

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Dina, the daughter of our forefather Yaakov, is kidnapped and taken advantage of by Shechem, the prince of the city his father named after him. Shechem falls in love with her and asks her family if he can marry her, to which they respond by saying that they do not intermarry. However, if the residents of Shechem want to become "one people" with Yaakov's family, whereby it is no longer intermarriage, they can convert. Shechem and his father agree and convince everyone to convert, but while all the males are in pain from their circumcision, Shimon and Levi attack, wipe them out, and take Dina back home. Yaakov is upset with his sons, but they counter by saying that they were standing up for the dignity of their sister (Beraishis 34:1-31).

Many questions are asked about this incident, including why Shimon and Levi killed everybody in Shechem if only the prince had sinned. One of the most widely quoted answers is the approach of the Rambam (Hilchos Melachim 9:14), who says that since a non-Jew that transgresses one of the seven Noachide laws is sentenced to death, and Shechem kidnapped Dina (a subset of the sin of stealing), he deserved to be put to death. Another is the requirement to set up a court system to punish those that transgress the other six, and by not prosecuting Shechem the entire city was transgressing a Noachide law, and therefore deserved the same punishment. [The Midrash Hagadol (34:27) is among the Midrashic sources that give this answer.] However, if it were appropriate to punish them, why would Yaakov have been upset with them? As the Ramban points out, if anything, Yaakov should have punished Shechem himself, not rebuked his sons for doing the right thing!

Additionally, how could Yaakov's sons have done something as radical as wiping out an entire city without first consulting with Yaakov? Even responding to Shechem's request before their father (34:13) seems inappropriate, and something we wouldn't expect of them, let alone taking the law into their own hands and killing others. And since it was "the sons of Yaakov" that answered, setting up the plan to wipe them out by getting them to become circumcised, why was it only Shimon and Levi that followed through and not all of them? Shouldn't everyone that planned it have been

rebuked as well, not just those that carried it out? Furthermore, when Simon and Levi defended themselves (34:31), Yaakov didn't respond. Yet, we know from the blessings he gave out before his death, which for Simon and Levi were more like a rebuke when he "cursed their anger" (49:5-7), that Yaakov did not accept their answer, and still felt they were wrong. So why didn't he respond to them, explaining to them then and there why they were wrong?

When the Sefer Hayashar relates the incident, it says that Yaakov was in on the plan from the get-go. Even before Shechem arrived to ask if he could marry Dina, her brothers had discussed with Yaakov that Shechem deserved a death sentence for what he had done, as did the whole city for not preventing it and/or not punishing him for it-and Yaakov didn't disagree. Shimon and Levi ask Shechem for some time before they give an answer so that they can consult with their [grand]father Yitzchok, but it was really just a ruse to be able to discuss it amongst themselves (all the brothers with their father) and decide how to proceed. When Shechem leaves, they (the sons of Yaakov) reiterate to their father that the whole town deserves to die and Shimon comes up with the plan to tell them to become circumcised so that they can easily be killed while they recover. They (including Yaakov) agree to the plan, and Shimon and Levi volunteer to carry it out.

So far, we have verified why the city deserved to be wiped out, learned that Yaakov agreed that they should be (so it was not done without first consulting him), and that they spoke to Shechem about becoming circumcised with their father's permission. Even though they all agreed to the plan, it was Shimon and Levi that carried it out because they volunteered to (and perhaps having only two would send a powerful message to others not to start up with them, for if only two did all this, imagine how much all of them can do).

But if Yaakov agreed with the plan, why did he rebuke anyone? Here's how the Sefer Hayashar describes it: "And when Yaakov their father saw all that they did to the city, and he saw the spoils which they took from, [he] became very angry with them." It wasn't the killing that upset Yaakov, but the plundering afterwards. By taking it that extra step, it seemed as if their motivation was not to mete out justice, but to enact revenge. Even the killing would now be seen as an act of vengeance. Rather than being examples of standing up for right and wrong, they were seen as warriors

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looking out for their own. And in fact the Sefer Hayasher recounts numerous battles the sons of Yaakov had with various cities in Canaan subsequent to their returning to Shechem.

