

פרשת  
וישלח  
Parashat Vayishlach

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*Bereshit / Genesis 32:3-36:43, Hosea 11:7-12:12  
Obadiah 1:1-21, John 1:19-2:12*

### **Relying upon the Merit of Others?**

In this week's Torah portion, we look at what it means to rely upon the merit of others. A concept which frequently occurs in the Rabbinic literature is the idea of the merits of the Fathers, which leads us to the question on the importance of the merits of others. According to the Apostolic Writings, we are told to rely upon the merits of the Messiah (Christ, *1 Corinthians 15:22*). In Parashat Vayishlach, Jacob calls upon the merit of his fathers Abraham and Isaac to protect himself from destruction by the hand of Esau. (*Bereshit / Genesis 32:10-11*) In contrast to the rabbinic view that the Patriarchs had a great amount of merit for future generations; the Patriarchs in Genesis are generally not portrayed as righteous, *i.e. Jacob is portrayed as a deceiver*. The power of these Patriarchal narratives lies within the fact that despite their shortcomings, the Lord God chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The rabbinic concept of merits has influenced our understanding of salvation as being found within the covenant of God which causes us to rely upon others due to our own shortcomings. As a result, the question of "*falling away*" is of central importance, as it is related to remaining in the covenant of God. The rabbinic concept of relying upon the merits

of others may be explained according to the words of the Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim 1:5*) which states, “*it is good to say the passage about the Akeida.*” He explains that the function of repeating a passage of Scripture is “*to mention and remind heaven of the merits of the patriarchs.*” He further states that this “*also inspires us to subdue our base nature, to make it subservient to the Holy One blessed be He, so that we offer our entire being to Him, as Yitzchak did.*” The concept here is that Isaac (Yitzchak) offered himself upon the altar (see *Bereshit / Genesis 22, Isaac was believed to be old enough to resist his father*) which is the source text for the belief in the merit of the Akeida. The Holy One swore an oath to Abraham, as it is written in *Bereshit / Genesis 22:16-17, 22:16 and said, ‘By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, 22:17 indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. (NASB)* The idea here is related to the matter of the giving of one’s life to sanctify the Name of the Lord. Throughout history, rabbinic halachah has stated regarding selfless behavior, when the people of Israel went to their deaths willingly and happily in order to sanctify the Name of God, there was merit for the kingdom of heaven in the Olam Haba (world to come). This falls under the premise of a Mishnaic principle that servants who work without reward (*i.e. who work for their keep*) are preferable to those who serve for a reward. (see the *Mishnah Pirkei Avot 1:3*) This is also the principle that was illustrated in the prodigal Son narrative (*Luke 15:19*), compare the older son to the younger son and the events when the younger son returns. Coupled with this idea of relying upon the merit of others is whether earning merit is something that is a viable option as a part of our faith? This is illustrated in the laborer being worthy of his wages, as opposed to being given something without laying claim to having done this thing by himself. Relying upon the merits of others leads to the conclusion that it is possible to earn a reward as a result of someone else’s actions. The Scriptures provide us with examples of relying upon the merit of others and not upon our own merits. In the case of Jacob, he had faith in the Lord God Almighty, relying wholly upon the merits of Him who is mighty to save. Do you rely upon Him who is mighty to save? Let’s discuss this

topic in this week's study.

In this week's Torah portion, we are looking at *Bereshit / Genesis 32:1-13*:

***Bereshit / Genesis 32:1-13***

*32:1 Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. 32:2 Jacob said when he saw them, 'This is God's camp.' So he named that place Mahanaim. 32:3 Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. 32:4 He also commanded them saying, 'Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; 32:5 I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.' ' 32:6 The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, 'We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.' 32:7 Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; 32:8 for he said, 'If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape.' 32:9 Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,' 32:10 I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. 32:11 'Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. 32:12 'For You said, 'I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.' ' 32:13 So he spent the night there. Then he selected from what he had with him a present for his*

