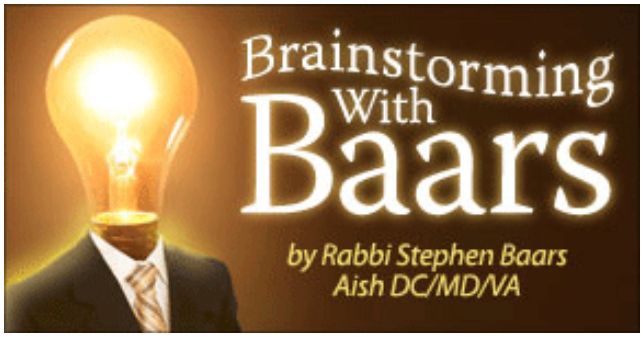
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Whatever Floats Your Boat

"A person is only as great as the ideas that form the fabric of his being."

To paraphrase Clint Eastwood, what would make your day? Winning the lottery? A new Bentley? A country estate maybe?

How about a great concept?

The Mesilit Yesharim (Path of the Just) brings the midrash that compares this world to the land, and the next world to the sea (Kohelet Rabbah 1:36). Rabbi Noah Weinberg explains that if you are going on a long voyage, you had better prepare everything you need.

Let's start with the boat. Crossing the seven seas in a raft may make for the experience of a lifetime, if you survive, but I would much rather have the QE2.

The boat is the vessel that keeps everything else safe and secure. Floating alone on a simple raft on a quiet lake is one thing, but bring on an elephant, then add a storm and maybe try the rapids and you won't be singing in the rain.

The vessel of your life is the fabric of your being: your ideas. Everything we experience is filtered through our concept of life.

> *"Nothing in life is ever what it is. It's all relative to what we expect it to be."*

If your concept of life is very primitive, like a simple raft, then when something big comes into your world your equilibrium is thrown off. A storm erupts, maybe bad news, and invariably you will fall.

This is life; the bigger and more well built the boat, the better you can handle the good as well as the bad.

Yes, good is a challenge, too. Anything good in life comes with responsibilities. Win the lottery and all kinds of new challenges will present themselves to you. It's no accident that the lottery destroys more lives than it improves. The vast majority of the people who play, typically buy a ticket barely holding onto a log, let alone a raft.

"God is good" may be an oversimplification of how the world runs, but it goes a long way toward explaining why more good doesn't happen to you: Maybe you don't have a big enough canoe to handle it.

Until you realize that it's only through ideas that your day will be made, you are stuck in the same dinghy you were born with.

In this week's Torah portion, Jacob, it could be said, had the greatest vision and concept of all time. He understood the ladder (Genesis 28:12), the process by which we reach heaven, yet remain rooted in this world.

> *"...It is only through earthly deeds that we climb to the loftiest heights. The different levels of the spiritual world - the rungs of the 'ladder' - can only be bound together when they are 'standing on the earth.' "*
>
> *- Rav Dessler, Strive for Truth, Treatise on repentance*

It's his vision that created what today we call Judaism. This is what it's all about, the process by which we can live in this world and yet get closer to and drink from the next.

As much as we would like to believe otherwise, nothing in this world can rise above the level of merely functioning. You might be able to buy a Swiss watch for $100,000 but it won't tell the time any better than my Chinese $10 equivalent.

It's the ultimate cosmic joke. Why else do people want to go where "no one has gone before" except that everywhere else has become boring?

There is only one place that you haven't visited that is worth going to: Heaven. Jacob understood what concepts and deeds we need to enable us to climb upwards. It's the Torah and Mitzvos that are the rungs.

So, if you really want to make your day, bring a little more Heaven to Earth. Travel in style; there is a class starting now.

Don't wait. This is the cruise of a lifetime.

Brainstorming Questions to Ponder

Question 1: What is your most precious idea in life?

Question 2: What would your life be like if you never had that idea?

Question 3: How much would you be willing to pay to get an idea that will do for you twice as much as the first idea?

Realize, there are vastly more ideas of greater value to you that you don't know, than you do, waiting for you to attain for free in the Torah.



Employer-Employee Relations

Some years ago, while living in Jerusalem, I had a friend who worked as an official in the Ministry of Education. My friend was **meticulous in his behavior,** following both the letter and the spirit of the law, whether involving religious or secular pursuits. He made it a point, for instance, to record the amount of time he spent each work day for private purposes such as making personal phone calls. At the end of the week, he would tally up the total time he had spent on his personal affairs and make sure to stay late at work **to make up for that "borrowed" time.**

This behavior is, in fact, consistent with Jewish law ("*halacha*"). **The obligations of an employee to his employer** are taken so seriously in halacha that modifications were even made in the prayers: Recognizing that employers would be shortchanged if workers spent too much time praying, the Sages composed an abridged form of "Grace After Meals" for workers.

