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5786 Parshat Vayishlach

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## תשפ"ו Parshat Vayishlach

The Ramban prefaces his commentary to the second book of the Torah, *Shemot*, by writing.

השלים הכתוב ספר בראשית שהוא ספר היצירה בחדוש העולם ויצירת כל נוצר, ובמקרי האבות כולם שהם כעין יצירה לזרעם, מפני שכל מקריהם ציורי דברים לרמז להודיע כל העתיד לבא להם

*Scripture has concluded the book of Bereshit, which is the book of the creation of the world and every creature, and the events of our Forefathers, which were like a creation for their offspring because all the events that happened to them portend what will happen to their children in the future.*

This is the concept called מעשה אבות סימן לבנים - "The deeds of our Forefathers are a sign for their children". How they dealt with their challenges created the *template* for us, their children, to follow when dealing with same and similar issues. If we fail to follow their path, we will necessarily fail.

The following story related in the Midrash illustrates this point.

מדרש רבה בראשית - פרשה עה פסקה ה

רבינו אמר לרבי אפס כתוב חד אגרא מן שמי למרן מלכא אנטונינוס. קם וכתב, "מן יהודה נשיאה למרן מלכא אנטונינוס." נסבה וקרייה וקרעיה. אמר ליה, "כתוב 'מן עבדך יהודה למרן מלכא אנטונינוס.'" אמר ליה, "רבי, מפני מה אתה מבזה על כבודך?" אמר ליה, "מה אנא טב מן סבי? לא כך אמר 'כה אמר עבדך יעקב'?"

*Rabbi Judah the Prince (Rebbe) told Rabbi Apos his scribe to write a letter from him to the Emperor Antonius. The scribe wrote: "From Judah the Prince to our King Antonius..." Rebbe read it and tore it up. He then instructed Apos to write: "From your servant Judah to*

*our King Antonius...” “Why do you lower your honor so much and disgrace yourself?” asked the scribe. Rebbe responded, “Am I any better than my grandfather Yaakov? Did not Yaakov tell his messengers to tell Esav, ‘So has Yaakov your servant said’?”*

Rebbe carefully followed Yaakov’s model vis-à-vis the posture that Yaakov had assumed towards Esav. Rebbe understood that if this is how Yaakov acted with Esav, then this is how we must act with his descendants. If we assume a superior or even equal posture in our dealings with them, we cannot succeed.

This week’s Parsha details the encounter between the world’s two opposing forces: good and evil, as manifest in Yaakov and Esav respectively. These two players are still center stage in today’s world in the form of the Jewish people and the world’s surrounding gentile nations. It thus behooves us to examine how Yaakov dealt with Esav to determine how best to deal with our gentile adversaries today.

Although Yaakov was completely righteous, and, thus, could have defeated Esav summarily and solved the immediate problem, Yaakov knew that his progeny would not maintain the perfect degree of holiness that he had achieved. Hence, in a battle with Esav’s forces, they would surely lose. Yaakov thus needed to adopt a strategy that would work even if his children were not perfectly righteous, a strategy that would guarantee the Jewish people’s existence for all time. This insight will help us understand Yaakov’s strategy and why it is essential for us to follow it. Because we are far from Yaakov’s level in our service to Hashem, to frontally attack Esav and try to defeat him in battle would not succeed. Hence, the circuitous path that Yaakov took is the only path that can work for us.

Esav and his 400 seasoned soldiers were on their way to annihilate Yaakov and his family. In Yaakov's effort to neutralize Esav, Rashi tells us that Yaakov employed a three--part strategy.

**והיה המחנה הנשאר לפליטה - על כרחו כי אלחם עמו התקין עצמו לשלשה דברים לדורון, לתפלה, ולמלחמה.**

Rashi (32:9, listing them out of order) explains: *Yaakov prepared himself in three ways: via a gift to his brother, via prayer, and for war.*

First, Yaakov prayed fervently that Hashem save him from Esav (Genesis 32:120:

(יב) הַצִּילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו

*Please save me from my brother, from Esav...*

Why the redundancy? Yaakov had no other brother!

