

PARASHAS VAYISHLACH

Diminishing Returns

It was the moment of truth. After thirty-four long years, the dreaded confrontation between the brothers was about to take place. Jacob had spent all these years in self-imposed exile to avoid Esau's murderous designs, and now he was coming home with his new family and wealth, hoping that his brother's anger had subsided. But apparently, it had not. Esau had responded to the news of his brother's arrival by mobilizing his forces and marching to meet him with four hundred armed thugs.

In desperation, Jacob cries out to Hashem to save him and his family from his vengeful brother. "I am diminished by all the kindness and truth You have done for Your servant." He then goes on to recount his rise from the sad plight of a destitute fugitive to the great prince he has become.

What does he mean by the expression "I am diminished by all the kindness"? The commentators explain that all his good fortune has depleted his store of credit with Hashem, and he has little merit left to stand him in good stead.

But if so, the question immediately arises: Isn't he defeating his own purpose with this argument? On the one hand, he is calling out to Hashem for deliverance, yet on the other, he is admitting that he has no right to make such a request.

The commentators explain that when Jacob described himself as "diminished" he was not referring only to his credit with Hashem but also to himself as a person. Hashem's kindness had "diminished" him, making him feel humble and unworthy. The sudden rise in his fortunes could easily have gone to his head. Here he had been a ragged fugitive, and now he had a beautiful family, many children and spectacular wealth. He could have assumed fine airs and become arrogant and conceited, attributing his successes to his charisma and his cleverness. But he did not. On the contrary, the more Hashem gave him, the more humble he became.

This then is what he was saying to Hashem. In all these years, I have only been humbled by all You have done for me. Now, too, if You come to my assistance and deliver me from my brother, I shall not think for a moment that my battlefield prowess and fearsome reputation have saved me. I will recognize that everything is a gift from You, although I have done nothing to deserve it, and I shall become more diminished than ever.

A king sent his armies into the battlefield against his enemies. One by one, his armies were victorious. Led by able generals, the soldiers fought valiantly and not only defeated the enemies but also conquered their lands. Presently, the king realized he was amassing quite an empire, and he turned his attention to organizing his imperial government.

For grand vizier of the new empire, he decided to choose one of his generals, but which one? The competition was fierce, and many delegations appeared before the king to recommend their respective candidates.

Finally, the king chose a solid but rather undistinguished general.

“But why didn’t you choose one of the others?” asked the queen. “Surely there are a number of generals who are far more talented than he.”

“You are quite right,” said the king. “But you see, the grand vizier will accumulate a lot of power over the years. The man I chose will know that those powers came to him only because he was loyal to me, and he will become even more loyal. But those talented generals, as you call them, are already so full of themselves and their own accomplishments, they will think all that power is coming to them. Next thing you know, they’ll want my throne as well.”

In our own lives, Hashem constantly showers us with innumerable blessings, the company of our loved ones, the roof over our heads, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the ground upon which we walk, the very air we breathe. Every step we take, every sound we hear, every fragrance we sniff, every beautiful sight we behold, all these are gifts which we have not earned through any special merit of our own, yet sometimes we tend to take them for granted. In fact, some people may even be resentful that they have not received more. Such an attitude will certainly not earn us divine good will. Only by being humble and appreciative can we assure ourselves of a steady flow of blessings from Heaven.