

ON THE WAY TO YISROEL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Ya'akov sent messengers before him to Eisav his brother, to the land of Seir, the field of Edom. He instructed them saying, "This is what you should say to my master, to Eisav, 'Thus says your servant, Ya'akov ...' " (Bereishis 32:3)

As we have discussed in the past on this week's parshah, Chazal did not look favorably at Ya'akov's encounter with Eisav. From the parshah, it seems as Ya'akov had no choice but to cross paths with his brother and mortal enemy; indeed, it seems like a self-sacrifice Ya'akov was prepared to make to return to the family and land he left thirty-four years after fleeing his angry brother.

However, the Midrash provides a different insight:

Rav Huna began, "Like one who grasps a passing dog by the ears, so is one who becomes impassioned over discord that is not his own." (Mishlei 26:17). Shmuel bar Nachman said, it can be compared to leader of thieves who was sleeping by the crossroads, by whom a person passed and aroused saying, "Get up! It is dangerous here!" He asked him, "Are you the bad person? Why did you wake me up? (Matanos Kehunah) You awoke the bad person and have endangered your own life!" So said The Holy One, Blessed is He, to Ya'akov, "He [Eisav] was going his own way (i.e., his anger had subsided; Matanos Kehunah), and you sent to him [messengers] and said to him, 'So says your servant Ya'akov ...' " (Bereishis Rabbah, Vayishlach, 75:3)

Furthermore, it says in another Midrash:

When Ya'akov said [to Eisav], "So says your servant Ya'akov ..." The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, "It is not enough for you that you profaned yourself, even after I said, 'The mightier will serve the smaller one,' that you have to say, 'your servant, Ya'akov'? Your life will be as you have said; he will rule over you in This World, while you will rule over him in the World-to-Come!" (Pirkei d'Rebi Eliezer 37)

From these words, it seems as if Ya'akov made a mistake. From the midrashim, it seems that what at first appeared as an inevitable confrontation was anything but that; in fact, it was completely avoidable! If so, then what was Ya'akov doing? What compelled him to "pull the dog by the ears"?

The answer lies in last week's parshah, where we explained Ya'akov's surprise in marrying Leah. We

said there that Ya'akov thought that creation had been rectified to the extent that the souls of the future mothers of the tribes had been unified within Rachel herself, as should have been the case. However, Divine Providence indicated otherwise when it worked out, even against Ya'akov's preparation, that Leah married Ya'akov as well.

"Perhaps," Ya'akov thought to himself, "if I still needed to marry both Rachel and Leah, then maybe my absorption of the positive aspects of Eisav was not complete either when I bought the birthright and took the blessings. Maybe Eisav still possesses holiness that belongs to me!"

To find out, Ya'akov went out of his way to confront Eisav, to draw him out and to draw out of him what ever holiness there was left to absorb. The result was a night-long battle with the angel of Eisav, after which the angel conceded to Ya'akov that the blessings truly belonged to him, and not to Eisav. The crowning glory of this achievement:

[The stranger] said, "Let me go! Dawn has arrived." He answered, "I won't let you go unless you bless me." He said to him, "What is your name?" He answered, "Ya'akov." He told him, "No longer will you be called 'Ya'akov,' but 'Yisroel,' because you have struggled with [an angel of] G-d, and with men, and have prevailed." (Bereishis 32:27-29)

Until that point, he had only been Ya'akov, the twin brother of Eisav. But after this last confrontation, Ya'akov became Yisroel--the unification of all that was holy in both Ya'akov and Eisav. This paved the way for the birth of the twelfth and final tribe: Binyomin.

Shabbos Day:

He touched the hollow of his thigh ... (Bereishis 32:25)

After an entire night of battling the "stranger," which the Midrash identifies as the angel of Eisav, Ya'akov prevailed, though not completely. The angel wanted to touch the "body" of Ya'akov, which the rabbis teach represented Torah. If the angel could have wounded Ya'akov here, then Torah would have been uprooted from the Jewish people, G-d forbid.

However, the Jewish soul is too intricately connected to Torah, and the angel could not reach this part of Ya'akov's body, settling instead for the leg (which the Zohar explains to represent the "supporters" of Torah). The leg is external to the body and therefore, Kabbalistically-speaking, more spiritually vulnerable to the negative forces in creation. That is the place that the yetzer hara first entered man after the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Aside from the law that arises as a result of Ya'akov's injury:

... As a result, the children of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh-vein to this day. (Bereishis 32:33)

the effect of the damage done to the gid hanashe (sciatic nerve) is seen as a symbol and source of many historical catastrophes--direct and indirect--such as indicated in the following Midrash:

He touched the righteous men and women, the prophets and prophetesses that would later descend from him. When was this? During the generations of destruction. (Bereishis Rabbah 77: 3)

What is the connection? What is the connection between the gid hanashe and the destruction carried out first by Nebuchadnetzar and later by Rome?

