

IN HIS IMAGE

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Vayishlach

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This week's parashah describes the momentous confrontation between Yaakov and Esav when the former returned to Eretz Yisrael after 20 years with Lavan. R' Yitzchak Isaac Sher z"l (1875-1951; rosh yeshiva of the Slobodka Yeshiva in Lithuania and Bnei Brak) observes that this parashah provides a glimpse of Yaakov's greatness and the contrast between him and Esav. Also, it teaches the lofty heights that a human being is capable of reaching. He explains:

We read (Bereishit 33:20), "He [Yaakov] set up an altar there and proclaimed, 'Kel, the Kel of Israel'." The literal translation of this verse suggests that Yaakov called G-d, "the G-d of Israel." However, Rashi z"l quotes the Gemara (Megillah 18a) which reads the verse differently: "He called him 'El' - The G-d of Israel." In other words, "He called Yaakov, 'El.' Who called him that? The G-d of Israel called him that."

Needless to say, G-d was not ascribing divinity to Yaakov. Rather, the title "El" means that Yaakov had perfected his tzelem Elokim / Divine image. He had accomplished what man was put in this world to accomplish. He was as close to godliness as a person ever can be.

Yaakov had attained extremely high spiritual levels even earlier. When Yaakov was fleeing to Lavan's home, Yaakov dreamt of a ladder on which malachim were ascending and descending. Midrash Rabbah records that the malachim were going back and forth between the human Yaakov and an image of Yaakov that was "engraved" on G-d's "throne," comparing the two.

The engraving of Yaakov's image on G-d's throne is meant to teach us what man is capable of

achieving. We can only imagine how hard Yaakov worked on himself to attain that level.

In contrast, we don't find that Esav worked on himself at all. At birth, he was named, "Esav," which comes from the word meaning "complete." Just as Esav appeared physically complete at birth, so he represents those people who view themselves as spiritually complete, having no need to work on themselves. Such a person stands in sharp contrast to the ideal human represented by Yaakov. (Lekket Sichot Mussar, Vol. III, p.41)

"You shall say, 'Your servant Yaakov's. It is a tribute sent to my lord, to Esav, and behold he himself is behind us'." (32:19)

"Accept my tribute from me, inasmuch as I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of Elokim." (33:10)

Why did Yaakov tell his servants who took gifts to Esav to point out that Yaakov would soon follow in person? Also, what did Yaakov mean when he equated seeing Esav to seeing the face of Elokim? R' Shlomo Kluger z"l (1783-1869; rabbi of Brody, Poland) explains:

Halachah requires that just as there were representatives of the kohanim and levi'im present in the Bet Hamikdash every day, so there must be representatives of the yisraelim (the "anshei ma'amad") present every day. The Gemara (Ta'anit 26a) explains this by asking rhetorically, "Is it conceivable that a person's sacrifice could be offered and he is not present?!" R' Kluger asks: Why is it so inconceivable that a person's sacrifice could be offered when he is not present?

Another question: We read (Bereishit 18:8) that when Avraham served food to his guests, "He stood over them beneath the tree and they ate." What does the Torah mean to teach us?

Says R' Kluger: When a person offers food to a guest, he may have one of two motives--either to feed a hungry person or to honor the guest. How can we tell what the host's motives are? When the main purpose is to relieve the guest's hunger, then the food is the main thing. The host need not "offer himself" to the guest as well, i.e., he need not be present. On the other hand, if the main point is to show honor to the guest, then the host's presence is more important than the food.

When we offer sacrifices in the Bet Hamikdash, we do so to honor Hashem. Obviously, He does not need our food. That is why it is inconceivable that our sacrifices could be offered without our representatives standing nearby. That also is why Avraham stood over his guests while they ate. Although they may have been hungry (assuming he did not know they were angels), he wanted to honor them with his presence as well.

