

THE FOUR CUBITS WE OCCUPY

by Rabbi Label Lam

Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he perceived that he could not overcome him, he struck him in the socket of his hip; so Jacob's hip socket was dislocated as he wrestled with him. (Breishis 32:25)... The sun shone for him as he passed Penuel and he was limping on his hip. (Breishis 32:33)

The sun shone for him: For whom doesn't it shine? For him it shone to heal him but for others it shone for the light. (Midrash)

The question stands. "For whom does the sun not shine?" Better yet, "For whom does the sun shine?"

In his introduction to the Talmud, the Rambam explains how to approach a Talmudic homily. The example he chooses is from Tractate Brochos 8A, "The Holy One Blessed be He has nothing in this world but the four cubits of Jewish Law." Can it be true? "What about before the giving of the Torah? What about other sciences and branches of knowledge?" He explains that the world, like any object of human craft is made purposefully, and therefore serves some meaningful end. The human mind sits atop the peak of the pyramid of life. The prime function of the mind is not merely to meet material means but "to form accurate abstract concepts and to know realities as they are." Although the world requires practical functions, still the whole of creation serves or enables those whose efforts lead them to actualize their uniquely human or G-dly potential. Therefore some giant building may find its fulfillment and purpose when even after hundreds of years that man for whom the world was made worthy came to rest in its shade.

Describing the human condition, Moshe Chaim Luzatto writes in the Path of the Just, "The Holy One Blessed be He has put man in a place where the factors which draw him further from the Blessed One are many... Resultantly, man is in truth placed in the midst of a raging battle...If he is valorous and victorious on all sides, he will be the "Whole Man", who will succeed in uniting himself with his Creator, and he will leave the corridor to enter the palace, to bask in the glow of the light of life. To the extent that he has subdued his evil inclination and his desires, and withdrawn from those factors which draw him further from the good, and exerted himself to become united with it, to that extent he will attain it and rejoice in it."

It is an established principle that the patriarchs, as it were, walked in wet cement. What they experienced made a lasting impression. Jacob's struggle all night was not just his own. It was a foreshadowing of what would be over the course of a protracted exile. As morning approached the

battle intensified. Jacob is injured but he continues to continue. He makes it; he survives till the break of dawn.

About this subject of the sun shining for Jacob, the Opter Rav wrote, "Also, just as when Israel is in exile, "limping on his hip", they are guaranteed that the sun will shine for them foreboding success in the future." The Klausenberger Rebbe is quoted as having said, "The biggest miracle is the one that we, the survivors of the Holocaust, after all we witnessed and lived through, still have faith in the Almighty G-d, may His name be blessed. This, my friends, is the miracle of miracles, the greatest miracle ever to have taken place." An uncle of my wife, that survived seven concentration camps, said at his grandson's Bar Mitzvah about the experience of World War II, "We lost all the battles but we won the war."

So it is that Jacob and the Children of Israel have been embattled for centuries. Although injured so often we have managed to limp toward the goal-line of human history graced with a heavenly spotlight especially trained upon our struggles within the four cubits we occupy. Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).