The Zohar states that anyone who eats on Tisha B'Av, the national day of mourning for the loss of the temples and other tragedies, is like one who eats the gid hanashe. Why? Because:

A person has 365 limbs, to which the 365 negative mitzvos correspond, which a Jew is forbidden to do. They also correspond to the 365 days of the year, of which Tisha B'Av is one, which corresponds to the obstructing angel, who is one of the 365 angels. Hence it says, "Therefore, the Children of Israel do not eat the (es--aleph-tav) gid hanashe ... " (Bereishis 32:33); es (aleph-tav) to allude to Tisha Av ... A day on which judgment becomes stricter and it was decreed that the Temple should be destroyed. (Zohar 170b)

Thus, the Zohar finds the word "es" in the above verse to be the source of an allusion to Tisha B'Av, because the angel that damaged Ya'akov was the same angel that brought about the destruction of the temples and the righteous people of that time. In other words, the attack on Ya'akov's leg and later, against the Jewish people in Temple times were the result of the same kind of spiritual vulnerability:

Ya'akov remained alone ... (Bereishis 32:25) ... He remained behind for small jars. From here we learn that to the righteous, their property is more valuable to them than their own well-being (Chullin 91a)

When a Jew is righteous, then the above is true for all the right reasons and the property facilitates spiritual growth. The money is not given more importance than is halachically and philosophically acceptable, and it is put to good use. However, when a Jew is not so righteous and he loves his property to such an extent, then it tends to take over his life and it comes at the cost of spiritual growth. Eventually, such individuals can be the cause of the nation moving away from Torah values, and the end result, the Zohar teaches, can be the destruction of all that we hold dear--including the righteous people who protect this world.

"Supporting" our bodies is important (as legs symbolize), but not to the point that the focus becomes the body itself, and all that makes it "tingle." We're supporting our bodies so that they can pursue truth, learn Torah, and do mitzvos. If not, then we too have been touched and damaged by that angel, and are in great need of spiritual repair

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Dinah, the daughter of Leah, to whom she had given birth for Ya'akov, went out to see the daughters of the land. Shechem, the son of Chamor the Chivite, the prince of the land, seduced her, slept with her, and violated her. He became attached to Dinah, the daughter of Ya'akov. He loved the girl and tried to appease her. (Bereishis 34:1-3)

The violation of Dinah remains to be one of the most tragic episodes in the Torah. In our own day and age, we know how destructive such a violent and animalistic act can be to a woman's and her family's life. How much more so was this true for Ya'akov, who had been in the midst of building a holy nation from the bottom up, after successfully being crowned "Yisroel" by G-d (via the angel).

Just to add some depth to what happened, the Arizal says that part of Shechem's soul came from Adam, which is why he felt attracted to Dinah in the first place. Obviously not enough, though, to compel him to approach Dinah in a more civilized manner. However, enough to produce a child that would eventually become the wife of Dinah's bother, Yosef, later on down in Egypt!

Not only was this act committed by Shechem ben Chamor (literally: son of a donkey, which explains everything ...), but it even happened in a town called Shechem, which exists to this very day. In fact, Shechem is one of the three places in Eretz Yisroel today that the Arab's are jostling for control. It is also the place that Ya'akov gave to Yosef as an extra inheritance (Parashas Yechi).

However, it is pointed out that the first letters (bais, shin, chof, mem, lamed, vav) of the second phrase of the Shema, "Boruch Shem ..." -- "Blessed be the Name of the glory of His kingdom forever," produce the words, "b'Shechem, lamed-vav," as follows:

Boruch ... bais
Shem ... shin
Kevod ... chof
Malchuso ... mem
L'Olam ... lamed
Va'ed ... vav

The words mean, "In Shechem, thirty-six" (lamed-vav is the way to write the number "36" using letters of the Aleph-Bais). And, as the Talmud Yerushalmi points out, thirty-six is a number that alludes to the supernal light of creation, the special light that Adam had use of for thirty-six hours in the Garden of Eden before G-d hid it for the thirty-six righteous people in every future generation!

This would therefore be a hint that, as terrible a place that Shechem may seem to be on the surface, as the Talmud states:

Shechem is a place set aside for punishment. (Sanhedrin 102a)

being the place from which Yosef was sold into slavery, and where the kingdom of David divided into two, it is also a place where light, supernal light, remains hidden. This is why Yosef, who was also associated with this light, was buried there. It is a case-in-point that when it comes to Jewish

history, a source of darkness always, eventually, will give way to light.

Melave Malkah:

These are the descendants of Eisav, who is Edom ... (Bereishis 36:1)

It is the calm before the storm. After all the action of the previous sections of the parshah, we move into a somewhat actionless, seemingly mundane recounting of the generations of Eisav, on his way to becoming the nation of Edom (and eventually Rome). Immediately after this section, the action will resume as the brothers sell Yosef into slavery catalyzing the descension into Egyptian slavery.

"Just another genealogical account," you may say.

If so, then why is that the Mekubalim (Kabbalists) clamor to receive this aliyah (be called up for this section of Torah reading in shul) each year? While the rest of us see nothing to get excited about, and pay half-attention to this closing portion of Parashas Vayishlach, the Kabbalists see in it allusions to the deepest of Kabbalistic secrets! It is another example of the maxim: what you see is not necessarily what you get!

In fact, the eight kings mentioned at the end of the parshah "who reigned in the land of Edom before [any] king reigned over the children of Israel," are allusions not only to the early moments of physical creation, but the "null and void" that preceded it. In that case, maybe we should call this section the "storm before the calm."

And it all happens to fall in chapter thirty-six of the book of Bereishis (even though the non-Jews established the chapters as found in most Chumashim today, still, they often did so based upon the traditional Masoretic breaks in the parshios; besides, everything is a matter of Divine Providence). And thirty-six is a number that alludes to the Hidden Light of Creation (which shone for thirty-six hours for Adam in the Garden), which came to eliminate such darkness and chaos, just like the holiday of Chanukah, during which we light thirty-six candles.

So, this year when you take your seventh inning stretch during this seventh aliyah, think twice. You may not know how it is so, but be aware that these final lines of the Torah, at least in the more esoteric realm of Torah, allude to the very foundation of history and what it is supposed to accomplish.

Have a good Shabbos,

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