This was Yaakov's message to Esav: I am not sending you a gift because I think you need it. I want to honor you, and I am following right behind my gift. And when Esav balked at accepting the gift, saying (33:9), "I have plenty," Yaakov reiterated: Seeing your face is like seeing the face of Elokim, i.e.,

my whole intention was to bring an offering to someone who does not need it, merely in order to show him honor. (Ma'amar Esther to Esther 5:8)

"Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav, for I fear him lest he come and strike me down, mother and children." (32:12)

R' Shlomo Alkabetz z"l (1505-1584; author of the Friday night hymn Lecha Dodi, among other works) writes that Yaakov referred in this verse not (only) to Esav, but to Esav's descendant, Haman who planned "to exterminate all Jews, young and old, children and women" (Esther 3:13). Thus, immediately after Yaakov's prayer (32:14), the Torah says, "He spent the night there." Note that the final letters of the Hebrew words in this phrase spell "Haman." Also, the Hebrew word for "at night" appears three times in our chapter, alluding to the three days and nights of the fast that Mordechai and Esther decreed. (Manot Ha'levi 7:7)

"Therefore Bnei Yisrael are not to eat the gid ha'nasheh / displaced sinew on the hip-socket to this day, because he struck Yaakov's hip-socket on the displaced sinew." (32:33)

R' David ben Shmuel Hakochavi z"l (Spain and Provence; died approx. 1330) writes: This law teaches us two lessons:

- (1) That we should distance ourselves from that from which our forefathers distanced themselves.
- (2) That we should use the occasion of eating to recall what befell our forefather Yaakov. (Migdal David: Azhara 183)

"He said, 'No longer will it be said that your name is Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have struggled with the Divine and with man and have overcome.'" (32:29)

R' Shaul Yisraeli z"l (1909-1995; rabbi of Kfar Ha'roeh, Israel and a rosh yeshiva in Yeshivat Merkaz Harav) asks: Since Yaakov left the struggle with the angel with a dislocated thigh, in what sense can it be said that Yaakov overcame the angel?

He answers: Our Sages say that the angel with whom Yaakov fought was the guardian angel of Esav and is synonymous with the yezter hara and the satan. The Gemara (Chullin 91a) also says that this angel first appeared to Yaakov in the guise of a Torah scholar. The struggle was not a physical one, but rather a spiritual one. Only when the angel could not weaken Yaakov spiritually did it resort to harming him physically. Yaakov won the fight because his adversary did not succeed in representing Torah falsely and had to show his true colors as an enemy of religion. (Siach Shaul)

Shemittah

We continue to discuss the halachic controversy surrounding the "hetter mechirah," the sale of the Land of Israel to a non-Jew for the shemittah year.

R' Ben Zion Abba Shaul z"l (1924-1998; rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Porat Yosef) writes: This sale lacks sincerity since it is plain that the sellers would not actually part with their fields in Eretz Yisrael for all the treasure in the world. Therefore, it cannot be considered a legitimate sale.

R' Abba Shaul continues: Some wish to equate the temporary sale of the Land with mechirat chametz / the sale of chametz to a gentile for the duration of Pesach. No one today challenges this practice though everyone knows that the Jew will buy the chametz back after the holiday. Nevertheless, mechirat chametz is effective because, when one sells something using a kinyan / legally enforceable method of transfer, it doesn't matter what his thoughts are; the act is what matters. Why should selling the Land be any different?

He explains: A contract of mechirat chametz specifies the (estimated) actual value of the chametz being sold. If the non-Jew wants to take possession of the chametz, he will pay its full value and the Jew will give him the chametz. That is not true with regard to the sale of Eretz Yisrael. As noted, we know very well that Jewish farmers would not sell their land in Eretz Yisrael to non-Jews for any price. Thus, writes R' Abba Shaul, the whole arrangement has the appearance of a joke.

He continues: But, didn't we say above that a person's thoughts cannot negate a legally-proper sale? Thus, if the land is sold to a non-Jew using legally-proper procedures, why does it matter that the seller is not sincere? The answer is that not all unspoken thoughts are the same. If a person says, for example, "I hereby give all of my property to so-and-so as a gift and I will henceforth beg door-to-door," we would not enforce that gift because it is obvious to us that such a gift cannot be sincere. The same is true when a Jew sells his land in Eretz Yisrael to a non-Jew. (Ohr Le'Zion: Shevi'it p.12-13)

R' Yaakov Ariel shlita (rabbi of Ramat Gan, Israel) responds: If farmers appreciated the severity of the sin of violating shemittah, there is no question that they would sell their land with complete sincerity.

R' Ariel continues: Some have argued that the sale cannot be sincere because no Jew would agree to sell all of Eretz Yisrael to a non-Jew. However, no one farmer is selling the entire land; rather, each is selling his own fields. It would be preferable, he writes, for each farm to be sold by a local rabbi rather than to have the Chief Rabbinate sell the entire Land at once. (She'eilot U'teshuvot B'ohalah Shel Torah: Shevi'it p.282)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Torah.org](https://www.torah.org) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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