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WEEKLY SHMUESS Vayishlach

Serenity Amidst the War of Life

**DRASHA FROM THE
AUTHOR OF BILVAVI MISHKAN EVNEH**

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Parshas Vayishlach - Serenity Amidst The War of Life

Gifts, Prayer, and War

In *Parshas Vayishlach*, Yaakov sends messengers to Esav to his brother as he is heading towards Seir, in the land of Edom, Esav's territory.

Rashi says that Yaakov Avinu prepared himself with three things: *doron* (gifts), *tefillah* (prayer), and *milchamah* (war). He prepared gifts for Esav in case Esav will act towards him like a brother; he prepared for war in case Esav is still vengeful against him and wants to kill him. His preparations through prayer, though, can be understood in several ways. In his prayer to be saved from Esav, he was praying that his gifts will succeed, and he was also praying that he should succeed in war against him, if there will be a war. So he was not merely *davening* that the gift will succeed or so that he will win the war.

From a deeper perspective, one really needs these three things in every task he encounters. There are the six days of the week for work, and there is Shabbos, for rest. The weekday is a time for hard work. One who merits it can have his work hard in Torah study, and if he does not merit it, he has to work hard in making a living, during the week. In either case, the six days of the week are a time of exertion and hard work. *Shabbos Kodesh*, though, is the time to rest from the six days of the week – it is a time for *menuchah* (serenity), where there is no exertion.

In our soul as well, we have an ability of *milchamah*/war/exertion, as well as an opposite power: *menuchah*/serenity, where we abstain from work and exertion. These two abilities are parallel to the six days of the week (exertion) and Shabbos (serenity)

When Yaakov was preparing for Esav, he was preparing through gifts and war. The gifts represent *menuchah*/Shabbos, for the Gemara says that Shabbos is called a 'gift'¹; and the war represents the weekday/work/exertion; for the six days of the week are for work, exertion, "war".

In our soul as well, there is a power of "war" – exertion - and there is also a power we have of "gift": serenity. The *Mesillas Yesharim* says that all of life is a test, whether one is wealthy or poor, and there is constantly a "war" in one's life. We are constantly in a 'war' in our own lives, for we are always encountering some kind of test or difficulty.

Since we are always in some kind of difficulty in our life, it seems that life should always be about 'war'. However, there can be a deeper perspective towards life. 'War' is but one side of our life. The other side of our life which we need is *menuchah*/serenity, or the ability of "Shabbos" in our soul. Our life cannot be entirely spent in a state of 'war' – we need some serenity too, some respite from the wars we fight in our life.

¹ *Shabbos 10b*

Too Much “Serenity” Vs. Too Much “War”

If we think about the situation of people today, most people do not deal with that much ‘war’ in their lives; it is mostly serenity which people are actively pursuing. However, this serenity is usually not a genuine kind of serenity, because it does not come after hard work and exertion. It is not the kind of serenity that is like the ‘gift’ that is called Shabbos. It is rather a kind of lethargy, a sleepiness, a laziness, which stems from the element of earth, which wants a ‘serenity’ in the form of laziness. So with most people, exertion is pushed aside for the most part, and it is mainly serenity which people want; but it is not the real serenity - it is just laziness.

Others have the opposite issue than this. They are constantly battling all kinds of [spiritual] difficulties in their life. Some people have constant fears due to their sins, which causes them to always feel like they are in a state of anxiety, but this is a low place which the soul can fall into. When the power of ‘war’ is used correctly, a person constantly fights his *yetzer hora* and he has exertion in Torah study, all the time. There are people who will always say something like, “That is the advice of the *yetzer hora*!” or “This is the *yetzer hora*!” or “This is *Samael*!” and other such expressions. Life to them is one big war with the *yetzer hora*, which never stops.

It seems that this is the correct way to live. After all, the *Mesillas Yescharim* says that life is always a test. It seems that we must be always in a war. We need to be like a ‘seasoned warrior’, from constantly fighting our *yetzer hora*; to always push ourselves to review our Torah learning, to always fight strange thoughts that may enter our minds when we *daven*, and to always fight the *yetzer hora* and all of its many henchmen, which comes in all kinds of forms, every day of our life.