The Bais Halevi and others see a deep meaning in this. There are two different tactics that Esav uses to try to destroy us. One is to physically attack us as an enemy. The other is to approach us as a loving brother, hoping that we will join him and abandon our heritage. This latter tactic is what we face today; and, unfortunately, it has taken a tremendous toll on us. Indeed, before parting ways, Esav offered to travel together with Yaakov and be friends. Citing his family and children's many needs, Yaakov, understanding the danger of being "brotherly" with Esav, politely refused. Esav accepted Yaakov's excuse and did not take offense that Yaakov declined his offer. In this way, Yaakov's prayer was answered in full.

Yaakov then sent Esav a massive gift: 200 she goats, 20 he goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 30 nursing camels, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 she donkeys, and 10 he donkeys. Yaakov divided the gift into

several groups and spread them out over several miles. Hence, when Esav looked down the road, he perceived a gift that went on and on. When Esav inquired, "What's this all about?" the messengers answered, "It's from Yaakov your servant, a tribute sent to my lord, to Esav." Yaakov's goal was to soften Esav by appealing to his love of money and possessions.

Our Sages explain how a bribe to Esav works.

Esav's default position is always tilted against Yaakov. The Midrash teaches:

ספרי במדבר פרשת בהעלותך פסקא סט  
ר"ש בן יוחי אומר הלכה בידוע שעשו שונא ליעקב

*Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said: It is a law, it is a known fact, that Esav hates Yaakov.*

Therefore, because Esav's view is always skewed by his hatred for Yaakov, a bribe, which focuses him on his love for himself, counteracts his bias, and evens out the scale.

Although Yaakov's prayer was answered, he still took this second step to create the template for future generations whose prayers may not be as pure and powerful as his.

The last resort, should the first two strategies fail, is war, for which Yaakov prepared by dividing his family into two different camps (Ibid 32:9).

(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אִם יָבֹא עֲשׂוֹ אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה הָאֶחָד וְהִכָּהוּ וְהָיָה הַמַּחֲנֶה הַנִּשְׁאָר  
לְפָלִיטָה:

*9. For he said, "If Esav comes to the one camp and strikes it down, then **the remaining camp shall survive.**"*

Yaakov recognized that some of his family may be killed in a war against Esav. At the same time, Yaakov was sure that Esav would be unable to kill them all. There would always be a Jewish nation. Our Sages learn this from the words “***The remaining camp shall survive.***” This seeming observation is indeed a statement of fact; it will *always* be the case. Esav will *never* be able to destroy the entire Jewish nation. Even if he succeeds in destroying one camp, another will always survive. We are witnesses to this truth from 4, 000 years of Jewish history.

The stage was set. Yaakov did everything he possibly could to achieve the desired outcome. He prayed to Hashem, sent a bribe to appease his brother, and prepared for the ultimate last resort, war.

After Yaakov had completed his preparations, the Torah informs us of a seemingly unrelated episode that occurred that night, before Yaakov and Esav met face to face the next day.

The Midrash informs us that Yaakov had left a few small vessels on the other side of the river and went back to retrieve them. There, alone, Yaakov was attacked by a strange man (Genesis 32:25-29).

כה) וַיִּזְתֶּר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֶק אִישׁ עִמוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר  
כו) וַיֵּרָא כִּי לֹא יָכַל לוֹ וַיִּגַע בְּכַף יָרְכוֹ וַתִּקַּע כַּף יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֶאָבֶקוֹ עִמוֹ  
כז) וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֶשְׁלַחֲךָ כִּי אִם בְּרַכְתָּנִי  
כח) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַה שָּׂמָךְ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב  
כט) וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד שָׂמָךְ כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי שָׁרִיתָ עִם אֱלֹהִים  
וְעִם אַנְשִׁים וַתִּזְכָּל

25) *And Yaakov was left alone and **a man** wrestled with him until the break of dawn.*

26) *When the man perceived that he could not overcome Yaakov, he struck the socket of Yaakov's hip; so Yaakov's hip socket was dislocated as he wrestled with him.*

27) *Then the man said, "Let me go, for the dawn has broken."*

28) *And Yaakov said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." He said to him, "What is your name?" He replied, "Yaakov."*

29) *He said, "No longer will your name be Yaakov, but Yisrael, **for you have striven with the Divine** (the angel) **and with man** (Lavan and Esav) **and have succeeded.**"*

Who was this *man*, and what was the battle about?

The commentaries teach us that this "man" who fought with Yaakov was really Esav's angel. He was fighting with Yaakov over the small vessels that Yaakov went back to retrieve. Esav's angel wanted to prevent Yaakov from taking them, but Yaakov fought valiantly to keep them. The battle lasted all night, and Esav's angel could not overcome Yaakov. Yaakov kept the vessels.

