

OH BROTHER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

This week's parsha has Ya'akov approaching the borders of Eretz Canaan (Israel) on his return from Padan Aram, and his Uncle Lavan's home. As Ya'akov told his wives, "Lavan doesn't look at me the way he used to ..." a clear sign to move on. Relative or no relative, Lavan had been prepared to do away with Ya'akov in spite of all Ya'akov had done for him over the years (including being a blessing to have sons), and in spite of the fact that Ya'akov posed no threat to Lavan's empire. It had been a prototypical anti-Semitic scenario.

If you recall, Ya'akov had left home in the first place to flee from Eisav, after he took the latter's brochos (blessings). Rivka, through prophecy, found out about Eisav's secret desire to murder Ya'akov, and sent him on his way to her brother's house for protection (some protection!). Thirty-four years later, he had married two wives, become a father to eleven sons (and some daughters) and a wealthy man in his own right. Now, after the birth of Yosef, the time had come to clear up his rift with Eisav and return home, which, of course meant confronting his angry brother on his way.

Or did it?

From the Chumash (Torah), it seems as if Ya'akov had no choice but to cross paths with Eisav if he wanted to return home. But the midrash tells a different tale; indeed, the midrash considered Ya'akov as someone who pulled the ear of an angry dog! In other words, after thirty-four years and his own success, Eisav cared very little about the "stolen" brochos, and even less about Ya'akov. It was Ya'akov who stirred up past sentiments by going out of his way to cause the confrontation with Eisav. The question is why?

The answer is crucial for understanding the test of every Jew. From the beginning, Ya'akov was Eisav's "twin" brother. Being a brother to Eisav was bad enough, but a twin brother! that was downright dangerous, because it meant that Ya'akov shared inborn characteristics with Eisav, like any twin brothers might.

This similarity became concretized when Ya'akov bought the birthright from Eisav, and then later took his brochos. What Ya'akov may not have been aware of at the time was that he was taking on more than the right of the firstborn, and his special spiritual blessing. As Ya'akov found out from Leah, he got far more than he had bargained for.

In last week's parsha, Ya'akov had asked Lavan for his daughter Rachel as a wife. Lavan complied, but, on the night of the wedding, Lavan switched Leah, his eldest daughter, for Rachel. The next morning, when Ya'akov discovered that he had married Leah instead of Rachel, he asked her how she could do it, to which she replied,

"What are you asking me about?"

"What do you mean what am I asking you about. You know full well that you were supposed to marry Eisav, not me!" Ya'akov countered. "I did!" Leah argued.

"How's that?" Ya'akov asked confusedly.

Leah explained, "When you bought the birthright and took the blessings, you, for all intents and purposes, became Eisav!"

Leah was one-percent correct. Ya'akov had taken on Eisav's role as leader of the nation, as well as sage of the nation by becoming the firstborn. This was alluded to Yitzchak's statement two parshios (weekly readings) ago at the time Ya'akov dressed up as Eisav to fool his father into giving him the blessings. As Yitzchak felt the arms of Ya'akov, he commented and said:

"It is the voice of Ya'akov, but the hands of Eisav" (Bereishis 27:22).

In other words, Yitzchak was saying,

"Whoever stands before me now can't be the Ya'akov I know, because he is a simple person who does little else other than learn Torah. It certainly can't be the Eisav I know, because he's not so quick to thank G-d for his successes. Whoever you are, you are a hybrid of the two!"

Thus, as different as Ya'akov felt from Eisav, he found out that there was a lot of Eisav within him, capable of rearing its ugly head at any moment of weakness, and especially among his descendants during the long exiles. Therefore, Ya'akov felt that for the sake of all his future descendants, he, personally, had to confront the Eisav within himself, to purge himself of his own "Eisavness" as much as he could.

Hence, Ya'akov's confrontation with Eisav was planned and unavoidable, at least from Ya'akov's point of view. For Ya'akov, it was a meeting with destiny, a moment to make the final break from Eisav-forever! And he had been right, for it led to his name being changed from Ya'akov to Yisroel, and it is only Ya'akov who was the twin brother of Eisav, not Yisroel. This is why the angel who changed his name said:

"Your name shall no longer be called Ya'akov, but Yisroel, for you have struggled with G-d and with man, and have prevailed." (Bereishis 32:28)

However, the main struggle alluded to here was the inner struggle Ya'akov fought to cleanse himself of his similarity to Eisav in an attempt to locate his true identity ... Yisroel!

The struggle that began with Ya'akov continues on throughout history into our own period of time,

and perhaps, beyond it. We are all confronted with a similar struggle, to come to terms with what it means to be a true Jew through-and-through. The question we must always ask ourselves is, "Am I more Ya'akov, or Yisroel?"