Yaakov didn't "curse their anger" because they killed the inhabitants of Shechem, but because they did it out of anger rather than justice. And since it wasn't what they did that they were trying to justify, Yaakov didn't need to point out their mistake; the actions weren't the problem, it was the motivation for them. They were trying to justify their anger based on what was done to their sister, which didn't deserve a response. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**W**hat's in a name?” has become a household expression, and Shakespeare would have us believe that an 'Iago by any other name is just as villainous.' Nevertheless, we do read in the Bible, "...for as his name is, so is he...." (I Samuel 25:25), that a name goes beyond the incidental sound of syllables, and relates in some important way to the character of its bearer. What is true for biblical names in general is particularly true about Jacob. Both the name he is born with (Jacob) and the name he receives after wrestling with the stranger at a ford in the Jordan River (Israel) are an expression of the central struggles of his life culminating in a mysterious, near-death encounter which seems crucial to the development of our nation Israel.

Let us attempt to examine the etymologies of the two names, and try to discover the major flaw in "Jacob's" early personality which "Israel" comes to fix. Jacob (Yaakov) comes from the root 'ekev' (ayin, kuf, vet) a reminder of the birth of the twins when Yaakov, the younger, grasped onto the heel (ekev) of Esau the elder; hence the name calls to mind an indirect, circuitous action from behind, a fleeing from direct confrontation. Jacob wants something that Esau has, and he's trying to hold him back-from behind.

As they grow older, Jacob knows that Esau the hunter is too busy running around and dating Hittite girls to really care about the 'b'chorah'-the spiritual inheritance. Instead of asking him to step aside for the brother whose life inside the tents of Shem is devoted

to spirituality, he waits for a day when Esau, starved with hunger, eyes a delicious soup Jacob is cooking, and in the ensuing conversation 'sells' his birthright for a bowl of red pot-tage. He manipulates Esau instead of confronting him.

The story continues, and Rebecca makes all the arrangements for Jacob to impersonate Esau and steal the blessing from Isaac. But Jacob is a mature adult, who should have confronted his father, informed him of Esau's sale of the birthright, and reminded him of Esau's two Hittite wives, a Biblical sin of inter-marriage, which the Bible itself records as having caused a bitterness of soul to Isaac and Rebecca! Why resort to pretense rather than direct discussion and dispute?

A similar thing happens with Laban after he and Jacob agree that Jacob's salary will be to keep the striped, speckled and streaked cattle which are born in his flock. But then Jacob resorts to subterfuge and "genetic engineering" (as he understood it) in order to "pack the deck," to manipulate the kind of sheep which would be born to his own material advantage. He should have made the best deal possible, but he also should have been straight up front about his tactics.

Returning after 22 years, Jacob is frightened of facing Esau, (the opening of this week's portion of Vayishlach), suspicious of an impending battle with the brother he has wronged. He prepares himself with a small army, many gifts, and a strategy to divide his camp in case of an attack. "I will win him over with gifts which are being sent ahead hopefully he will forgive me" (Gen. 32-21). But here again, why doesn't he explain to his brother why he did what he did so many years before, and in an outright fashion request forgiveness?

Now, the most probable reason for Jacob's circuitous style of interpersonal communication is that he lacks the necessary self-confidence for open confrontation. Perhaps that is the price Jacob pays for a childhood bereft of a father's love, growing up feeling himself to be rejected by the most important individual in his life in favor of his twin brother. No wonder it is difficult for him to confront either the perpetrator or the beneficiary of that rejection. So, Jacob, lacking the ego-strength to directly claim what he believes he truly deserves, chooses a life-plan strategy of deception to gain his desires.

The significance of the encounter with the stranger at the river's edge is the existential personality transformation that takes place there. Jacob wrestles all night with a stranger, identified by Rashi as Esau's guardian angel, the force of evil antithetical to the Jewish people. Other commentaries see the stranger as symbolic of the darkness within Jacob's own soul, the negative aspects of his own personality. But, whoever this stranger is, Jacob must fight him frontally, must confront him directly. No longer can he

keep himself distant, bent down, operating from the side or attacking from behind. He must stand tall and demonstrate a new strength - the kind of ego strength in confrontation that the nation Israel must display if it is not only to survive itself but also to succeed in its mission to bless the world with ethical monotheism.

What gives Jacob the courage now to disgorge the deceptive "Jacobitis" from within himself and emerge as Yisroel, victorious in battle? Perhaps after two decades with the tumultuously deceptive and hypocritical Laban, he can no longer allow himself to see himself within the mirror of Laban's style of operation; perhaps it is the truth of his beloved Joseph, the heir apparent to Abrahamic leadership, whom he believes worthy of a better legacy from his father than "Jacobism." But whatever the motivation, it is only after the nocturnal and numinous wrestling match - the mother of all confrontations - that Jacob can return to his father's house and become Israel.

