

**פרשת וישלח תש"ז - The Proper Path
By Rabbi Reuven Spolter**

I delivered this sermon in response to the Conservative Movement's decision during the week to approve a teshuva that normalized and accepted same-sex relationships, commitment ceremonies, gay rabbis and the like under the banner of Conservative "halachah."

Over Thanksgiving, I learned something about online directions. We tend to believe that if we look it up online, it must, by definition, be true. But I discovered, unfortunately, that this is not always the case. I needed to drive from a wedding hall in Monsey back to Newark Airport in New Jersey to catch a late Sunday flight to Detroit – so I printed up directions from Yahoo's Map site. At first, I followed my online directions without incident. The Garden State Parkway was flying – no traffic whatsoever. Carefully sticking to the instructions, I took the exit onto 46 West, which was supposed to take me to Routes 1 and 9, and then the airport. But the correct exit never came. And as I kept driving, I began to feel as if something was wrong. So I waited. After all, I had followed the directions I printed out from the Internet. And the longer I drove, the more wrong things seemed.

Finally, I called my in-laws, who live in New Jersey, who did something antiquated and outdated. They took out a map. And they quickly discovered that I was moving in precisely the wrong direction, away from the airport – away from my destination. And it was then I realized: it might look like a map and give directions like a map, but without the right information, bad directions can leave a person very, very lost. And sadly, without the proper guidance, a person can even miss a flight, or an important connection – or something far greater than that.

Why do we keep halachah? Why do traditionally-minded Jews follow a seemingly arcane and antiquated set of rule that guide so many aspects of their lives? Why do people call me when they want to know if they can attend a shabbos dinner during their year after the death of a parent; why do they call me when they want to buy frozen corn without a special symbol; why do they call me when they accidentally drop use a meat knife to cut their milchig lasagna? Why do they even have a meat knife? After all, a knife's a knife. We do these things because we believe that this is the very best way for us to grow closer to God. There's a clearly defined, objective path – a way to follow that will bring us ever-closer to our creator. There's a map that we follow. That's what the word halachah means – the way to walk. There is a way, a path that we follow, that leads in the right direction.

וישלח יעקב מלאכים לפניו אל עשו אחיו

"Ya'akov send messengers before him to his brother Eisav."

It's time for Ya'akov to return home and confront his brother. Before he meets him personally, he sends Eisav a message of greeting; a message he words carefully and meticulously.

עם לבן "So says your servant Ya'akov," – כה אמר עבדך יעקב
שמרתי, "and I have been delayed to this point."
וואחר עד עתה, "I have lived with Lavan," – גרתי

Rashi, citing the questions of חז"ל, wonder why Ya'akov chooses the strange word, גרתי – which implies dwelling in a temporary manner; after all, he's been living with Lavan for 22 years. Why not say "עם לבן שבת" – "I have lived with Lavan?" What message does Ya'akov convey to his brother with this choice of words? Rashi gives us two answers:

I did not become an important minister; rather, I remained a stranger in Lavan's house. – לא נעשיתי שר וחשוב אלא גר

In other words, Ya'akov tells his brother, "Eisav, we have nothing to fight about. I'm a simple person, and you have nothing to be jealous about. So let's not fight." But Rashi gives us another interpretation as well:

דבר אחר – גרתי בגמטריא תרי"ג, כלומר עם לבן גרתי ותרי"ג מצוות שמרתי

Another interpretation is that the word "I lived" in gematria is 613, meaning, 'I lived with Lavan, and I kept the 613 commandments.'

The numerical equivalent of the word גרתי is 613, so in effect Ya'akov tells his brother, "Yes, I lived with Lavan, but I kept the 613 commandments; I did not assimilate his attitudes and mores and way of life. Rather, I'm still the same Ya'akov that I was when I left."

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Why does Rashi give us these two interpretations that גרתי teaches us two things – that Ya'akov has lived the life of a גר, a stranger in his in-laws' home – and that he kept the 613 commandments? What can we learn not from each interpretation separately, but from the message that these answers bring us together?

To my mind, while each of Rashi's answers conveys important meaning, the answers together as a whole teach us that keeping the commandments demands a sense of strangeness; of different-ness and otherness. You see, following the commandments requires at some level, a measure of discomfort and unease. The commandments challenge us – they estrange us -- in three different ways:

First and foremost, we find mitzvot physically challenging. Who wants to walk to shul on a frigid, frozen Michigan mid-December morning? But we do it. We did it today, and we'll always do it. Who wants to get out of bed for minyan, or abstain from physical contact from my wife for two weeks at a time? But we do it – despite the physical challenges – because that's what the Torah demands from us. But, even while we do these things, we feel physically strained. We feel different when we don't eat the meal with the rest of the staff, or we're standing at the holiday – sorry – this year it a Christmas party. We're גרים – strangers.

Mitzvot can also be intellectually challenging: we struggle with the law of purity and impurity. We grapple with the תקות התורה – the laws whose meaning and reason we cannot grasp. But we accept them nonetheless.

Finally, sometimes commandments can even be morally and ethically challenging. They can make us uncomfortable, and seemingly out of step with accepted social graces and ideologies. But we follow them notwithstanding. If a Kohen falls in love with a divorcee – albeit unknowingly – no matter how difficult and tragic the case may be, and I've had women sitting and crying in my office – I might feel morally challenged. I certainly felt sadness for her predicament. But I cannot, I may not, and I will not change the הלכה to make myself feel better. And if a rule in the Torah tells me that people with strong inclinations towards members of the same sex may not follow that instinct, I feel sadness and distress. I feel like a גר – a stranger in my land right now, defending what many in our society consider outdated – even immoral. But I cannot, and will not change the rule to make myself feel better. Or, to borrow a phrase from Ya'akov,

I do not belong with Lavan. I am a stranger. – לא נעשיתי שר וחשוב אלא גר – עם לבן גרתי
I remain loyal and dedicated to the path – to the map that leads me closer to God. – ואת תר"ג מצוות שמרתי
Those two elements are inextricably tied together.

When we bend to the whims of society and redefine the rules to make ourselves more comfortable, then our temporary stay begins to take on a level of permanence. When Ya'akov begins to follow the Yahoo map that he downloaded from the Internet, when he allows himself to become a minister in the house of Lavan; when he accepts and learns new rules customs and chooses the comfort of his father-in-law's home and the prominence he enjoys there over the struggle and different-ness of authentic Judaism – then something even more tragic happens. Ya'akov remains in the house of Lavan, and never again wants to return home.

We're left to wonder: according to Rashi's second interpretation, why should עשו care? Why should it make any difference to him that Ya'akov still keeps the Mitzvos? Because even Eisav realizes the power of walking the path; of following the correct map, and keeping the 613 commandments:

אמר ליה: אל תבטח בגבורך, שגדולה זכותן של מצוות לעזרני יתר מגבורתך

He said to him: do not have faith in your physical strength, for the power of the merit of the commandments to help me is far greater than your physical prowess.

This week has truly been a sad week for the Jewish people. It represents no less than the beginning of the demise, the end – of what was once the most prominent and powerful Jewish movement in America. And, I might add, that's not cause for celebration, because it marks the Conservative movement's move ever farther leftward away from the map – from any imprint of authentic Judaism, precisely when that's what American Jews need most. Sure, we here might gain a few members, but it's hardly worth the cost of a movement abandoning the Torah wholesale, for the sake of a map printed off of the Internet. And they have no one to call – or that they're willing to call -- to point them back in the right direction.