

Vayishlach, 5781  
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Even those of us who are not fluent in Yiddish can translate the famous (or infamous) phrase of Sholom Aleichem, "שווער צו זיין א ייד" -- *it's hard to be a Jew*. By now a cliché, this quip commonly connotes -- sometimes jokingly, sometimes seriously -- the perceived misfortune of being Jewish. And it's not difficult to understand. I have indeed met individuals who have chosen not to raise their children with any Jewish identity precisely on these grounds. Why would anyone choose to subject his or her children and grandchildren to a life of discrimination, persecution, and eternal envy? Why would anyone take the side of a country that is the object of derision and scorn throughout the world? Even the Talmud itself teaches that when a prospective convert inquires about conversion, we must question his or her motives, stating "אי אתה יודע" -- *Don't you know that Israel nowadays is anguished, put down, hated, and agitated, and suffering befalls them?* And yet, somehow, despite all the clear difficulties involved, so many of us continue to love being Jewish, and volitionally choose to raise our children in this path. While one could indeed debate whether the difficulties that the average Jew faces are net-outweighed by the many aspects of Jewish life that actually make life easier, the implication of שווער צו זיין א ייד is flawed for a deeper reason. Namely, *just because something is hard does not mean that it is bad*. And that's exactly what the nation of Israel is in this world to teach.

The mention of our nation's name -- Israel -- is so commonplace that we are apt to forget what this name actually signifies. In Parashat Vayishlach, as Yaakov emerges wounded but victorious after the grueling struggle with a mysterious villain, he is named "Yisrael," "כי שרית עם אלקים ועם אנשים ותוכל" -- *For you have struggled with the Divine and with men, and you have overcome* (32:29). Apparently, to be an Israelite means to struggle, to sustain a painfully wounded sciatic nerve, but to ultimately overcome. It is specifically through this name -- Bnei Yisrael as opposed to Bnei Yaakov -- that we derive our national identity, because this is our true essence.

Life is full of struggles. No one knows this better than the nation of Israel. It struggles with venomous enemies like Hassan Rouhani and Hassan Nasrallah, and overcomes them through G-d driven interventions like the miraculous operations we have witnessed over the years in Entebbe, Iraq, Iran, and of course, Israel itself. It struggles with spiritual challenges, like the erosion of values and moral decadence that infects much of society, and overcomes them through redoubling its commitment to Torah

values, prayer, and common decency in order to illuminate the world. It struggles with societal problems like widespread loneliness and pain, and overcomes them by lifting each other up, inviting each other over, and supporting each other financially during times of need. It is precisely through the struggles that the nation of Israel faces -- possessing every justifiable excuse to quit, languish in self-pity, and throw in the towel -- that it reveals the ultimate glory of G-d in this world. As the prophet writes, "ישראל אשר" -- *Israel, through you, I will be glorified* (Isaiah 49:3). G-d has placed an aspect of Himself into a world of great difficulty through each one of our souls, and our purpose is to express His glory through the ability to struggle, even fail and sustain physical or emotional wounds, but ultimately overcome.

Of course we do not wish for challenges, nor do we deliberately seek out struggles. But when we erroneously conflate “difficult” with “bad,” we do a disservice to ourselves and our children. Life is hard. Life is scary. But it is not bad. Quite the contrary. Life was specifically set up with these challenges to create the perfect arena for a G-dly soul to choose good over evil and perseverance over resignation. When we do this, we create the ultimate sanctification of the name of G-d, and attain a sense of true personal pride. Indeed, anyone who has ever experienced this knows quite well that challenge is invariably a prerequisite to joy, self-esteem, and a sense of meaning.

While much of the world sees struggle as being indicative of a problem, the Israelite sees it as the essence of life. Just because a person struggles with a particular character deficiency does not mean he or she is evil. Just because a relationship does not come easy does not mean it is fundamentally flawed. Rather, it is precisely by going up against Goliath -- whether externally or internally -- that we find our greatest purpose, and bring the greatest honor that we can possibly give to the Almighty. Providing our children with every luxury and amenity, immersing them solely in the carefree world of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, while sheltering them completely from adversity and disappointment, sets them up for significant potential problems later in life. Lives devoid of challenge and work -- in whatever form they come -- quickly become stale, meaningless, and ultimately overwhelming.

The Zohar notes that the letters of the name “ישראל” can be rearranged to spell “שיר א-ל” -- *the song of G-d*. Through our own national and personal struggles, whatever they may be, we sing the glory of G-d in this world, revealing the prophetic truth that G-d is always with us in every generation and every challenge. As we sing Maoz Tzur this week, noting the downfalls of Pharaoh, Nevuchadnezzar, Haman, Antiochus, and so

many others, let us remind ourselves of the immense privilege of being an Israelite. Though our present-day enemies may wound us significantly, we affirm without doubt that they too will ultimately be added to this long list of ignominious failures of רבים ביד מעטים, while we and all those who support goodness will continue to sing the song of G-d in this world forever. It *is* hard to be a Jew...but it is such a blessing.