

Vayishlach: Two Realities

- by Rav Moshe Yitzchok Shulman, zt"l.

Two realities: What is, and what ought to be. Reflected in Torah portion. What is more true to life; the charade of politeness when Yaakov meets Esav, or the struggle of Yaakov with the angel of Esav? Pachim Ketanim must have contained very precious tiny objects, for we keep our most precious things in small vessels. But nothing is important when Yaakov is separated from his children. He was vulnerable, and wounded, only when separated from them, and healed and whole again when re-united with them.

VAYISHLACH: TWO REALITIES

Rabbi Moshe Yitzchak Shulman zt"l

(I heard this thought from my revered father and teacher, Harav Moshe Yitzchok Shulman zt"l [Ed.])

There are two realities in this world: what is, and what ought to be.

Those two realities are reflected in the Torah portion we read today. For in this portion we read of two encounters between Yaakov and Esav; one with the brother in actual life, and the other with the spirit of Esav, whether in a dream as Rambam thinks, or in some supernatural happening of actual struggle as Nahmanides maintains.

Which encounter is the more real? Esav's hypocrisy, his lying tongue professing love, gentleness and care, while his secret heart is consumed by hate? Or is the life and death struggle between Yaakov and the angel more real and closer to actual history, the angel that stands for the spirit of Esav, the angel of death, as far as the people of Israel is concerned?

Which the more true to our long and difficult history? Of course, the struggle with Esav's angel, Esav's spirit, that lasted through the night till the dawn, till blessing was dragged out of him, reluctantly.

There are some serious questions that we ought to ask when confronted with this strange text. For our rabbis, wondering why he was stranded on the wrong side of the ford of Yabok, teach that Yaakov returned for small objects: tiny vessels, PACHIM KETANIM. Suppose they were important things? Often really valuable objects come in small packages – diamonds, rubies, pearls – so why do our Rabbis criticize him for returning and crossing the river for such PACHIM KETANIM? So what, if they were small! If Yaakov returned for them, they must have been valuable!

Also: what is the significance of the struggle, and especially of the Rabbinic discussion of the way they struggled, VAYEAVKU, VAYECHABKU... “They struggled against each other till dust rose to heaven, and they struggled in each other's embrace”?

And why, after all, is Yaakov depicted as struggling with an angel? Is this not absurd – a struggle

of mortal man versus a supernatural being? And even more absurd, that in such an unequal struggle, Yaakov the mortal emerges the victor!

And what is the significance of making the angel bless him, and particularly the nature of the beracha, the name YISRAEL? Why not the BERACHA of the land? Why not the BERACHA of plenty, of TAL HASHAMAYIM UMASHMANEY HAARETZ? If it represents Esav reaffirming the BERACHOT, surely those should have been the words he used?

Of course the answer is that this supernatural versus mortal struggle is the struggle of Jewish history, and our confrontation with the forces of the world that seek our destruction, forces that by all logic should have been triumphant, but by miracle, are not. The night represents the hardship, hour after hour, day after day, century following century, of galut till the dawn of geula comes.

Yaakov struggles with the angel. Nothing could be more absurd. Just so our survival in history against all the laws of history is equally absurd. But we defy the laws of history and live on. We defy the laws of reason and survive – just as Yaakov held on till the dawn. We defy the laws of history, of reality, and create our own reality, that of the Eternal people, for that is the demand – and the blessing – of the Almighty.

Yaakov is wounded. The enemy smites his thigh. Because Yaakov is alone! He is separated from his children, the young men who will be the next generation! He is unable to teach Torah to the next generation at that time, and so he is vulnerable. Yaakov without his students, his spiritual progeny, is in grave danger. Sometimes these spiritual children, the next generation of Torah scholars, are taken from us by force, VAYEAVKU, in the struggle with Esav. Sometimes it is the gentle kiss of the sleep of assimilation and spiritual death, that seduces our children; HIBUK ZEROA, says the Zohar, perishing in Esav's embrace.

That is why Yaakov was vulnerable. He was separated by the NAHAL YABOK from those he must teach. Surely Yaakov went back, not for PAHIM KETANIM, insignificant things, but immensely important things, the more important because they could be stored in such small vessels.... But nothing is important if it prevents Yaakov from fulfilling his central task of transmitting our tradition to his children. Nothing is important if it means that Yaakov's spirit is separated from his children.

Yaakov was not healed, and whole again, till he was reunited with his children. VAYAVO YAAKOV SHALEM, and then everything had meaning again. That is why Yaakov required the Angel's BERACHA, that he be called YISRAEL. The fat of the land and the dew of the heaven is nothing. Not even Abraham's BERACHA that he be a blessing to all nations means anything, unless it is through his children, BET YISRAEL.

YISRAEL is BET YISRAEL. The house of Israel is his children. That is why Abraham and Isaac were not called YISRAEL, but only YAAKOV, because he started the Jewish family. And through the spiritual children – the angels of Esav – even the supernatural forces of Esav – shall have no power over us. Then we become SHALEM BEGUFO, SHALEM BEMEMONO, because we are SHALEM BETORATO.

We are all engaged in Yaakov's struggle every moment of our lives. As long as we, the Yaakovs who will lead our people in Israel and in many countries throughout the world, seek to build Yeshivot and maintain them, create scholars and teach them, we will succeed and even triumph in this relentless struggle against the angel of Esav; the struggle for Jewish survival.

Sometimes it feels like an endless night, each hour passing into yet another hour of torment and persecution – but we hold on. Sometimes it feels like a terrible compulsion to sleep, a seduction of luxury, good living, wealth and honor, that will cause us to drowse away the night, oh so pleasant a night, to let go, and fall away into oblivion, that kiss of death – but we hold on.

Our father Yaakov showed us the way. Yeshivot in Israel and in America, show us the way today.

Even if the task seems sometimes superhuman we shall succeed, for the Lord is with us. For we are BET YISRAEL, Israel's children, and we shall come SHALEM BEGUF, SHALEM BEMAMON, SHALEM BETORAH, till the ending of time, AD BO MASHIACH TZIDKENU, AMEN.

Submitted by Nisson E. Shulman