Shabbos Day:

As Ya'akov approached the borders of Canaan and his brother's territory, he couldn't help but be concerned that Eisav might still bear sufficient grudge to want to destroy him. In anticipation of this possibility, Ya'akov prepared for war. Then Ya'akov went out to meet Eisav and his army, readying himself for the worst and praying for the best.

However, what followed was less than the spectacular battle that might have ensued, as the following verses portray:

Ya'akov looked up and saw Eisav approaching with 400 men... [Ya'akov] then prostrated himself seven times as he approached his brother. Eisav ran to meet them. He hugged [Ya'akov], and throwing himself on his shoulders, kissed him. They wept...

"What did you have to do with the whole camp that came to greet me?" asked Eisav.

"It was to win favor in your eyes," replied [Ya'akov].

"I have plenty, my brother" said Eisav. "Let what is yours remain yours."

"Please! No!" said Ya'akov ... "Please accept my welcoming gift as it has been brought to you. G-d has been kind to me, and I have all [I need]." [Ya'akov] urged him, and he [Eisav] took it. (Bereishis 33:1-12)

They then departed, each in his own direction, quite anti-climactically.

It appears that the Torah has detailed a seemingly non-eventful confrontation. However, the description of the confrontation between Ya'akov and Eisav is concerned with more than the resolution of a personal conflict, as their dialogue reveals (with Rashi's help).

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According to Rashi, the underlying meaning of Ya'akov's words was that he had all that he needed; Eisav, on the other hand, spoke in a proud manner, telling Ya'akov that he had much more than he needed.

Rashi insightfully isolates Eisav's ideology through the episode of the gift. Eisav's initial refusal of the gift, Rashi points out, was not due to a generosity of spirit, but was instead Eisav's attempt to give Ya'akov the impression that he was powerful and had everything-even that which he didn't need and could never use.

However, unlike Eisav, Ya'akov did not relate to material possessions quantitatively, but rather, viewed them in terms of their potential to allow one to develop spiritually. Whereas Eisav claimed to be rich, Ya'akov proclaimed an attitude: I have received all that I need. It was this attitude towards the physical world that made Ya'akov wealthy, no matter how rich he was, as the mishnah confirms:

Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his portion! (Pirke Avos 4:1)

Imbedded in the dialogue and the context of the story as a whole, is a deeper message about man's relationship to money. Contrary to outward appearances, Eisav's words represented his belief on a conscious level that the more he was able to acquire, the more he would be-the illusion that evolves by focusing on material pursuits as ends in themselves.

We see from the Torah's account that Eisav's hunger to conquer and possess caused him to diminish his appreciation for spiritual ideals. This was true of Eisav to the point where he was driven to material pursuits in spite of foregoing irretrievable opportunities to heighten his sensitivity, such as occasioned by the mourning period for his grandfather Avraham (Parashas Toldos).

Thus, while on the surface, the episode of the gift presents Ya'akov and Eisav as important men of means exchanging pleasantries, in fact they represent ideological opposites. In the end, though a physical confrontation between the brothers did not take place, an ideological one did; a pre-destined confrontation whose philosophical underpinning traces back to the purpose of creation.

Seudos Shlishi:

Ya'akov, on his way back to Canaan to confront Eisav, sent his family and belongings, across the Yavok river (an eastern tributary of the Jordan, approximately half-way between the Kinneret and the Dead Sea). However, he himself, instead of crossing the river with his belongings remained behind to retrieve some small containers, even though it meant spending the night alone out in the open. But it was well worth it, since for retrieving these small, seemingly unimportant containers, Ya'akov was greatly rewarded:

G-d said to Ya'akov, "For endangering yourself for a small container, I Myself will repay your children with a small container to the Chashmonaim." (Midrash Tzeida Laderech)

The "small container" repaid to the Chashmonaim was the famous small jar of oil that remained spiritually pure after the Temple's desecration at the time of Chanukah. As the rabbis point out, finding even just one jar of oil whose priestly seal had not been broken (indicating that the oil was still fitting for use in the menorah), was also a miracle. The Greeks had maliciously defiled all the oil in the Temple, but miraculously overlooked this one jar that was hidden away (thus two miracles actually occurred: the first one was finding the undefiled oil, and the second was the fact that the oil

burned for seven extra days, which is why we celebrate all eight days as opposed to only the last seven days during which the second miracle originally occurred). From the above midrash, it appears that this was the reward for Ya'akov's act .

