



When Yaakov and Esav finally reunite for the first time in over thirty years, Esav sees Yaakov's wives and children and inquires his brother about them. Yaakov identifies them as "the children with which God has graced your servant" ("*Ha-yeladim asher chanan Elokim et avdekha*" – 33:5).

Maimonides cites this verse in the first section of his *Guide for the Perplexed* (chapter 54) in discussing the precise definition of the verb *ch.n.n.* According to Maimonides, this verb denotes an undeserved gesture: "When we give something to a person who has no claim upon us, we perform an act of grace." God is therefore referred to as *chanun*, in that He creates and cares for human beings despite the fact that we clearly have no claim upon Him, that He owes nothing to any of us. Maimonides cites several verses as examples of this meaning, including Yaakov's aforementioned remark to his brother. Maimonides' son, Rabbi Avraham, in his Torah commentary, elaborates on his father's reading of the verse: "He [Yaakov] believed that they are gift from Him, may He be exalted, and an undeserved present that, in his great humility, he did not imagine to himself that he deserved." Yaakov speaks of God as "gracing" him with children because he felt unworthy of having received such a precious gift from the Almighty.

Interestingly, however, several chapters earlier we find Yaakov taking a degree of personal credit for his children. Yaakov worked fourteen years as a shepherd for his father-in-law, Lavan, as "payment" for his marriage to Lavan's two daughters. Upon the completion of his term of service, he asks Lavan to allow him to return to his homeland, and he says, "Give [me] my wives and my children in exchange for whom I have worked for you, and I shall go" (30:26). Yaakov, realizing that Lavan will not easily bid farewell to his daughters and grandchildren (sure enough, Yaakov and his family ultimately had to flee from Lavan's home), emphasizes here that the wives and children belong to him, that he had earned them through his years of service. This emphasis was likely in anticipation of the argument Lavan would later make after pursuing his son-in-law, "The sons are my sons, the daughters are my daughters, and everything you see belongs to me" (31:43). Yaakov stresses that he earned Rachel, Leah and his children through his many years of loyal and devoted service to Lavan.

These two perspectives that Yaakov expresses with regard to his children – "with which God has graced your servant"; "in exchange for whom I have worked" – represent the proper attitude with which one should look upon all his achievements. On the one

hand, it is appropriate to see what one has as something "for which I have worked," the fruits of one's toil, the results of his hard work and devotion. We should all take pride in our achievements and acknowledge the products of our efforts and devoted work. But at the same time, we must realize that everything we have is but a gift from the Almighty, "with which God has graced your servant." Without His assistance and His blessing, our efforts could not have produced the desired results. Thus, even as we take pride in our accomplishments, we must at the same time recognize, as Yaakov did, that they have been achieved only through divine grace, as an undeserved gift from the Almighty, of which we are all, ultimately, undeserving.