

"And Yaakov was Left Alone"

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

The night before meeting his brother Esav, while alone in the dark, Yaakov grapples with a strange and mysterious visitor.

And Yaakov was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. And when he saw that he was not able, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Yaakov's thigh was put out of joint... (32:25-26)

Injured but not defeated, Yaakov refuses to release his adversary until the latter blesses him (32:27). In response, his assailant names him Yisrael, "for you have contended (sarita) with God and man and have prevailed" (32:28-29). Based upon his antagonist's statement that he had contended with "God," and his unsuccessful attempt to learn the identity of the man (32:30), Yaakov concludes that this was no mere man. He names the place Peniel, meaning the "face of God," "for I have seen God face to face and my life has been spared" (32:31).

This short story abounds with difficulty. Who was the mysterious assailant? On the assumption that the man is in fact an angel, a divine emissary, why did God send him? What is the meaning of the injury, the blessing and the re-naming of Yaakov as Yisrael? In sum, reading the story places us metaphorically in the position of Yaakov. We too wrestle with a mysterious yet clearly significant unknown.

II

In grappling with the story, I have become convinced that a key to interpreting the story can be found in Rashbam's comments. Rashbam notes a parallel between the textual context of Yaakov's wrestling match and the story of David's river-crossing (II [Shemuel 17:21-24](#)). Immediately preceding the story of the struggle, the Torah informs us that Yaakov got up in the middle of the night, took his wives, children and possessions and crossed at Yabok. This closely parallels the later story of David.

Just as Yaakov "got up," so too David "got up" (17:22). Just as the verb stem for crossing (ayin-vet-reish) appears three times in the Yaakov story to describe a middle-of-the-night event, so too the verb stem appears three times in the David story and likewise describes a middle-of-the-night water traversal (17:21-22). Finally, as Rashbam notes, the two crossings happen in geographic proximity one to the other. Immediately after the river crossing, David arrives at Machanaim (17:24). This, of course, is the place Yaakov has last been located (32:3), the approximate geographic locale of his crossing.

Rashbam concludes that just as David crosses to flee Avshalom, so too Yaakov crosses to flee. The two are both stories of avoidance and flight. Yaakov's nocturnal crossing constitutes an attempt to run away, to avoid meeting his brother the next morning.

A careful reading of the larger context of the struggle story (the beginning of parashat Vayishlach) provides further support for Rashbam's revolutionary claim. The beginning of parashat Vayishlach is all about Yaakov's preparations for meeting Esav. After receiving word from his emissaries that Esav, accompanied by four hundred men, already marches to greet him, Yaakov is gripped by fear and anxiety (32:7-8). He divides his camp into two and prays for divine help (32:9-13). Nevertheless, despite his fear, he apparently remains steadfast in his intention to meet with Esav. At this point, Yaakov has but one more preparation to make. As night begins, either just before or just after going to sleep (32:14), Yaakov engages in a final activity. He gathers together an offering for his brother sends it off in the hands of his servants (32:14-22). His threefold preparation complete, Yaakov goes to sleep, as ready as he can be (32:22).

Surprisingly, immediately after being informed of Yaakov's lying down for the night, and right before the story of the struggle, we find Yaakov up and about, crossing the Yabok.

And he got up that night, and took his two wives and two maidservants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Yabok. And he took them, and sent them over the wadi and sent over that which he had. (32:23-24)

Is this some new preparation for meeting Esav? I think not. Yaakov has already arranged his camp in preparation for the upcoming confrontation (31:8-9). In pointed contrast to the previous splitting of his camp, he gathers together all of his

people and possessions. He is breaking camp and initiating a journey. The sense of reversal of Yaakov's previous preparations is further emphasized by the image of "getting up that night" (32:23), the precise opposite of the "sleeping there that night" (32:22) that closes out Yaakov's preparations. Yaakov seems to have undergone a last-minute change of plans.

To put all of this together, something has changed during the night. Whether out of fear, despair, habit, shame or a sense of not deserving divine protection, Yaakov has decided to slip away into the dark.