But the truth is that our soul cannot always feel like we are in a state of war. We cannot live that way. Although all our life is a test, which means that we always have to fight and overcome, we also need some rest. We see that even when people are fighting a war, they need to take breaks, or else they will not have any strength to go on fighting. The Gemara says that a person cannot go for more than three days without sleep, and if he swears that he will not sleep for more than three days, he is punished for making a false oath.

The Need For Menuchah/Serenity

A person needs *menuchah* (serenity); it is not possible to survive without serenity. This is true in the superficial sense, but in more inner and clearer terms, every person must form a space in his soul where he can find serenity, like a state of ‘Shabbos’ in the soul. From there a person needs to derive his vitality in life.

Shabbos is called “the source of all blessing”, and it is also the time for *menuchah*. When a person has exertion in Torah, at first there is the “war of Torah” - as the Gemara says, when learning Torah with another, at first they are like enemies towards each other. But even amidst the very “war of Torah” in one’s Torah learning, there must also be *menuchah*. The Sages teach that the verse “*And he saw that serenity was good*” is referring to “bearing the yoke of Torah”; so *menuchah*, serenity, is not

to be understood as the inevitable result from exertion, but part of how a person must live, and a way towards acquiring Torah.

There are some people who are perplexed when they hear about the need for *menuchah*. After all, we know that a person must have exertion all the time in learning Torah; he must always fight the *yetzer hora* in the morning when it tells him to lie in bed; he must fight the *yetzer hora* when he is *davening* and he is having disturbing thoughts, and he must fight the *yetzer hora* not to waste time from learning Torah – so when is there time for *menuchah*?! And even on Shabbos and Yom Tov, we must learn Torah, for Chazal say that “The Shabbos and the festivals was not given to the Jewish people except to learn Torah”. It appears that we must always be exerting ourselves in a war against the *yetzer hora*, and that there is never a time to have *menuchah* from all of this war.

But if we have a deeper understanding of life, war with other forces is the only from the point in our soul that feels opposition, but there is a deeper point in the soul which is above opposition, and that deeper point is where *menuchah* comes from. In other words, all fights and wars exist on the outer layer of our soul. But in the inner layer of the soul, we have a deeper place in ourselves, where there is only harmony there, and no possibility of opposition.

The Points of Free Will (War), Below Free Will (Serenity) and Above Free Will

In clearer terms, Rav Dessler explains that there are three points in our soul, regarding our *bechirah* (free will): there is a point of free will, a point below free will, and a point above free will.

The point “below” free will is the area in which one does not face a battle with the *yetzer hora* in, and these are areas where one can naturally avoid the temptations to sin. The “point of free will”, above that, represents the areas in which we face a battle with the *yetzer hora* in; we are engaged in an equal struggle between good and evil when it comes to these areas, and we have the free will in these areas to choose correctly [which we are rewarded for, if we overcome the struggle]. Above that point is the point “above” free will, which are the areas in we have almost no possibility to overcome the *yetzer hora*. That area usually does not include any of the 613 mitzvos of the Torah, which are clearly obligatory to us; rather, it usually concerns what kinds of levels we can or cannot reach in our *Avodas Hashem* at this point.

One who lives all the time in his “point of free will” will always be in a ‘war’. His entire life will be a war; he always lives within the perspective of the “six days of the week” – work, exertion, war. He will live only in the outer layer of the soul, where there is a battle between the *yetzer tov* and *yetzer hora*, (which each exist in the two different sides of the heart); that means he will always be fighting between his *yetzer tov* and *yetzer hora*, with no place for respite.

But when a person has inner understanding about life, he knows that the point “below free will” is a major area that one needs to use to aid him in his *avodah*. The proper way to go about life is to sometimes be at the point of free will (fighting the *yetzer hora*), and sometimes to be “below” it - where he is naturally connected to good, to holiness, to Hashem and to His Torah.

