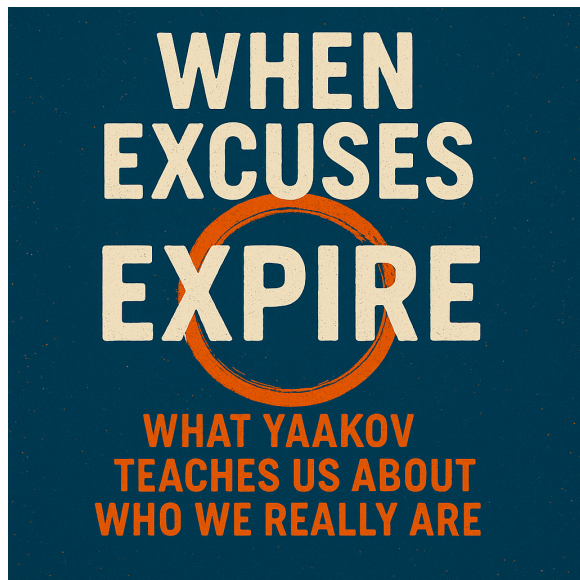


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When Excuses Expire: What Yaakov Teaches Us About Who We Really Are

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The Journey That Was Supposed to Be Brief... and Became 22 Years

Our parashah opens at the end of tremendous familial upheaval. After Yaakov receives the blessings—legitimately, but not without conflict—Rivkah sees the danger. She approaches Yitzchak and says: “I don’t want our son growing old here without finding his match. Send him away—to our family, to our city—to find a bride.”

Yitzchak calls Yaakov, blesses him, commands him, and sends him off to find a wife from their ancestral home.

Famous story. We know the beats: Yaakov arrives. He falls in love with Rachel. Works seven years that feel like days because of his love. Is tricked. Marries Leah. Works another seven for Rachel. Builds a family.

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And the total time Yaakov spends outside the Land of Israel?

Twenty-two years.

And our Sages tell us: Yaakov is “paid back” measure-for-measure. Just as he was absent from his parents for 22 years, Yosef is absent from him for 22 years.

The reasoning given by Chazal is that Yaakov was deprived of the mitzvah of kibbud av va’em—honoring father and mother—by virtue of being away. And his punishment mirrors that absence.

But immediately a powerful question arises, famously posed by Rabbeinu Bechaye:

How can you punish Yaakov for not honoring his parents... when his parents themselves commanded him to go?

How can the fulfillment of his parents’ will become the basis for a punishment?

The answer Rabbeinu Bechaye gives is subtle, brilliant, and—if we allow it—piercingly personal.

****Going Was the Mitzvah**

Staying Was the Choice**

His parents did indeed send him. But what did they intend?

Like Eliezer before him, they intended a brief journey:

Go. Find the girl. Bring her home.

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Eliezer did not go on a 22-year vacation package. He was sent on a mission and returned the moment the mission was done.

When Yaakov's mission was done—at least the core of it—he didn't return. He stayed.

And here comes the deeper question:

Even if they intended him to get married there, wouldn't that require at least seven years—his initial agreement with Lavan?

Correct. Minimally he's under instruction for seven years.

Not 22.

Which means the remaining years were self-chosen extensions.

That is the opening. But the real answer is found in the Chafetz Chaim.

The Chafetz Chaim's Scales of Heaven

The Chafetz Chaim interprets the Mishnah in Avot which says:

"If you neglected Torah, there are many who will testify against you."

On a simple level, it means: you'll face the consequences.

But the Chafetz Chaim explains something astonishing.

When a man doesn't learn Torah because he's working to support his family, Heaven says:

"We understand. We believe you. That was not bitul Torah—that was a mitzvah."

But then—after work—what happens?

If he goes home, kicks off his shoes, sits back with Netflix, or spends an hour scrolling, then Heaven says:

"Aha.

This reveals your true priorities."

Because if, when you finally could learn, you still didn't...

then what does that say about all your excuses earlier in the day?

When the excuse expires, the truth is revealed.

