



Sefer Bereishis - Parshas Vayishlach

Wrestling in the Dark

We find that Yakov while crossing a river at night, Yakov remains behind the rest of his family, and is accosted by Eisav's guardian angel, which has many forms – Satan, the angel of death, the evil inclination etc.:

וַיִּזְתַּר יַעֲקֹב, לְבַדּוֹ; וַיֵּאבֶק אִישׁ עִמוֹ, עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר. וַיֵּרָא, כִּי לֹא יָכִיל לוֹ, וַיִּגַע, בְּכַף-יָרְכוּ; וַתִּקַּע כַּף-יָרְךָ יַעֲקֹב, בְּהֶאֱבָקוֹ עִמוֹ. וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחְנִי, כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר; וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ, כִּי אִם-בְּרַכְתָּנִי. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, מַה-שְּׂמֶךָ; וַיֹּאמֶר, יַעֲקֹב. וַיֹּאמֶר, יַעֲקֹב לֹא יֹאמַר עוֹד שְׂמֶךָ-כִּי, אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל: כִּי-שָׂרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים, וַתִּזְכָּל. וַיִּשְׂאֵל יַעֲקֹב, וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידָה-נָא שְׂמֶךָ, וַיֹּאמֶר, לָמָּה זֶה תִּשְׂאֵל לְשִׁמִּי; וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ, שָׁם. –

And Yakov was left alone, and a man grappled with him until daybreak. And when he saw that he could not overcome him, he struck his hip, and dislocated his hip, as he grappled with him. And he said, “Let me go, because dawn is breaking!” – but Yakov said “I will not let you go, until you bless me”.

So he said to him, “What is your name?”, and he replied, “Yakov”. And he said, “No longer shall your name be Yakov, for your name is Yisrael, because you have mastery with God and men, and you have prevailed”. And Yakov asked, and said, “Now tell me your name?” and he replied, “Why is it you ask for my name?” and he blessed him there. (32:25-30)

Rashi explains how the word – וַיֵּאֲבֶק – to wrestle/grapple, comes from the word אֲבָק, dust, called so for the dust that is kicked up when moving and grappling for leverage. There is a Midrash that the dust kicked up from this epic struggle, reached all the way to Hashem's throne.

R Tzvi Meir Silberberg explains how this relates to all of our struggles. People think that Judaism is about results, an end product. Not so. It was the not the victory that went up to Heaven; that remained with Yakov. But the struggle, the dust kicked up, went straight up to Hashem.

No one is born perfect. We are human, and we struggle. It is the human condition, and it's what we are here for.

It is apt that this struggle occurs at night, which is darkness, the uncertain, the unknown. When confronted with light, which is truth and reality, the night is dispelled. This angel has

to leave at sunrise, to sing in front of Hashem.

The Gemara in Suka teaches how at the end of days, Hashem will slaughter the Satan, and the righteous will cry because they will see it as a mountain, and they don't understand how they overcame it, but the evil will cry because it will be as if it were a hair, and lament their lack of control and discipline to resist it. The Yetzer Hara is subjective.

The Steipler compares this to someone who hasn't seen their family in a long time, and is certain that when they meet, they will all be happy, and never argue or fight again. It will never last. The imagination stage is always better than the reality, because when reality hits, the illusions disappear.

The angel had to leave when confronted with reality, and Yakov asks for his name. He asks for his name. The angel seems to refuse a real answer, "Why is it you ask for my name?".

R' Leib Chasman explains that this is the essence of what it is – nothing. It cannot be defined, because it's almost a reflection of ourselves. There is no answer to what is, just what we make it into.

Actions: Louder Than Words

As Yakov's fight with Esav's angel turns in his favour, the angel injures Yakov:

– וַיִּרְאֵהוּ כִּי לֹא יִכָּלֵל לֹא וַיִּגַע בְּכַף יָרְכּוֹ וַיִּתְקַע כֹּף יָרְךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֶאֱבָקוֹ עִמּוֹ

When he saw that he would not defeat Yakov, he struck the socket of his hip, and the socket of Yakov's hip became dislocated, as he wrestled with him. (32:26)

The Midrash Yalkut Reuveni says that the hip socket was the location of the injury, because the angel foresaw Yakov's – יוֹצֵא יְרֵיכּוֹ his descendants; Nadav and Aviyhu.

Why did Nadav and Avihu cause the angel's failure beat Yakov?

