

YEARNING FOR REDEMPTION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"No longer will you be called Ya'akov, but Yisroel, because you have struggled with [an angel of] God, and with men, and have prevailed." (Bereishis 32:29)

This is such a defining parshah. It is the one in which we earn the name Yisroel for the first time in history, as opposed to only Ya'akov, making us, his descendants, first and foremost Bnei Yisroel—Children of Yisroel—as opposed to only Bnei Ya'akov—Children of Ya'akov. It behooves us to know the difference.

The starting point is recalling what Ya'akov means, a name that we take for granted but which is really quite unusual:

His brother came out holding onto Eisav's heel—Ayin-Kuf-Bais; he called him "Ya'akov"—Yud-Ayin-Kuf-Bais. (Bereishis 25:26)

Hence, the ancestor of what would become the holiest nation on the face of the earth, the nation destined to be God's people, the intended light unto the nations, derived his name based upon a seemingly incidental fact at the time of birth. It was as if Yitzchak, their father, from birth built into Ya'akov a sense of being only second best, of being a follower as opposed to a leader. Dr. Spock would have had a field day with that one.

Actually, it was a warning. It was a built-in warning to Ya'akov Avinu that has different as he may have considered himself to be from his twin brother Eisav, in reality he wasn't that different. Thousands of years of assimilation prove the point only too well, especially when we recall that some of the worst prosecutors of Jews during times like the Inquisition were Jewish apostates.

Not only can Jews be as evil as Eisav can be, but they can sometimes be worse. Some Nazis commented that Kapos often tortured their fellow Jews in ways that even the Germans hadn't thought of. Jewish self-hatred can run so deep sometimes that it can surface as anti-Semitism that can rival the worst of Jewish enemies through history, and can be even more dangerous sometimes because of its Jewish origin.

Then there is the other side of Eisav that seems to attract Jews by the droves, what is called the "Western Lifestyle." It's the nine-to-five workday, all that time shopping, keeping up with the latest fads and fashions, over-emphasis on physical appearance and too much devotion to exercise and sports, etc. All of this may have something to contribute to a Jewish lifestyle, but only up until it

interferes with one's devotion to God, and for millions, it is exactly that.

It's like following someone in a car with the belief that he is going to the same place you are. He turns right, so you turn right. He turns left, so you turn left. He pulls a U-turn, so you do as well, enjoying the ride until you find out that the one leading you has a different destination in mind. All of a sudden, you find yourself a long way from your intended destination, and quite upset about it as well.

Eisav is not heading for the World-to-Come. Therefore, he can only put all of his eggs in one basket: life in this world. He only has his present life time, and even if he reincarnates, his life will always be about this world. Unless his is a righteous gentile, he has nothing to look forward to after death, only to what he can have and enjoy until death (Avodah Zarah 10b).

Ya'akov, on the other hand, is just passing through. For Ya'akov, and his descendants, this world is but a corridor to the next world, which is eternal and more pleasurable than we can imagine at this stage of history. When he benefits in this world, it is not as any kind of reward, but as Divine assistance so that he can perform more deeds that increase his reward in the World-to-Come. Physical pleasure, for Ya'akov Avinu and his descendants, is supposed to be a by-product of living in this world, not a goal unto itself.

This is not an easy lesson to teach, absorb, and follow when you live side-by-side in Eisav's world. He knows, and has always known, how to manipulate the physical for his pleasure, and has done a great job doing so. And, he seems to have so much fun doing it as well, so who wouldn't be attracted to his lifestyle?

I remember once, while at an airport, watching some Chassidic boys watching a football game on a television in the window of an electronics shop. They probably had just been walking around when the scene from the t.v. caught their eye, and caused them to stop and watch for a few moments. They probably weren't even aware of what they were doing for the first couple of moments.

No doubt television was a foreign experience for them, as was the game being played at the time. However, both had quite a seductive power of what seemed to be too very pure religious teenagers, and breaking away from it did not seem so easy. I could feel their struggle from 10 feet away, and it made me think about what was really going on when spending so much time in Eisav's world.

Hence, when Ya'akov Avinu fought against the angel of Eisav that fateful night, he was really fighting against the tendency within himself to be like Eisav. And, even though the "stranger" seemed to have snuck up on him, Ya'akov had actually sought out the confrontation, for, as the midrash explains, he could have easily returned home to Be'er Sheva without crossing Eisav's path.

