

*Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason
Parshas Vayeitzei November 29, 2014*

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates ~

Most of us remember the classic counting rhyme, "One potato, two potato, three potato, four; five potato, six potato, seven potato, more!" But all those potatoes have a special meaning to Jason Brown, who now has quite a few potatoes -- and one of the best, most unusual stories you'll find. Jason Brown played for the Baltimore Ravens and St. Louis Rams from 2005-11. In 2009, his five-year deal with the Rams for \$37.5 million made him, at that time, the highest-paid center ever. He made more than \$25 million from that contract; despite not even being 30 and having interest from other NFL teams after the Rams cut him, he gave up football to become a farmer. "My agent told me, 'You're making the biggest mistake of your life,' " Jason said. "And I looked right back at him and said, 'No, I'm not. No, I'm not.'" Jason had never farmed before. He learned by watching YouTube videos and asking other farmers for tips. Really!

In a recent interview, Jason talked about serving G-d, and how he was doing that through farming. He said he plans to donate the first fruits of every harvest to food pantries. This year it was 100,000 pounds of sweet potatoes Jason had just harvested from his five-acre plot. The remarkable Jason Brown story probably won't be recreated by many NFL multi-millionaires down the road. He certainly seems very happy with his new career.

The pursuit of fame, exorbitant amounts of money, and greed can't give a person the even greater gift of a satisfied mind and true inner happiness. A character trait in Hebrew known as *histapkut*, defined as contentment through simplification, is an attribute designed to help us appreciate that at times, "less is more." "Who is rich?", our Sages ask. "He who is happy with his portion" (*Ethics of the Fathers 4:1*) One who is truly wealthy will not become caught up in conspicuous or excessive consumption.

Parshas Vayeitzei Genesis 28:10 -- 32:3

Jacob escapes from his wicked brother Esau and travels to Charan, where he will stay with his uncle Laban. While spending the night at the future site of the Temple, G-d appears to Jacob in a dream. Rich in symbolism and meaning, the dream depicts a ladder extending from heaven to earth upon which angels are ascending and descending. After arriving in Charan, Jacob meets Laban's daughter Rachel and agrees to work for Laban for seven years for her hand in marriage. When the wedding night finally arrives, Laban deceives Jacob by substituting his older daughter Leah in Rachel's place. After waiting a week, Jacob also marries Rachel, but not without being forced to commit to another seven years of labor.

Over the next few years Rachel remains barren, while Leah gives birth to six sons and a daughter. Bilhah and Zilpah (the maidservants of Rachel and Leah respectively) each have two sons with Jacob. Finally Rachel also has a son, Joseph. Jacob becomes very wealthy during his twenty-year stay with Laban, even though his father-in-law continually tries to swindle him. After seeking counsel with his wives, Jacob and his family flee from Laban, who pursues and confronts him, upset that he left without saying goodbye and arrogantly claiming that Jacob stole his idols. Eventually they sign a peace treaty and part ways.

Rabbinic Ruminations

In his best-selling book on business and leadership, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins identifies the qualities that separate good (or briefly great) companies from longstanding great ones. One fascinating strategy is what Collins terms the "Stockdale Paradox"-- a strategy with relevance to the business world, and to our personal lives. The Stockdale Paradox is named after Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was the highest-ranking naval officer imprisoned in Vietnam. He was kept in solitary confinement and tortured throughout his eight years of captivity, and yet he never lost faith. Admiral Stockdale said, "I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."

The Stockdale Paradox, as described by Jim Collins, is a combination of realism and optimism. Unrealistic optimism of the Pollyanna variety can get you into trouble. However, a degree of optimism is essential to resilience. A truly optimistic person confronts the brutal facts of their current reality but at the same time retains faith that they will prevail in the end. As Dennis Charney, biological psychiatrist and researcher, explains, "The Stockdale Paradox (means looking at a) challenge objectively. You might make the assessment, 'I'm in really big trouble.' You have a realistic assessment of what you're facing. On the other hand, you have the attitude and the confidence to say, 'But I will prevail. I'm in a tough spot, but I will prevail.'

The "realistic optimism" of the Stockdale Paradox brings to mind a profound thought from Rabbi Bunim of P'shiskha. Everyone, Rabbi Bunim says, should have two pockets, each containing a slip of paper. On one should be written: *I am but dust and ashes*, and on the other: *The world was created for me*. From time to time we must reach into one pocket, or the other. The secret of living comes from the flexible thinking of knowing when to reach for humility, and when to reach for the understanding we are special, unique individuals.

Quote of the Week

Only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone. ~ *Pablo Picasso*

Joke of the Week

A young fellow was up for membership at a very exclusive club where Jewish people were not welcome. As his name was Morgan, he thought they might not figure out his true identity.

The day of his interview with the membership committee, the young man took great pains to dress carefully and make an elegant appearance. One committee member asked, "Did your parents come from Russia?" His reply was a simple, "No." Since they had no real grounds on which to base their suspicions, the board accepted Morgan.

But several weeks later, an investigator gave the committee the facts. Summoned before the committee again, Morgan was asked, "Why did you lie to us? We asked if your parents came from Russia and you said no."

"Well, they didn't" answered Morgan. "They're still there!"