*brother Esau (NASB)*

א וַיִּשְׁכֶם לָבוֹן בַּבְּקָר וַיִּנְשֹׁק לְבָנָיו וּלְבָנוֹתָיו וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶתְהֶם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיָּשָׁב לָבוֹן לְמָקוֹמוֹ: ב וַיַּעֲקֹב הֵלֶךְ לְדַרְכּוֹ וַיִּפְגְּעוּ-בּוֹ מִלְּאָכִי אֱלֹהִים: ג וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאִים מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים זֶה וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם-הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא מַחֲנֵים: פ פ פ [פרשת וישלח] ד וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מִלְּאָכִים לְפָנָיו אֶל-עֵשָׂו אָחִיו אֲרֻצָּה שְׂעִיר שָׂדֵה אֲדוֹם: ה וַיֵּצֵאוּ אֹתָם לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמְרוּן לְאֲדֹנָי לַעֲשׂוֹ כֹּה אָמַר עַבְדְּךָ יַעֲקֹב עִם-לָבוֹן גִּרְתִּי וְאָחִיר עַד-עֲתָה: ו וַיְהִי-לִי שׂוֹר וְחִמּוֹר צֹאן וְעֶבֶד וְשִׁפְחָה וְאֲשֻׁלְחָה לְהַגִּיד לְאֲדֹנָי לְמִצְאָ-חַן בְּעֵינָיִךְ: ז וַיָּשָׁבוּ הַמִּלְּאָכִים אֶל-יַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר בָּאנוּ אֶל-אָחִיךָ אֶל-עֵשָׂו וְגַם הֵלֶךְ לְקִרְאָתְךָ וְאָרְבַּע-מֵאוֹת אִישׁ עִמּוֹ: ח וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיֵּצֵר לוֹ וַיַּחֲזֵן אֶת-הָעַם אֲשֶׁר-אִתּוֹ וְאֶת-הַצֹּאן וְאֶת-הַבְּקָר וְהַגְּמָלִים לְשָׁנֵי מַחֲנוֹת: ט וַיֹּאמֶר אִם-יָבוֹא עֵשָׂו אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֵה הָאֵחָת וְהִכָּהוּ וְהָיָה הַמַּחֲנֵה הַנִּשְׁאָר לְכַלְיָתָה: י וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי אָבִי יִצְחָק יְהוָה הָאֵלִים אֵלֵי שׁוֹב לְאֲרֻצְךָ וְלִמּוֹלְדָתְךָ וְאִיטִיבָה עִמָּךְ: יא קָטַנְתִּי מְכַל הַחֲסָדִים וּמְכַל-הָאֲמֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת-עַבְדְּךָ כִּי בְמִקְלִי עִבַרְתִּי אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה וְעַתָּה הֵייתִי לְשָׁנֵי מַחֲנוֹת: יב הַצִּילְנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו כִּי-יִרָא אָנֹכִי אֹתוֹ פֶּן-יָבוֹא וְהִכָּ-נִי אִם עַל-בָּנָיִם: יג וְאֵתָה אָמַרְתָּ הֵיטֵב אִיטִיב עִמָּךְ וְשִׁמְתִּי אֶת-זַרְעֲךָ כְּחוֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִסְפָּר מֵרֹב:

In *Bereshit / Genesis 32*, Jacob is returning to the Promised Land, and he is worried about his brother Esau and whether Esau is still angry with him after so many years? After having spent twenty years in Laban's home, Jacob is commanded by the Lord to return to the land of his ancestors, the land of Canaan. In order to do so, Jacob has to pass through Edom, the territory of his brother, Esau. In Judaism, more emphasis is usually placed upon actions than on intentions, on the acts we perform rather than on the emotions we feel. Therefore, Jacob was very worried about his past actions against his brother. Here in Parashat Vayishlach, Jacob calls upon the merit of his fathers Abraham and Isaac to remind the Lord of His promises and to protect himself