The Balance Between Exertion (Aspirations) and Serenity (Accomplishments)

One needs to constantly be progressing back and forth between these two areas of his soul, trying to acquire more holiness (the point of his free will), and the point below free will, which are the areas that he has already acquired; that is the area that he can get *menuchah* from at times. This is also the depth of the concept of being “*someiach b’chelko*” (happy with one’s lot).

When one is not clear about this perspective, he is not clear what he has already acquired and what he is working hard to acquire, and he is not clear of which points are beyond his current level which he cannot reach at this point.

When one lives with a clearer perspective towards life, he knows which levels are above his level, which areas are within his *bechirah*, and which areas he has already acquired and which are the areas that he doesn’t have to work hard in right now. Sometimes he merits to have perfected those areas due to a previous lifetime, or he was born already perfected in that area. Either way, these are areas which a person doesn’t have to work hard for this point - and he can derive his *menuchah* from these areas.

One needs to move back and forth between the point of free will (war) and the point below free will (*menuchah*). One needs to try exerting himself in the areas which he is trying to acquire, but he also needs to keep returning to *menuchah*, by finding serenity in his previous accomplishments and in the areas which he knows he doesn’t have to work hard in. There should be a constant shifting between *bechirah*/war/bearing the yoke of Torah, with *menuchah*/serenity.

Life should be a constant war with the *yetzer hora*, but that is only one side the coin. At the same time, a person needs a point where he derives *menuchah* from; where he can be “*someiach b’chelko*” in.

Connecting To Shleimus (Perfection) Amidst Imperfection

In different terms, if a person is only at his “point of free will” all the time (not that this is actually possible - only in his fantasies is it possible), all of his life will be a constant war, with no peace. But if a person can also access his point “below” free will, he is in a place of *shalom* (peace). The *avodah* of a person is always to place in himself where there is *shalom* (peace) and *shleimus* (perfect), in spite of all that is currently lacking and imperfect right now.

This sounds like a contradiction. How can a person be in a place of *shleimus*, when *shleimus* comes only at the very end of our *avodah*, as the *Mesillas Yesharim* says? The answer is, of course, that only individuals of the generation have reached *shleimus*; but one can delight in the areas of *shleimus*, relatively speaking, in the levels that he has already reached. That his own level of *shleimus* right now - and that is his *shleimus* right now. This is where a person can be “*someiach b’chelko*” in and find *menuchah* in; this is where one can find *shalom* (peace) in himself, amidst all of the wars and struggles of his life.

This picture of life, in which one is clear of what he has already reached, as well as what he still needs to reach and he needs to wage war in – this is the picture towards life that one needs to be clear about. When one is clear about this perspective and he knows that there are times in which we must battle evil as well as times in which we must draw forth serenity – this is the sensible way to approach life, and it enables one to have the proper balance, to move back and forth between ‘war’ and peace, to move between aspirations and feeling inner content, to move between exertion and serenity.

Most people who feel content in their accomplishments, though, have not arrived there from actually feeling serene in their accomplishments, but because they prefer to be sleeplike and lethargic, rather than push themselves further. It is not because they have reached “*someiach b’chelko*”, and it does not come from being connected to the power of *shalom* (inner ‘peace’) *shleimus* (self-perfection) or *menuchah* (serenity). When one has the correct outlook, he knows that on one hand, there must always be war, exertion, and aspirations in his life – and at the same time, there also needs to be serenity.

How Much Serenity, and How Much Exertion?

How much serenity does one need, and how much exertion does one need? How much should a person feel fine with his accomplishments, and how much should he push himself further? This needs to be thought about carefully, because if a person becomes too content, he will not work as hard and his aspirations will decrease.

But if a person goes in the other extreme and he tries too hard, he is always trying to go above the point of his free will, so he will get all of his vitality from ‘war’ alone, which is not the deepest and holiest resource available. Even more so, when one feels like he is struggling all the time, the soul cannot be calm, because the inner world of a person requires *menuchas hanefesh* (serenity of the soul). In Kelm, and in other places, they stressed the importance of *menuchas hanefesh* as one of the fundamental keys to one’s inner, spiritual world.

How indeed can a person reach *menuchas hanefesh*?

