Dvar Torah Outline

Parashat Vayetzei: Jacob, Evening Prayer, and Finding God in the Darkness

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explores why Jacob established evening prayer and why that prayer was originally considered voluntary. Drawing on Rav Tzadok, he contrasts Abraham's and Isaac's relationships with God in the clarity of daylight with Jacob's ability to maintain that relationship amid spiritual darkness. The Jewish people's acceptance of evening prayer as obligatory expresses their conviction that every descendant of Jacob inherits something of his capacity to illuminate the darkness.

I

Jacob's encounter: sunset as an invitation to prayer

A. *The opening verse*

- **Genesis 28:11:** > וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיָּלֶן שָׁם כִּי בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּקַּח מֵאַבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיָּשֶׂם מְרַאֲשֹׁתָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא: > (He encountered the place and spent the night there because the sun had set. He took some of the stones of the place and placed them by his head, and he lay down in that place.)
- The Sages understand Jacob's "encounter" as **prayer**, identifying this episode as his establishment of evening prayer.

B. *Rashi: God causes Jacob to stop*

- Rabbi Shulman highlights the unusual sequence: the verse first describes Jacob stopping for the night and only afterward explains that the sun had set.
- Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains that God caused the sun to set suddenly.
- God wanted Jacob to remain at **Mount Moriah, the future site of the Temple**, and encounter Him there.

C. *Rav Tzadok's alternative Midrash: Jacob himself is the sun*

- In Joseph's dream, the sun represents Jacob; Jacob's own response acknowledges that symbolism.
- The Midrash therefore connects the setting sun with Jacob's identity:
  - Jacob sees the sun setting and understands that he, its human counterpart, must also stop.
  - Sunset becomes a summons to pray.
- This raises the central question: **What connects Jacob, the sun, and prayer at night?**

II

Why was evening prayer originally voluntary?

3:00

A. *The distinction among the daily prayers*

- Morning and afternoon prayers are obligatory, while the Talmud describes evening prayer as originally **voluntary**.
- Rabbi Shulman immediately emphasizes that the Jewish people subsequently **accepted evening prayer as obligatory**.

B. *The sacrificial explanation*

- **Morning prayer:** corresponds to the daily morning offering.
- **Afternoon prayer:** corresponds to the daily afternoon offering.
- **Evening prayer:** corresponds to burning the sacrificial fats and portions that had not yet been burned during the day.
- Unlike the two daily offerings, this nighttime service was conditional:
  - If the burning had already been completed, nothing remained to be done at night.

C. *A deeper explanation*

- Rav Tzadok understands this distinction as expressing different modes of relating to God.
- The question is not only what happened in the Temple, but **what makes prayer possible when God's presence is not apparent**.

III

Abraham and Isaac: prayer in the clarity of daylight

4:30

A. *Abraham: recognizing God's sovereignty*

- The biblical source associated with Abraham's morning prayer is **Genesis 19:27**: > וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר עָמַד שָׁם אֶת פְּנֵי ה׳: > (Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he had stood before the Lord.)
- Rav Tzadok connects **בוקר**, morning, with **לבקר**, examining or discerning.
- Morning represents a world in which God's presence can be clearly recognized.
- Abraham's prayer expresses the clarity of **standing before the King**.

B. *Isaac: the intimacy of speaking openly*

- **Genesis 24:63:** > וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לָשׂוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לִפְנוֹת עָרֶב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה גְמַלִּים בָּאִים: > (Isaac went out to converse in the field toward evening; he raised his eyes and saw camels approaching.)

- Rabbi Shulman explains **שיחה** as personal, intimate conversation:
  - Sharing anxieties, concerns, feelings, and aspirations.
  - Confiding in someone with whom one has a close relationship.
- Isaac's prayer expresses the clarity of **being able to open one's heart to God**.

C. *Their shared foundation*

- Both forms of prayer take place in daylight.
- Their emphases differ—sovereignty and intimacy—but both begin with a clear awareness of **Whom one is addressing**.

IV

Jacob: becoming a source of light in spiritual darkness

6:30

A. *The challenge of praying without feeling God's presence*

- What happens when a person opens a prayer book but experiences only words on a page?
- God may seem hidden, with no felt sense of Someone listening or embracing the person praying.
- Rabbi Shulman identifies this as the spiritual "night" addressed by Jacob's prayer.

B. *Jacob's distinctive power*

- Jacob can penetrate the darkness and discover the **unbreakable relationship with God that lies beyond it**.
- His relationship does not depend entirely on God's presence being visible in the surrounding world.

C. *Why Jacob is compared to the sun*

- For the sun itself, it is never dark: nighttime describes the experience of those no longer receiving its light.
- Similarly, Jacob does not merely wait for external illumination.
- He possesses the capacity to **illuminate his own spiritual night**, bringing awareness of God into a world that appears dark.

D. *Why this explains evening prayer's original status*

- When God's presence is clear, prayer follows naturally as an obligation: how could one not address Him?
- Praying amid concealment requires access to a deeper spiritual capacity.
- Evening prayer's original voluntary status reflects the exceptional achievement of establishing a real relationship with God **even without the support of felt clarity**.
- Rabbi Shulman presents the very possibility of such prayer as Jacob's great innovation.

V

Accepting evening prayer: claiming Jacob's inheritance

9:00

A. *From an exceptional achievement to a national commitment*

- The Jewish people accepted evening prayer as obligatory because they are all **children of Jacob**.
- His ability is therefore not entirely foreign or inaccessible to any of his descendants.

B. *What that acceptance declares*

- Accepting evening prayer expresses the conviction that:
  - Every Jew possesses some share in Jacob's spiritual strength.
  - Darkness need not end the relationship with God.
  - Even when God is concealed, one can strive to stand consciously in His presence.
- Rabbi Shulman concludes by turning the teaching into practice: **"Let's pray the evening prayer."**

VI

In Summary

- **Jacob's sunset encounter** establishes evening prayer as a response to darkness, not merely an accommodation to it.
- **Abraham and Isaac** represent prayer grounded in clarity: recognizing God's sovereignty and experiencing intimacy with Him.
- **Jacob's comparison to the sun** expresses his ability to illuminate spiritual darkness from within, uncovering an enduring relationship with God.
- **The acceptance of evening prayer as obligatory** affirms that every descendant of Jacob inherits some capacity to sustain that relationship even when God's presence feels hidden.