from destruction by the hand of Esau. *Bereshit / Genesis 32:9-11*, ט  
 וַיֹּאמֶר אִם-יָבוֹא עֲשׂוֹ אֶל-הַמַּחְנֶה הָאֶחָת וְהִכְהוּ וְהָיָה הַמַּחְנֶה הַנִּשְׁאָר לְפָלִיטָה:  
 י וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי אָבִי יִצְחָק יְהוָה הָאֵל אֲשֶׁר  
 לָאֲרָצָה וְלְמוֹלְדֹתָהּ וְאֵיטִיבָה עִמָּךְ: יא קָטַנְתִּי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל-הָאַמֶּת  
 אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת-עַבְדְּךָ כִּי בְּמַקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה וְעַתָּה הֵייתִי לְשָׂנֵי  
 :32:9 *Jacob said, ‘O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,’ 32:10 I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. 32:11 ‘Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. (NASB)* Jacob calls upon the God of his fathers, recalling the covenant promises the Lord had made with them to remind the Lord to protect him from his past actions because He is worthy of death at the hand of his brother. He asks for deliverance, favoritism, and peace with Esau.

The rabbis have much to say concerning these Scriptures and the merit of the fathers. Radak has the following two say concerning *Bereshit / Genesis 32:1-11*.

***Radak on Bereshit / Genesis 32:10 Part 1***

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי אָבִי יִצְחָק  
*“You are the One Who has assured me when I left my father’s house that due to the merit of my fathers You would assist and protect me. (28,13). Now I turn to You in prayer relying on their merit in hoping that You will keep Your promise. Secondly, it was You Who has told me while I was in Charan to go back to the land of my fathers since their country was my country.*

Radak states that Jacob believed, when leaving to travel to Laban in Haran, the Lord would keep His promise based upon the promises He had made with his fathers Abraham and Isaac. This was understood as being *“due to the merit of my fathers.”* Based upon these promises, he turns in prayer resting in their merits hoping the Lord will keep His



promises. Radak continues saying the following:

***Radak on Bereshit / Genesis 32:11 Part 1***

קטנתִי, *I am not asking You G'd to help me in a manner commensurate with my merits, as I am perfectly aware that these are utterly inadequate.* כל החסדים וכל האמת. *Yaakov described as חסד the acts of unearned love G'd had performed for him, whereas he described as אמת, "truth," i.e. deserved compensation, that G'd would keep His promise to him. ("Here, I am going to be with you, etc." 28,15) He feels entitled to expect G'd to keep His promises when these are of a positive nature. When G'd had said to him that He would protect him wherever he would go, this had not been a conditional promise, dependent on Yaakov being worthy of such protection. He is aware that he may have sinned, but expects the promise to be kept for the sake of his father and grandfather both of whom G'd Himself had invoked in association with this promise. He feels that he deserves such protection, having heard that Esau is an unreformed sinner, still relating to him with hostility.*

Note how Radak states Jacob believed, based upon his actions, that his brother was an unreformed, disobedient, and rebellious sinner. Radak continues to interpret the meaning of *32:11* to say that Jacob did not believe the Lord would help him commensurate with his own merits saying that his merits are *"utterly inadequate."* This is a very important observation since Radak continues in his commentary to say, *"Yaakov described as חסד the acts of unearned love G'd had performed for him, whereas he described as אמת, "truth," i.e. deserved compensation, that G'd would keep His promise to him."* This is the same conclusions found in the Apostolic Writings, due to God's Chesed (חסד, mercy, grace) we are given unearned love and the Lord causes His blessing to come upon us, not because of our own merits. Because Jacob understands the Lord as merciful, by reason of God's mercy he is given

a future expectation of the Lord keeping His promises. This is further interpreted as an unconditional promise, that God's protection was not based upon Jacob's performance. Note how Jacob "*expects the promises to be kept for the sake of his father and grandfather both of whom G'd Himself had invoked in association with this promise.*" According to the Apostolic Writings, we are said to expect the Lord to save us for the sake of the Messiah Yeshua and what He did for us upon the cross. The significance of these things is that the Lord God of Israel has provided for all men of this world a way to rely upon the merit of one man to enter into a covenant with God and receive the gift of redemption. Note how this is consistent with Judaism placing more emphasis upon actions than on intentions, on the acts we perform rather than on the emotions we feel. Our faith is in the actions of the Messiah and what He had done for us! All that we receive from the Lord due to His mercy is for the sake of His Messiah, because of what He had done, because of His actions, He lived a perfect life without sin and laid his life down for ours. Again, this is consistent with the rabbinic halachah on selfless behavior and earning merit for entry into the Olam Haba (the world to come) also known as "*salvation.*"