This topic of workers' obligations is alluded to in this week's Torah portion, Vayetzei. Jacob flees from his brother Esav, and goes to Padan Aram, where he marries his cousins, Rachel and Leah. Jacob works for their father Lavan, a deceitful person who constantly changes the terms of their work agreement.

After 20 years of service to Lavan (and encouraged by God in a dream), Jacob decides to return to Canaan. But before leaving, he consults with his wives, and describes how **"with all my might I worked for your father."** Maimonides cites these words of Jacob as a source for the requirement that workers work a full day - and "labor with all your might."

At the same time, the need for responsible management and the **protection of workers' rights** is also derived from this week's Torah portion. When Jacob does finally decide to return home, he does so stealthily, fearful of what Lavan may do to him. Lavan gives chase and ultimately overtakes Jacob and his family. In the midst of the ensuing confrontation, Jacob refers to his 20 years as watchman over Lavan's flocks, and bitterly comments, "By the day I was consumed by scorching heat, and at night by the frost, when sleep was snatched from my eyes."

Jacob's comments are seen as a criticism of Lavan - a reflection on the fact that he had been treated unjustly. Jacob's words ultimately find their way into **Jewish law which prohibit an employer** from harming his laborers' health, and puts strict guidelines on the degree to which workers can be asked to stay up at night to work.

There are actually hundreds of laws in rabbinic literature dealing with labor-management relations. For example, failure to pay a worker his wages on time is an explicit transgression of Torah law. Through it all, the paramount theme is to ensure that neither party is taken advantage of, and that **respect is maintained for each person** as having been created in the image of God.



Thanks, But No Thanks

In this week's Torah portion we meet Laban, the coldhearted swindler who repeatedly deceives Jacob. He tricks Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel and, as Rashi explains (*Bereishis* 31:7), he then tries to cheat Jacob by changing the terms of their agreement more than 100 times.

And then the despicable Laban says something so completely out of character, you can't help but stop in your tracks and take notice.

Jacob has completed the 14 years of work that he committed to do for Laban in exchange for marrying his daughters Rachel and Leah, and now he wants to return to Israel. Laban is not happy to see Jacob go, however: "But Laban said to him, 'If I have found favor in your eyes! I have learned by divination that Hashem has blessed me on account of you'" (ibid 30:27).

Laban is telling Jacob, "I figured out the secret to my wealth – God blessed me because of you. Now, of course I don't want you to work for nothing, so let's cut a deal and figure out a way for you to continue working for me." What is so striking is that Laban says that God, the transcendental, eternal Source of existence, is the One Who blessed him on account of Jacob. Does this appreciation of God sound like the Laban we know? Why has he suddenly become

so pious?

We understand that Laban wants to manipulate Jacob to continue working for him, but that does not explain his admission that God is behind his success. Recognizing God as the Source of all your blessings is no easy task! That is why the Hebrew for thanks, *todah*, comes from root "to admit" – because saying thank you means we are admitting we have a debt of gratitude that must be repaid. None of us likes to owe anything to others. We have a tendency to minimize our debt of gratitude and thereby lessen the extent to which we are beholden to others and Hashem.

If we Jews, who say *Shema Yisrael* and *Modim Anachnu Lach* every day, have a tough time admitting that the Almighty has blessed us, how can a self-absorbed swindler like Laban explicitly recognize that God is the Source of all his blessings and wealth?

It's All a Sham

One person understood Laban's true intentions, and that was Jacob. Look at Jacob's response to Laban's acknowledgement of God:

> *But he [Jacob] said to him, "You know how I served you and what your livestock were with me. For the little that you had before I came has expanded substantially as Hashem has blessed you with my coming; and now, when will I also do something for my own house?" (ibid 30:29-30)*

Jacob is confronting Laban and telling him, "I see right through your verbiage and lies. Yes, God blessed you because of me. That's true, Laban. But God isn't the only One you need to thank. You cannot ignore the fact that I worked hard for your sheep. I was the one who took care of your livestock and increased the size of your flock. You owe me as well. And if you cannot recognize your debt of gratitude to me, then don't talk to me about how much the Almighty did for you."

Jacob has Laban's number. He understands that *hakarat hatov*, gratitude, begins with appreciating the debt you have toward humans. If you cannot admit to that more concrete debt of gratitude, then you cannot truly recognize your more ephemeral debt of gratitude to God. It's all a sham.

