

United We Stand

Written By Yehuda Dov Reiss, Talmid of Gruss Kollel (YU Israel)

December 2, 2023

Parshas Vayishlach

19th of Kislev 5784

The Parsha's Path

And Yaakov was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until dawn (32:25).

This week's Parsha features one of the most famous cryptic accounts in the Torah. Yaakov, after learning that his brother Eisav is on his way to attack him with four hundred men, quickly takes various steps to prepare, including sending Eisav a large gift to appease him, preparing in case of battle, and praying. On the night before the anticipated confrontation with his brother, Yaakov helps shuttle his family across the Yabok river, perhaps to position them better in case of a surprise attack. The verse then relates how "Yaakov was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until dawn." The man succeeded in dislocating Yaakov's thighbone, but could not prevail over him. Finally, he agrees to bless Yaakov in exchange for his release, renaming Yaakov as "Yisrael".

The commentators have grappled with how to understand this story from beginning to end. Why was Yaakov alone? Who was he wrestling with, and why? What's the significance of Yaakov's thighbone being dislocated? And what's the meaning behind Yaakov's name change?

These questions are made much more fundamental in light of a startling midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 77:3). The midrash, in accordance with the dictum states that "the deeds of the fathers are a sign for their descendants", explains that Yaakov's dislocated thighbone represents the generations in Yaakov's future where his enemy would succeed in inflicting mortal damage on him. In light of this midrash, understanding this episode of the Torah could be crucial to gaining insight into what leads to all the suffering the Jewish people endure, and how we might prevent it.

Returning to our first question: Why was Yaakov left alone? Why didn't he stay with his family? The midrash suggests that he went back for some small jars that he had left behind, based on a homiletic rereading of the Hebrew word for "alone" - "levado", as "for his jars" - "lekado". The midrash explains that Tzadikim care deeply about their possessions because they earned them honestly. At the same time, Chazal (Chullin 91a) learn from this incident that a person should not go out alone at night; it puts yourself in a situation of danger. The Kli Yakar explains that it wasn't right of Yaakov to put himself

in danger over items worth a small sum of money; as a wealthy man, he should have recognized that these small jars were unimportant compared to the risks of separating from his family.

Chazal widely understand the man that Yaakov wrestled with to be the angel of Eisav, who they equate with the Evil Inclination. If so, then Rabbi Sacks' suggestion, that Yaakov "wrestled with himself", is really very traditional. According to the Kli Yakar, the Evil Inclination was able to grab hold of Yaakov due to his inappropriate pursuit of materialism. This may fit with the midrash, cited by Rashi, that Yaakov was agitated over feeling compelled to send such a large and elaborate gift to appease his brother. It can also be appreciated in light of Yaakov's extensive efforts, over the last six years, to cultivate wealth as Lavan's shepherd.

A complimentary angle to Yaakov's struggle is that suggested by R. Steinsaltz, who points out that one of the midrash's descriptions of the image of the angel is that of a Talmid Chacham, a wise and righteous individual. R. Steinsaltz suggests that Yaakov struggled with the notion of perfection; he saw himself, and strived to be a perfect and ideal individual. As Chazal tell us, Yaakov was a man who stood for truth above all else. Yet time and again, he was confronted with situations which forced him to act deceitfully, from taking his brother's blessing to manipulating Lavan's sheep to the facade of deference he was now about to show his brother. According to this approach, Yaakov was plagued by an identity crisis, perhaps compelled to do an inner reckoning as a result of the impending danger that awaited him upon his confrontation with Eisav, or perhaps because he was compelled to pull his greatest deception yet in appeasing him. How could he do such a thing? Who was the real Yaakov - a man of subterfuge or a man of truth?

A couple of years ago I wrote up a more thorough treatment of Rav Steinsaltz's approach; suffice for now to say that in an imperfect world, perfection is impossible. Yaakov had to accept the fact that circumstances beyond his control compelled him to act the way he did, but that didn't detract from who he was. He had to embrace the "very good" he was able to achieve, even as the perfect ideal was elusive.

