



בס"ד

Partners In Torah

San Diego

Study Guide &

Take home Dvar Torah

פרשת וישלח

Parshat VaYishlach

By Rabbi Avi Cohen

November 27, 2017

© 2017

Partners In Torah San Diego
Mission Statement:

Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant. Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees, thinking is shared, and hearts are inspired.

Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Welcome. Thank you for coming. Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.

Parshat Vayishlach – Following Jacob’s Example

Our world has come to realize that the proper education of our children is accomplished through setting an example, not by rhetoric. We can instruct our children from morning till night not to smoke, for example, but if we smoke ourselves, it will be futile. In their minds they say, “If it is so bad, why do *you* do it? It must not be so bad, so I can do it too.” We are role models for our children whether we like it or not.

As parents, we take upon ourselves to attempt to live up to this standard. In this way, our children have the benefit of looking to us for guidance, and the assurance that as their parents, we are intent on offering them guidance and assistance as they find their personal way forward.

As the children of the forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, this is also very much the case. We understand that the reason the Torah is so careful to detail for us their stellar qualities, is so that we may follow their sterling examples, and model our lives after theirs. (It is also true that the Torah is unsparing in recording their shortcomings, as a further means of instruction and guidance.)

In doing this, our Torah is offering us role models to follow. In addition, on a mystical level, we the Jewish nation, as their children have inherited the potential of their exemplary traits and outstanding qualities. We can strive to reach toward

following their examples, understanding that as their descendants, they have not only offered us role models to consider, but also have left for us a rich spiritual legacy.

King David said, “The Jewish people have three inherent attributes: They are kind, they are humble and they are merciful. We inherited the kindness from Avraham, the humility from Yitzchak, and the mercy from Yaakov.” These three great qualities can be found among us, the Jewish people until today.

It is for this reason that our sages tell us we are obligated to strive to achieve the greatness of our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

תנא דבי אליהו רבה - פרק כה
לפיכך הייתי אומר שכל אחד ואחד מישראל חייב לומר - מתי יגיעו
מעשי למעשה אבותי אברהם יצחק ויעקב

When will our actions reflect the greatness and purity of the lives lived by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Our sages teach us that there is yet a deeper concept called *מעשה אבות סימן לבנים* - *The deeds of our forefathers are a sign for their children*. What this translates to mean in real and practical terms is, that the way forefathers dealt with their challenges, created the *template* for us, their children, to follow when dealing with those very same issues. If we fail to follow the path forged by the forefathers, we will not succeed in carrying forward the rich spiritual legacy which they left for mankind.

This week's Parshah details the encounter between the two opposing forces in the world, good and evil, manifest in Yaakov and Esav. These two actors are still center stage in the world we live in today, in the form of the Jewish people, and the antagonisms which have so often confronted the Jewish people throughout our history. It behooves us to take a close look at how Yaakov dealt with Esav as a means of determining how we are to deal with our enemies today. If we follow the path created by Yaakov, we are sure to succeed.

Yaakov understood that his role in the world was to found the Jewish nation, growing it from a family toward nationhood. It would be this nation which would uphold the reason for creation, through its commitment to Torah, Service, and Kindness. His 12 sons, would be the kernels of the people who would receive the Torah on Mount Sinai, and through adherence to the Torah bring the world towards its perfection / Tikkun Olam. Yaakov's every decision was with that supreme goal in mind. In order to be completely successful, his plan would also need to encompass the prescription for the continued existence of the holy Jewish people. If they could not be sustained throughout time, the continuity of humanity would be called into question.

Esav, also knew well his role in life. He represented the force of evil, whose job it is to challenge Yaakov at every turn, and try to take him off his game. Any tactic is acceptable, no holds

barred in the quest to bring Yaakov down from his spiritual standing. Greatness is only achieved in the face of challenge.

Yaakov adopted a strategy that would sustain his family and the future Jewish nation even during times when they were not perfectly righteous. By adopting a strategy that would always work under difficult conditions would provide a lasting example, and a guarantee for the existence of the Jewish people for all time. This insight will help us understand the strategy Yaakov used in his confrontation with Esav. Even though we are far from perfect in our service to Hashem, this is the only path that can work for us as we seek to sustain Jewish life.

That being said, Yaakov's strategy was to try to avoid out and out war with Esav at all cost, and try to appease him to neutralize his hatred and desire to kill Yaakov.

Yaakov began by sending messengers to Esav to try to appease him. The messengers brought a message of greeting, and one of subservience, attempting to minimize Yaakov's importance, as a threat to Esav. Esav didn't respond to Yaakov's messengers and continued to advance with 400 seasoned warriors to attack and destroy Yaakov and his family.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said: It is a fact, that Esav hates Yaakov. (Sifrei Behaalotcha)

Yaakov understood what he was up against. He was facing total annihilation. What were the odds? Esav, a seasoned warrior with 400 armed warriors up against Yaakov, a scholar and a family man, with only his family- a bunch of kids, and a few women. Did Yaakov stand a chance? He probably didn't even own an armament! But, in reality, Yaakov knew that he didn't need physical weapons to defeat his brother Esav and his men.

While Yaakov knew that G-d has given him assurances that he would remain alive and well, he did not know if members of his family might be killed, becoming casualties of war. This was something that Yaakov did not want to risk. He knew his 11 sons (Binyamin had not yet been born) were the perfect candidates to be the kernel of the Jewish nation. Therefore, Yaakov chose a weapon of far greater power than anything Esav possessed.

