

Gratitude from the Torah

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Parashat Vayishlach

What is the Secret to Overcoming the Inner Emptiness that We Sometimes Experience?

Why Do We Sometimes Feel Empty Inside Even When Things Are Going Well?

Sometimes we feel this emptiness inside that is difficult to explain. It is like an inner lack that we cannot place, but it sucks our energy and makes us sad. Sometimes the inner emptiness even makes us sink into depression. I have often experienced this internal lack in my heart, even when I can count all my blessings intellectually. After having prayed and prayed and then finally Hashem answered my prayer, the initial rush of riding on the height of gratitude often takes a downward plunge into the abyss of darkness. This happened to me a while after my innumerable prayers for a baby were answered, and recently after Hashem answered my years of prayer for his soulmate. Please don't get me wrong, I'm ecstatically grateful for these blessings and others as well, and I do express this gratitude often. Yet, even when I sing Hashem's praises and thank Him for all the many blessings, He has bestowed upon me – a recommended practice – at times I feel that something is still missing deep down, and I know that I'm not alone. I have this insatiable yearning for something more... to feel a deeper connection... to be part of something much greater – to tap into the infinite. When I studied the interaction between Ya'acov and Esau, I had an Aha moment, that this sense of lack stems from following Esau's outlook, which is disconnected from infinity rather than tapping into Ya'acov's deepest attachment to the source of all.

What is the Difference Between Having a Lot and Having it All?

When Ya'acov returned to face his brother after years of separation, he presented him with a generous gift of livestock. Esau reacted seemingly nicely by generously refusing his brother's gift on the grounds of having plenty himself and no need for Ya'acov's gift.

ספר בראשית פרק לג פסוק ט וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו יֵשׁ לִי רַב אֲחִי יְהִי לְךָ אֲשֶׁר לְךָ:

“But Esau said, ‘I have plenty, my brother; keep that which is yours’” (*Bereishit* 33:9).

Although Esau called Ya'acov with the endearing title “My brother” Rashi explains that by saying I have a lot, Esau, spoke haughtily, “I have plenty,” [meaning] much more than I need. – [from *Tanchuma Vayishlach* 3] (Rashi, *ibid.*).

In the end, Ya'acov convinced Esau to receive his gift, by proclaiming that he (Ya'acov) was not only favored with plenty by G-d, but moreover, he had everything.

ספר בראשית פרק לג פסוק יא וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב נָא אֶת בְּרִכְתִּי אֲשֶׁר הֵבֵאתָ לְךָ כִּי חֲנֻנִי אֱלֹהִים וְכִי יֵשׁ לִי כָל וַיִּפְצֹר בּוֹ וַיִּקַּח:

“Now take my gift, which has been brought to you, for G-d has favored me [with it], and [because] I have everything.’ He [Ya'acov] prevailed over him, and he [Esau] took [it]” (*Bereishit* 33:11).

From the difference between Esau and Ya'acov's attitudes regarding their blessings, we can extract vital life lessons about how to overcome a feeling of inner lack. Yet, what is the difference between Esau's statement “I have a lot (רב/rav)” and Ya'acov's declaration of having it all (כול/chol)? Both statements seem to express gratitude and satisfaction with their lot in life.

The Esau Drive for Ephemeral Pleasures

Kli Yakar explains that although Esav claimed to have much, those who are bent on physical and materialistic pleasures never feel they have it all. There was a survey in Reader's Digest of the amount that people in different earning brackets felt needed to be truly happy. The results uncannily backed up the words of our sages who stated, "If one has one hundred, he wants two hundred, if he has two hundred, he wants four hundred" (*Midrash Kohelet Rabbah* 1:13). The following story about two terminally ill patients confined to hospital beds contrasts Esau and Ya'acov's attitude to life. One patient was next to a window and able to see outside while the other patient was not. All day long he would recount to his friend the beauty outside. The majestic trees overlooking the sparkling lake where the rowboats rippled through the water, the ball games on the fields next to the children playing on the grass. At first, the other patient enjoyed the descriptions but soon became overcome with jealousy. "Why is he able to see all this beauty but not I? I want his bed!" A few nights later his roommate passed away. The nurse asked the other patient if he'd like to be moved next to the window. He answered in the affirmative and his bed was wheeled over. As soon as the nurse left the room, he excitedly looked out the window to finally see the wondrous sights for himself. He quickly discerned the dirty gray wall of the adjacent apartment building. From here we learn that happiness and satisfaction result not from what we have but rather, from how we deal with and view what we have. When we "have it all" like Ya'acov we will be able to turn even a dirty gray wall into the most exquisite landscape! (Yisroel Ciner, *Project Genesis*, Inc.)