From this reading of the context of the struggle, Rashbam reaches the obvious conclusion, and so should we, that God sends the angel to prevent Yaakov from fleeing. The angel grasps Yaakov at the last minute, after all have crossed over, and Yaakov alone remains. They wrestle and thrash about in the dirt (Rashi, Ibn Ezra 32:25), thus physically preventing Yaakov from running away. When the angel realizes that he cannot prevail and Yaakov seems on the verge of breaking away, he "touches" Yaakov on his thigh, apparently dislocating his leg and thereby preventing Yaakov from slipping away.

If so, we may conclude that the story of the struggle really constitutes a story of frustrated flight. At the last minute, Yaakov wavers. God sends the angel, seizes Yaakov and forces him to meet Esav. Yaakov is injured, preventing his flight and symbolizing his disobedience. Nevertheless, numerous issues remain unresolved. What about the blessing and the name change? For that matter, why does God insist on Yaakov's meeting Esav? Why not let Yaakov slip away into the night?

III

In trying to puzzle out God's insistence on Yaakov's meeting Esav, it seems reasonable to posit that God does no more than help Yaakov accomplish his own original intentions. After all, it was Yaakov himself who initiated the original contact with Esav, without explicit divine prodding. He sent the messengers (32:4-7). While, as Rashbam maintains, God may in fact desire the meeting, God's role in the story seems primarily supportive, a dovetailing of divine will with Yaakov's initiative. This returns us to the central problem of the story: What motivates Yaakov to meet Esav?

Yaakov's third preparation, his sending of an offering (mincha) to Esav (32:14-22) may provide the key. In instructing his

emissaries as to what they should tell Esav, explaining the stream of gifts, Yaakov tells them:

And say, "Behold, your servant Yaakov is behind us, for he said: I will cleanse his anger/face (akhapera panav) with the offering (mincha) that goes before me, and afterwards I will see his face (panav); perhaps he will accept me (yisa panai)." (32:21)

The combination of a mincha (offering) and the verb stem khaf-peh-reish, meaning "cleanse" (Rashi 32:21), possesses overtones of atonement. It would appear that Yaakov seeks forgiveness. How else would Esav's anger be purged?

The remainder of Yaakov's statement further strengthens this point. Yaakov states his desire that perha "yisa panai," literally, that Esav will lift his face. The verb for lifting or raising (nun-sin-aleph) is often associated with forgiveness and relationship. For example, after Kayin's mincha is rejected and his "face falls," God informs him that if he is good, he will be "lifted up," an apparent reference to his "fallen face" (4:6), and the possibility of divine forgiveness, acceptance and relationship (4:5-7). In sending his mincha, Yaakov wishes for exactly what Kayin failed to achieve with his mincha, namely, an elevation of his face by his master, a renewed relationship and reconciliation.

Finally, let us turn to one last image utilized by Yaakov. Yaakov's refers to "seeing his face" (er'eh panav), the face of Esav. This of course is the classic image used for pilgrimage to the sanctuary of God. Throughout Shemot, numerous references are made to "not seeing the face of God empty-handed" ([Shemot 23:17](#), [34:20](#)). Just as the children of Israel must journey to God bearing gifts in order to express loyalty, achieve reconciliation and maintain their relationship, so too Yaakov sends gifts for the purposes of service, loyalty and relationship.

In sum, in sending his mincha, Yaakov wishes to telegraph to Esav his position as a supplicant, a servant who desires to express fealty to his master. He desires to appease Esav's anger and to establish a relationship with him. He seeks atonement and reconciliation.

If so, we may infer that this complex of desires constitutes Yaakov's motivation not only for sending the mincha, but also for originally contacting Esav. The text easily can be interpreted along these lines. From the very start, in his original sending of

emissaries to his brother Esav, Yaakov places himself in the "servant" position and his brother Esav in the "master" position. He refers to "my master Esav," and "your servant Yaakov" (32:5). He wishes to "find favor in his master's eyes" and implies that whatever he owns, exists for the sole purpose of serving his master (32:6, Abarbanel). By no accident, the terms "brother," "master" and "servant" appear repeatedly throughout the entire narrative (32:4-7, 11,12,14,17-19,21; 33:3,5,8,9,13-15). These terms capture what the story is all about.