After defeating Esav's angel, the angel wanted to take leave of Yaakov and return to heaven where it was his turn to praise Hashem, but Yaakov would not let him go until he gave Yaakov a blessing. With no choice, he blessed him by changing his name from Yaakov to *Yisrael*. Yaakov was satisfied with this and released the angel.

Yaakov's efforts paid off. The next day, when Yaakov and Esav finally met face to face, Esav embraced and kissed his brother. After a short exchange in which Yaakov convinced Esav to accept his gift, they parted ways peacefully, and the danger was, at least for then, averted.

What could be the meaning of the battle over the small vessels? Why would Yaakov risk his life to save them and why would Esav's angel want them? Why was Yaakov satisfied with the blessing of the angel?

Rashi (32:29) explains the depth of what occurred.

לא יעקב - לא יאמר עוד שהברכות באו לך בעקבה ורמיה כי אם בשררה וגלוי פנים וסופך שהקב"ה נגלה עליך בבית אל ומחליף שמך ושם הוא מברכך ואני שם אהיה ואודה לך עליהן וזהו שכתוב (הושע יב) וישר אל מלאך ויוכל בכה ויתחנן לו בכה המלאך ויתחנן לו ומה נתחנן לו בית אל ימצאנו ושם ידבר עמנו המתן לי עד שידבר עמנו שם ולא רצה יעקב ועל כרחו הודה לו עליהן וזה ויברך אותו שם שהיה מתחנן להמתין לו ולא רצה

**Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov: No longer shall it be said that you came about the blessings in a deceitful way; rather, you earned them openly with your victory. In the end (at a future time) Hashem will reveal Himself to you at Beit-el and there He will change your name and bless you. I will also be there and concede to you about the blessings. This is the meaning of the verse in Hoshea (12:5): "He struggled with an angel and prevailed, (the angel) wept and beseeched him: 'In Beit-el He will find us and there He will speak with us.'" For what was the angel weeping and begging? **Wait for Beit-el, until Hashem speaks to us there.** (He was crying and begging Yaakov not to force him to bless him here and now, rather, to wait for Hashem to do it later on!) But Yaakov would not agree and forced the angel to bless him then and there. This is why the Torah (29:30) stresses that "the angel blessed him **there.**"**

The significance of the name change is that when Yaakov successfully diverted Yitzchak's blessing from Esav to himself, Esav cried out, "**Is it because his name was Yaakov that he outwitted**

**me these two times?** – He took away my birthright, and see, now, he took away my blessing!” (There is a connotation to the word עקב *-akev* – heel, the root of Yaakov’s name, that implies being devious and deceitful.)

**Yisrael**, on the other hand, comprises two words: “*Yisra* (you were victorious), and *el* (over an angel). Defeating Esav’s angel proved that the blessing really belonged to Yaakov. Even Esav’s heavenly advocate had to admit that Yaakov was entitled to it.

Why was Esav’s angel crying and begging Yaakov not to have to give him the blessing then and there? And why was Yaakov so merciless on the angel? Why couldn’t he wait until Beit-el to receive the blessing with the concession of the angel there? What was so crucial about receiving the angel’s blessing immediately?

The following explanation is from a lecture by my teacher Rabbi Moshe Shapiro ל"צ.

Approximately two years later Hashem told Yaakov (Genesis 35:1).

(א) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל יַעֲקֹב קוּם עֲלֵה בֵּית אֵל וְנָשָׂב שָׁם וַעֲשֵׂה שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ  
לְקַל הַנִּרְאָה אֵלֶיךָ בְּבִרְחֹךָ מִפְּנֵי  
עֲשׂוֹ אָחִיךָ

(1) *Hashem said to Yaakov, “Arise – go up to Beit-el and dwell there, and make an altar there to Hashem Who appeared to you when you fled from Esav your brother.”*

This is the event to which the angel referred.

What is the nature of this sacrifice that Hashem requested from Yaakov?

Our Sages explain that this was not the first time that Yaakov was in Beit-el. Twenty- two years earlier, when Yaakov left home to flee his brother Esav who had vowed to kill him, he slept at Beit-el. It was there that Yaakov had the dream with the ladder reaching the heavens with the angels going up and down it. Upon waking, he made a promise that if *Hashem will be with him and guard him, give him bread to eat and clothes to wear and return him to his father's home*, he will bring a sacrifice of thanks to Hashem. Hashem now told Yaakov that it was time to make good on that promise and bring the sacrifice, since all of the conditions had been satisfied.

