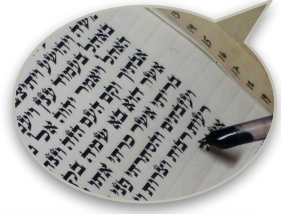




The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bereshit

Parshat Vayishlach

Kislev 5784 / December 2024

The Courage of Israel

By Jordan Bryk

וַיֵּתֶר יַעֲקֹב, לְבֶדּוֹ; וַיֵּאָבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ, עַד צֹלֹת הַשָּׁחַר

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

The story of Yaakov's wrestling match is an enigma that perplexes readers and leads the meforshim in many different directions. Who was the adversary? Why did he fight Yaakov? Why was this moment so transformational that it merited a name change? What is the meaning of this name? Why does the Torah continue to call him both Yaakov and Yisrael from that point on?

One thing is clear: this event was the turning point in Yaakov's life in which he obtained the name that would stick with the Jewish people until this day, Am *Yisrael*.

The Yaakov we find at the beginning of *Parshat Vayishlach* is exceedingly virtuous but ultimately incomplete. We know him as learned, gentle and pure (אִישׁ תָּם), content to stay inside and learn Torah (יָשֵׁב אֶהְיֶה), focused on the birthright and continuity of the Jewish people (מְכַרֵּה כִּיּוֹם אֶת-בְּכֹרֶתְךָ) and able to connect deeply with God in the spiritual realm (וַהֲגִה מְלָאכִי אֱלֹהִים עֲלֵי וַיִּרְדִּים בּוֹ).

His brother Eisav is the polar opposite. As Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, *zt"l*, observed, "Eisav is everything Yaakov is not. He is strong, full of energy, a skilled hunter, a man of the field ... the archetypal hero of the ancient world." These are classical virtues but become vices for Eisav when disconnected from righteousness and justice.

Yaakov, in his youth, is timid. He consistently avoids confrontation. He resorts to subterfuge to obtain a blessing from his father. He runs away, fearing for his life after Eisav learns the news. His uncle Lavan easily takes advantage of him, tricking him into marrying Leah and forcing him to work 14 years until he can marry his true love Rachel, all the while changing his wages ten times. Yaakov flees Lavan, citing his *fear* that Lavan would steal back his daughters. The night before he is set to encounter Eisav for the first time in 22 years, Yaakov is *afraid and distressed*, unprepared to face his deepest fear.

Up until this moment in his life, Yaakov lacks courage. In this epic wrestling match, Yaakov finally faces his fears and finds his courage. God is telling him that if you want to be a forefather of the Jewish people and ultimately a Light unto the Nations you need to be more than one who wrestles with the Divine. You need to wrestle with Man too. You need to stand up for yourself, for your people, for what is right, and confront head-on those who seek to abuse you.

Up until this moment in his life, Yaakov lacks courage. In this epic wrestling match, Yaakov finally faces his fears and finds his courage. God is telling him that if you want to be a forefather of the Jewish people and ultimately a 'Light unto the Nations' you need to be more than one who wrestles with the Divine. You need to wrestle with Man too. You need to stand up for yourself, for your people, for what is right, and confront head-on those who seek to abuse you.

That is exactly what he does, and immediately after the encounter with Eisav, the Torah declares וַיָּבֹא יַעֲקֹב שָׁלֵם, *Yaakov arrived complete*. He has filled in the hole in his character development. He is now fit to be a Patriarch of Am Yisrael.

Rabbi Sacks suggests that the new name here is different from the previous name changes in *Sefer Bereshit*. This name should be read as a challenge. It's as if God said, "Act as if you are deserving of the name Yisrael."

Some of our greatest heroes were courageous warriors: Avraham, Yehoshuah, David Hamelech, Devorah, Shimshon, and Judah the Maccabee. Some of our greatest moments as a nation were born in acts of courage: Escaping Egypt, stepping into the Red Sea, fighting Amalek, conquering the Promised Land and Yerushalayim, destroying Haman and his followers, defeating the Greeks and revolting against the Romans. In modern times, we draw inspiration from the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, 1948, 1967, 1973, the Raid on Entebbe, and operations after operation in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon. Since October 7, countless acts of courage have been on full display every day, from both our brave soldiers in the IDF and ordinary civilians.

History has taught us the harsh lesson that Am Yisrael can not afford to live in fear, both in Israel and abroad. When we lack confidence in ourselves as Jews and hunch over like victims, we invite oppression and aggression. When we stand upright as proud Jews and fight for what is right, we are able to achieve miracles. This very concept of Jewish dignity — *hadar* — motivated the early Zionists to realize Herzl's dream.

As Am Yisrael fights her enemies on the battlefield and in the war of ideas, let us channel the completeness of Yaakov — now known as Yisrael. May we cling faithfully to God and remain fearless in the earthly arena.

Chazak V'ematz! Am Yisrael Chai!

Jordan and Caroline moved from NYC to Scarsdale in the summer of 2021 and can't believe we waited that long! Our kids Margaux (8), James (6), and Nicky (3) love YIS groups, WDS, and the Golden Horseshoe.

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