



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

His Father's Fears

There are many ways to interpret biblical texts. Some commentaries take a literal approach, others probe for deeper meanings. The great Chassidic masters, beginning with the Baal Shem Tov in the mid-eighteenth century, offer us many examples of the latter path.

At times, the effort to discover depths of meaning results in what seems to be a distortion of the plain meaning of the text. Such seeming distortions are often referred to colloquially as “*Chassidische Torah*.” I have personally found that these efforts are very worthwhile and that the seeming distortions reveal essential hidden truths.

The collected writings of Rabbi Levi

Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740-1809) contain classic examples of *Chassidische Torah*. Almost invariably, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak diverges from the plain meaning of the text and ingeniously reinterprets the text in a manner that academicians, along with ordinary readers who prefer to read the Bible literally, find scandalous. However, his ingenuity unfailingly reveals unanticipated layers of meaning that are worthy of reflection. Some would even go so far as to maintain that this approach reveals vital truths that are utterly inaccessible were one to limit his study to the plain text itself.

Before proceeding with an example of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s brand of biblical exposition, a few words about the man and his loving personality are necessary. Legend has it that the founder of the Chassidic movement himself, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, appeared one day before his disciples with drinks and pastries, distributed them to the assembled, and told them to rejoice. They were surprised and asked for the reason for the celebration. The master explained, “A holy soul is about to descend into the world today, a soul who will see only the good in every person, and who will ardently advocate for every member of the House of Israel.” The year of that small celebration was 1740. The man about whom the master spoke was

**In beloved memory of
Sharon Tamar Horowitz z”l**

On her 47th Yahrtzeit
The first night of Chanukah
יהי זכרה ברוך

*Mina and Howard Millendorf
Sharon, Shlomo
Elior, Amiad, and Yagel Rabinowitz*

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev.

For more details, and for your inspiration, I refer you to any of the many biographies of this great “defender” of the Jewish people. But I particularly suggest two excellent biographies, one by Samuel Dresner and another by Simcha Raz.

Now, let us turn to the very first verse in this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Vayeishev* (Genesis 37:1-40:23). The verse reads, “Jacob settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan.” The Hebrew for “the land where his father had sojourned” is *b’eretz megurei aviv*. There is no dispute among the major commentators as to the meaning of those words, although some translators may substitute “had dwelled” for “had sojourned.”

Along comes Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, however, who suggests an entirely different meaning of the word *megurei*. Elsewhere in the Bible, in admittedly very different contexts, that word means “fear,” “anxiety,” perhaps even “terror.”

Consider but three examples from the book of Psalms. There, in chapter 31 verse 14, we have the phrase *magor mesaviv*, which translates as “terror on every side.” Continuing on to chapter 33 verse 8, we have the phrase “*mimenu yaguru*,” which translates as “they will dread him.” Finally, in chapter 34 verse 5, we have the phrase “*umikol megurosai hitzilani*,” which translates as “He saved me from all my terrors.”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak does not find it necessary to cite any of those verses in Psalms, for he assumes that his reader can



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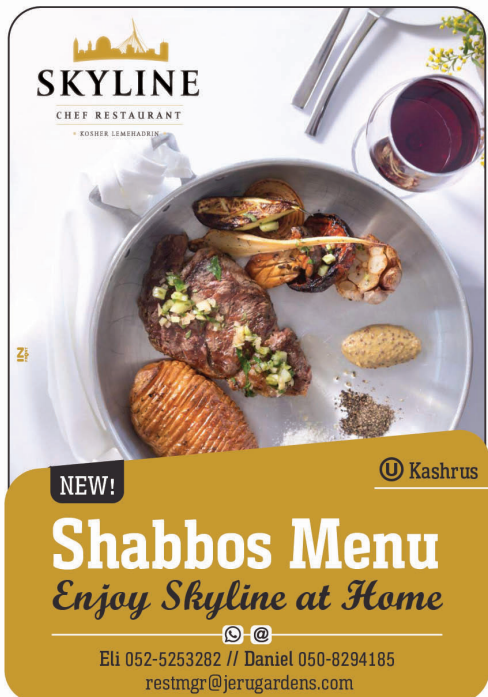
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easily come up with many other examples that support his thesis. His thesis is simple: One can easily justify the following translation of the first verse of our Torah portion: “Jacob settled in the land of his father’s fears, the land of Canaan.”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak also assumes that his reader need not be reminded of the significance of the phrase “his father’s fears.” After all, it was as recently as two weeks ago that we read in Genesis 31:53 of the oath that “Jacob swore by *Pachad Yitzchak*, the Fear of his father Isaac.” Whereas Jacob’s grandfather Abraham symbolizes lovingkindness, his father Isaac has come to represent fear and awe in the Jewish consciousness. In this week’s Torah portion, then, Jacob is returning to settle in the land where he cannot escape the attitude of fearfulness that characterized his father.

But what is the nature of his father’s fear? Was he anxious about the circumstances that confront us all? Was he fearful of his enemies, of natural disasters, of famine? Rabbi Levi Yitzchak responds to these questions with a resounding, “No.”

Isaac’s fears were of a distinctly spiritual nature. He feared that he might fall short of the Almighty’s expectations of him.

He was anxious lest he sin and, thereby, distance himself from his desired and well-earned closeness to the Almighty.

It was to those spiritual fears that Jacob was returning when he returned to his father’s land. When he was distant from his father and struggling to adjust to his father-in-law Laban’s treacheries, he could not trouble himself to be concerned about his diminished relationship with the Lord. After all, the Lord had promised him, “Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land” (Genesis 28:15). Now that he had returned to that land, he had to recover his “father’s fears.” He had to be concerned about his relationship with the Almighty and to become afraid, yes afraid, of *shemma yigrom hachet*, perhaps his sins had caused a breach in his relationship with the Lord.

The selection of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s biblical commentary that I have just shared with you, dear reader, is part of the collection of his teachings known as *Kedushat Levi*. But Rabbi Levi Yitzchak never stops with just a comment upon the biblical text. Rather, he teaches a practical lesson to his readers, a lesson aimed at connecting his reader to the Jewish people at large.

Thus, he goes on to write as follows: “For each of us must serve the Lord at every moment and every occasion, so that we always rejoice when we see that it goes well for other Jews in the world, and so that if, heaven forbid, the reverse is true, we feel the pain of others and are consciously anxious lest we have sinned and are, thereby, somehow responsible for

May the Torah learned from this issue
of Torah Tidbits be לעיני
our beloved husband and father

Micky (Michael) Klein ז"ל

מיכאל משה הכהן קליין ז"ל

on his 15th Yahrzeit

כ"ה כסלו

Dani, J.J., Sammy, Avi and Nesanel Klein

the misfortunes of others.”

Each Jew must rejoice when other Jews are fortunate and must not only suffer along with their misfortunes but must do whatever is possible to alleviate those misfortunes.

Jacob’s “father’s fears” are not mere neurotic anxieties. Rather, they are based upon a felt connection with others and an abiding concern that one’s own failures may somehow affect others in his family, others in his community, others in his nation, and others in the world.

But just feeling empathy is insufficient. We must be concerned enough to rectify our own shortcomings for the ultimate benefit of those around us.

Jacob’s return to his father’s land was not a mere geographic change of location. It was a change in his sense of responsibility for others. He would now be motivated to better himself so that others could gain from his closeness to the Almighty.

Read more about the life and works of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, and you will learn that he practiced what he preached. ■

May the Torah learned from this issue

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and great-grandmother

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