With this, Yaakov said to his entourage (35:2,3).

(ב) וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל בְּיָתוֹ וְאֶל כָּל אֲשֶׁר עִמּוֹ הִסְרוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי הַנֹּכַח אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְהִטְהַרוּ וְהַחֲלִיפוּ שְׂמַלְתֵיכֶם  
(ג) וְנִקְוְמָה וְנַעֲלָה בֵּית אֵל וְאֶעֱשֶׂה שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לְקַל הָעֲנָה אֵתִי בְּיוֹם צָרְתִי  
וְיִהְיֶה עִמָּדִי בַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר הִלְכֹתִי

2) *So Yaakov said to his household and to all who were with him, "Discard all the alien gods that are in your midst; cleanse yourselves and change your clothes. 3) Then come, let us go up to Beit-el; I will make there an altar to Hashem Who answered me in my time of distress, and was with me on the road that I traveled.*

(ו) וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֱלֹקִים שְׁמֶךָ יַעֲקֹב לֹא יִקְרָא שְׁמֶךָ עוֹד יַעֲקֹב כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל  
יִהְיֶה שְׁמֶךָ וַיִּקְרָא אֶת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל

10) *Then Hashem said to him, "Your name is Yaakov. Your name shall not always be called Yaakov, but Yisrael shall be your name. Thus, He called his name Yisrael.*

It was for this that Esav's angel was pleading with Yaakov. ***Wait for Beit-el, until Hashem speaks to us there.*** There, Hashem

will officially change your name to *Yisrael*! Please don't make me do it here.

There in Beit-el, Esav's angel was prepared to concede to Yaakov being called *Yisrael* implying that he had *earned* the blessings instead of stealing them, because they had just purged all foreign gods from their midst. Since at that time they were all perfectly righteous, they were worthy of the name *Yisrael*. When the Jewish people are perfectly righteous, Esav concedes that they are *Yisrael* and he must be subservient to them, for these were his father Yitzchak's instructions to him in his blessing. But for people who are not righteous, Esav's angel contested Yaakov's right to the blessing claiming that such people are not worthy of the name *Yisrael*.

Our Sages teach us that the *small vessels* that Yaakov went back to retrieve represent the Jews who are far from perfect. Esav's angel claimed that once they veered from their roots, those Jews belong to *him* and do not merit the right to carry the name *Yisrael*. That is why he did not want to let Yaakov have the small vessels and bring them under his name *Yisrael* at that place and time. Because they are sinners, he felt that they were unworthy of the name *Yisrael*. Only righteous Jews like the ones at Beit-el are worthy of carrying that exalted name.

Yaakov fought valiantly with the angel and, by winning, established the fact that even a Jew who has sinned, still maintains the name *Yisrael*. As long as a Jew maintains contact with his Jewish identity, no matter how far he has strayed, he is still a *Yisrael*. His Jewish identity cannot be expunged from within him, no matter what. This is why Yaakov wouldn't release the angel without conceding its defeat and agreeing that even now his name is

*Yisrael*. Yaakov argued that because I have defeated you over the *small vessels*, the name *Yisrael* applies to them as well. Because the name *Yisrael* means, “*I have sparred with an angel and won,*” my seed is indestructible and can stand up to any challenge. A spark of me that can never be extinguished will always remain within them. Therefore, my children can always be called *Yisrael* no matter how far they may stray from the Torah. You must bless me here and now and admit to me that the name *Yisrael* applies to them as well.

This is an explicit teaching in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 44a):

אמר רבי אבא בר זבדא אף על פי שחטא ישראל הוא

*Rabbi Abba bar Zavda said: “A Jew, even though he has sinned, is still a Yisrael.”*

This was Yaakov’s major triumph over Esav’s angel. Had the angel had his way, perhaps, many Jews would not be considered members of the Jewish nation. As soon as a Jew worshipped a foreign god, he would have instantly lost his right to carry the name *Yisrael*. In days of old when idol worship was prevalent, many Jews actually worshipped other “gods.” In today’s world the other gods take the form of money, career, and any other pursuit that people idolize and spend their lives in service of. The name *Yisrael* would be the exclusive domain of the select few who never strayed from their roots. By defeating the angel Yaakov changed that. Even a Jew who has worshipped an idol is still a Jew. The idol worship is external to him. Inside of him burns a Jewish ember that can never be extinguished and that can flare up into a raging fire at any time.

