

## Parshat Vayishlach 5775

"And Esav ran toward him, embraced him, fell upon his neck, and kissed him; then they wept." The climax of the story of two estranged brothers, Yaacov and Esav, who finally meet and embrace cannot fail to move. Yet, we may also wonder about the preparation for this meeting where Yaacov was "very frightened, and it distressed him." Why the need for the elaborate strategy: the gift of the sheep, the oxen, the donkey, and the slaves; dividing the camp into two – "lest he come and attack...and the other one can escape"; and the heartfelt prayer? Had Yaacov so misjudged his brother that he thought his own life was in mortal danger? The happy ending makes the beginning seem like cracking the nut with a sledge-hammer.

As night descends, Yaacov makes his way across the ford of the Yabok and is met by an "ish", literally "man", who struggles with him and finally blesses him with a new name before leaving. What is this story doing in the centre of the narrative at the intersection between Yaacov's preparation for meeting Esav, and the actual meeting? What, indeed, is the nature and meaning of this mysterious struggle between Yaacov and the "ish"? A closer look at the text of reveals a fascinating set of parallels between the two halves of the story – the preparation and the actual meeting itself, as elaborated by R' Elchanan Samet:

	Preparation for the meeting	Actual meeting
1	Yaacov sends messengers: "We came to...Esav, and he is coming to greet you and FOUR HUNDRED MEN ARE WITH HIM. Then Yaacov was greatly afraid and distressed"	"Yaacov looked up and he saw: Esav had come and FOUR HUNDRED MEN WERE WITH HIM"
2	"And he DIVIDED the people with him...and he said: 'If Esav come to the one camp and smite it, then the camp which is left shall escape.'"	"He DIVIDED the children to Leah and to Rachel"
3	Prayer to be saved	The reunion between the brothers
4	Sending the gift: "I will atone his face with the gift that goes before my FACE, and then I will see his FACE; perhaps he shall raise my FACE"	Debate and Esav's acceptance of the gift: "Therefore I have seen your FACE, like the FACE of G-d, and you have graced me"

5	Crossing the Yabok	The brothers part ways
---	--------------------	------------------------

The parallels between the two parts of the narrative are striking, yet perhaps even more revealing is the subtle differences between them. Firstly, the encounter between the brothers is not at the centre point of the story, as we may have expected, but rather it is buried deep within the second half, parallel to Yaacov's desperate prayer. Secondly, when the messengers return to Yaacov with news of the four hundred men in the first half of the story, we read that "Yaacov was greatly afraid and distressed". Yet, in the second half, on actually seeing the four hundred men there is no mention of being afraid. Finally, whereas in the first half, Yaacov's dividing his family into two is explained by the possibility of Esav attacking one of the camps, in the second half, there is no mention of this. It is almost as if the dividing here is just going through the motions or part of the gift ceremony to impress Esav. These three differences between the two parts of the story are astounding. What can the explanation be?

**"And Yaacov remained alone"** Chazal, as quoted by Rashi, identify the "ish" in the story as the angel of Esav, or the spiritual embodiment of what Esav represents (see the book of Daniel). The angel attacks Yaacov in a struggle between two cosmic forces – the force of Esav, representing the "here and now", and the force of Yaacov, representing Godliness and the ultimate purpose of the world. The battle is tough and the angel even appears to have the upper hand as he dislocates Yaacov's hip. But Yaacov digs deep and turns the tide towards a stalemate. The angel is ready to call it a draw but Yaacov persists and demands "a blessing". The blessing here is no ordinary one but rather an acceptance of the blessing that Yaacov took away from Esav all those years ago. And finally, the angel changes his name to "Yisrael". No longer are the blessings considered to have been taken in a deceitful way by Yaacov ("eikev" = deceit) but by Yisrael ("Yashar" = upright). As day breaks, Yaacov can now be confident that he has defeated the force of Esav and so is able to walk into the encounter with his brother with confidence and without the fear of the night before.

Yabok is the key to unlocking the entire story, and hence positioned at the intersection of the two halves. The struggle that happens at this place is crucial. In fact the words for "struggle" and the name of the place are very similar: "Va'yeavek" and "Yabok". And it is the resolution to this that manifests itself in the positive outcome, as the brothers "embrace", also a similar sounding work: "Va'ye'chbkehu". Finally, it is interesting to note that the names of our patriarch frame the entire story, as the story opens with "And Yaacov sent" and finishes with the "G-d of Yisrael", and so the transition is complete.