

# BATTLE AND SURVIVAL

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

The battle between Yakov and the Angel of Eisav presents a number of questions:

1. Why was Yakov alone the night that he encountered the Angel?
2. What were they fighting about?
3. Was the battle to prove something to Eisav, or to prove something to Yakov?
4. Of what consequence was the battle to Eisav himself?
5. Was the fight a real encounter or a prophetic vision?
6. If it was prophetic, was Yakov actually hurt in the battle?
7. If it was real, what does it mean for an angel to "hurt" Yakov?
8. In the end, why does Yakov demand a blessing, and why does the Angel change Yakov's name?
9. How does the encounter with the Angel relate to Yakov's confrontation with Eisav?

Pasuk 32:25 states that, "Yakov was left alone...". Rashi references the Talmud in Chulin 91a that explains why Yakov was alone on the east bank of the Jabbok River (an eastern tributary of the Jordan - Areyeh Kaplan). "He had forgotten some small vessels and went to retrieve them."

Taking into account the preparations that Yakov had made in order to protect his family from possible battle with Eisav, it seems foolish that Yakov placed himself in danger by returning alone for some small vessels. In fact, we could assume that Yakov was wealthy enough to ignore some small vessels that had been left behind and could easily be replaced. What was so important about those small vessels that Yakov was willing to put himself in danger?

In order for us to accomplish our mission as the representatives of G-d upon earth, we must be exceedingly careful how we present ourselves. Foremost in the minds of the rest of the world will be our integrity. Are we honest in business? Do we respect our associates and behave with concern for their welfare? Is profit and wealth an end or the means? If they see us as consistently honest, they will be willing to listen to our message of truth and G-d.

One of the more subtle but profound indicators of honesty is how we treat our own belongings. Someone who is careful about his own possessions shows that he is aware of their value and purpose. He manifests a recognition that what he has is from G-d for the purpose of better serving Him. Therefore, it makes sense that such a person will equally value someone else's possessions. However, someone who shows disrespect for his own belongings is obviously not concerned for

their value and purpose, and therefore may not respect the autonomy and value of someone else's belongings.

Yakov, as the progenitor of the Bnai Yisroel, had to maintain the highest standards of integrity. By recognizing G-d as the source of his wealth, and valuing each of his possessions, Yakov fully accepted the inherent limitations that G-d had established in His world. Just as species are separate and unique from one another, so too are individuals and their possessions separate and distinct from one another. Through our honesty and integrity we actualize our belief in G-d as the Creator and Director of the universe. Through our behavior we are teachers and role models.

Yakov returning alone for "some small vessels" showed the value he placed on every one of his possessions as direct gifts from G-d. "If I have them it is because G-d gave them to me. If G-d gave them to me they must be important to my personal mission in this world. Therefore they are too valuable to simply discard." However, were they important enough for Yakov to place himself in danger? Possibly, the fact that Yakov put himself in danger in order to retrieve the "small vessels" may not be so significant. We know that Yakov was exceedingly strong and quite capable of defending himself. Therefore, he may have felt that he was not in any unnecessary danger by returning alone to retrieve the small vessels.

Yakov's fight with the Angel is easier to understand as a prophetic vision rather than an actual physical encounter. First of all, all the commentaries explain the battle as having been spiritual rather than physical. Secondly, there is no compelling reason why we must explain the battle as physical.

In order to understand the battle let us look at its outcome. First of all, Yakov's victory was that he had survived - not that he had beaten the Angel. Secondly, the Angel changed Yakov's name to Yisroel because, "...You have become the commanding power before G-d and men, since you have prevailed".

The changing of a name heralds the defining moment in that person's life. Changing Yakov's name to Yisroel accented his ability to remain "the single-minded man living in tents" and yet survive the physical world of Eisav and Lavan. The battle between Yakov and the Angel of Eisav was to finalize the blessings of Yitzchak. Yitzchak had never intended to give Eisav the blessings of spirituality and Torah. His intention was to bestow upon Eisav blessings of materialism in the service of his brother Yakov. Eisav's strong arm and commanding ability would have freed Yakov to devote his strength and talents to understanding and teaching Torah. However, Rivkah and Yakov forced Yitzchak into recognizing that Eisav could not be a partner with Yakov. Eisav would never join Yakov in continuing the "blessings of Avraham."

Considering that it is impossible to properly serve G-d without taking care of our physical needs; and considering that Eisav was not going to be Yakov's partner; therefore, Yitzchak had to give both blessings to Yakov - the blessing for material wealth as well as spiritual dominance. Yitzchak had no problem blessing Eisav with physical prosperity and power, as he did. There is more than enough

material wealth to go around. However, there can be only one truth, one Torah. That truth and Torah was Yakov's inheritance, not Eisav's.

Yakov's battle with the Angel of Eisav had little to do with Eisav himself. The purpose of the battle was for Yakov and his children to realize that Eisav was out the equation. From now on the Jews would have to do business with the non-spiritual world without Eisav's help and support. Yet, they would survive the influences and assimilative attempts of that world just as Yakov survived his battle with Eisav's Angel. The Jew can do battle. He can survive. The Jew can be the commanding spiritual power in this world. In surviving the battle, the Angel of Eisav was forced to admit that the blessings of Yitzchak were fully Yakov's.

Eisav's most insidious method for destroying us is to infiltrate our thinking and suggest that our physical and spiritual survival depend upon integrating Eisav's values into Judaism. He attempts to confuse and obscure the lines of demarcation that separate us from him that were established through Yitzchak's blessings and Yakov's battle. Yet, the name Yisroel tells us that although we must have contact with Eisav, we can survive him and his strategies. However, every encounter with Eisav hurts us. Yakov walked away from the battle limping. Whether or not he actually limped, or if it was part of the prophecy, does not really matter. The fact remains that G-d gave us the mitzvah of Gid Hanashe, (not eating the sciatica) as a constant reminder of the dangers we face and the injuries we must suffer when doing battle with Eisav.

When the Angel changed Yakov's name, it was clear that Eisav would no longer retain a claim on his birthright. From then on, Eisav became our nemesis. He was no longer our brother. However, can not defeat Eisav, we can only survive his attempts at destroying us.

The very next scene in the Torah confirmed Yakov's ability to be Yisroel and survive Eisav. When Eisav and Yakov finally met, Eisav kissed Yakov. Eisav did not confront his brother in anger and battle, instead he embraced him. Eisav's greatest weapon and the Jew's gravest danger is his kiss. The Jew has survived persecution and even a holocaust, but can he survive Eisav's love?

Eisav saw that Yakov was too strong - he was Yisroel! But what about the children? Eisav knew that he could always infiltrate the thinking of the children, his nephews and nieces, and undermine their sense of being apart, separate, and holy! Therefore, he said to Yakov, "I will travel alongside you". To which Yakov responded, "My Lord knows that the children are tender and they depend upon me for their growth..."

Yakov understood Eisav's intention. Eisav wanted to destroy the Bnai Yisroel by being their loving uncle who would protect and care for them. However, Yakov effectively let Eisav know that he had seen through his strategy. In the aftermath of the Angel's confirmation, Yisroel no longer needed to depend upon Eisav. The Jew no longer needed Eisav. The Jews would survive. The Jews would prevail.

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