An important Post-Script: To be sure, the change is not without reservations and Jacob still retains earlier character traits, as is evidenced by the subsequent story of Shekhem, and the fact that the newly-named Israel is still often referred to in the biblical text as the old Jacob. Jacob's true ability to face things directly can be seen in the last pages of Genesis, when a full cycle closes. Just as he himself had previously arranged to 'unseat' Esau, switching the order of blessings from younger to older, he does it again with Efraim and Menashe, Joseph's two sons. However, this time, he states his will directly, without resorting to deception or subterfuge.

Aware of his father's failing sight, Joseph places the elder son, Menashe, on the left side, so that when Jacob reaches out with his right hand, this right hand will bless the elder. But Jacob's outstretched right hand reaches out for Efraim, and he ignores Joseph's attempt to correct the mistake. Jacob, unlike Isaac, knows precisely who is the worthy one, and this time he doesn't have to shy away from his choice, pretending, as he was wont to do in the past. What Jacob does is direct and straightforward. The younger is the greater and more deserving son, says the older and wiser Israel, and Efraim must receive the b'chorah, the birthright.

Similarly, when it comes to the blessing of Jacob's sons, no words are minced. Reuven, the eldest, is subordinated to Joseph and Judah. As far as the rest of the brothers, the father's exquisite vision sees deep into the heart and soul and future of his sons, a prophecy of the end of days. Jacob, spelling things out so directly, takes the risk of confrontation and rejection. Yet, he can do this now, illuminating the future of the children of Israel because Jacob has become Israel. Just as he now knows himself inside out, he also knows his children outside in. The son who felt his father was blind to him has learned to see his

own children with clarity and understanding. By the end, the son of circuitous subterfuge becomes the father of direct confrontation; the transformation is complete. © 2007 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL SHLIT" A

Translated by Kaeren Fish

In Parashat Vayishlach, on his return journey to his father's house, our patriarch Ya'akov faces many challenges. We have much to learn from the way Ya'akov deals with each situation, but his reaction in the episode concerning Dina (Bereishit 34) is very strange, on a number of levels. The first peculiarity is his lack of involvement in the whole story: after all, he is the father of Shimon and Levi (and of Dina, too); why does he not intervene and prevent the wholesale slaughter of the men of the city of Shekhem, who are innocent? Furthermore, after witnessing his sons' rampage, he reproaches them with the words (34:30): "You have sullied me, to make me look bad before the inhabitants of the land..." Why does he respond only to the practical effect of their actions, rather than addressing the moral issue? Why does Ya'akov postpone this rebuke until he is on his deathbed, at which point he finally declares, "Shimon and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty are their swords... for in their anger they killed a man, and willfully they lamed an ox" (49:5-6). Why are these harsh words not uttered right away?

With regard to the first question, we see that when the Torah introduces the brothers' sin, it says: "The sons of Ya'akov answered Shekhem and Chamor his father with guile, and they spoke" (34:13). It seems that when Ya'akov sees that they are trying to trick Shekhem, he feels that he has no right to interfere; if he were to do so, his sons might respond that Ya'akov himself deceived his father; why should they not do the same? (Yitzchak even uses the same term, "with guile," "be-mirra," in 27:35, when he discovers Ya'akov's subterfuge.) For this reason, Ya'akov is unable even to attempt to dissuade the brothers from their scheme.

When they carry out their plan, Ya'akov is terrified, and we can understand what it is that he fears if we examine the account of his encounter with Esav. Upon hearing that his brother is approaching with four hundred men, "Ya'akov was very afraid, and it distressed him" (32:8). Rashi explains, based on the words of Rabbi Yehuda bar Ila'i in Bereishit Rabba 76:2, that he is "'afraid' lest he will be killed, 'distressed' lest he will kill others." Despite G-d's promise to protect him (28:15), Ya'akov is scared that he may die because he has spent twenty years with Lavan, during which time he was unable to honor his father, while Esav had this opportunity all along. Perhaps now Esav's

merits will be greater than his own, and consequently G-d will not save Ya'akov from Esav!

Likewise, in the case of Dina, Ya'akov is afraid of the historical consequences even more than the moral ramifications of what has happened. He fears that in light of this act, G-d may reject him and his descendants; He may discontinue Ya'akov's line and not create Am Yisra'el, the Jewish nation, from his descendants! For this reason he says, "You have sullied me"-in the eyes of G-d; they have added their sins to the calculation. Only just before Ya'akov dies, when he knows that this mistake has not caused G-d to abandon him or the promises that He made to him-only then does he give expression to his moral outrage; only then is the time ripe.