The atomic weapon of a Jew is his mouth, the power of prayer. When used properly, nothing can stand up to it, for it enlists the power of Hashem, who can overcome any opponent. Also, this weapon would work at all times for all people, even those not perfectly righteous. For when we turn to Hashem for help through prayer, Hashem always listens and responds. Additionally, the act of praying to Hashem in and of itself, makes us more holy and worthy of rescue. In this way, prayer is the guaranteed path to deeper connection to G-d in all times and situations.

In his continued effort to neutralize Esav, Yaakov had a three-part strategy.

רש"י על בראשית פרק לב פסוק ט
והיה המחנה הנשאר לפליטה - על כרחו כי אלחם עמו **התקין עצמו**
לשלושה דברים לדורון לתפלה ולמלחמה.

Rashi explains: *Yaakov prepared himself for three things: Prayer, a present, and war.* (Rashi listed them out of order)

First Yaakov prayed fervently to Hashem to save him from Esav. It is interesting that in the prayer that Yaakov offered, he said:

ספר בראשית פרק לב
(יב) הַצִּילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו כִּי

Please save me from my brother, from Esav... (Gen. 32:12)

Why the redundancy? Yaakov had no other brother than Esav, so why the repetition?

The Bais Halevi and others see a deep meaning in this. There are two different strategies that Esav uses to try to overcome the Jewish people. One is when he comes at us as an opponent threatening to kill us out. The other strategy is to come to us as a loving brother, and provide us with all their liberties, and hope that we will join their society by abandoning our heritage. This second strategy is what we face today most often within the open and free democratic countries. This freedom has also taken a tremendous toll on us.

[In fact, before parting ways, Esav offered Yaakov to travel together, and be friends. Yaakov politely refused citing his family with children who have many needs. Esav did not take offense when Yaakov's declined his offer. In this way, Yaakov's prayer was answered in full, enabling Yaakov's family to develop as a unique nation among the nations of the world, alongside the descendants of Esav who established powerful empires and military dominance, but were not able to achieve long lasting continuity.]

Following his intense prayer, Yaakov sent Esav a massive present. 200 she goats, 20 he goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 30 nursing camels, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 she donkeys, and 10 he donkeys. He divided his gifts into many groups and spread the groups out over a few miles. This way, when Esav looked down the road, it looked like the present went on and on. When Esav would ask, "What's this all about?" the messengers were to answer, "It's from Yaakov your servant, a tribute sent to my lord, to Esav." The goal of this was to soften Esav's anger and hatred, and to awaken within Esav brotherly love; perhaps it can be seen as a bribe, an open appeal to his love of money and possessions.

Our sages explain that this openness to transfer physical possessions and to avoid competing for physical dominance assuages Esav by softening his natural bias and antipathy towards the spiritual priorities shown by the Jewish people. In a sense it conveys to the world at large that the Jewish

people accept that their spiritual priorities can become part of a larger tapestry of the world, without impugning the priorities of others.

The last resort, if both of the above strategies fail is war. And Yaakov also prepared for this by dividing up his family into two different camps.

ספר בראשית פרק לב
(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אִם יָבוֹא עֵשָׂו אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה הָאַחַת וְהִכָּהוּ וְהָיָה הַמַּחֲנֶה הַנִּשְׁאָר
לְפָלִיטָה :

*For he said, "If Esau comes to the one camp and strikes it down, then **the remaining camp shall survive.**" I will fight with him. (32:9)*

Yaakov was aware of the fact that some of his family may be killed in a war against Esav. However, at the same time, Yaakov was sure that Esav would not be able to completely kill out his entire family. There would always be a Jewish nation. Our sages see this in the words - **The remaining camp shall survive** -This is a statement of fact; some remnant of the Jewish people will always be preserved, so that the legacy of Judaism will never completely disappear. This is reflected in the Jewish Diaspora, in that since the Jewish people are scattered all over the world, even if 'one camp' is destroyed there will always remain a camp that will survive.

The stage is set. Yaakov has done all within his power to achieve the desired outcome. He has prayed to Hashem, he

has sent a bribe to appease him, and he has prepared for the ultimate last resort, war.

There was just one more unfinished detail that felt he had to attend to. He had left a few small vessels on the other side of the river, and he went back to retrieve them. When Yaakov was alone on the other side of the river, the Torah tells us:

ספר בראשית פרק לב
(כה) וַיִּנְתֵּר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיִּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר :

And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.

Who was this man, and what was he after? The commentaries teach us that this “man” was really the angel of Esav and he was fighting with Yaakov over the “small vessels” that Yaakov had gone back for. The angel was trying to wrestle the small vessels away from Yaakov, telling him they are not worth his efforts but Yaakov would not relinquish even the smallest vessel. He valiantly fought for each and every one of them. Our sages teach us that the small vessels are a metaphor to illustrate that no member of the Jewish people, no matter how seemingly unimportant, unaffiliated, or alienated, can ever be overlooked or abandoned.

The angel of Esav said to Yaakov, “These are mine! Leave them to me!” But Yaakov would not agree. Every descendant, every inheritor of the rich legacy of the founding families of

the Jewish people counts, matters, and is never to be abandoned. The completeness of the family which Yaakov raised has an integrity. As the sages state: all of Israel is connected; each Jewish person is a guarantor for another.

The wrestling match lasted until dawn broke. Our sages explain that dawn symbolizes the final redemption, the coming of the Mashiach. This implies that the battle for the “small vessels” will continue until the coming of Mashiach – the end of days when all human history will reach its conclusion. We look forward to a time when the ‘lost tribes’ will be reunited, and rejoin the body of the Jewish people.

And those lost in the land of Assyria and the ones sent away to the land of Egypt shall come to prostrate before G-d at His holy mountain, in Jerusalem. (Isaiah 27:13)

For a link to a song based on this verse, sung by Shlomo Carlebach

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDpFD6MIIGk>