For one, if a person is the type who has a strong intellect that is very in control of his emotions, he is a person whose “mind controls the heart”, and he will have a much easier time getting *menuchas hanefesh*. This is certainly true, but there is a more fundamental approach of how one can acquire *menuchas hanefesh* [as follows].

When one is only within his “point of free will” – meaning that he is always in a state of fighting his *yetzter hora* - it will be very hard for him to have *menuchas hanefesh*; but when a person moves back and forth between his challenges and his serenity in his current attainments, his attainments will become a basis of *menuchas hanefesh* to him. This will also enable him to fight his ‘wars’ better, because he will have gained more *yishuv hadaas* (settled mind).

Finding Serenity Amidst Exertion

If a person finds himself in a situation where he is mainly trying to overcome struggles and he is exerting himself, and he feels like he has nowhere to get serenity from at the moment, he should ‘return’ to his current level – the point ‘below’ his free will; to revel in the bliss of his previous accomplishments - and he can feel serene there.

Example 1 – Finding Serenity When Learning Torah

To give an example of this, if a person is learning in *yeshiva* and he’s poring over a *sugya* of the Gemara and trying to understand what he is learning, as he delves into it in-depth - on one hand, he needs to exert his mind as he learns the *sugya*, trying to figure out the basic understanding of it (the *pshat*), as well as exertion in the areas of *cheshbon*, *diyuk* and *sevara*.² But can he really exert all of his mental energy every moment as he’s learning? Only a few rare individuals can do that. A person can work hard trying to understand a *sugya*, as much as he can understand, and at a certain point, after he feels like he can’t exert his mind anymore, he should return to a simpler kind of thinking, and let the mind revel in whatever he has understood thus far. The soul will be calmed from this. Then he should return to exerting his mind in the *sugya*, and repeat the cycle.

Of course, if one is in the beginning stage of learning and he tries to think about all of the above as he is learning, he will not succeed. We must always begin working with a small point, and slowly it can become a way to live life.

Some people, when they learn, don’t exert their minds that much to begin with. They are fine with a small level of understanding, a little bit of listening to what another has to say about the Gemara, and a little bit of talking about the Gemara with others, and it doesn’t bother them that much if they aren’t exerting their minds trying to understand it well. This is not *menuchah* (serenity), but a complacent kind of sleepiness, which doesn’t amount to anything.

Others, though, have the opposite problem – they exert their minds too much as they learn the Gemara, and they never allow their minds to become calm and enjoy anything that they’ve learned and understood so far. This often happens with teenagers and adolescents, who tend to aim very high in their aspirations, so they exert their minds greatly when learning, and then they become mentally exhausted afterwards. It is impossible for a person to stay that long in a state of exertion.

But when a person has the inner perspective that we described, he makes sure to exert his mind as he should, trying as much as possible to understand what he’s learning; but at a certain point, he makes sure to return to *menuchah*/serenity, by allowing himself to revel in the joy of what he has already understood so far. He thinks: “What didn’t I understand before, and what do I understand now? What wasn’t as clear to me beforehand, and what has become clearer?” He develops a space in

² Refer to the Rav’s *derashah* of *Tefillah*_0167_ *Torah of Life*

his soul where there are no oppositions, where the points that hadn't been clear before are now clearer to him. This is a place of *menuchah* in one's soul.

Part of a person's *avodah* is to keep returning to this place of *menuchah*, to feel serenity in the areas that he has already reached, understood, and accomplished. This serenity is not reached through exerting the mind to get there, by reviewing and clarifying what one has already learned; rather, it is about simply enjoying and reveling in whatever you have understood so far in your Torah learning, so that it becomes absorbed in your innards, where it becomes sweet and pleasant to you, where there is only 'peace' there and no possibility for 'war'/opposition/exertion.

If a person only has exertion in Torah, if he can only argue about it with another and he isn't finding any serenity amidst his exertion in his Torah learning, he will never find the words of Torah sweet to him. Although there is always a certain sense of sweetness as one exerts himself in his learning, the true sweetness and pleasure of Torah learning is only felt when one can feel serenity after he has exerted his mind; when he revels in the pleasure of the words of Torah that he has merited to comprehend so far. He should review those words of Torah, verbally and mentally, and he should realize that what hadn't been clear to him beforehand has now become clearer to him; it has become more absorbed in him. Then he can truly find pleasure in Torah learning and he connects himself to it.