The question of timing has a further application in Parashat Vayishlach. After the story of Dina, the Torah relates (35:6-10): "Ya'akov came to Luz-which is in the Land of Kena'an and known as Beit El- he and all the people that were with him. There he built an altar, calling the place El Beit El, for there G-d had appeared to him when he fled before Esav his brother. Devora, the nurse of Rivka, died, and she was buried below Beit El, under the oak (allon), and he named the place Alon Bakhut (Weeping Oak). G-d appeared again to Ya'akov, when he came from Paddan Aram, and He blessed him. G-d said to him: 'Your name, Ya'akov-you will no longer be called by the name Ya'akov; rather, Yisra'el will be your name.'"

Why is Devora's death noted in between the building of the altar and G-d's revelation, with a full paragraph break separating them? G-d's appearance and blessing are usually right next to the construction of an altar! In Bereishit Rabba 81:5, Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman teaches that this verse telling us about the death of Devora is actually hinting at the death of Rivka; Beit El is where Ya'akov found out about his mother's passing.

If we examine G-d's blessing here, we see that it is now that Ya'akov's name is officially changed to Yisra'el. Why is this necessary? G-d knows that Ya'akov is afraid on account of his sins: the deception of his father, as well as his absence and failure to honor him for twenty-two years. Ya'akov is afraid that G-d has abandoned him. Therefore, G-d changes his name to Yisra'el, as if to tell him: I have changed your name, so now you may start afresh. I do not hold you accountable for all of your previous sins.

Until Rivka dies, however, G-d cannot tell Ya'akov that his past has been effectively erased, because part of that past is Rivka's role in the sin- and Ya'akov cannot erase his mother's participation in his life! For this reason, it is only after Rivka's passing that G-d can tell Ya'akov to forget the past and to begin anew. Hence, prior to G-d's blessing and the changing of Ya'akov's name to Yisra'el, the Torah notes the passing of Rivka and her nurse. We see clearly that

whether it is rebuke or blessing, the timing can often be as important as the message. (*This sicha was delivered at Se'uda Shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Vayishlach 5762 [2001].*)

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

Hatred has a very long memory. More than twenty years had passed since Jacob had taken the blessings Esau thought were coming to him, and Jacob had fled into the night, a fugitive from his own home. And now, Jacob was coming home, no longer a lonely fugitive but a wealthy man with a large family, and it was inevitable that Esau's smoldering hatred would burst into flames. And indeed, as Jacob drew closer to home, the electrifying news arrived. Esau was fast approaching with four hundred men armed to the teeth. Deeply concerned that he was unworthy of divine protection, Jacob prepared for the worst.

And then came the turnaround. It could not have been more dramatic. As we read in this week's Torah portion, Jacob "bowed down to the ground seven times until he approached, until his brother Esau. And Esau ran towards his younger brother, and embraced him and hugged him and kissed him, and they wept." The danger had passed, and everyone could breathe a sigh of relief.

What had brought about this stunning turnaround? Had Jacob completely misread Esau's intentions? Were the four hundred armed men simply an honor guard? Not very likely. Esau's hatred had smoldered for over twenty years, and he had undoubtedly come with violent intentions. Could a simple bow have extinguished this fire of resentment?

Before we attempt to resolve this baffling mystery, let us first take a closer look at a famous Talmudic vignette of the celebrated sage Hillel.

A gentile once approached the great sage.

"I want to convert to Judaism," he said.

"However, I have one condition. I want you to teach me the Torah."

"Very well," said the sage.

"I understand that the Torah is vast," continued the gentile, "and I have no patience to spend so much time studying. I want you to teach me the entire Torah in the amount of time I am able to stand on one leg."

"No problem," said the great sage. "I will do exactly as you say. Do not do to others those things that are hateful to you. This is the essence of the Torah. All the rest is explanation."

This wonderful story is often repeated to underscore the importance of being adam lechaveiro, the Jewish emphasis on interpersonal relationships encapsulated in the commandment of ve'ahavata l'reiacha kamocho, "love others as you love yourself." But what exactly did Hillel mean? The Torah is infinitely complex, full of concepts and laws and observances. Is

loving others the overriding central theme of the Torah, everything else being just explanation and elaboration? Was Hillel giving the prospective convert a facetious answer? Or is there a real connection between interpersonal relationships and all the rest of the Torah?