But what possible relationship could there be between Ya'akov's bravery to retrieve the containers and a miracle that wouldn't occur for another 1,300 years? On the other hand, why did Ya'akov go back for the containers? The following midrash (mentioned last week) explains what made those jars so valuable:

From where did Ya'akov get this jar? When he picked up the stones from under his head (this week's parsha) and returned them in the morning, he found a stone that had a jar of oil in it, and he used it to pour on the top stone (of the monument he built). When it refilled itself, Ya'akov knew it was set aside for G-d. He said, "It's not right to leave this here ..." (Yalkut Reuveni, VaYishlach)

Hence, Ya'akov had not returned for just any old containers; he had returned for the special oil he had found thirty-four years earlier. But why did that prompt a reward in the time of the future Chashmonaim? What does oil symbolize?

Ha-shemen (the oil) is made up of the same letters as "neshama" (nun, shin, mem, heh), which means soul. Like the soul, olive oil is something that exists below the surface, and seems non-existent until some sort of process is performed to reveal it. Just like the olive must be squeezed to produce light-giving oil from a seemingly bitter olive, so too must the body be "squeezed" before the light of the soul can be revealed. This is the role of a mitzvah, which creates a spiritual crisis of sorts to draw the soul out of the person and make them "shine."

Ya'akov was constantly putting himself on the line, first to get the birthright, and then later to get the blessings. Then he had to survive the evil Lavan, and confront Eisav on the way home, even risking his life for the miraculous oil ... all in the name of fulfilling G-d's master plan. Rarely did he complain, but always did he do his best.

It was his soul that shone throughout Ya'akov's life, and in this respect, his self-sacrifice was his connection to the story of Chanukah, since the Chashmonaim had put physical safety second after spiritual freedom. This was symbolized by their quick return to the Temple to rekindle the Menorah though their military victory had yet to be completed. And, as the midrash alludes, it was Ya'akov's initial self-sacrifices that planted the seeds for similar self-sacrifices in the time of the Chashmonaim, and the miracle of Chanukah, 1300 years later.

Melave Malkah:

After Ya'akov successfully survived Eisav, physically and ideologically, he moved on to Shechem

where he camped with his family. The possuk tells us that Leah went out to see what the place was like, which is what put her into view of Shechem ben Chamor (literally, Shechem, the son of a donkey!), the son of the head of Shechem. It did not take long for Shechem to force his way with Dinah, and then desire her as a wife.

The physical violation of any woman is a horrific thing-how much more so for a daughter of a nation that prides itself on being modest and acting holy. The news of what happened sent shock waves throughout Ya'akov's family, and certainly dampened the spirit of success and Divine approval Ya'akov felt up until then. He had "struggled with G-d and with man," and had prevailed. Yet, shortly after, he was humbled by Shechem ben Chamor, and had suffered such incredible personal and national disaster.

Yet, in spite of all this, Ya'akov still acted with equanimity. Though every cell in his body must have yelled out, "Revenge!" he kept his peace, even accepting Shechem and his father into his camp, and their request to intermarry (after performing Bris Milah).

Not so Shimon and Levi. As the Chumash relates, on the third day after Bris Milah, Shimon and Levi went into the city of Shechem and wiped out everyone, men, women, and children. They brought Dinah home as well. Later on, at the end of Sefer Bereishis, Ya'akov will criticize his son's behavior and even curse their anger for the damage it causes. He will tell them how they acted like Eisav, and not like B'nei Ya'akov, children of Ya'akov, by taking up sword to avenge the wrong done to their sister. But what should they have done? What did Ya'akov do?

Ya'akov, first and foremost, acknowledged the Divine Providence in all of it. He did a cheshbon hanefesh, an accounting of his actions, to see what he may have done, or may not have done, that could have led to such a disaster. He mourned the results for sure, but then he set about on a course of self-correction, in order to open the path for more favorable Divine Providence in the future.

Historically, there have been times when fighting physical battles have been the key to enlisting G-d's help (witness the battle against the Greeks at the time of Chanukah). However, even that battle had not been a totally physical one. First Mattisyahu and his group created an air of tshuva, and inspired zealousness in mitzvos against all odds. It was this self-sacrifice for Torah values that led to their inspiration to fight the Greeks though they were greatly outnumbered, and which led to the miracles on the battlefield and in the Temple (with the menorah).

No matter what the final response to bad events in our lives or in the lives of others may be in the end, personally or nationally, whatever we decide to do must be predicated on some soul-searching, and then a commitment to improve spiritually. This is the key to turn events around in our favor, and invoke that special light that G-d sends down whenever the world needs a miracle, and which shines out through the thirty-six candles we light during Chanukah.

Have a great Shabbos.

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