According to either explanation - whether Yaakov was compelled by some sort of self-doubt or a material temptation - Yaakov felt he was lacking something. This, perhaps, led to the root of the issue which led to Yaakov's struggle, the only clue mentioned explicitly by the pasuk -

that "Yaakov was left alone." Yaakov's preoccupation with his own deficiency caused him to separate from his family, putting himself in the dangerous situation of "one who goes out alone at night."

This was what led to the dislocation of Yaakov's thighbone. The thigh joins the upper part of the body with the lower. This may allude to the joining of the Good and Evil Inclinations to work together in harmony, or the mastery of the intellect over man's passions (see R. A. Feldman's *The Juggler and the King*, where he explores how Chazal utilized a Greek framework for understanding the upper body as representing the Good Inclination/the intellect while the lower body is the Evil Inclination/passions; perhaps the Torah itself employed this conception). The dislocating of the thigh thus represents an impairment in this harmonious relationship (see the Kli Yakar who suggests that this impaired Yaakov from understanding the secrets of Torah).

Perhaps just as the dislocation of Yaakov's thighbone represented a lack of inner unity, it also alluded to a future lack of unity among the people of Yaakov. Just as Yaakov's inner fragmentation and feeling of deficiency led him to separate from his family and be "one who goes out alone at night", so too an individual or community's insecurities, whether prompted by various desires or a crisis in self-image, might prompt them to focus more inward and turn away from the rest of their nation - even amidst the dangers and uncertainties of the night.

It is perhaps this lack of unity which explains the cryptic midrash we began with. Why are the Jewish people faced with generations of suffering and affliction? Why is Yaakov's thigh dislocated? Because of sinas chinam; because we get so caught up in our own deficiencies, our own issues, that we fail to be there with the rest of our nation - we go out alone at night. We fail to be united.

The only question left is, how do we become whole again? When Yaakov arrives in Shechem after his encounter with Eisav, the pasuk relates that he arrived "whole." The midrash explains that his thigh was healed; the damage inflicted by the angel was undone. What changed?

The Kli Yakar explains that when Yaakov told Eisav "yesh li kol", I have everything, he fixed what he had broken. By overcoming his feeling of deficiency, by embracing everything G-d had given him - whether in terms of his resources, abilities, or circumstances - as all that he needed and all he was supposed to have, he was able to restore his senses and achieve wholeness. No longer was he consumed with a deficiency he needed to overcome - "Yesh li kol." Now he could rejoin his family in confidence, without worrying about small jars or self-

image. Now Yaakov, the crooked, could be Yisrael, the straight.

The intention of this article is not to point fingers, which worsens divisions and resentment. We all have a responsibility to look within ourselves to overcome any feeling of deficiency and embrace a perspective of wholeness. In a world where society impresses on us a feeling of deficiency and insecurity, pushing us to want more and feel victimized, it's so easy to feel threatened and resentful of others. We demand a perfect life, where society acts perfectly and all our wants are met, and this can consume us with anger and angst. Yaakov's struggle teaches us that we must make peace with the circumstances in which we find ourselves, recognizing G-d gives us everything we need to fulfill our mission in the world, and that we can embark on our mission with confidence. From such a perspective, we will be empowered to see ourselves as one body - a united whole where every part makes up a larger, singular entity, and thus every part is desperately sought and loved. We will recognize that even when confronted with the most unideal of realities, we can still embrace our wholeness as one people. If Yaakov was able to emerge from his inner struggle and make peace with his brother Eisav, all the more so can we make peace with our brothers who are part and parcel of Yisrael. Let us infuse in ourselves and those around us a spirit of "yesh li kol", embody the confidence and wholeness necessary to make our nation whole, and may Yaakov's thigh be restored to its rightful place forevermore.

Goal of the week

Take on an extra mitzvah or commitment as a Zechus for Eretz Yisrael.

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Tziviah Leah, Bracha bas Shoshanah, Reuven ben Golda, Yitzchok Moshe haKohen ben Miriam, Ephraim Melech ben Tzilah, Yitzchok Elimelech ben Chanah Sarah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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