The commentators explain that the greatest obstacle to having perfect love for other people is the ego. People are so absorbed in their own needs that they cannot be as sensitive to other people as they are to themselves. Indeed, it is practically impossible for an ordinary person to truly love others as he does himself. But this obstruction is rooted in the material aspect of humanity. The pure essence of a person, the spiritual soul, is free of complexes, egotism and ulterior motives. It is utterly selfless. And therefore, as a person becomes more spiritual, as his soul assumes an increasingly prominent role in his life, he becomes ever more capable of loving others as he loves himself.

This is what the Torah is all about. It is the means by which a person rises above his material restrictions and grows spiritually. It is not a simple process. It requires study and work and observance, but it is the only way to reach that level of pure spirituality at which a person can truly love others with pure and absolute selflessness.

When Jacob prepared to face Esau, he sought to awaken in his own heart the dormant sentiments of brotherly love. He "bowed down," symbolically subjugating his ego, and he let his mind dwell on his brother's positive traits until a feeling of true brotherly love awakened in his heart. "Like a face reflected in water," the Torah tells us, "so is the heart of one person to another." People are instinctively attuned to how they are viewed by others; they feel the "vibes." Esau felt the love in Jacob's heart, and his own heart immediately melted in response.

In our own lives, there is no question we would be happier and more fulfilled if we were more sensitive to others and enjoyed better relations with family and friends. But it is so difficult to step away from our own needs and focus completely on the needs of others. The answer lies in becoming more spiritual, in letting our souls rather than our bodies rule our lives. Only if we imbue our lives with Torah, if we nourish the divine spark of spirituality with ourselves, can we begin to approach to the level at which we can love others as we love ourselves. © 2007 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

Many questions have been asked about the story of Yaacov's struggle with the mysterious "man." For example: What is the significance of this fight, and why at the end, which is a victory and a blessing for Yaacov, does Yaacov become lame? Let

us try to analyze this amazing story and understand what it means.

Yaacov made many preparations for his meeting with Eisav. He divided his people into two camps, he prayed to the Almighty, and he prepared a gift. The Torah differentiates between the two main preparations? prayer and a gift? and ends both their descriptions similarly: "And he slept there that night" [Bereishit 32:14]; "And he slept in the camp that night" [32:22]. The commentators do not agree about whether Yaacov was right to prepare the way he did or if he should have simply trusted in G-d and not sent gifts to Eisav. The simple reading of the passage implies that the Torah does not criticize Yaacov for his preparations. This is reasonable, in that a person should not depend on the occurrence of a miracle. Yaacov did everything in his power to defend his household, including praying to G-d for help.

However, it would seem that the Torah purposely emphasizes twice that Yaacov slept in the camp in order to point out the fact that the situation changed after he finished his preparations. "And he rose in the night and took his two wives and his two maidservants, together with his eleven children... and he sent all that he had across the Yabok crossing" [32:23-24]. Evidently in the middle of the night Yaacov woke up and found that in his heart he still felt fear. Yaacov did not depend on his having divided the people into two camps or the prayer and the gift to Eisav. Rather, he added another step? he sent all of his people and his property across the river.

At this point Yaacov went beyond the necessary preparations, and that is why there was an immediate reaction. "And Yaacov remained alone, and a man fought with him until daybreak" [32:25]. The verse implies that if Yaacov had not remained alone? if he had not woken up and sent everybody away? the entire struggle might not have taken place. But Yaacov, who was not able to sleep because of his fears, was thus forced to spend the rest of the night fighting the mysterious man. This struggle showed Yaacov that his fears were groundless. He was able to overpower the man and even to demand a blessing. In the blessing, the man reveals his identity and the reason for his task: "For you have succeeded against G-d"? it is thus clear that he could fight "against man and succeed" [32:29]. If previously Yaacov feared his meeting with Eisav? "and afterwards I will see his face, perhaps he will view me with favor" [32:21]? his faith was now stronger. "For I have met G-d face to face and I have survived" [32:31]. He could thus be sure that he would be rescued from his meeting with Eisav. However, Yaacov was punished because of his momentary weakness in the middle of the night, and his thigh was injured. From this point on Yaacov will remember what was revealed that night, as will all of Bnei Yisrael who are forbidden to eat the tendon: After all the proper preparations have

been made, it is necessary to remain strong and maintain the trust in G-d.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Our father Yaakov lives in a very violent and dangerous world. Escaping from Lavan and his treacheries, he falls into a wrestling match with an angel and an actual encounter with Eisav, who apparently is determined to kill him. Extricating himself from these difficulties, bruised, wounded and slightly poorer materially for the events, Yaakov then suffers the tragedy of his daughter Dina being kidnapped and assaulted and the resultant war that his sons, led by Shimon and Levi, conduct against the leaders and citizens of Shechem.

