretly requesting riches, honor and glory?
4. Why did the king receive also that which he did not request, namely, riches and honor?
5. And if he is already receiving unasked-for gifts, why was one of them - long life - granted him only on condition that he follow G-d's ways?

### ■ His Will, Your Will

These questions lead us to a famous Mishna in Pirkei Avot, which states:

**“Make G-d's will like your will, in order that He may make your will like His.”** (Chapters of the Fathers 2,4)

What this means is as follows: Study what G-d wants, and based on this, develop and build your own desires. If you do so, G-d will build His will based on what you want.

With this understanding in mind, King Shlomo turns to Hashem and says:

“Your Will, G-d, is my will. My request for wisdom is solely to have the means by which to fulfill Your desire and the national mission with which You have charged me. You have entrusted me with the mission of leading the Nation of Israel, a wise people. I ask you to please grant me the wisdom and understanding to fulfill my mission in the best possible way, and to lead the nation with justice and truth – and thus, fulfill Your desire.”

King Shlomo is not asking anything for his personal enjoyment or status. Whatever gifts he receives from G-d will be used only for the benefit of Israel and its national needs. It was this depth of Shlomo's request that G-d so willingly accepted – and He therefore gave him additional things for the

same purpose. Wealth and honor are vital for the King of Israel to lead his great nation, both on the home front and in its relations with other peoples.

But the gift of long life is totally different. It is more of a personal request, and Hashem grants it only conditionally. For every person is granted a certain amount of years to live on this earth. Even King Shlomo, who was destined from before his birth to be the King of Israel, was granted a particular life span – sufficiently long for him to fulfill his mission. However, if he utilizes all of his years to do what is right in G-d's eyes, then, and only then, will there be a reason to lengthen his lifetime. But there is no reason to promise as much before the time comes.

### ■ Yaakov's Dream

We have still to clarify the reason for the difference between material requests, about which one must be modest, and spiritual requests, which do not have that limitation.

Let us return to Yaakov's vow and the question we asked above: Why does it sound like Yaakov, who said to Hashem, *"If You keep Your promise,"* is not sure that Hashem will remain true to His word? Studying carefully the conditions that Yaakov listed, we notice that he added an extra one that G-d did not mention. Hashem had introduced Himself to Yaakov by saying, *"I am the G-d of your father Avraham and Yitzchak"* (B'reshit 28,13) – and Yaakov said, *"If Hashem will be with me... and if Hashem will be my G-d"* (verses 20-21).

G-d did not pledge to be G-d of Yaakov, as He promised Avraham and Yitzchak. Yaakov therefore combines all G-d's promises to him with an additional request: that all these gifts should be enwrapped in the framework of "G-d's Name upon him." Yaakov wants to reach the level on which Hashem is called "the G-d of Yaakov" as well.

We can now understand Yaakov's vow as follows: "If Your promises to me are made as the 'G-d of Yaakov,' this will obligate me to be a righteous man like my fathers. Then, only if I am deserving on my own merits, and not merely because I am the descendant of Avraham and Yitzchak, do I ask that You fulfill Your promises to me. In such a case, this rock that I am placing here will become a home for the service of G-d, like the Beit HaMikdash. In addition, I hereby pledge to give a tenth of all my earnings – and institute this concept for generations."

Yaakov, therefore, is not asking for food to eat, clothes to wear and Divine protection just so he will be "set up" in life. His true desire is to fulfill the mission with which Hashem has entrusted him. Let us study Yaakov's promise as written:

וְהָאֵבֶן הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר שִׁמְתִּי מִצְבָּה יְהִיָּה בֵּית אֱ-לֹהִים...

*This stone that I have placed as a monument will be  
a House of G-d...*

His plan is to render it a place of Divine worship, prayer, and the study of Torah and G-d's ways. It will be the world headquarters for the path of G-d, that of truth and justice, and a place from which to publicize and disseminate it to all.

וְכָל אֲשֶׁר תִּתֶּן לִי עֹשֶׂר אֶעֱשֶׂרנּוּ לָךְ.