The Divrei Yosef explains that Esav's angel fought with Yakov over the blessings taken from Esav, by tricking Yitzchak into giving him. When Yitzchak blessed Yaakov, his intention was to bless Esav – this was who Yakov professed to be. Yitzchak's intent was that Esav should receive the brachos, however his actions bestowed them on Yaakov. The angel claimed that Yakov had to abdicate the blessings, as Yitzchak never intended to give them to him, and this was what they fought over.

At the Golden Calf, Aharon unwittingly catalysed the entire episode, and due to this he lost his two oldest children; Nadav and Aviyhu. Despite the fact we know that Aharon only took a leading part to stall the Jews, yet he was still punished eventually.

His intentions were well meant, but his actions themselves were bad, and overall he lost Nadav and Aviyhu, so we see that when intent and action clash, the action takes precedence in interpreting the outcome.

Thus, Nadav and Aviyhu's deaths prove that Yaakov was right, and he was the legitimate holder of the blessings from his father.

The Dying Truth

As Yakov learnt of Esav's pursuit of his family, accompanied by a battalion of four hundred men, he split his family into two groups, a day's travel apart from each other. Yaakov remained with the first camp, while sending the second ahead.

His rationale:

– ויאמר אם יבוא עשו אל המחנה האחד והכה והיה המחנה הנשאר לפליטה
 He said, "If Esav comes to one camp and strikes it down, then the remaining camp will survive." (32:9)

Rashi notes that Yakov was confident of the second groups survival if the first was wiped out – the remaining camp "will" survive – not might. Why was he so certain; was it not possible that Esav could wipe out both camps?

The Gan Roveh answers that Rivka had said before Yakov fled:

– למה אשכל גם שניכם יום אחד
 "Why should I lose both of you in one day?" (27:45)

The Midrash records that she predicted that their death dates were linked. Accordingly, if Esav were to kill Yaakov with the first camp, the prophecy recorded that Esav would die before the day faded, and before he was able to reach the second camp, a day's journey away.

This was Yakov's strategy to guarantee his family's safety, and his certainty of the second groups survival is clear. Indeed, Rivka's prophecy was accurate and their deaths truly were linked – Esav died at Yakov's funeral.

A Little Arrogant...

Humility is acknowledged to be one of the foremost identifying features of a Jew. The Gemara in Sota cryptically recommends that the appropriate measure of humility is as an eighth of an eighth (or 1/64) of arrogance.

What does this cryptic figure mean, and how does it indicate a suitable degree of humility? The Koheles Yitzchak explains that the 64th correlates to the Gemara in Megila that tells how all the mountains competed for the right to have the Torah delivered on them, and Mt. Sinai "won" the right by not competing. The mightiest mountain was called Tabor, which was 32,000 cubits tall. Sinai was 1/64th, and was deemed worthy.

But how do we practice this measurement? What does it look like to us?

The Vilna Gaon explains that the 8th pasuk in the 8th parsha (Vayishlach) has Yakov doubting his merit's ability to deliver him from danger:

– קטַנְתִּי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל הָאֱמֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת עַבְדְּךָ –
 I have become small from all the kindnesses and from all the truth that You have rendered Your servant.

That is to say, our perspective should be that our merits are small, and that we don't deserve that much at all.

The Maharsha notes that the word for arrogance in Hebrew אג has the numerical value of 63. Seeing oneself as part of something greater (1/64th), and not an individual contextualizes things, and a person will be humble.

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that the Gemara specified an eighth of an eighth, and not one sixty-fourth, for a reason.

The number 8 connotes the confluence of natural and supernatural. It is a repetition of a cycle, an octave higher. It is a rededication of the connection from God. This is what the Bris of circumcision and Yovel indicate – an eighth unit. The second eighth is necessary, because a person may recognize that their talents and achievements are from God – but why did God give them to him?

The second eighth offsets that. The path to humility is recognition that everything is from God. The gift is itself a gift, and not because you deserve it.

Disability

Yakov's family traveled from their previous encampment, but he remembered that some items were missing, and returned on his own to get them. As he crossed a bridge, he was confronted and attacked, by what we identify as Esau's guardian angel:

– וַיִּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֹלֹת הַשָּׁחַר...וַתִּקַּע כַּף יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֶאֱבֹקוֹ עִמּוֹ –
 A man wrestled with him until dawn...and his hip was dislocated while wrestling with him.
 (32:32)

They were wrestling, and Yakov was injured. Why mention that the injury was sustained while wrestling, when it is established that they are wrestling already?

