STRIPPING LIFE DOWN TO ITS 'BEAR' MINIMUM

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Then Yaakov sent angels ahead of him to Eisav, his brother... "Thus shall you say, 'To my master, to Eisav: So says your servant, Yaakov: I have dwelled with Lavan, and have lingered until now. I have oxen, and donkeys, sheep, servants, and maidservants; I have sent [this message] to inform my master—to find favour in your eyes.'" (32:4-6)

With these words of instruction Yaakov charges his angel/messengers before sending them off to greet Eisav. As Yaakov himself says, he hopes to find favour in Eisav's eyes.

Thirty-four years previously, Yaakov was forced to flee from his brother, who threatened to kill him as a result of his usurping the cherished blessings from their father Yitzchak. One might have hoped that after such an extended lapse, Eisav's anger might have subsided.

The angels response: "We came to your brother—to Eisav—moreover, he is headed toward you, and four-hundred men accompany him. (32:7)"—"You think he's your brother—well he's still Eisav; he still hates you (Rashi)."

Eisav has not forgotten why he hates Yaakov. You stole my birthright; then you stole my blessings... Now I know why they gave you the name Yaakov ('tricker'). (27:36) In his message of friendship and forgiveness—to find favour in your eyes—one might have thought that Yaakov would have attempted to appease his brother's anger through one of the traditional methods; remorse, regret, and asking for forgiveness. Yet in his instructions to the angels we find none of this. I've been living with Lavan for the past twenty years... I'm still faithful to the Torah's 613 mitzvos (Rashi)... I've accumulated livestock and servants... How does Yaakov hope that his curt message to Eisav will in any way find favour in his eyes?

Things that go bump in the night... For children, the night is a time for eerie monsters and untold mysteries. Have you ever tried to tell a horror- story in the daytime? There's no menace. Every good camp director knows: If you want to scare kids (or adults), it has to be dark.

What's so scary about darkness and night?

During the daytime, if you tell a kid there's a monster in the closet, or under his bed, he can check to see if it's true. At night time—when the sun's gone down and the lights are out—he can't see. There's also the fact that the dark of night distorts what we do see. Is that a tree stump with a protruding branch—or is it a robber with a gun? What's that form crouching in the corner of my room? Turn on

the lights—and you'd find it's just dirty laundry. But in the shadowy darkness of night, it could be just about anything our imagination wants (or doesn't want) to see.

Sometimes our relationships go through similar distortions. We have a falling-out. There was an argument. Perhaps someone who should have thought about us didn't. We're upset, and rightfully so.

In our hearts, we feel the seeds of resentment taking root. It's embarrassing to say it, but sometimes we're so upset that it disturbs our davening. We can't stop thinking about it. How could she? How dare they? It's so inconsiderate... so thoughtless...

The more the resentment grows, the more the person who is its cause grows monstrous in our eyes. What might have been a careless mistake quickly becomes a calculated crime; a hideous deed intended to hurt and to maim.

Successful marriage counsellors say that by the time they get together with husband and wife to try and make amends, each one has so demonized the other in their eyes that their first task is to simply sit down and talk civilly. To remind them that their spouses are really people too—and are hurting just as much as they are.

Until recently, many anti-Semites believed Jews had horns. Perhaps some still do. This is because of a misinterpretation of the Torah's description of Moshe's 'radiant' face. But why, for hundreds of years, did they persist in perpetuating this ridiculous fable?

If we are monsters, it's okay to hate us. If we're human just like them, it's not so easy. Perhaps this is one reason the Nazis, before murdering us, did everything possible to degrade and disgrace us, from housing us sub-human ghettos, to stripping us of our clothing and our possessions and our beards and our hair. To murder a human is callous; to kill vermin is normal.

As a child, a friend once confided, he was exposed to his father's hatred of his father-in-law—the boy's grandfather—who lived on another continent. Trying to capture his intimidating nature, his father would refer to him as a der ber ('the bear'). After many years the grandfather came to visit. To his grandson's genuine shock, the bear he had expected to see, complete with claws and fur, was actually just a feeble old man.

Yaakov is acutely aware of human nature. He knows that over thirty-four years, he has likely—in Eisav's eyes—become a monster of epic proportions. This is the nature of anger and hatred; the longer it is left to fester, the more we tend to de-humanize its perpetrator. Like the distorted coat rack transformed into a giant ogre in the murky shadows of night, anger and resentment cloud the truth and deform their objects to the point that they are no longer human in our eyes.

Eisav, my brother, I'm on my way home. It's me—Yaakov. It's been 34 years. Can you believe it? I've been wandering around for 34 years! I spent the last twenty by Lavan working day and night, and trying to keep up my commitment to the Torah... Yeah, I know, I've schlepped a little. You see, I'm

schlepping along all these sheep, and donkeys... Anyway, when I heard you were coming towards me, I just had to send you this message, and tell you I'm looking forward to seeing you again.

Yaakov hopes that by describing himself in very human, mundane terms, he will succeed in convincing Eisav that the monster he sees in his mind's- eye is really just old Yaakov. Maybe not his favourite person, but no horned monster either. [Ralbag/Maya'an Ha-shavua]

Yaakov's tactic of invoking his humanness can be a powerful tool not only in interpersonal relationships and anger management, but in many other aspects of personal growth and development as well.

In the selichos prayers recited during Elul and Tishrei, as well as on fast-days, we beseech Hashem with the words of King David (Tehillim/Psalms 71:9): "Do not cast us aside in old age; do not forsake us when our strength fails." Like me, I'm sure others too put just a little extra concentration into these words, especially when we've seen how the harsh reality of old-age sometimes wreaks devastation, taking its prisoners without regard to fame or fortune.

While we sincerely wish we will be blessed with good health, a sound mind, and a lively spirit until our very last day, it can sometimes be a humbling experience to remind ourselves of our own frailty even as we're still young and vibrant. Remembering on occasion that a time may come that we too may walk with difficulty (if at all), forget the names and faces of our own children, etc., can go a long way to keeping our egocentricity in check, and not letting ourselves get too caught-up in the give-and-take of life in the present.

When Yosef was presented with his greatest test—that of Potiphar's wife who did her utmost to entice him to sin—Chazal (our Sages) teach that he was ultimately saved by seeing the image of his father Yaakov (Rashi, Bereishis/Genesis 39:11; Sotah 36b). Conventional understanding is that envisioning the holy image of his father gave him the strength to resist sin.

Yaakov was at that point 115 years old. Yosef was a tender 17. According to Rashi (37:2), Yosef was caught-up in the throes of youthful desire, and was thus greatly challenged by the overtures of his master's wife. Perhaps "imagining the face of his father" also describes Yosef's realization that one day, he too would no longer be the carefree youngster he now was. How would he look back on this day—if he were to sin—at the age of 115, when his body was no longer young, and his curls no longer black? Maybe it was this dose of reality—combined with the holy face of his father—that prevented him from sinning. This is a slight variation on our Sages suggestion (Berachos 5a) to "remind oneself of the day of death" when enticed to sin.

That person that really intimidates you—did you ever try picturing him as a small baby on the changing table? Believe it or not, he once was. So were you. The more we acknowledge our humanness and frailty, the easier it becomes for us to deal with the faults of others, them with ours, and we with ourselves. They are not bears, we are not bears, temptation is not a bear, and neither is repentance. Life can get complex, but when it does, stripping it down to its 'barest' elements goes a

long way towards seeing matters in their true light.

Have a good Shabbos.