This indeed happened in the times of Eliyahu the Prophet.

When Hashem spoke to Yaakov in Beit-el, He hinted to him that there would come a time when all his children would worship idols, but that they will nevertheless be brought back to Hashem.

Rashi says (*Ibid*, 35:11) that Hashem told Yaakov.

ד"א שעתידים בניו להקריב בשעת איסור הבמות כגוים בימי אליהו

*There will come a time when your children will bring sacrifices outside of the Holy Temple (which is prohibited) just like the gentiles. This will occur in the times of Eliyahu the Prophet.*

Achav, the King of Israel, and his queen Izevel (Jezebel) were ardent idolaters. They killed all the true prophets except for Eliyahu whom they were unable to catch. Achav and his wife believed in the gods Baal and Ashera who had 450 and 400 false prophets respectively. The Jewish people were unfortunately in the same camp.

In an effort to bring the Jewish people back to Hashem, Eliyahu challenged the 850 false prophets to a “duel.” They would each build an altar and place an animal on it. The sacrifice that would be consumed by a fire that came down from heaven would prove the true prophet.

When Eliyahu built his altar, the prophet tells us (I Kings 18:31)

(לא) וַיִּקַּח אֱלִיָּהוּ שְׁתֵּים עָשָׂר אֲבָנִים כְּמִסְפַּר שְׁבֹטֵי בְנֵי יִעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר  
הָיָה דָבָר יְדוּד אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהִיָּה שְׁמֶךָ

*31) Eliyahu took twelve stones corresponding to the number of the tribes of the children of Yaakov, to whom the word of Hashem came, saying, “Your name shall be Yisrael.”*

Here Eliyahu alluded to Yaakov's victory over Esav's angel. These Jewish idolators are still the descendants of Yaakov's twelve sons and bear the name *Yisrael*. They still have the indestructible spark of *Yisrael* inside them, and even though they worship idols and are very far from Hashem, they can be brought back in an instant. This was Yaakov's accomplishment hundreds of years earlier when he defeated Esav's angel and extracted the blessing from him.

The 850 false prophets knew that there was no chance that a fire would descend and consume their sacrifice, so, the Midrash tells us, they prepared a man inside the altar to light the fire at the desired time. Hashem made a miracle, and a poisonous snake came along and killed him. They tried all types of tactics, but, ultimately, nothing happened. They were left cold. Eliyahu prayed to Hashem. and despite his having poured buckets of water to heighten the miracle, a fire came down from heaven and consumed the water, the wood, and the sacrifice. Upon seeing this, the people all spontaneously fell on their faces and recognized Hashem as the real G-d. The verse tells us.

(לט) וַיֵּרָא כָּל הָעָם וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל פְּנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ יְדוֹד הוּא הָאֱלֹקִים יְדוֹד הוּא  
הָאֱלֹקִים

*39) The entire people saw (the fire consume the sacrifice) and fell on their faces and exclaimed, "Hashem - He is the G-d! Hashem – He is the G-d!"*

In a second, the concealed spark of *Yisrael* became a raging fire, and the Jewish people returned to Hashem. *A Jew, even if he has sinned, is still a Yisrael.*

The wrestling match between Yaakov and the angel lasted until dawn. Our Sages explain that *dawn*, the time just before the sun rises, symbolizes the period just before the final redemption, the coming of the Mashiach. We are witnesses to this. The battle today is to save the “small vessels,” that is, Jews who are caught up worshipping other “gods” and remain distant and unconnected to Hashem. Some will claim that if a Jew has strayed, he is no longer a member of *Yisrael* and might as well just join the opposition, but, this is *not* the case. Yaakov has established that a Jew is always a *Yisrael*.

What could better describe the challenge that we face today as we prepare to welcome the Mashiach? So many Jews today are unaffiliated with their Judaism. Our goal at Partners is to reconnect them to their essence. Since every member of the nation *Yisrael* has an unextinguishable spark of *Yisrael* in him, we continue Yaakov’s struggle to connect him to his Forefather *Yisrael* and his Creator.