Pharaoh vs. Moses

Pharaoh exhibited a profound lack of gratitude, as the Torah says, "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know of Yosef" (*Shemos* 1:8). Pharaoh was an ingrate of the highest order, because he did not recognize all that Yosef had done to save Egyptian society from starvation. This lack of gratitude made it possible for him to oppress the Jewish people, and inevitably led him to deny God. As the Midrash says, "Today Pharaoh does not know of Yosef; tomorrow he says, 'I do not know Hashem.'" (*Tanchuma, Shemos* 5)

It is much easier to be real with another human being than it is to be real with God, because the Almighty cannot be perceived on a sensory level. Therefore, if you want to genuinely appreciate all the Almighty does for you, you first have to appreciate everything your parents have done for you. They are more concrete, and their giving is more real and far more tangible. First recognize your debt of gratitude to them, and then you will be able to appreciate what the Almighty has done for you and continues to do for you. The opposite is also true. If you cannot admit that you were helped by a human being, in the end you will certainly have a tough time admitting that you were helped by God.

Moses's behavior was the opposite of Pharaoh's; he excelled in his ability to be grateful. Moses not only appreciated the kindness he received from others, he was also careful to show his gratitude even to inanimate

objects. As the Midrash says in explaining why Aaron, and not Moses, was the one who brought the plagues of blood and frogs, "Since the Nile protected Moses when he was cast into it, it therefore was not hit by him, neither with blood nor with frogs, but was hit by Aaron" (Rashi on *Shemos* 7:19, based on *Tanchuma*, *Va'eira* 14).

Pay Your Debts

Laban is willing to recognize God's existence and even admit that the Almighty Himself is involved in the affairs of man and has personally blessed him, as long as he does not have to admit that he owes Jacob anything. That is why Laban suddenly uses the word God, which he never mentions again in the Torah.

Unless we are willing to recognize our debt of gratitude to our fellow man – whether it is to our parents, our friends, our teachers, or to anyone else who tries to help us – and to appreciate that the effort alone creates a debt of gratitude, then we do not recognize the good done to us. As a result, we will not be able to appreciate what the Almighty has given us, either. In the end, we may even say, "I do not know God. I did all this myself. It was my hard work, my intelligence, my commitment, that brought this about. I don't owe God anything."

We bristle against the idea that we are indebted to others. We do not like to recognize the good people do for us, for we think that being beholden to them impinges on our independence. But we are deceiving ourselves, just as Laban did. Real independence means having the inner strength and humility to appreciate the gifts we have received from the people in our lives. Doing so is the only way to truly appreciate the gifts we have received from the Almighty as well.



The Morality Business

In this week's Torah portion, Jacob arrives in Haran and meets some shepherds. He notices that they are sitting around chatting and immediately admonishes them: If you are working for someone, then you are being paid to tend that person's sheep, not to sit and talk. And if you are self-employed, you should get on with life. Either way, you shouldn't be sitting around doing nothing.

It turns out that these men were waiting to water their sheep, and could not do so until there were enough of them to remove a rock from over the well. Jacob single-handedly moves the rock and allows them to get on with shepherding.

It seems more than a little strange that Jacob, for whom these shepherds are complete strangers, immediately launches into a critique of their values. Surely this is none of his business. They are not his sheep, not his shepherds, and this is not even his country. Who is he to show up and tell them how to behave?

The Sages elucidate from this a fundamental Jewish idea.

We live in a world whose motto is: Live and let live. The way another person conducts himself is his own business. As long as he's not bothering you, let him get on with it. It's none of your business to tell others what to do.

This is not at all a Jewish value. Judaism says:

Live, and also help others to live more meaningful, fulfilled and happy lives. 'Live and let live' is an attitude without concern for others. Let people destroy their own lives, as long as they don't bother me in the process. Someone who cares about other people, will not 'let live,' if that living is self-destructive or harmful to anyone. In the same way as no one would allow someone to jump off a building without trying to talk him down, so too, Judaism says, that no one should allow another person to waste his life without trying to educate him differently.

Far from being "none of his business," the men at the well were precisely Jacob's business. Infusing society with ethics and values was the "family business" that Jacob had inherited from his father, Isaac, and grandfather, Abraham. It may not have been a public company, but nonetheless it was a business that eventually changed the way the world thinks. (The world's two largest religions eventually became its major shareholders.)

For we Jews, morality is still very much the family business. It's not enough to be moral ourselves. When we see immorality, it is also our business to try to educate - as Jacob did 4,000 years ago with the shepherds of Haran.