Rashi makes a similar conclusion on his interpretation of *Bereshit / Genesis 32:11*:

### ***Rashi on Bereshit 32:11 Part 1***

מכל החסדים קטנתי *I AM TOO UNWORTHY OF ALL THE MERCIES* (This may be rendered "I am small — unworthy — because of all the kindnesses) — My merits are diminished in consequence of all the kindness and truth which You have already shown me. For this reason I am afraid: perhaps, since You made these promises to me, I have become depraved (נתקלקלתי) by sin (another version of Rashi has נתלכלכתי, I have become defiled by sin) and this may cause me to be delivered unto Esau's power (Shabbat 32a).

### ***Part 2***

ומכל האמת [my merits are diminished in consequence] *OF ALL THE TRUTH* — of the true fulfillment (אמיתת)



*of Your promises — because You have already kept all the promises You made me*

### **Part 3**

*כי במקלי FOR WITH MY STAFF — I had with me neither silver nor gold nor cattle — only this staff of mine. The Midrashic explanation is, that he had placed his staff in the Jordan and Jordan had divided for him to pass over.*

Rashi summarizes the unworthiness of Jacob and the mercies of God. In Part 1 of his commentary, he says that Jacob's merits are diminished due to the kindness and truth of the Lord. He sees how sin defiles and causes punishment to come, and the Lord blesses because of his (Jacob's) faithfulness in the Lord.

Sforno states the following on *Bereshit / Genesis 32:11*.

### **Sforno on Bereshit / Genesis 32:11 Part 1**

*קטונתי מכל החסדים, I was not worthy of all the acts of kindness I have experienced at Your hands.*

### **Part 2**

*ומכל האמת, the good You did for me on account of the merit of my father and grandfather. Seeing that You have already seen fit to treat me well beyond my deserts, I beg of You to continue to do so. Our regular prayers reflect this sentiment when we use the expression כגודל חסדך, “in accordance with the greatness of Your kindness.” Moses used this expression in Numbers 14:19 when praying for forgiveness of the people after the debacle with the spies.*

Sforno states that Jacob believed he was not worthy of all the acts of kindness the Lord had shown him, bringing great wealth into his life in family, in children, and in cattle. Jacob held to the belief that it was the result of the promises God had made and the merit of his fathers Abraham and Isaac. Sforno states that our prayers also reflect this sentiment



in the expression “*in accordance with the greatness of Your kindness,*” because the measure of kindness is greater than all our sins.

Rashbam has the following to say on *Bereshit / Genesis 32:11*.

***Rashbam on Bereshit / Genesis 32:11 Part 2***

*החסדים, the loving kindness as expressed by promises. We have a parallel to this in 1 Kings 8:64 Seeing that You have performed for me both חסדים and אמת, although I have not yet redeemed my vow to establish an altar at Beyt El and to sacrifice to You there, I am now afraid in spite of the assurances You have given me. I am aware that You do not judge man according to his good intentions but according to his carrying out such intentions, and I have been remiss in this respect. We find in connection with Chizkiyah, King of Yehudah in 1 Kings 20:1 that when the prophet had told him: “you will die and not live,” that the king prayed to G’d and was granted an additional 15 years of life on earth. [he was given this extension as in his prayer he had enumerated his merits, although G’d justified the extension with reference to King David, Chizkiyah’s ancestor. Ed.]*

Rashbam states comments upon the חסדים and אמת (grace and truth) of God towards Jacob. Jacob had vowed to return to the Land and build an altar to the Lord in Bethel. He is seeking to fulfill his oath with the Lord’s help to do so and asking the Lord to help him to be safe so that he can praise His name in the Sacrifice. Jacob had the intention of carrying out what he had promised. The intention is what is important, just as the Mishnaic principle speaks of the servant who works without reward (*i.e. a laborer being worthy of his wages*) as compared to those who serve for a reward. (*Mishnah Pirkei Avot 1:3*) Note these things are consistent with what is taught in the Apostolic Writings! (see *1 John* and *2 John* in regard to the commands of God)

