



The Joy of Torah - For Life

Parshas Vayishlach - Unfounded Guilt

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When Yaakov heard Eisav was coming, the Torah says that “Yaakov feared very much, and it was distressing for him.” Many mefarshim deal with why Yaakov feared, and what the extra phrase about distress is referring to. For example, the Rosh says he was afraid because Hashem had only given a guarantee to him about his safety, but not for his family, and the Da’as Zekeinim says he was afraid because he didn’t have the merits of honoring his parents over the past 20 years and living in Eretz Yisrael, while Eisav did have those zechusim, so Yaakov was therefore afraid of Eisav.

The Da’as Zekainim then says that the distress Yaakov had, was distress that he felt fear even though Hashem had given him a guarantee that he’d be safe. One can ask - why was Yaakov distressed about his fear? He had reasons to fear that the guarantee no longer applied and they seemed like good reasons because those shortcomings would seem to make the guarantee no longer apply. (as explained in the Midrash Rabbah 36) But if the fear was well-founded, then why was Yaakov distressed about his fear?

It seems that people are very complicated! Even while Yaakov was afraid and rightfully so on an intellectual level. He still had this visceral deep rooted emotional reaction. He felt from his core that how can he be afraid if Hashem gave him a guarantee! Sometimes in life, we know something but we still have discomfort. For example, we can know we gave something our best shot but emotionally we still feel like failures. Imagine for example someone with health issues being forced to eat on Yom Kippur because it’s a life threatening situation. He knows it’s the right thing to eat but it’s still human nature to feel guilty! If even the greatest of people can have this human weakness, then it must be hard-wired within the human psyche to have this very human reaction of unfounded guilt!