

# NOT MEDITATION ATOP A MOUNTAIN

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

*"Yaakov remained alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of day." [32:25]*

Who was this man? Our Sages tell us: it was no man, but an angel. The battle wasn't physical, but spiritual. And the angel represented the spiritual force of Esav, Yaakov's brother.

From the very beginning, the two brothers were different. "The children grew; and Esav became a skilled hunter, a man of the field, while Yaakov was a simple man, a dweller in tents." [25:27] Esav became wound up in the physical world, acquiring wealth, while Yaakov sat in tents, dwelling upon spiritual matters. And even in the womb, the two were already at odds with each other.

At the time of our story, many years have passed. Yaakov, the spiritual brother, has already acquired the right of the first-born - the right to lead the Service of G-d - and the blessings which were intended to accompany that right. Yitzchak had agreed that the blessings belonged to Yaakov, saying to Esav, "indeed, blessed shall he be." [27:33] Rashi explains: "in order that you should not say 'had Yaakov not fooled his father, he would never have taken the blessings,' Yitzchak agreed and blessed Yaakov again, with full knowledge that he was doing so."

Yaakov's exile is coming to an end. He is returning to the land of Canaan, the land promised to his fathers - and to him. Only Yaakov, the spiritual brother, was to carry forward the Jewish people... but Esav has never agreed.

Preparing to confront Esav himself, Yaakov does three things: he sends gifts, he prays, and finally he prepares his camp for battle. But the confrontation with Esav's spiritual force comes suddenly, and when it happens, Yaakov must fight immediately. The real battle is not the physical one, which is over before it begins; it is the spiritual wrestling between Yaakov and the "spiritual force for the physical."

What is this angel, this self-contradiction, a "spiritual force for the physical?" The Kli Yakar commentary tells us: it is the force which tries to *blind* us to the spiritual. Yes, the physical *can* affect the spiritual - by getting in the way.

If so, we confront another question: why did Yaakov, the spiritual son, want Yitzchak's blessings for *physical* wealth? Why did Yitzchak agree that this was appropriate?

Because ideally, the physical should serve the spiritual. In Judaism, a spiritual person is not he who separates himself from all humanity, sits on a mountaintop and meditates. In Judaism, a spiritual person is he who takes the physical, and elevates it. A spiritual person not only studies G-d's word, the Torah, but also gives food to the poor, and money to support Torah study. A spiritual person uses a house to have guests, a car to take passengers, new shoes to visit the sick [the Internet to acquire Torah literature].

Yitzchak says to Esav: "You shall live by your sword, and serve your brother; but it shall be that when you shall dominate over him, you will break his yoke from upon your neck." [27:40] The physical shall serve the spiritual. Esav must serve Yaakov as long as Yaakov deserves his blessings - as long as Yaakov uses the physical properly. But Rashi explains how Esav might come to "dominate" - should Yaakov, the spiritual, descend and fail to serve G-d, then he is failing to use the physical in accordance with Yitzchak's blessings. At that point, Esav need not agree - he has grounds to complain about the blessings which Yaakov took.

Yaakov has no choice. For him to succeed and go forward, he cannot permit the physical world to blind him to his spiritual goals. He must fight the angel head on.

---

Text Copyright © 1995 Rabbi Yaakov Menken and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is the Director of Project Genesis.