It is important to understand how the rabbis are not promoting a works based salvation in the context of Jacob’s prayer and request of God. Within the idea of the merits of our fathers is the Torah principle that the deeds of a faithful parent affects his children and future genera-

tions. A faithful parent will not incur God's wrath which would bring destruction to not only himself but to his entire family, including his children (e.g. and future generations). Also, a faithful parent will teach his children in the fear of the Lord, in faith, and to obey the mitzvot because of our love for the Lord. Living a faithful life is how we serve and love our Father in heaven, and this will cause one's children to be instructed in the way of God and His Messiah Yeshua, to trust in the Lord God in heaven and to follow in the footsteps of the Messiah. In an analogous manner, the children of the unrighteous will learn the wicked ways of their parents and thus incur the wrath of God. Relying upon the merit of the fathers, Jacob expressed faith in both the word of his fathers Abraham and Isaac, as well as faith in the word of the Lord and His promises which they communicated to Jacob. As a result, Jacob believed that it was the Lord God who assisted and protected him in the land of Haran.

Based upon this study, can it be said that the single most important mitzvah of all is to trust in the merit of others? Based upon the rabbinic interpretations on *Bereshit / Genesis 32:11*, our own merits, or in other words, our own ability to keep the commands of God are "*utterly inadequate.*" This is the observation of Radak and others who describe Jacob as recognizing "*חסד the acts of unearned love G'd had performed for him, and אמת, "truth," as deserved compensation, that G'd would keep His promise to him.*" This is the reliance upon the Lord for His mercy, and in His keeping the promises He had made to our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is why it is taught in the Apostolic Writings that the single most important mitzvah of all is to trust in Yeshua as Lord and Savior. Christians speak of being "*free from the Law*" and argue that it is easy for some to justify themselves as pleasing to God on the basis of some litany of rules that are being kept. The claim says "*we do not want to live as truly free individuals before the Lord because this implies that we are responsible for our individual lives.*" My question is "*how do you understand freedom? Is this the freedom to sin?*" This implies that the Torah is a form of bondage contrary to *Romans 7* and *Galatians 5*. The point is that "*we are responsible for our individual lives*" otherwise we would not be guilty for our sins. Scripture states that we will be held accountable for what we have said and done before the Lord God Almighty. We are

not given a license to sin because of our faith in Yeshua the Messiah! This is the point and the significance of trusting in the merits of others that has been pointed out according to the words of Jacob in Parashat Vayishlach.

***Bereshit / Genesis 32:9-11,***

*32:9 Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,' 32:10 I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. 32:11 'Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. (NASB, וַיֹּאמֶר*

*אֵם-יְבוּא עֲשׂוּ אֶל-הַמַּחְנֶה הָאֶחָת וְהִכּוּ וְהָיָה הַמַּחְנֶה הַנֶּשְׁאָר לְפָלִיטָה: י וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי אָבִי יִצְחָק יְהוָה הָאֵמֶר אֵלַי שׁוּב לְאַרְצְךָ וּלְמוֹלְדֹתְךָ וְאִיטִיבָה עִמָּךְ: יא קָטַנְתִּי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל-הָאַמֶּת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֵת-עַבְדְּךָ כִּי (בְּמִקְלֵי עֵבְרָתִי אֵת-הַיְרֵדֹן הַזֶּה וְעַתָּה הִיִּיתִי לְשְׁנֵי מַחְנוֹת:*

Jacob had faith in the Lord God Almighty, relying wholly upon the merits of Him who is mighty to save. Just as the prophet Habakkuk stated in *Habakkuk 2:4 But the righteous will live by his faith. (NASB, (הִנֵּה עֲפָלָה לֹא-יִשְׁרָה נַפְשׁוֹ בּוֹ וְצַדִּיק בְּאַמוּנָתוֹ יִתְּיָה: The law of God is the absolute standard of perfection. Anyone who has tried to keep the Torah realizes the absolute necessity to rely upon the merit of others. This is the spirit of the law that Paul speaks of in relation to our faith in the Messiah and our Father in heaven. The truth is not about our inability to keep the Torah, but that we are bit not able to consistently keep the Torah all of our lives thus necessitating the help of God. This is why trusting in the merit of the Messiah is so important and this why all men, both Jew and Gentile must trust in the Merits of Yeshua in order to be saved!*

