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Let me begin by saying that I am very favorably impressed by your fair community. Indeed, I find myself in the same predicament in which Jacob found himself at the beginning of this week's portion. VAYETSEI YAAKOV MI'BEER SHEVA, Jacob left his home for a new and strange place; so have I left New York for Chicago, which I have never visited before. Like Jacob of old, I too did not expect to see any great and beholden sights. We of the East know that there is an active Jewish community in Chicago, but that is about all. After even this brief visit to with you, I am glad to repeat the very phrases Jacob uttered when he discovered the nature of the place he visited: ACHEIN YESH HASHEM BA'MAKOM HAZEH VE'ANOCHI LO YADATI, There is G-dliness, greatness, in this place, and I did not even know about it. Your synagogue is a beautiful one; your community an intelligent and responsible one; and your ambitions, as I have come to know them, noble and far-sighted. I am glad to be with you and learn about you. I sincerely thank you for your hospitality.

In reading today's Sidra we are puzzled by some extraordinary incidents the Bible relates and which compose what is almost - and I hesitate to say this - a comical episode. Jacob, we read, had chanced upon a group of shepherds waiting to water their sheep from a nearby well. VE'HA'EVEN HA'GDOLAH AL PI HA'BEER, on the mouth of the well there lay a great stone. When Jacob noticed the shepherds lingering, he told them HASHKU HA'TSOAN ULECHU RE'U, why don't you remove the stone and water your sheep? It all seemed so simple to the naive Jacob. But they answer, LO NUCHAL, we cannot, it is impossible, until all the other shepherds help us. Jacob was puzzled by their attitude, and he thought he might be able to do it singlehandedly. And, in the Bible's eloquent simplicity, VAYIGASH YAAKOV VAYEGAL ES HA'EVEN ME'AL PI HA'BEER, he approached the well and rolled the stone off - just like that!

We can well imagine the attitude of the shepherds when Jacob walked over to the well. "Look," they probably sneered, "look who's going to play Big Hero - Jacob the Yeshiva-Bachur, Jacob the frail scholar!" And we can also imagine their amazement - and embarrassment - when this same Jacob walks up to the stone and effortlessly rolls it off. The stone appeared to Jacob, say our Rabbis, KIMLO PI KVARAH KTANAH, as big as the hole of a strainer. What to these mighty muscle men appeared to be a boulder, appeared to Jacob as a mere pebble!

This certainly is a remarkable story. The display of great strength by brainy Jacob and the weakness of the brawny shepherds requires explanation. What does all this mean, and what is it that the Bible is trying to teach us?

Perhaps our Rabbis can give us some clue. The BEER, the well, was interpreted in many ways by them. Some said it refers to Zion - the love for the Jewish homeland and the Jewish home. Others would have it refer to Jewish ethics and the Torah when they say BEER ZEH SINAI. Still others say BEER ZEH HAMEHALECHES IM HA'AVOS, that it refers to the tradition of the Jew and his sense of continuity. In essence, what our Rabbis are trying to tell us is that the BEER is the well-spring of the Jewish personality, the source of the forces of creativity and accomplishment which well up in the Jewish soul and beg to be released. It is a man's talents and abilities and the spark of holiness within him which seek expression.

But the trouble is that so often these talents and abilities, this holiness and creativity, ~~the~~ never expressed and never released and never used, because there is a stone on the mouth of the well, there are difficulties - hard, cold and rocky - which must be rolled away first. And it is in the attitude to this stone, in each and every man's approach to these difficulties, which determines whether he will be able to roll it away like Jacob, or be forced to keep the well covered like the shepherds.

Yes, it is the attitude which counts most. The reason the shepherds could not roll the stone away was because they were convinced they could not do it; they said LO NUCHAL, we cannot, it's impossible. When a man thinks a task impossible, then for him it becomes impossible.



Jacob, however, had no such problem. He did not think it impossible. He thought that it certainly was possible for a man to remove the stone from his well. He therefore went over and without further ado, simply moved it out of the way. He never thought it impossible, and so, for him it became possible.

The same holds true for all of us. Think of your difficulties as boulders, then that is what they are. Our LO NUCHAL attitude makes of the stone an EVEN GDOLAH. Take Jacob's attitude, however, think of them as KIMLO PI KVARAH KTANAH, as mere pebbles, and you can roll them away and give expression to the talents and abilities with which G-d has endowed you. What you think is impossible becomes impossible; think of it as possible, and the odds are that you can do it. When the famed Vilna Gaon was once asked how one becomes a Vilna Gaon, he answered, VILL NUR, VEST DU ZIEN A GAON. Just don't say LO NUCHAL.

But we cannot let the matter rest here. I am sure that some of you here this morning are still skeptical. It is not altogether true, you will argue, that knowing that you can beat your difficulties will make you do so. And right you are. Thinking something possible, even knowing something possible is not all. I know of at least one person, who was a classmate of mine from first grade on, who can prove that. He had, I subsequently discovered, an IQ of 160, which puts him up in the genius class. He was aware of his superior intellect, and occasionally showed penetrating flashes of brilliance. He had a great well. All he had to do to roll the stone off the well, was to study for fifteen minutes a day. I remember teachers and parents prodding him. He was fully aware of the ease with which he might gain prominence and be a success in any field of his choosing. And yet today he is a failure and has not yet found himself. Why is that? Or, let us put that question in the affirmative: what is it that can give a man the ability to grow great, to roll the stone off his well, to display great strength, the wisdom to know what is possible and the will power to do it?

Here the Torah presents us with three techniques, three ways to recognize our abilities and gain the will power to use them constructively. For there are three particular events which occurred to Jacob just prior to the episode of the rolling of the stone.

The first element is Love. Jacob gets the superhuman strength only when he sees his beloved Rachel walking towards him. VAYEHI KA'ASHER RA'AH YAAKOV ES RACHEL. Where there is love and devotion and dedication, there any feat of greatness is possible. Love can remove all difficulties, solve all problems and release all hidden treasures. And not only love of persons, but love of tradition and people and G-d as well. America, you will remember, was once considered barren soil, a country where Jewishness and Jewish education could never thrive. LO NUCHAL, it would be impossible to transplant Torah in America, and certainly not west of the Hudson River. And yet there were some Jews who were driven by an intense and abiding love for the values we hold sacred, people who were in love with their tradition and Torah, and who gave their time and energy and lives for Jewish education. It was a labor of love, and so today not only New York but Chicago too can boast of Yeshivos; not only the East, but the West too can be proud of fine, staunch, traditional synagogues and bnei-Torah. Love, then, is the first motive which can get us to roll away the stones from our wells.

The second is Vision. When Jacob arrives at the appointed place, he lies down and VAYACHALOM, he dreams and beholds the great vision of the ladder and the angels. When a man has inspiration and visions, when he dreams of angels, when he has ambitions which come from the bottom of his heart and from deep in his soul, then he can succeed. Success is never accidental; it is always preceded by dreams and visions and ambition. The chemist who supposedly discovers a new process "by accident" has envisioned himself as a future benefactor of humanity for many years. The surgeon who "accidentally" develops a new surgical technique has dreamed of just such a situation since he was in knee-pants. And probably his mother and father also dreamed the same dream for him. One must always have a great vision if he is to have the power to remove all stones from his well and release his talents. I know of no great synagogue which was built without inspiration, without men and women who dreamed dreams and saw visions. I know of no great community which was ever formed without somebody experiencing and being urged on by a CHALOM. Allow me, as a stranger, to say this to you: do not be disappointed if all your plans for expansion and activity have not come true yet. Just continue to have great dreams and inspiring visions, and you will have in Chicago more than we in New York.



Wallace Rice, in his poem "Chicago", refers to this city as "O great city of visions, waging the war of the free". Keep up the visions, even whilst others laugh, and your community, your synagogue, will grow to something of which you can be proud.

The third method of acquiring the strength to accomplish the near-impossible is that of prayer. After his famous dream, Jacob awakens and, overcome by awe, offers one of the holiest and noblest prayers ever composed. It is after this that he approaches the EVEN GDOLLAH with such calm and confidence and rolls it away. When a man can pray in the true sense, when he can reach such religious heights that he can speak with G-d - for that is really the essence of prayer - then he can do all that is humanly possible. The verb "to pray" is, in Yiddish, "tzu davenen". Others say that this word "daven" comes from the French word "devant", which means "in front of". Because prayer means that man is always conscious of the fact that he is in front of G-d, before the Divine Presence. And in front of G-d, no stone is too hard, no problem too difficult, no task too risky. Prayer, and a prayerful personality, is a prime requisite in exploiting all the forces of your personality.

I am firmly convinced that it is prayer which is responsible for the State of Israel today. One of the chief arguments presented in the UN in favor of the creation of the Jewish State was the fact that we Jews have always prayed for Israel. Even when the Land was overrun by jackals, populated by a few lone Bedouins, and all but desolate, even then we prayed for it. And in our days, friends, prayer for Israel has become more than a mere passive request that G-d do something about it. Our combined prayers have become a challenge we fling into the teeth of our enemies. When only ten short years ago our people were carted off like cattle to crematoria and gas-chambers, when every effort was made to crush their minds as well as bodies, our Jews did not despair. And even when sure with the knowledge that they were facing the bitter end, they sang out loud ANI MAAMIN BEVIAS HAMASHIACH, I believe the Messiah will come and redeem Israel. Nazis may destroy 6 million in one war, but never never can they destroy the hopes of generations, for our prayers will not allow it. And today - this very day - when all the great powers, none excepted, have ganged up on little Israel and with the tactics of hoodlums demanded that we renounce our rights to Jerusalem; even today when both Church and State in England and State Department in America and Kremlin in Russia have connived to choke our age old dream of Jerusalem rebuilt, even today we throw a dare and a challenge into their faces, a challenge hallowed by generations, the prayer UVNEI YERUSHALAYIM IR HAKODESH BIMHAIRA VEYAMEINU. We firmly declare that we renounce no rights to any part of Jerusalem, the Old City included. And to the cynical machinations of diplomats we reply VESECHEZENA EINEINU BESHUVCHA LEZION BRACHAMIM. We shall never say LO NUCHAL, "we can't" or "impossible", as long as we pray the same prayers which have inspired us from time immemorial and which shall continue to so do even unto eternity.

These three, then, Love, Vision and Prayer, can give a man the power to keep away from LO NUCHAL, the power to see his problems not as boulders, but as pebbles, and the ability to give expression to the wellspings of his personality. Jacob did it, and every grandson of Jacob can do it too.

Let us remember that the limits of our abilities are much greater than many think they are. Tremendous forces churn incessantly in the well of human nature and particularly in the Jewish soul. The stone upon the well can either block it, or be cast off. Let us not be like the peasants and, in primitive fear, imagine it a boulder and allow it to choke our life's missions. Let us rather be like Jacob who understands that many a stone is only an overgrown pebble, cast it off, and eventually grapple even with angels - "vatuchal", and win.

BENEDICTION: O G-d, When we attempt to do Thy will even when it seems impossible, do Thou laugh with us even as others laugh at us. For we know that if Man will not attempt to be more than human, he must remain less than human; that only by attempting the absurd can Man achieve the impossible. Amen.

impossible

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