Rashi gives two interpretations on the word וַיִּאָבֵק: firstly, the word is from אָבַק – dust – that they kicked up a lot of dust through their movements. Alternatively, שָׁחֲבֹקוּ וְאָבִקוּ – בזרועותיו – that they were embracing with their arms, an essential part of wrestling, of course.

The Ksav Sofer points out that the first interpretation is in line with the way that enemies fight with each other, whereas the second has echoes of the way that friends embrace.

It is famously said that Yakov requested help – מִיד אַחֵי מִיד עֵשָׂו from his brother, from Esau. They are not always the same. מִיד עֵשָׂו is harsh decrees, pogroms, crusade. But far more insidious, sinister and dangerous is – מִיד אַחֵי my brother! Our guard is down. This is integration without distance – assimilation.

This is the second interpretation of – וַיִּאֲבֹק the head on fight does not succeed, so the embrace is attempted. History has shown the second method to have far more severe ramifications, as it distances us from G-d before you realize. Through this וַיִּאֲבֹק, this embrace, – וַיִּרְךְ יַעֲקֹב the hip, the site of the Bris is dislocated.

What follows is a reflection of the same:

וַיִּזְרַח-לוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, כִּאֲשֶׁר עָבַר אֶת-פְּנוּאֵל; וְהוּא צִלְעוֹ, עַל-יָרְכוֹ –
The sun rose... and he had a limp.

After the dark, which equates to the harsh treatment of Exile and overt anti-Semitism, discrimination and genocide; suddenly there is sunshine, or enlightened, friendly treatment. But it is this which reveals that he is crippled despite sustaining injury in the night – it compounds the injury received earlier!

This illustrates the Torah's principle of עֲשֵׂה אֲבוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים - The actions of our ancestors lay out a blueprint for the national identity they gave rise to. The Torah gives clear warning that sometimes there are struggles, and recommends that we keep distance and not let our guard down. What truly cripples someone is an inability to see what's just ahead.

Torah: A Mother's Duty

As Esav caught up to Yakov, he did not attack, and the two brothers conversed:

וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת הַנְּשִׂיִם וְאֶת הַיְלָדִים וַיֵּאמֶר מִי אֵלֶּה לָךְ וַיֵּאמֶר הַיְלָדִים אֲשֶׁר חָנַן אֱלֹהִים אֶת עֲבָדְךָ –

Esav lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children, and he said, "Who are these to you?". Yakov said, "The children with whom God has favored your servant." (33:5)

Esav was no fool, he knew Yakov and his entourage were; he'd tracked them down with a small army, ostensibly to kill them all. So why does their conversation take the form of a chance meeting, as if it weren't apparent who they were and what their connection to Yakov was?

This was the first ever Jewish family. A look at Yishmael, Lavan and Esau describes how people behaved in that society, and Yakov's children acted in an unprecedented manner. This was Esau's astonishment.

The Chafetz Chaim explains that Yakov answered what made his family different. He answered "אֲשֶׁר חָנַן אֱלֹהִים אֶת עֲבָדְךָ – with whom God has favored your servant". The normal word for giving – נָתַן, is not used, and is substituted for חָנַן; an anagram of the 3 Mitzvos exclusive to women – נִדָּה, נֶר, חֲלָה the laws regarding the separation of

Challah; lighting Shabbos candles; and family purity. Yakov told his brother that what made his children special was that his family observed these laws.

The Sforno explains that נר does not just mean Shabbos candles; it hints to the light of Torah; it is a mother's obligation to ensure her children know Torah. The Gemara in Niddah says that every foetus gestating in its mother's womb has two things – an angel that teaches the baby the whole Torah, which it forgets at birth, and a light above it's head. Allegorically, this means that the child's mother provides the circumstances through which the child was exposed to Torah before birth; she is charged with nurturing the "spark" into a full blown flame throughout the child's life.

There is a story told about R' Yaakov Galinski and the Chazon Ish circa 1953. They were walking together in the street one night. The Chazon Ish would exclaim, "Wow!" every time he walked under a light, and his student, R' Yaakov asked what his teacher was doing. The Chazon Ish explained a phenomenal lesson.

He answered that the further away from the streetlight, the bigger your shadow appears. The closer you get to the streetlight, the smaller, until its right underneath you.

The same is true of Torah – we are charged with keeping our negative character traits in check, and attempt to curb them. The task is impossible the further away one is from Torah – the shadow cast is massive. But the closer and more in tune one is, the more closely they align with where the stander truly is.

This is what it means to be close to Torah, and this pertains particularly to mothers.

Thank you for using gTorah.com