



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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The Jewish Mission

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רי מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Vayeitzei

The Jewish Mission

Good Shabbos!

In the early 1900s, there were two brothers in America named Isadore and Nathan Strauss. They were among the richest and most famous people in the United States. They founded the legendary Macy's department store chain, and also started other businesses.

They were also very involved in the community. They helped popularize the idea of drinking pasteurized milk. They believed that it was very important and healthy, and so they subsidized pasteurized milk so that people would specifically buy it. They also donated money to the poor of the Holy Land of Israel.

In the year 1912, the Strauss brothers and their wives traveled for a vacation to Europe. But while they were touring Europe, Nathan turned to his brother Isadore and said, "If we're already here, then it's worth hopping over to visit the Holy Land."

In those days, Israel wasn't the tourist hotspot that it is today. The place was plagued by diseases, poverty and starvation. But the Strauss brothers cared about their Jewish brothers living in the Holy Land, and so they decided that they would travel there to see what was happening with the charitable organizations there to which they regularly gave money—and, of course, to see the country itself.

After a stay of one week in Israel, Isadore started losing his patience. He turned to his brother Nathan and said, "How many camels, ancient sites, and yeshivos can you see already?!" It was time to go back to the U.S., he said.

But Nathan said to him, "You see how serious the situation is here? People need our help here! How can we possibly run away?" So Isadore answered, "If you care so much for them, then give them more money!" Nathan indeed agreed—but he argued that the people in Israel needed more than money. They needed their direction and their leadership.

So the brothers argued. Isadore wanted to leave but Nathan insisted on staying. Finally Isadore said to him, "Our place is in America," and he notified him that he and his wife were leaving Israel.

This was in April of 1912, over 100 years ago. So Isadore and his wife went back to Europe, traveled a bit more, and then decided to buy tickets on a ship sailing from England to the United States. Isadore also took out reservations for his brother Nathan and his wife so that they, too, could sail with them on that same voyage. Isadore telegraphed his brother to come quickly to

Europe, and that he had two guaranteed spots on the voyage departing Southampton for New York.

But Nathan still dawdled in the Holy Land, visiting more places. He also donated money to start a new settlement by the sea. Finally, he, too, left Israel. But when he got to Europe, he discovered that he was late, and that the ship had sailed for America without him.

But this wasn't any ship—as you may already know, or have already guessed, it was the legendary luxury ship known as the Titanic.

A few days later, Nathan Strauss found out what a disaster he was saved from.

From that point on, he dedicated his life to helping people, particularly those in the Holy Land. Nathan Strauss died in 1931, and for him is named the city of Natanya.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah, we also read about a Jewish man's strong desire to return to the Holy Land—and indeed, after all his difficulties, our Patriarch Yaakov (Jacob) finally succeeds in getting back to the Holy Land.

The story begins with Yaakov leaving Beer Sheva and going to a land called Charan (somewhere in modern-day Turkey), where he was to marry Rochel. So he works for her for seven years, and at the end, her father Lavan tricks him, and he ends up marrying Rochel's sister Leah. After a dispute, Lavan agrees to also give Yaakov Rochel as a wife—but not before Yaakov commits to work for seven years to get Rochel.

In the meantime, 14 years go by. Yaakov has 11 sons and one daughter, and he decides that the time has come to go back to his father's house. So he turns to Lavan and says (Bereishis 30:25), "Send me forth and I shall go to my place and my land." But then Lavan tells him, please stay with us here in Charan! I feel that all my success is in your merit. And so Yaakov gives in to his pressure, and stays in Charan.

So another six years go by. But then, Yaakov senses a change in the local political climate there. He hears Lavan's sons complaining that all of Yaakov's wealth and success in Charan is all because of their father. They claim, "Yaakov took that which is our father's." Sounds all too familiar, doesn't it? "All the money the Jew makes, he stole from us local natives." We've heard that despicable lie throughout Jewish history.

But Yaakov heard this from the sons of Lavan. From Lavan himself, he heard nothing at all. But he took note that Lavan was already not showing him a pleasant face. The very same Lavan who had begged him to stay, the same Lavan who had given Yaakov all the credit for his financial success, now suddenly was showing him a displeased countenance. As the Torah tells us, "And Yaakov saw Lavan's face, and behold, it was not with him as yesterday or the day before." Yaakov now understood that Charan was no longer a place for him, and that he needed to leave and go back to the Holy Land as soon as possible.

Yaakov knew from experience that Lavan would not let him leave Charan and would only pile problems on him. So Yaakov waited for the opportunity for Lavan to go away on business, and

then he quickly rounded up his extended family of four wives and 12 kids, together with all his livestock—it wasn't easy to "run away."

Several days later, Lavan found out that Yaakov had deserted him. So he immediately pursued him, caught up to him, and demanded to know why he had fled. Why didn't you tell me? I would have sent you off "with happiness and song, with tambourine and harp."

And we read a similar story in last week's Parshah about Yitzchak. Yitzchak came to live in a place called Grar. He settled there, dug wells, and sowed the earth. He became very successful—as the Torah tells us, "And the man grew and went forth proceeding and growing, until he had grown much." And right after that, the Torah tells us, "and the Pelishtim were envious of him." Avimelech, king of the Pelishtim, was not embarrassed to tell it to Yitzchok straight: "Go from us, for you have become much more powerful than us." So Yitzchok leaves and goes to live in Beer Sheva.

But then, Avimelech suddenly arrives with a full entourage and his top general to visit Yitzchok! So Yitzchok asks them: "Why have you come to me when you hate me and you sent me away from you?" (Bereishis 26:27).

This story, too, sounds too familiar to us Jews.

At first, they ask Jews to come to a certain country to improve the economy. Everyone knows that Jews are smart people and good businessmen. But when they succeed too much, they start getting jealous of them and claiming they make all their money off the backs of the locals—and then they kick them out of the country. And after a few years of them not being there, the economy collapses and they again chase after the Jews.

Now take a look in China. There the Jewish religion is not a legally recognized religion. The Chinese government recognizes five religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism and several other "ism"s, but Judaism isn't one of them. And so by law, it is forbidden to live life in China according to Judaism, doing mitzvos and so on.

Nevertheless, the Chinese understand that Jews are good businesspeople and that it's good for their economy to have Jews coming to China. They know that if they want Jews to come, then they need to provide them with religious services, and so they allow the Chabad shluchim to establish shuls, kosher restaurants, mikvahs and so on. But all that is on one condition—that they be for visitors, not local residents.

So currently, Jews are okay in China. But what would be in a couple of years if a few thousand Jews moved to China? The rest of that story would be predictable.

And so we can ask the question: Why indeed did Lavan run after Yaakov? And why did Avimelech go back to Yitzchok after he kicked him out of his land? And the answer might be found in the words with which Avimelech replied to Yitzchok's complaint, "you hate me," and why did you come now to me? "We have surely seen that G-d was with you."

After Yitzchok had left, the Pelishtim suddenly noticed that something was missing. They felt that they had lost a spiritual man, a man who was their moral visionary. When they found

themselves in his company, they felt a little closer to G-d, a little more human and a little less a slave to money—and it is this thing that everyone seeks in the Jew.

And this, my friend, is our mission.

We need to live in Charan, in Grar, in the United States and in China, but regardless of where in the world we live, our mission is not just to facilitate local business and economy but primarily to bring to them the Word of G-d—to tell them that there is a Creator of the Universe, to teach them that every human being, not just Jews, must pray to G-d, and to trust in Him, to love Him and to respect him. To teach them the concept of repentance, and more than anything else, to teach them that there is “an Eye that Sees, an Ear that Hears, and that all your deeds are inscribed in a book.”

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