

PARSHAS VAYECHI: HAND-TO-HAND BATTLE

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

During the last days of his life, Yaakov Avinu blessed the two sons of Yosef, and uttered the words that Jewish fathers have used for more than 3,000 years - "Yesimcha Elokim k'Ephrayim V'chMenashe." After blessing them, Yaakov informed Yosef that he would receive the city of Shechem as an additional portion of his inheritance in Eretz Yisroel. Rashi comments that this gift was a reward for Yosef's efforts in arranging the complex logistics of his father's burial in Eretz Yisroel. He explains that since Yosef buried his father, he was rewarded with the gift of a burial place for himself as well. (Yosef was buried in Shechem - after his temporary interment in Egypt). When describing the city of Shechem, Yaakov referred to it as the city that he took from the Emori "b'charbi u'vikashti (Bereishis 48:22) - with my sword and my bow".

At first glance, it would seem puzzling that Yaakov would take credit for gaining territory in Eretz Yisroel by use of his weapons. After all, we find no mention of Yaakov going to battle in any of the previous parshiyos. Rashi, in his first p'shat, forewarns this question by explaining that after Shimon and Levi destroyed the city of Shechem, members of the surrounding nations attacked Yaakov and his children. It was this defensive battle that Yaakov was referencing when he mentioned his use of military weapons - his sword and bow.

This clarification of Rashi does not, however, address a broader question. Why would Yaakov mention the conquest of Shechem at this time, when this subject was something that was a source of discomfort to him? In fact, Yaakov was so upset at the actions of Shimon and Levi that he admonished them in rather harsh terms several pesukim later (Bereishis 49:5-7). Compounding the difficulty is the fact that Yaakov was referred to as a yoshev ohalim (Bereishis 25:27); one who dwells in the tent of Torah, while his brother Eisav was the fierce warrior. Why, then, did Yaakov refer to his success in the battlefield in the last days of his life if it was contrary to his very nature?

I would like to propose that the difficulty posed by these questions may be the reason that Rashi offers a second interpretation of those words to mean his wisdom and his tefilah (This p'shat of Rashi concurs with Targum Unkelus). According to this view, Yaakov was informing Yosef that his victory over the Emori was a spiritual one - represented by his night-long battle with the angel of Eisav. Yaakov utilized his power of tefilah and Torah just as a warrior wields his weapons. This explanation would be very much in line with the life that Yaakov led. As his days on earth were drawing to a close, Yaakov informed his children that although we need to defend ourselves with real-life weapons when the time calls for it, the real struggle for a Jew in this world is our battle with our own

yetzer ho'rah.

The Koheles Yitzchak offers an interesting insight into the reason that Rashi and Unkelus depart from the literal translation of the sword and the bow. The cherev, sword, is a short-range weapon ideal for hand-to-hand combat. The keshes, bow [and arrow], is suitable for long-distance combat. When entering a battle, the keshes would normally be used first, and then as the enemy draws nearer, the cherev would come into play. The fact that Yaakov reversed the order and listed the sword before the bow proves that the enemy Yaakov was referencing was an internal one - his yetzer ho'rah.

When one seeks to grow spiritually, to acquire middos tovos, to become a more complete person, he or she will need to vigorously fend off the temptations of the yetzer horah, who is part of us from the moment we enter this world (see Bereishis 4:7). This is represented by the hand-to-hand battle of the sword - the daily struggle to achieve our goals; success in our kodesh and general studies, refraining from engaging in lashon horah, becoming a more supportive friend, maintaining respect for our parents. Even after one is victorious, however, one must keep the bow and arrow handy - remaining vigilant to keep our bad habits far away.

Yaakov, in his final days, was leaving an everlasting legacy to us - his future generations of children. His message to Yosef's sons was congruent with the theme expressed during the brachos given to the first 3 of his 12 sons. Yaakov was informing us that the road to becoming a complete person and achieving our goals is not through impulsive behavior (which Reuvin had exhibited when he moved his father's bed) or hasty, aggressive actions (Shimon and Levi with regard to Shchem).

Perhaps this would explain why he used the possessive term in describing his victory over the Emori, (Eisav, according to Rashi). "Yosef, I am giving you the city of Shchem, which I acquired with MY sword and MY bow," not the weapons of war, but rather the tools that Yaakov devoted his life to perfecting - the wisdom of Torah, and the passion that he devoted to tefilah.

May we all be zoche to live meaningful, spiritual lives.

Best wishes for a gutten Shabbos.

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