

WHY WORK FOR A LIVING?

Background

For twenty years, Yaakov worked as a shepherd for Lavan. When Yaakov ran away, Lavan eventually caught up with him and accused him of stealing. Yaakov, in his defense, said that not only was he innocent, “If it weren’t for the merit of my fathers, you would have sent me out empty-handed, and if it weren’t for the merit of the labor of my hands, you would have succeeded in killing me.” It is clear that Yaakov attributed more merit to his working in the fields than to the merits of Avraham and Yitzchak.

מדרש תנחומא ויצא פרק יג

יג) השמר לך פן תדבר עם יעקב מטוב ועד רע מכאן אנו למדין שזכות מלאכה עומדת במקום שאין יכול זכות אבות לעמוד שנאמר לולי אלהי אבי אלהי אברהם וגו' א"כ לא עמדה לו זכות אבותיו אלא לשמירת ממונו את עניי ואת יגיע כפי ראה אלהים ויוכח אמש שהזהירו מהרע לו בזכות יגיע כפיו למד שלא יאמר אדם אוכל ואשתה ואראה בטוב ולא אטריח עצמי ומן השמים ירחמו לכך נאמר ומעשה ידיו ברכת (איוב א) צריך לאדם לעמול ולעשות בשתי ידיו והקב"ה שולח את ברכתו

Medrash Tanchuma

“Guard yourself, lest you speak to Yaakov from the bad to the good.” (Bereishis 31)

From here we see that the merit of labor stands in a place where the merit of our forefathers doesn't, as the posuk says, “If it weren't for the merit of the G-d of my father and of Avraham. . .” We see that the merit of Yaakov's forefathers only stood to guard his money, whereas when HASHEM warned Lavan not to harm Yaakov, it was in the merit of the labor of Yaakov's hands. A man must work hard with both hands, and HASHEM will send His blessings.

Questions

Can one imagine the power of *zechus Avos*? Two of the greatest individuals who ever lived, Avraham and Yitzchak, spent their lives in piety and near-perfect service to HASHEM. The merit this brings to their offspring is difficult to imagine. How can it be put in the same league as the merit that came from Yaakov working in the field? All he did was act as a shepherd — a simple worker. There is no great accomplishment in simple work. Yet Yaakov feels that this merit is even greater than that of his forefathers, and the Medrash learns this out as a lesson for us. The question is: why is this so?