To complete the picture, let us take a look at a final proof. The morning after the struggle with the angel, Yaakov finally confronts Esav (33:1-11). Needless to say, he defines himself as the servant (33:5), Esav as the master (33:8) and talks about finding favor in his master's eyes (33:8,10). More importantly, he bows down - not just once, but seven times (33:3). Even after Esav has embraced Yaakov, kissed him and cried, the bowing continues. Group by group, Yaakov's wives and children approach and bow to Esav (33:6-7).

This scene should sound familiar. Recall one of the blessings Yaakov had stolen from Esav:

Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you: be a master (gevir) over your brother and let your mother's sons bow down to you. (27:29)

The meeting of Yaakov and Esav constitutes the antithesis of the theft of the blessings. In place of Esav serving and bowing, it is Yaakov who serves and bows. In place of Yaakov acting the master, and receiving the tribute and obeisance of the descendants of Esav, it is Esav who plays the master, symbolically receiving the fealty of the future tribes of Israel. Everything plays out exactly as Yitzchak had intended. But this is also precisely what Yaakov intends. Yaakov contacts Esav in order to arrange this scene. He seeks his brother, in order to symbolically return to him the blessings he has stolen, a crucial step for achieving atonement and reconciliation.

IV

Much of the argument above is not new. Particular segments of the argument, its general thrust, and even additional proofs, have already been noted by Rashi, Ramban and Abarbanel. Nevertheless, most commentaries have hesitated to draw the necessary conclusions. For example, Ramban, in commenting

upon the "servant"- "master" language discussed above, implies that Yaakov acts "as if" the sale of the birthright were irrelevant, "as if" he seeks to make up for the theft of the blessings. Yaakov deliberately presents a false front to Esav. He acts out of fear alone and seeks no more than to save his neck. On this account, Yaakov's behavior in parashat Vayishlach constitutes the third time Yaakov has pulled the wool over Esav's eyes. We may add insincere reconciliation and fake fronts to the previous pair of purchasing the birthright and stealing the blessings.

In general, it is almost impossible to disprove this kind of claim, a claim that posits a true interior motivation disguised by an external false front. In the technical language of philosophy of explanation: it is not falsifiable. Almost any evidence can be countered by the claim that we face just more of the false front. Nevertheless, I believe that the text tilts strongly against the "false front" interpretation and in favor of the "sincere apology and reconciliation" approach.

As pointed out above, the bowing of Yaakov's family to Esav occurs after Esav and Yaakov have embraced, kissed and cried (33:4). Offhand, there seems no reason to doubt the apparent mutual sincerity. At the very least, Yaakov must already realize that Esav has no intention of killing him. If Esav intended to kill him, he already would have done the deed. Yaakov's crying signals his relief. But it is at this point that the "reversal" of the stolen blessings takes place. If it is a false front, a mask worn over the fear, why keep it up?

Moreover, at this point, after the threat has evaporated, a crucial conversation occurs between Yaakov and Esav (33:8-11). Yaakov continues to employ the "servant-master" language and insists that Esav accept his offering. Esav declines and replies, "I have much (rav), my brother" (33:9). While Esav only means to tell his brother Yaakov that he has enough possessions, he manages to conjoin the word "rav," also meaning "older," with the word "brother". This linkage creates an unmistakable echo of "ve-rav ya'avod tza'ir," "and the older shall serve the younger," the phrase appearing in the oracle of Rivka and the genesis of the entire Yaakov-Esav conflict (25:23). While Yaakov, the younger, now proclaims himself Esav's servant, Esav defines himself as "rav" (possessing much \ older) versus Yaakov. On the level of subtext, Esav's refusal of Yaakov's offering subversively contains the acknowledgement that it is the younger brother who serves the older, and not the reverse. Once again, we see another reversal of the supposed superiority and lordship of Yaakov over Esav. But once again, if it is all a false front and Esav no longer threatens Yaakov, why are they talking about something that happened before they were born?