Yaakov is appalled by the violence perpetrated by his sons but is apparently powerless to limit it. Even on his deathbed he will reprimand Shimon and Levi for their violent nature and behavior. This parsha therefore turns into a litany of tragedies and untoward events that befall Yaakov. I have always felt that when Yaakov told the Pharaoh that "my years have been few and bad" he was referring to this week's parsha and its events.

It certainly seems that any assessment of Yaakov's life, based on the events of this week's parsha, must certainly be a bleak one, full of shade with very little light shining through. Yet in the assessment of Jewish history and rabbinic tradition, Yaakov's life is seen as a triumph and success. He is the one who takes a family and builds it into a nation. He takes thirteen disparate children, each one with a distinct personality and differing goals and welds them into the people of Israel. He imbues them with the belief of monotheism, good purpose and probative behavior, in spite of their living in a world of paganism and dissolute behavior.

Yaakov is strengthened in his belief by the promises made to him by G-d many years earlier in his life, before he embarked on his fateful journey to Aram. He never questioned the validity of G-d's support of him, of his eventual salvation and survival, no matter how difficult the circumstances. In this he is the paradigm of all future Jewish existence that mimics his life and circumstances.

Jewish life and events can be characterized as always being one of "out of the fire into the frying pan." There never seems to be a letup, a respite from the challenges and dangers that constantly arise. Yet we Jews are constantly aware of G-d's promise that He will never completely forsake us and that within us is the ability of being an eternal and constantly renewed people.

Being a loyal and Torah abiding Jew can create within each of us a sense of serenity and harmony. However, as a nation and people, such a pleasant passage through the waters of human history is

unlikely. It is natural for us to wish that this would somehow be otherwise. But the events of the life of Yaakov stare us in the face. They chart our course in life as well. Faith in G-d and the will to persevere under all circumstances define our goals and hopes in this difficult world in which we live. For, after all, we are all the children of Yaakov. © 2007 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

One of the most powerful images in the Torah is that of Yaakov (Jacob) struggling with a mysterious being (ish) before his anxiously awaited meeting with his brother Esav (Esau). (Genesis 32:25) The term used to denote this struggle is va-yeavek.

Rashi first gives a literal reason as to the use of this unusual term. He points out that the word va-yeavek comes from the word avak-dust. While wrestling, dust physically rises from the ground.

Physical confrontations have always been a part of our national psyche. Throughout history our enemies would try to destroy us. In fact, Ramban points out that when the enemy cannot prevail, they attack our children, which is exactly what the ish striking Jacob's loins symbolizes. The power of this Ramban came to the fore in the early 70's in the town of Maalot, when terrorists targeted children in order to bring us down and this trend, unfortunately, continues today. Still, in the end, like the Yaakov of old, we prevail.

Rashi offers a second suggestion. The word avak interchanges with hibuk-embrace. According to this interpretation, the Torah does not record a physical confrontation; rather a meeting of embrace between Yaakov and the ish.

In reacting to this interpretation, Ketav Sofer, Rabbi Avraham Sofer of the 19th century (son of the Hatam Sofer) explains that this idea has resonated powerfully throughout history. There are times when the ish, representative of the outside world, would try to openly approach the Jew with the intent of convincing us to assimilate. Not only did this concern apply in the times of the Ketav Sofer, but it resonates strongly today. The soul of the Jewish people is at far greater risk than its body; and without a soul, we will lose our direction and identity. Ketav Sofer emphasizes that the struggle between Yaakov and the ish concludes with the Torah's description of Yaakov limping as the sun rose. (Genesis 32:32) Precisely when the sun is glowing, and the darkness of oppression diminishes, Jacob, the Jew, can spiritually limp and is in spiritual jeopardy.

Of course in our times, we pray that there be no darkness of exile. But in a society of freedom other challenges surface. For example, throughout Jewish history, whenever the darkness of anti-Semitism prevailed, the marriage of non-Jews to Jews was verboten. In America today, Dennis Prager notes, we are so free that non-Jews are marrying us in droves.