When the soul of a person has absorbed this kind of pleasure from Torah learning, it becomes satisfied, and after feeling that serenity, one should then return to exerting himself in his Torah learning. When a person keeps to this formula, he is constantly "advancing and retreating", back and forth, between two places in the soul that are necessary to traverse: from exertion to serenity/pleasure/comprehension, and from serenity back to exertion, repeating the cycle. One who does this will become a true *ish menuchah* (man of serenity), who has *yishuv hadaas* (a settled mind) and *menuchas hanefesh*.

Example 2 – Finding Serenity When Davening

This is not only a concept that applies to learning Torah, which was a fundamental example. It is also true when it comes to *tefillah* (prayer). When a person is *davening*, he has to 'wage war' against various bothersome thoughts that enter his mind while *davening*. These strange thoughts can be stemming from his actions, thoughts or words which weren't pure, which come to haunt him as he is *davening* and don't let him concentrate. However, one cannot approach *davening* as if it is entirely a 'war' with bothersome thoughts. If he has this approach, he will surely find it too difficult to be in a 'war' with his thoughts for all 19 blessings of *Shemoneh Esrei*.

On one hand, a person must certainly fight the unwanted thoughts that enter his mind during *davening*, as much as he can. But at the same time, a person must be able to return to calmness, by speaking simply to Hashem, and to enjoy the very act of talking to Hashem, while *davening*. After a person feels an enjoyment in simply talking to Hashem, he should then return to concentrating his mind on the words and fighting the unwanted thoughts, so that his *davening* will flow from the

depths of his heart, with true yearnings. But this is only one part of the *davening*, and it should not be the entire attitude towards *davening*.

This is surely the case with the three times of the day when we *daven*, but it is even more applicable to the longer *tefillos* we *daven*, such as the *tefillos* of *Yomim Noraim*. Sometimes we can see people during *Yomim Noraim* who are trying very hard to concentrate on their *davening*, greatly straining their minds in order to concentrate fully on the words. They mean well, but this is not the truthful way to *daven*. When we *daven*, we certainly need to exert our minds in order to concentrate, but there must also be a yearning from our heart as we *daven*, a yearning for more connection with Hashem, which can only come from a serene and pleasant place in our soul.

It is very possible that in the beginning of one's way, he will not find that much pleasure or serenity when *davening*, because it feels far from him. At that point, one has to pause every here and there in his *davening*, in order to experience the pleasure. But after a person has merited finding an enjoyable taste in his *davening*, his *davening* changes entirely.

Cycling Between Serenity and Exertion

We have spoken here about finding serenity in the areas of Torah learning and *tefillah*, but it applies to all other areas of *Avodas Hashem* as well. The inner, truthful way that life is supposed to look like is to find serenity amidst exertion.

Sometimes we can see certain great leaders and Torah scholars who have reached a very deep *menuchah*, and we have a hard time understanding how they can be so serene, when it should seem the opposite. Shouldn't their fiery Torah learning and unceasing exertion in Torah cause them to be restless, in their constant pursuit of more and more comprehension of the Torah and to keep growing spiritually? How does this allow them to find any serenity?

But the answer to this is because as we explained earlier, *menuchah* does not come from sleepiness or lack of aspirations. It comes from a place in the soul that wants to move ahead with precision; from a place of yearning that leads to serenity; from a place of aspiration that leads to inner contentment; from a place of serenity that leads to exertion – and to repeat the cycle.

In Conclusion

The words here are subtle, perhaps *very* subtle. If the words here are not absorbed correctly, it might cause a person to weaken his aspirations, and to have less exertion in his Torah learning. But if the perspective described here has been absorbed correctly, a person on one hand will merit to recognize the constant “war” that we have which surrounds us on all sides, but at the same time, a person will also have a source of *menuchah*/serenity and a pleasurable source of connection in his life; as it said is in the verse, 'אז תתענג על ה' “*Then, you will rejoice upon Hashem.*”