

PARSHAS VAYISHLACH - DOING WITHOUT POWER

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Doing Without Power¹

Therefore the Bnei Yisrael are not to eat the displaced sinew of the hip-socket to this day, because he struck Yaakov's hip-socket on the displaced sinew.

Bereishis introduces four institutions of remembrance: Shabbos, the rainbow, milah, and the gid hanasheh of our pasuk. Curiously, they form a perfectly matched set. Half declare Man's moral calling; half speak of history. Two are relevant to all of mankind; two are a Jewish exclusive.

Shabbos is observed only by Jews. Its message, however, is entirely relevant to non-Jews, whose moral calling will remain obscured unless they can internalize the central idea of Shabbos, of Hashem as the Creator of all things. When man understands himself to be a product of a Designer, he can then try to understand what design there might be for the universe. He goes on from there to discover the role of mankind, and eventually what demands that design has on him personally. The rainbow reminds all of mankind of the destructiveness of sin, of the events that took place when society corrupted itself beyond the possibility of redemption.

The remaining pair match the first two. Milah is to Jews what Shabbos is to mankind. Milah reminds Jews of their special calling to establish a holy community, and the need for self-limitation and restraint without which this goal is unattainable. The prohibition of Jews eating the gid hanasheh insures that we Jews do not forget an important historical event, and parallels the more universal lesson of the rainbow appearing in the sky.

Just why is the episode of Yaakov's wrestling match, and his subsequent injury (which healed quite nicely on its own a short while later) so worthy of remembrance? We do not ban chametz and insist on eating matzah once a year merely to remind ourselves of the dietary habits of our ancestors. Our interest is not remembering for its own sake. The historical mitzvos are meant to teach us something. Surely our key objective in the mitzvos of Pesach is to internalize sublime lessons about our relationship to Hashem, and the nature of His Providence. The ban on eating gid hanasheh must allude to some momentous truth as well.

When Yaakov walks - or rather limps - away from his encounter with Esav's angel, he is deficient, but only temporarily. His leg is whole, his muscles are intact, the tendon is there. Yet, they do not function well together as they should. Yaakov has assumed the role of a nosheh (formed of the

same there Hebrew letters, נִשָּׂה), a creditor, who seems to lose money by lending it to another. In truth, however, the creditor has not lost anything at all. What he gave, he gave willingly. In place of what he gave now stands an obligation, which one day will be collected. Yaakov has lost something of his physical strength and power, but he will lay claim to something greater through that loss.

Through the long night of Yaakov's struggle with Esav's angel, Yaakov remains unvanquished. He is not even thrown to the ground, limp and paralyzed with helplessness. Yaakov is slowed by his injury, which does not allow him to even stand firmly on two feet, let alone move without restriction. Yaakov did not come to his encounter with his brother exuding strength and vigor. Esav arrived at the head of a small army of four hundred men loyal to him; Yaakov could not even marshal the forces of his own body to present himself as an image of strength and vigor.

So it would be during the long night of our exile. We would not be beaten down, but we would not be allowed to move about easily or unmolested. We would survive, but we would lack standing in the community of nations. We would move with small, uneasy steps, rather than a brisk, confident stride.

It may seem to be undesirable to arrive at a long-anticipated encounter with a physical disability, but it actually helped Esav understand something about the brother who stood before him. Yaakov would become identified with Divine assistance precisely because he could not compete with others with his own resources. Yaakov would not be defeated, but the source of his strength was not within him, but in his relationship with Hashem. Esav understood on some level that Yaakov was not the master and source of his good fortune and his very survival. Something higher stood behind him.

Jews throughout history would take notice of their material weakness, and accept it with pride, rather than bemoan their plight. Sitting down to eat, they did without the *gid hanasheh*, i.e. they willingly renounced the strength they might have had, realizing that in giving it up, they gave up nothing of value. Their strength would come from their connection to G-d. If they kept it strong and vital, they would be buoyed up by Him. When they stumbled, it was not because they lacked strength, but because they lacked His assistance.

They would understand that the very weakness that others found contemptible was a vehicle to ultimately help them understand their Protector, and thus fulfill their mission in history.

Why Esav Kissed Yaakov²

And Esav ran towards him and embraced him, and fell upon his neck and kissed him and they wept.

The weeping changes everything that we might think of Esav. He could have feigned the kiss and the embrace, but the tears flowed from his soul. At this moment, he showed himself to be a descendant of Avraham, and showed the secret of his eventual success. The Esav we see here was something more than a cunning hunter. There was a strength of character that was available to him. He may have used it infrequently, but it did not disappear. It would display itself throughout Esav's

travels through history.

Through military prowess and skill, through force and might alone he would not become a master of the entire world. Rome was strong and brutal - but there was more to her than strength and brutality. There had to be. Rome could not have dominated the known world through force alone. Other gifts were used.

Those gifts were not directed to noble or proper use, but this could change. Our episode points to that capacity. Esav was able to set down his sword, and relate to his brother with love and compassion. For the strong to respect the rights of other people of strength demonstrates nothing more than prudence and practicality. It is simply wise to avoid the consequences of a struggle. The strong can nurture qualities of humanness and respect for the rights of others. When that happens, they will abandon the use of raw might even when dealing with the weak. Esav's casting down his sword and throwing himself on the neck of his brother shows his capacity to grow in that direction.

It will take a Yaakov and his relationship with him to draw out that capacity, and allow it to slowly grow and progress.

[1] Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 32:33

[2] Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 33:4