Hence the challenge for our times: We must re-focus our priorities solely from Jewish defense to Jewish spirituality, to radically reprioritize communal resources to the spiritual and educational spheres.

The ish's embrace of Yaakov warns us that while combating continued anti-Semitism and terrorism is a critically important objective, especially in these times, we must never lose sight of the fact that this effort must be taken alongside the goal of the stirring and reawakening of Jewish spiritual consciousness.

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RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

“**A**nd a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.” (Breishis 32:26) What does this come to teach us? "Until the break of dawn" for Israel-the salvation of Israel which is comparable to night. The nations of the world and the wicked Edom, they will be wrestling with Israel in order to sway them from the ways of HASHEM as it says, (Shir HaShirim 7:1) "The nations have said to me, 'Turn away, turn away from G-d, O nation whose faith in Him is perfect, turn away, turn away, and we shall choose nobility from you.'" (Lekach Tov)

Who would not like to have witnessed that wrestling match? Well the good news is that it's an event yet in progress, and we may be in the most dangerous stage of all.

Prior to WWII Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman zt"l wrote in his treatise, "The Epoch of the Moshiach" about many of the prevalent symptoms of the darkness that precedes the break of dawn: "'And a man wrestled with him.' Jacob is the pillar of Torah. 'A man' refers to the 'Satan'. This indicates that in the Epoch of the Moshiach immorality will compete with the study of Torah.

"And the thigh of Jacob was dislocated as he wrestled with him." This refers to the Torah schoolchildren, the backbone of our nation for thousands of years. Even this foundation will weaken in the Epoch of the Moshiach, through internal and external foes" Alternately, "the thigh of Jacob", refers to those who support Torah study" In the Epoch of the Moshiach this precept is diminished... Even in those countries where it is still temporarily possible to help

financially, people give to all causes; for Torah study 'prutas. (pennies)"

"Before the redemption, the Jews will err after various forms of idol-worship. Any matter which appears to man as a controlling factor independent of HASHEM's will, and as capable of doing good or evil is included in the definition of idolatry. (Sanhedrin)"

He writes, "Let us now review all the 'idols' which were worshipped in the last one hundred years. The Enlightenment of Berlin promised a great salvation. As soon as the breeze of liberalism began to blow, the Jews hastened to stand in the ranks of the foremost exponents. After Liberalism had made its exit, they turned to Democracy (worship of public opinion), Socialism, Communism, and to other "isms"... To these idols they made sacrifices of blood and money- and were betrayed by all of them. Not even one justified the faith that was pinned on it"

Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman zt"l attributes the following story to Rabbi Yisrael Salanter zt"l: A king sent one of his loyal princes on a mission to another country. He warned him, "If the nobles of the land offer to make a bet with you, you are to decline." He repeated his warning over and over again. At the conclusion of his mission the noblemen of the place said, "You are a hunchback Sir!" When he rejected their claim, they bet him a million pieces of silver that he was in fact a hunchback. He proved them wrong.

With a million pieces of silver in hand he returned home. The king was not happy to hear about the bet. The prince assured him that it was a "sure thing" and he won the bet. The king told him that he had a wager with the same nobles for a hundred times that amount that the prince could not be tempted to make a bet. Now his foolishness has caused a great loss to the king's treasury.

He writes, "The moral is obvious. If a man thinks in his heart that in spite of the Torah's warnings that a prohibited thing can bring great advantage, we must tell him, 'The advantage you see, the Torah also saw; and if the Torah yet prohibited it, it is evident that not benefit but great harm must result from it.'"

We have been witness to a ferocious wrestling match in recent history with wildly desperate moves on display even today before our very eyes. © 2007 Rabbi L. Lam & Project Genesis, Inc.

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

Immediately following his encounter with Esav, Yaakov involves himself in three activities. First, he purchases a plot of land in the area of Shechem. Second, Yaakov encamps on the outskirts of Shechem which Chazal in Masseches Shabbos interpret to mean that he physically improved the city for the inhabitants of Shechem. Lastly, Yaakov builds a mizbeach for serving Hashem and it becomes the spiritual center of

his new home. Three suggestions are given as to what physical improvement Yaakov made to Shechem: he built a bathhouse, established a market place, or instituted a new currency to enable the population to do business more efficiently. We are supposed to view the actions of the Avos as models for our behavior. What should we derive for ourselves from the actions of Yaakov as he enters Shechem?