This, says the Chafetz Chaim, is why Yaakov is punished for all 22 years.

Before his marriages, he had no choice.

During his work, he had limited choice.

But eventually, he had windows to return—and didn't.

And once you reveal what you would do when you can, Heaven knows what you wanted to do when you couldn't.

The Witnesses You Never Expected

Chazal say something wild:

Two witnesses appear in Heaven's court:

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1. The walls of your house
2. Your hands and feet

How you do anything is how you do everything.

Now... how does that make sense?

Your house walls don't follow you to work.

Your legs weren't there when you lost your temper in traffic.

So what are they testifying to?

Simple:

Your excuses.

You said you spoke harshly at the office because of "pressure."

But the walls at home know how you speak when you're not under pressure.

You said you couldn't learn because you were "exhausted."

But your hands know what you reached for when you had downtime.

You said you couldn't visit your parents because of "work."

But your feet know exactly where you chose to walk when you finally had a free weekend.

Heaven doesn't judge your pressured moments.

Heaven judges what your unpressured moments reveal about you.

The Multiplier Effect of a Mitzvah—or a Mistake

The Mishnah says:

"Consider the reward of a mitzvah against the loss, and the loss of an aveirah against its reward."

That sounds redundant.

But now we see the depth:

A small missed opportunity can multiply into a massive spiritual deficit—because it reveals the truth about all your previously claimed limitations.

And the reverse is also true.

Do one mitzvah with sincerity in a moment of freedom, and Heaven says:

"Ah!

This is who he truly is."

And God retroactively credits you as if you performed that mitzvah even in the moments you were constrained.

What Retirement Really Reveals

It's one thing to ask:

What do you do after a day of work?

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But let's ask the bigger question:

What do you do after a life of work?

When the day finally comes—retirement hits, the business is sold, the schedule opens—and suddenly you have “all the time in the world”... what happens?

For decades you said:

“I wish I learned more Torah.”

“I wish I spent more time with my wife.”

“I wish I could take the kids on trips.”

“I wish I could volunteer more.”

“I wish I could visit Israel.”

Beautiful wishes.

Now you're free.

Show me the money.

Not the 401(k).

Not the cash-out from the business sale.

The spiritual balance sheet.

Now we see who you truly wanted to be.

If you seize the moment, God says:

“Now I know. And I count all your previous years as if you were that person.”

If not...

The opposite.

Rare Mitzvot and Revealed Desires

Some mitzvot come once in a lifetime:

- Pidyon Peter Chamor (redeeming a firstborn donkey)
- Yovel (once every 50 years)
- Birkat HaChamah (once every 28 years)

When a rare mitzvah appears, everyone runs.

Why?

Because we reveal what we value by what we run toward.

Rav Shlomo Brevda quoted Rav Wolbe:

“When a person closes his Gemara, he should immediately think:
‘When can I return?’”

We have moments when all we want is to return to sleep.

We count hours until a nap.

Imagine counting hours until you can learn.

Until you can daven.

Until you can do chesed.

Until you can call your parents.

If—when you get those rare opportunities—you grab them, Hashem says:

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“This is the real you.”

And He retroactively redefines your entire life’s spiritual story.

Use the Moments That Reveal You

This is the lesson of Yaakov.

Not a lesson about punishment.

A lesson about identity.

We are not judged by our constraints.

We are judged by our choices.

Use the small windows of freedom to demonstrate who you truly are.

In those moments, you tell God—and yourself—everything.

Amen v’Amen.

Shabbat Table Discussion Questions

1. What is one area where you’ve been making “excuses”—and what small action could reveal what you truly value?
 2. If someone looked only at your unpressured moments—your evenings, weekends, downtime—what would they learn about your priorities?
 3. Which mitzvah do you feel you “wish you could do more”? What’s one way to steal a few minutes for it now, rather than later?
 4. Think about retirement: if you suddenly had endless free time, what would your schedule reveal about the person you always said you wanted to be?
 5. What is one “rare mitzvah” or rare opportunity in your life right now—and how can you run toward it like a once-in-a-lifetime gift?
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