

Did Yaakov enjoy shepherding?

The other day I asked Google about job satisfaction among shepherds, but the best it could do was produce a paper on *Job Satisfaction and Wages of Family Employees* by a researcher named Shepherd. So I turned to ChatGPT, which told me, “Shepherding can be incredibly rewarding for those who feel a strong connection to the outdoors, animals, and a slower-paced lifestyle... However, it’s a physically demanding job that often involves long hours and solitude, which might not suit everyone.”

I was curious about shepherd satisfaction because Yaakov sent mixed signals about it in this morning’s parshah. On one hand, he complained bitterly; “I was consumed by heat by day, and frost at night, and sleep fled from my eyes.¹” On the other hand, when he told Lavan that he was ready to leave, and Lavan offered to settle up with him, Yaakov didn’t pocket Lavan’s gold and walk away. Just the opposite, he said *אָרְעָה צֹאנֶךָ אֲשַׁמֹּר*, I’m willing to continue herding your sheep! He only stopped six years later, when he felt threatened by Lavan’s family. If Yaakov was miserable, why did he keep doing it?

I’m not the only one who was confused; Rabbi Avraham, son of the Rambam, asked this question in his sefer *המספיק לעובדי ד’*.

Rabbi Avraham ben haRambam

A fitting figure for our Sephardic Month, Rabbi Avraham ben haRambam was the only child of the Rambam to survive to adulthood. The Rambam praised Avraham’s intellect as well as his character. After the Rambam passed away, Rabbi Avraham took his father’s position as the leader of Egyptian Jewry as well as the king’s personal physician. He also wrote numerous works defending his father’s Mishneh Torah work of Halachah² and his Moreh haNevuchim work of philosophy.³

Rabbi Avraham ben haRambam had a fascinating affinity for elements of Islam. He was heavily into a contemplative and ascetic form of piety, and he saw reflections of it in an Islamic sect called the Sufi. If you’ve heard of “whirling dervishes”, that’s actually a Sufi form of meditation. Rabbi Avraham⁴ claimed that Sufism came from Jewish roots.⁵

Yaakov’s Hitbodidut

In his work of mystical mussar, *המספיק לעובדי ד’*,⁶ Rabbi Avraham promoted the meditative practice of *התבודדות*, which literally means “seclusion”. In *התבודדות*, a person seeks to focus his thoughts only on Hashem, excluding everything else and developing an awareness of Hashem to such an extent that he experiences total focus on, and love of, Hashem. As the Rambam wrote,⁷ this is what prophets do.

Rabbi Avraham wrote that our patriarchs were all contemplatives; all of them meditated in this way.

- This is why the two youths who escorted Avraham and Yitzchak to Har HaMoriyah were not surprised when Avraham told them to wait while he would go off without them.
- Yitzchak did it, too; we read in Parshat Chayei Sarah how he went *לשוח בשדה*, to speak [to Hashem] in the fields.
- Yaakov was a *יושב אהלים* as a young man; he would sit in a tent and contemplate Hashem. That’s how he achieved the vision of the ladder at the start of our parshah.
- And this is why so many of our ancestors engaged in shepherding; like ChatGPT said, it afforded long hours and solitude - lots of time to be away from society, in *התבודדות*.

¹ Bereishit 31:40

² Birkat Avraham, Maaseh Nisim

³ Milchamot Hashem

⁴ HaMaspek l’Ovdei Hashem: Perishut; he calls the Sufis *האיסלאם*

⁵ Note: Rabbi Avraham’s yahrtzeit is actually this coming week, the 18th of Kislev. For more, see Rav Baruch Weintraub’s brief biography of Rabbi Avraham ben haRambam in Toronto Torah Vayishlach 5774. And see Chovot haLevavot 5:5, which brings an adage that is popular in Sufism (re the greater and lesser war).

⁶ Perek 13: *התבודדות*

⁷ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei haTorah 7:4

To return to Yaakov's puzzling response to Lavan - According to Rabbi Avraham ben haRambam, התבודדות is why Yaakov chose the painful heat and frost of shepherding even after he earned Leah and Rachel. It was painful, but he wanted to continue as a shepherd in order to connect with Hashem.

התבודדות מן התורה מנין

Really, all of us should practice התבודדות. It's a halachic imperative. After all –

- Don't we have a mitzvah of אלקיך ד' אנכי ד' אלקיך, to develop emunah in Hashem as Creator of the World?⁸
- Don't we have a mitzvah of אהד ד' אלקינו ד' אהד, to develop emunah that Hashem is One?⁹
- Don't we have a mitzvah of ואהבת את ד' אלקיך, to develop love of Hashem?
- Don't we have a mitzvah of את ד' אלקיך תירא, to develop awe of Hashem?

How can we achieve that, if we don't spend time actively contemplating Hashem?