The Divine Attribute of כֹּל/Kol

While Esau's attitude of "I have a lot" doesn't necessarily satisfy the need to have more, as it is known that no matter how much we have there always seems to be more. Yet, by saying "I have it all" Ya'acov expresses great satisfaction with his lot in life. When "I have everything" what else can I want? When we yearn for spiritual growth and accomplishment, we understand that Hashem sends us exactly all that we need in terms of material possessions. As we say in our daily morning blessings: "*She'asah li kol tzarchi*" – You have given me all of my needs. In Grace after Meals the section called Hatov Vehemetiv we recite "...just as our fathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'acov were blessed כֹּל מִכֹּל כֹּל/*ba kol mikol kol* – with everything, from everything, everything, so too may He bless all of us together with a complete blessing and let us say Amen." We commemorate that each of our patriarchs was blessed particularly through the expression "כֹּל/*kol* – all." "When Avraham was old, advanced in years, Hashem blessed Avraham כֹּל/*bakol* – with everything' (*Bereishit* 24:1). Yitzchak likewise was blessed with this same expression, "Then Yitzchak got very scared and said, 'Who was it that hunted game and brought it to me and I ate מִכֹּל/*mikol* – 'from everything' before you came, and I blessed him; he too will remain blessed" (*Bereishit* 27:33). Likewise, we have seen how Ya'acov uses the same expression when facing Esau "...G-d has favored me and I have כֹּל/*kol* – 'everything' (*Bereishit* 33:11). Ramban brings us a very deep explanation of the concept כֹּל/*kol*, containing a secret from the secrets of the Torah. It refers to a great concept that Hashem has an attribute called כֹּל/*kol*, because it is the foundation of everything, and about it is written "I am Hashem, maker of כֹּל/*kol* – 'everything'" (*Yesha'yahu* 42:24); (Ramban, *Bereishit* 24:1).

Tapping into the Unified Source of Abundance

How can anyone say that he has everything, isn't there always something more to have? The fundamental difference between "a lot" and "all" is that "a lot" refers to quantitative increase: a lot of power and abundance, yet "all" alludes to the unified source of abundance. Sometimes after

teaching a class, I leave with an unsatisfied feeling of not having flowed well with the shiur. Then in review, I find that I indeed did teach many worthy Torah concepts to my students. Yet, the unified root that connects all the concepts was missing. When Ya'acov says he has “everything” he means that he is connected to the Almighty, from which it follows that he is connected to all the goodness and abundance in existence. For a person who has an inner sense of lack, of emptiness, its true fulfillment is only the attachment to G-d to “all.” Esau belongs to those people who are trying to collect more and more things from the world. Esau is so happy and pleased with his great power in collecting things that, with the generosity of the victor, he tells Ya'acov, “It’s okay, I have much more than you. I don’t need favors.” But in contrast, Ya'acov makes it clear to Esau that he is not at all concerned with multiplicity, but with attachment to the source, to the root, to what enlivens everything.

Know Him in All Your Ways!

Our great test is whether we succeed in being connected to the Master of all, to the inner dimension of everything, and whether we understand and live in a way in which all our actions are connected to the great principles of life. “Know Him in all your ways” (*Mishlei* 3:6). The ability to be connected to “all,” despite the multiple ways of the world, is the essence of our service in the world. It is written that Ya'acov merited “an inheritance without boundaries.” This is because of his ability to be connected to everything – to reach beyond all narrow constraints and become part of infinity. “... Whoever cleaves to the upper root, whatever he has is an aspect of “all,” because everything has a point of vitality in it from Hashem, and “all” is included within this point.” (Sefat Emet, *Bereishit, Parashat Vayishlach*, Year 1871). May we merit to fulfill “Know Him in all your ways,” and thus be blessed in every way! (Yeshivat Har Beracha).

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Vayishlach

This meditation is to help us get in touch with the aspect of “all,” and cleave to the upper root.

- **Settle Yourself and Become Aware of Your Breath** – Take three deep breaths, breathing in, breathing out. Breathe in positivity, breathe out, and let go of old and stale air, stories, and complaints. Breathe in, breathe out. Sit with our attention on the breath. Relax your body, drop your shoulders, and be still.
- **Recall Your Blessings and Accomplishments** – With every inhale increase positivity and well-being. Exhale all the negative emotional toxins. Allow your mind to wander over all your blessings and accomplishments in life. Let each of them pass before you and thank Hashem for them one by one. Keep breathing.
- **Allow Yourself to Feel Fulfilled and Express Gratitude** – Recite in your mind’s eye, “*I have everything I need right now.*” Repeat this sentence over and over like a mantra. Thank Hashem with all your heart for fulfilling all your needs.
- **Tune Into the Root Connecting all of Your Blessings** – Keep breathing and open your heart to truly get in touch with the “everything” that Hashem is granting you. Allow your mind to go deeper into the inner divine root of everything good in your life.
- **Expand Your Boundaries to Tap into Infinity** – Ponder how Ya'acov merited “an inheritance without boundaries” via his ability to reach beyond all narrow boundaries and become part of infinity. Visualize seeing yourself in the mirror holding a mirror in which you see yourself and in that mirror, you are also holding a mirror ad infinitum.

- **Stay attuned to ‘the all’ of Divine Infinity** – Pray to visualize weaving all the strands of your blessings into one. Pray to reach beyond all narrow limitations and become part of infinity. Recite *bakol, mikol, kol* while tuning into how our patriarchs were blessed with all. Repeat this recitation several times.
- **Pray to Hashem to Know Him in All Your ways** – Recite: “May I truly tap into the consciousness that every blessing and accomplishment in my everyday life are part of the Holy Divine realm.
- **Repeat These Affirmations to Yourself** – taking a deep breath at the end of each sentence. *“I am a Jew connected to my Divine Essence!” “Sometimes I do not know. It is OK not to know. What is not known is an invitation to be curious and to discover. I do my best. I let go of the rest.” “I trust that whatever Hashem gives me whether revealed or concealed good, is exactly what I need to reach my full potential.” “My feeling of lack is being filled right now by the root of the Divine all.”*
- **Return Your Attention to Your breath** – If your mind wanders off, come back to the home base of Your breath. Allow yourself to feel at rest, welcome the feeling of peace and serenity.
- **On the Next Breath, Gently and Easily, open your eyes** – and return your attention to the space.