In Maseches Shabbos we are taught the story of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai who had to flee from the Romans and spent many years in hiding, learning Torah in a cave. Why were the Romans looking for Rabbi Shimon? Chazal tell us that they wanted to punish him for a disparaging comment he had made about Roman society. Someone had praised three areas of accomplishments of the Roman Empire in Rabbi Shimon's presence. Their bathhouses, market places and bridges were praised as improving the lot of the populations they conquered. Rabbi Shimon responded to the praise saying that all these physical accomplishments amounted to nothing. The bathhouses were built to beautify citizens' bodies to enable more immorality; the market places had been built to allow public gatherings for inappropriate activity; the bridges were only built to enable the Romans to collect more money as tolls to further their own physical pleasure. Upon hearing these words of Rabbi Shimon, the Romans began to search for him, forcing him into hiding.

Many years later when the decree against Rabbi Shimon was rescinded, Rabbi Shimon emerged from the cave. To commemorate his escaping the clutches of Rome, Rabbi Shimon turns to Yaakov as a model. What had Yaakov done to express his gratitude for being saved from the clutches Esav, the ancestor of the Romans? He physically improved the city of Shechem thereby performing kindness to others just as Hashem had been kind to him. Rabbi Shimon, therefore, decided to improve the quality of life of the people of Teveria where he now resided.

The model that Rabbi Shimon chose to emulate is striking in light of the events that caused him to flee in the first place. He criticized the bathhouses, marketplaces, and bridges for toll collection of the Romans. Yet, these were the same areas of public life that Yaakov had improved for the people of Shechem! Yaakov built a bathhouse, a marketplace, and improved their coins! What did Rabbi Shimon have in mind by drawing upon the example of Yaakov in specifically those areas he had criticized so harshly so many years earlier?

Perhaps the answer can be found in the actual improvements Rabbi Shimon did perform for the people of Teveria. The gemara relates that he helped determine that a certain area in Teveria that had previously been thought to be impure was in fact pure. By making a spiritual improvement to Teveria, Rabbi

Shimon was teaching us the secret of the improvements of Yaakov: of course every city needs bathhouses, marketplaces, and a source of revenue and monetary system. However, these physical necessities, like all other physical needs, can never be seen as ends unto themselves. In order to function in this world, physical needs must be taken care of, but only to facilitate spiritual pursuits. In Roman society, the physical bathhouses, market places and monetary system had become ends unto themselves. Without spiritual goals, all these institutions were no more than ways to pursue and enhance physical pleasure. Rabbi Shimon didn't oppose these necessities but rather opposed pursuing them as ends instead of as means to spiritual goals.

The key to Yaakov's success was his last improvement, i.e. building a mizbeach. He created the spiritual center of Shechem, thereby giving meaning to all he contributed physically. In Teveria Rabbi Shimon saw bathhouses, market places and a monetary system, and recognized the opportunity to help see to it that these institutions didn't become merely physical ones. He purified Teveria, and by doing so purified the entire physical life of the city. A city can have well developed bathhouses, market places and a strong economy and be worthy to be the home of Yaakov and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai as long as there is a pure mizbeach at the center. © 2007 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & aish.org

RABBI ARON TENDLER

Parsha Summary

NAs he flees his brother Esav, G-d promises Yaakov that he would return safely to Canaan (Genesis 28:15). Then why in this week's Parsha, Vayishlach, is Yaakov afraid? Doesn't Yaakov's fear reflect a lack of belief in G-d?

The Abrabanel suggests that fear is a not sign of weakness, but rather a part of the human dimension, a feeling that is neither right nor wrong. A person who is afraid should not be judged harshly, for whom among us has never been afraid? The real question is what do we do when we're afraid? Do we become immobilized, unable to go forward, or do we gather strength in an attempt to meet the challenges that lie ahead? Feelings may be involuntary but actions can be controlled. Yaakov's greatness was his preparedness to act contrary to his natural feelings; to come back to Canaan even though it meant confronting Esav.

Rav Nahman of Bratslav once said, "the whole world is a very narrow bridge, but the main thing is not to be afraid at all." Yaakov's actions teach us that when we are afraid, it doesn't mean we're lacking in faith or convictions. Rather, it means that we have an opportunity to gather our strength and conquer our fears by confronting them! We won't act afraid, unless we are afraid to act! ©2007 Rabbi S.Ressler & Lelamed Inc.