So, he fought with the angel all through the night, which our rabbis teach symbolized exile, alluding to the fact that we too will have to contend with our Eisav-like tendency all through exile. He only prevailed because he continued that struggle until the sun came up, which we are told symbolized

the Final Redemption, at which time he earns the name Yisroel: [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] God, and with men, and have prevailed." (Bereishis 32:27-29)

In other words, it is the struggle to remain Ya'akov and different from Eisav until the struggle ends that makes one a true Yisroel. And, the Malbim has an interesting litmus test that allows a Jew to measure whether he is achieving Yisroel status, or remains stuck on the Ya'akov level. On the following verses:

For thus said Hashem: Sing, O Ya'akov, with gladness, exult on the peaks of the nations; announce, laud [God], and say, "O Hashem, save Your people, the remnant of Yisroel!" Behold, I will bring them from the land of the North and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, the pregnant and birthing together; a great congregation will return here. With weeping they will come and through supplications I will bring them; I will guide them on streams of water, on a direct path in which they will not stumble; for I have been a father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn. (Yirmiyahu 31:6-8)

the Malbim writes:

At the end of their exile, the oppression will be removed from them, and they will be joyous because they will be on the peak of the nations. The gentiles will give them honor and they will be their heads, instead of being disgraced and lowered amongst them as they were at first. Ya'akov will be the masses of the people, and the lesser amongst them; Yisroel are the great ones. The joyousness from being at the peak of the nations will be Ya'akov's only, and not Yisroel's, because they will want to return His Presence to Tzion. However, at that time they will "announce" and publicly proclaim, and "praise" Hashem when they say, "O Hashem, save Your [righteous] people, the remnant of Yisroel," because they will want the true salvation of the ingathering of the exile and return to Tzion. Then it will be like that, "that Hashem will return them: Behold, I will bring them . . ." (Malbim, q.v. v'Tzahal B'Rosh HaGoyim)

So, inasmuch as the name Yisroel is a flashback to our battles of yesteryear, and to those we are still fighting, more importantly, it is an allusion to the victories we will have achieved. Misery loves company, and Eisav would love to take our minds off of our long term national goals, first the Final Redemption, and eventually, our going to the World-to-Come, two ultimate realities of which he has little or no part at all.

Oh, has he been successful to date, as Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, zt"l, the Mashgiach Ruchani of the Mir and Ponovez yeshivos pointed out decades ago:

The Sefer Mitzvos Katan wrote in his explanation of the Positive Mitzvah, "I am God, your God, Who took you out of Egypt," that it means one must know that He Who created Heaven and Earth alone controls above and below. However, to this he added, "This is the basis of what the rabbis teach: At the time of a person's judgment after death, they ask him, 'Did you anticipate the redemption?' (Shabbos 31a). Where is this mitzvah written? It comes from this [same mitzvah], for just as, 'I am God, your God, Who took you out of Egypt,' means that we must believe that God redeemed us from Egypt, it also means, '... I also want you to believe that I, God your God, will gather you in and redeem you in mercy a second time'." According to this, belief in the future redemption is part of our belief in, "I am God, your God," and thus included in the first of the Ten Commandments. However, if we examine ourselves, it seems as if we are very far from having faith in the future redemption . . . When it comes to the arrival of Moshiach and the resurrection of the dead, we are quiet, as if we are embarrassed to speak about them, as if we have given up on them altogether. (Ohr Yechezkel, Emunas HaGeulah, 1960; p. 287)

The Ya'akov element of our people, perhaps, but not the Yisroel element, which subscribes to this approach to Jewish history:

The exodus from Egypt liberated only one out of five Jews—and some say one out of every fifty—because all those who were bound to Egypt and did not want to depart died in the three days of darkness and were not privileged to leave. That is, only those who desired redemption with all their hearts were redeemed. The Final Redemption, likewise, depends upon our yearning. (Ohr Yechezkel, Emunas HaGeulah, p. 288)

It's the yearning for redemption, and all that it means, especially life in Eretz Yisroel, that defines a Yisroel at the end of the struggle, and history as well.

Text

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