

ASK ME NO QUESTIONS

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

One of the Bible's most famous battles was not between two armies or two nations. It was between mortal man and his immortal counterpart -- an angel.

Leaving his family's encampment to retrieve some small items, Yaakov Avinu (Jacob) lingered alone in the pre-dawn hours, and a man approached him. The man engaged him in battle, and in the struggle, Yaakov dislocated his sciatic nerve. Nevertheless, he was able to lock the mysterious man in a fast hold. "Send me away," cried the foe, "dawn is approaching."

Yaakov realized that this combatant was no ordinary wayfarer, in fact he was a heavenly messenger - the Angel of Esav -- and Yaakov made a condition for release. "I will not release you unless you bless me," he demanded.

The Midrash explains that everyone has an angelic representative. Yaakov, who had Divine inspiration, met his angelic opponent as a prelude to the face-to-face encounter with his adversarial mortal brother. The Talmud explains that the angel had celestial responsibilities that began at dawn. He therefore begged Yaakov to allow him to return to those duties.

In response to Yaakov's demand, the angel asked Yaakov his name to which he declared. "Your name will no longer be Yaakov but rather Yisrael (Israel), as you fought with angels and with men (Lavan & Esav) - and won" (Genesis 32:26-29).

Then Yaakov asks the angel for his name. The response is enigmatic. "Why do you ask my name?" There is no further response. The angel blesses Yaakov who, badly injured, limps back to his family (Genesis 32:30).

The obvious question is: What is the meaning of the angel's response? Why did he answer Yaakov's question with a question? Why did he refuse to divulge his name? Or did the angel actually tell Yaakov an answer with that question?

At our supper table one evening each of our children took turns trying to stump me and my wife, with riddles. Some of the brain twisters were quite tricky, but my wife and I managed to figure out the answers. Then my daughter announced that she had something to say that would stump everyone.

After prefacing her remarks by telling everyone to listen to the clues carefully, She started her riddle. She began by telling us that China had 1.2 billion people, it occupied approximately 3,700,000 sq.

miles, and its population density was 327 people per sq. mi. She continued by listing China's principal languages: Mandarin, Yue, Wu, Hakka, Xiang, Gan, Minbei, Minnan. Then she stopped, and with a probing tone in her voice announced quite smugly: "How long is a Chinaman's name."

We all took the last statement as a question and looked at each other. We were stumped. How did the previously stated facts correlate with the length of a Chinaman's name? How would the fact that China had over a billion people explain how long a Chinese name was?

Again she just stood up and repeated. "How long is a Chinaman's name."

In unison, we all shrugged our shoulders. "O.K.", we conceded, "How long is a Chinaman's name?"

My daughter just smiled. "I don't know either. I never asked you a question all I wanted to tell you, in addition to all the other facts that I compiled about China, is that How Long, is the name of a Chinese man!"

Sometimes, "why do you ask" is a questions, sometimes it is an answer as well. The angel that wrestled with Yaakov responded to Yaakov's question in a very intriguing way. My name is, "why do you ask my name." Rabbi Yehuda Laib Chasman, the Mashgiach (dean of ethics) of the Hebron Yeshiva, explained that the angel of Esau sent a very poignant message through Yaakov. Those who struggle with Jacob do not want us to question them. They want us to act without thought, rhyme or reason. Their motto is, "Why do you ask?" If we do not ask questions, Esav's angel will surely overcome. If you ask no questions, no answers are necessary. Actions go unchecked, and there is never an accounting.

Throughout history, Jews always asked for names. When Moshe first encounters G-d in the Egyptian dessert he asks of Him, "when the Jews ask me what is His Name what should I tell them." Hashem responds, "I shall be As I Shall Be" (Exodus 3:13-14). The Jews were asking for an anthropomorphic quality that G-d's name personified. Yaakov, too, wanted to understand the very essence of the angel who personified the struggles he would eternally encounter.

The answer was simple - My name is - Why-do-you-ask-my-name. That name may be a little confusing at times. It may be difficult to comprehend. It may even sound like Chinese. But if we don't ask, and if we are satisfied with the response, "why even ask?", then we will never have an answer. In fact, we won't even have a clue.

***Dedicated in honor of the 11th Wedding Anniversary of Dr. Blair and Andrea Tuttle Skolnick
by Drs. Irving and Vivian Skolnick
Good Shabbos!***

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