*and all that You have given me, I will tithe for You.* (28,22)

"I will donate ten percent of whatever You give me," Yaakov continues, "in order to teach that whatever I have is actually from You, and that I am merely returning to You from that which You have given me." Precisely as expressed by King David: *"For everything is from You, and from Your hand we have given to You."* (Chronicles I 29,14)

This returns us to the differentiation between spiritual and materialistic requests. The above-quoted Talmudic passage tells us that we must ask one question: What is the purpose of the request? If one asks G-d for blessings whose purpose is his own physical comfort and benefit, he must be modest, keeping in mind his status relative to the rest of existence. But if he is asking for the sake of a spiritual, or communal, goal – that is, he is seeking the tools necessary to fulfill his Divinely-charged mission in life – he need feel no compunctions about asking for them without limits; it is even praiseworthy to do so.

## ■ Happy With Our Lot

Based on this, we can proceed to understand yet another pair of teachings of our Sages, regarding the age-old question, "Who is truly wealthy?" This question is asked twice in the Talmud, and receives two different answers from two different Sages.

R. Meir states in Tr. Shabbat (25b): "Who is rich? He whose riches give him pleasure." And in Pirkei Avot (4,1), R. Shimon ben Azzai teaches: "Who is rich? He who is satisfied with his lot."



At first glance, each of these definitions seems to be problematic. What does R. Meir mean by “riches that give him pleasure”? Does he mean that only one who **enjoys** his wealth is wealthy? True, one who never spends his money and leaves it in the bank forever cannot be called truly rich. But is R. Meir advising wealthy men to spend all their money on daily pleasures?

And on the other hand, what does Ben Azzai mean when he speaks of being “satisfied with one’s lot”? Should one never strive for more than he happens to have at any given time? Does he mean that it is desirable to kill all ambition and refrain from developing and advancing?

Apparently, we have not yet understood the depth of our Sages’ teachings. Let us begin with Ben Azzai: “He is rich who is satisfied with his lot.” Based on the other parts of that Mishna, it is clear that he means that one who **appreciates what he has** is thereby happy with his lot, and is truly rich.

This arouses another question: How *do* we come to an appreciation of what we have? The answer is: By giving to those who do not have. One who helps a blind man cross the street begins to appreciate his own eyes that until then he took for granted. One who helps a handicapped person go from place to place comes to recognize the value of his own legs. In both cases, the giver thus becomes “rich,” for his legs and eyes have now become more valuable to him than they were before.

This is the principle: One who gives to those who have not, becomes wealthy in that it brings him to appreciate what he has. The opposite is true as well: One who is jealous of others for having what he does not, will never properly evaluate what he does have, and will always remain “poor.”

If so, it may be asked: “Now that I appreciate what I have, why should I give it to others? I should show my appreciation by *not* giving it away! Why not keep it for myself?” The Torah warns us against such a mistake:

וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְּךָ בְּחַי וְעֶצֶם יָדַי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת הַחֵיל הַזֶּה.  
וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי הוּא הַנוֹתֵן לְךָ כֹּחַ לַעֲשׂוֹת חֵיל ...  
...*Lest you say in your heart: “My strength and power brought me this wealth.” You must remember that it is G-d Who gives us the power with which to acquire wealth.* (D'varim 8,17-18)

We must truly and deeply understand that it is G-d Who gives us our skills and potential. He grants us life, wisdom, strength, and emotions by which to act and thus accomplish. And when we thus acquire wealth, He asks that

we use what He has helped us obtain to help others. And what is the final result of this chain?

The outcome is that we will merit to rejoice in the privilege that G-d has granted us – the privilege of using our G-d-given life, strengths and wisdom to do good in the world and to help those in need. At the same time, we will also be able to appreciate all that He gave us. “He who is happy with his lot” is, accordingly, one who is happy with the talents and abilities he was given.

This, then, is the Sages’ recipe for true wealth and joy: satisfaction and pleasure with our lot, enhanced by knowing that we are using it in the prescribed manner.

Accordingly, when we strive to use increasingly more of our abilities in order to do more and accomplish more, this is certainly not negative, but rather very positive. We are simply seeking to actualize the talents and gifts that G-d gave us.

This is what the Torah means when it says:

וְשִׂמְחֶתָּ בְּכָל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּלְבֵיתְךָ  
אֲתָה וְהַלְוִי וְהַגֵּר אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ.

*You shall rejoice in all the goodness that Hashem gave you and  
your home – you, and the Levite,  
and the foreigner in your midst. (D'varim 26,11)*