Our Path

But as much as our patriarchs practiced התבודדות and Rabbi Avraham ben haRambam praised it, and as much as we need it in order to fulfill those fundamental biblical mitzvot, the reality is that this isn't the way that most of us practice Judaism. We tend to find our greatest Jewish expression in group settings, and in social mitzvot בין אדם לחבירו.

Consider our response to the war in Israel, so much is group-oriented - We give tzedakah and raise tzedakah from others. We learn Torah in shiurim and with chavrutot. We bake challah together, we send letters to chayalim. Even when we say Tehillim, it tends to be in a group, and with the goal of benefiting another person, not contemplating Hashem.

There are reasons for that bias toward the social:

- Helping other people can be emotionally rewarding.
- Engaging other people is a lot more stimulating for many people than sitting in thought about Hashem.
- Society understands and reinforces good deeds toward others; society doesn't really understand taking time to think about Hashem.
- Plus, Torah itself prioritizes social mitzvot and empathy. Rav Yerucham Levovitz, Mashgiach of the Mir Yeshiva wrote, "All of the Torah study, all of the learning and all of the deeds, the final goal is that all souls should be joined, to feel each others' feelings, to truly be one."¹⁰ In fact, the Rambam criticizes a פורש מן הציבור who seeks to practice his mitzvot in private, away from the community.¹¹

In fact, even within the realm of Jewish meditation, there is an anti-התבודדות practice, called התבוננות. In התבודדות we shut out the world and just contemplate Hashem; in התבוננות we look about ourselves, take in our surroundings, and identify the Divine in that environment – people, animals, plants, everything. One school of thought shuts out the world in order to find Hashem, the other welcomes in the world and searches for Hashem there.

But we need התבודדות

But we need התבודדות. Each of us needs to nourish a loner inside of us.

- A Jew who only perches on a rock in the forest thinking about Hashem may be missing something – but so is a Jew whose phone is constantly ringing with opportunities for chesed.
- A Jew who makes a siyum hasahas learning privately all day and all night may be missing something – but so is a Jew who spends all of his time running a soup kitchen.

And that hisbodidut can happen in shul. This is what I meant at the Installation, when I described a shul as Gan Eden, a place to return to intimacy with Hashem. It is a place of tzibbur, of community – but it is also a place to be alone.

⁸ Sefer haMitzvot Aseh 1

⁹ Ibid. Aseh 2

¹⁰ Daat Chochmah uMussar III 295

¹¹ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:11

Rav Soloveitchik lovingly described¹² the itinerant peddlers of his childhood community in Europe. He depicted the primitive conditions in which they suffered on the road all week, and how they would return home for Shabbat and they would come into shul, mikvah water dripping from their peiot and beards, singing Tehillim 107: “הודו לד' כי טוב כי לעולם” “Sing to Hashem for He is good, for His generosity is forever! So will declare those Hashem has redeemed, for He has saved them from the enemy, and He has gathered them from east and west, from north and south.” Their joy was not only about being home, but about returning to Hashem, in shul. The shul is a place for Yaakov the shepherd, for intimate התבודדות, for a focus on Hashem.

Practicing Yaakov's intimate התבודדות means that at some point in davening we block everything out and envision Hashem in front of us. If it's not Shabbat, we silence our phone, or just leave it in our car, because really, we aren't going to answer the text or the call if it comes in while we are davening, because we are being מתבודד! We are here for ourselves and Hashem, to develop belief in our Creator, to develop belief in One Gd, to develop love of Hashem, to develop awe of Hashem, to find and nourish our personal bond with Hashem.

Closer

At the Simchas Beis haShoevah a million years ago, I told the story of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, a student of the Baal Shem Tov.¹³ Every day, all day, people would besiege him, seeking his help, and it kept him from focusing on Hashem. In desperation, he davened that people should hate him, so that he could just be with Hashem. And so it happened, and he was מתבודד, alone with Hashem.

On the first night of Succot, he davened in shul and he invited people to come to his succah for a seudah, but no one would come to him. He went home alone, and he started the meal and invited in the Ushpizin. He saw Avraham standing outside his succah – but Avraham wouldn't come in. He asked Avraham, “What have I done wrong?” Avraham replied, “I don't go into places where there are no guests.” And Rav Pinchas davened to reverse the wish that had been fulfilled.

There is a danger of spending too much time in the contemplation described by Rabbi Avraham ben haRambam. But I'd wager that many of us are not Sufis yet, that our social התבוננות is greater than our intimate התבודדות. We have work to do, to find ways to emulate Yaakov the shepherd. May we merit that even as we daven in shul together, sing together, celebrate and commiserate together, we also learn to be alone with Hashem, and to sing הודו לד' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו.

¹² דברי הגות והערכה, *The Synagogue: The Institution and the Idea*, published in בית הכנסת: המוסד והרעיון

¹³ Sippurei Chasidim, Moadim pg. 130