

# FORCING THE ISSUE

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

"He [the angel] said, 'It will no longer be said that your name is Yaakov, but rather Israel, for you have contested with both the Divine and with man, and have prevailed.'" [32:29]

Some time after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the infamous Yevsektzia expelled the Jews from the synagogue in Tcherkov, and converted it into a social hall. [The Yevsektzia was a group of Jewish Bolsheviks dedicated to the secularization of Russian Jewry. It was they who were responsible for many of the Soviet decrees against Jewish studies.]

Rav Aharon Milikovsky addressed the congregation, discussing this tragic event, and he turned to this verse from our parsha. His explanation, while not necessarily a literal interpretation, certainly teaches a profound lesson which is applicable even today.

We must wonder, he said -- what great victory was this? We see that Yaakov was wounded in battle, and emerged limping on his thigh. The angel, as a spiritual being, was not wounded. So where was the victory?

Rather, we know that when two people are engaged in an intellectual argument, then the one who is correct offers proofs and intelligent contradictions to the other position. The one who is in error, however, should he refuse to admit it, will be left without intelligent proofs. Instead, he will fume with anger, shout and slander the other party (the ad hominem being the last recourse of one with nothing intelligent left to say). Sometimes, he may even resort to violence.

The argument between Yaakov and the angel, the ministering angel of Esav his brother, was certainly an intellectual argument -- an angel is an entirely spiritual being, and there is no way it could have a physical battle. If Yaakov emerged wounded, limping on his thigh -- then this indicates that the ministering angel of Esav could not subdue him with proofs, and Yaakov won the debate.

The situation, he concluded, is the same with us. We have an intellectual dispute with the Yevsektzia. If they must use force against us, it only indicates that the truth is on our side.

Today we know that truth was indeed with them -- the Yevsektzia faded long before the Soviet Union itself dissolved, leaving millions of Jews with no Jewish education, having experienced neither Rosh HaShanah nor Pesach, neither Purim nor Chanukah. Yet it is dead and gone, and we the Jewish people remain.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken