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At The SHABBAT TABLE

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PARSHAT
VAYECHI

Roses are Red, Thorns Accrue

Have you ever seen a vendor trying to sell flowers on the sidewalk or walking between lanes on the road, passing as many cars as he can during the span of every red light? Why is it that a dozen roses from him will cost less than \$10, whereas a flower shop will charge double or triple the price?

After Yaakov Avinu passed away in this week's parsha, the pasuk states: "vayavo'u ad goren ha'atad – and they came to the threshing floor of Atad (...to lament and mourn their father)." [1] The Midrash finds a very simple difficulty in this verse. In the entirety of Torah, there is no place named "Atad." What, then, is this place being described in the verse? If the intention is to understand Atad by its literal translation, which means "thorns/thistles," then what is meant by "goren ha'atad – the storehouse of thorns"? No one gathers thistles and thorns; they're completely worthless!

The Midrash elaborates: אלו כנענים שהיו ראויים לדוש באותך. It refers to the Canaanites, who were wicked people – worthy of being destroyed and thrown away like thistles. However, the Midrash adds that they were not in fact overlooked and wiped out like a pile of thorns. They managed to survive because of a merit they owned: בזכות חסד שעשו עם יעקב אבינו. The Midrash offers numerous opinions as to how exactly they showed kindness to Yaakov Avinu. According to one, they opened their belts (which held their weapons) as a show of solidarity during the funeral procession. Another opinion suggests that they untied their laces as a show of respect. Another posits that the Canaanites pointed with their fingers and commented what a heavy source of mourning this was for Egypt. Yet another opinion maintains that they stood up and straightened their backs as a display of honor for Yaakov.

This Midrash is a mind-blowing one. Just to offer some perspective, these Canaanites didn't lift the coffin, dig the grave, or bury the body. They didn't even walk with the funeral. They merely pointed a finger, untied a belt, loosened some shoelaces, or straightened their backs – yet were saved from catastrophe.

The Midrash is imparting something extremely profound. Things which people don't care for, discarded like meaningless thorns, are actually stored and safeguarded in Heaven as a "goren ha'atad." After 120 years, we will find that we accumulated not only the big mitzvot and grand moments but the small and seemingly irrelevant things as well. It applies in the negative sense, as halacha makes clear that even the subtlest facial expression in response to a slanderous conversation – even without an actual verbal response – can be considered *lashon hara*. However, it most definitely applies in the positive sense as well. While a person can make light of the one time he helped someone, or overlook the other time he sat down

and gave someone time and advice even though he was in a rush, Jewish wisdom stresses the impact of even the slightest actions. Hashem paid attention to the unbuckling of the belt and untangling of the shoelaces and spared the Canaanites for it; nothing is too insignificant for Him to overlook.

One morning, a man woke up to discover that his phone screen was completely unresponsive. As a dealer in art who relied on calls from clients around the world, the malfunction immediately caused him anxiety. He tried every solution he could think of, but nothing worked. He considered rushing to the nearest Apple Store, yet realized that doing so would mean missing shacharit.

At that moment, he made a decision. "Hashem," he said, "I'm going to pray shacharit now. When I finish, I hope my phone will work. And if it does, I commit to not using my phone before shacharit anymore." He knew how often his phone distracted him, pulling his focus away from prayer or delaying it altogether, and felt that this commitment would be both meaningful and sincere.

Later, the man recounted that just as the congregation finished shacharit, he handed his phone to someone nearby. The person pressed the power button and the screen immediately lit up at the exact moment the prayer had concluded.

It may seem like something insignificant, but the Creator knows more than anyone that sometimes the small things can mean a big deal, and this is just one of G-d's countless expressions to us that He notices our subtlest motions, expressions, and even phone screens.

When someone asks for directions, there's a big difference in Heaven whether you simply tell him or if you tell and show him the way. When someone is asking you for charity, simply tapping your credit card doesn't have the same outcome as giving the money together with a smile. While life may seem long to us, in G-d's eyes time flashes by faster than a blink. In the short span of whatever time we have, Hashem pays incredibly close attention – not to catch you out, but to actually capture the good.

Fancy roses from the flower shop may cost more because they strip away the thorns, but G-d instead collects our "thorns" and assembles them into a precious and timeless garden of roses – one's personal "goren ha'atad." Our power as the Jewish Nation is to embody the greatness of the "thistles" – to transform the meaningless and ordinary into meaning and extraordinary. [2]

[1] Gen. 50:10

[2] Based on a d'var Torah shared by R' Shlomo Farhi

"Bitachon is not hoping Hashem will show up; it's knowing He never left."