Let us go on. Yaakov refuses to accept no for an answer. Twice using the word for "please," he practically begs Esav to accept the offering (33:10). Moreover, he compares the experience of

having his face seen and accepted by Esav with that of being seen and accepted by God (33:10). As if this were not enough, Yaakov describes Esav's actions until this point as "va-tirtzeini," a term normally referring to divine acceptance of sacrifices ([Vayikra 1:3](#)). Is this all a bluff? I doubt it. Rather, Yaakov insists upon concrete acceptance of his offering because it is about far more than augmenting Esav's wealth. For Yaakov, it is about a very real and concrete act of atonement, a way to physically correct his previous treatment of Esav.

If any doubts remain, let us take a look at the very next verse. Yaakov beseeches Esav:

Please take (kach) my blessing that has been brought to you, for God has been merciful to me... (33:11)

If we choose merely to scratch the surface of Yaakov's statement, the term "blessing" here means only the offering being proffered to Esav. But this would be naive. The language of "taking" and "blessing" is the exact language found in the aftermath of the theft in parashat Toldot. Yitzchak informs Esav that Yahav "come in trickery and taken (ve-lakach) your blessing" (27:35). Esav responds that he now finally understands the true meaning of the name Yaakov: "He has supplanted me (va-ya'akveini) twice; he took (lakach) my birthright and now he has taken (lakach) my blessing!" (27:36). Flash ahead twenty years to the meeting of parashat Vayishlach, the first conversation between Esav and Yaakov since that fateful day. On the level of subtext, at the very least, Yaakov symbolically offers to give back the blessing he has taken.

V

Let us return to the story of the struggle with the angel and try to close the circle. As argued above, the first part of Vayishlach constitutes the story of the reconciliation of Yaakov and Esav, the story of Yaakov's efforts to achieve atonement and make it right. Yaakov leaves the house of Lavan determined to reconcile with his brother and correct his earlier actions. But things turn out not to be simple. Yaakov receives word that Esav is already on the march with four hundred men. Yaakov assumes that Esav approaches with murderous intent.

Yaakov must now contend not only with the flesh-and-blood Esav, but also with the mythic Esav of his imagination. He must not only wrest atonement from the real Esav but must also

grapple with his fear. Yaakov gives ground to neither his fear nor the mythic Esav of his imagination. He remains determined and focused. He prepares his camp, prays, and devises a strategy to achieve reconciliation (32:7-22). But then he goes to sleep. In the dark of the night, Yaakov wavers. The struggle proves overwhelming. Out of fear, habit, guilt, a sense of a lack of deserving divine protection, or a mix of them all, Yaakov rises and attempts to run away.

This brings us back to the story of the struggle with the angel. God sends the angel to prevent Yaakov from fleeing and to compel the confrontation between Yaakov and Esav. Why is this important to God? For the very same reason it has been important to Yaakov. God also knows that Yaakov needs to make up for his behavior of twenty years past, that he requires atonement and reconciliation. Yaakov is now injured; he cannot run. He has no choice but to face Esav. But there is more to God's action than mere support of Yaakov's original intentions. When God forces Yaakov to struggle with an angel, he thereby proves to him that he can meet almost any challenge. He teaches Yaakov that he can complete the struggle and face his brother (Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel). Even when causing Yaakov's temporary physical collapse, God in fact helps and bolsters Yaakov. He challenges him to find new existential resources, to complete the task and atone for his past.

This leaves us with the blessing and the name change, the final and most difficult piece of the puzzle. Yaakov's angelic adversary blesses him by renaming him Yisrael. More precisely, he tells him that, "They will no longer say your name is Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have contended (sarita) with God (E-lokim) and with men and proven able" (32:29). On the simplest level, the name stems from the conflict with the angel that night. The "God" that Yaakov has struggled with is the divine emissary he has spent the night entangled with. He has not succumbed and has proven able.

But there is much more to it than this. Let us consider for a moment who the "men" are that Yaakov has struggled with. Is this a reference to Lavan, Yaakov's previous adversary? But this places the renaming slightly out of context. Is this a reference to Esav? But Yaakov has not yet met up with Esav. Perhaps the verb "contended" (sarita) should not be read as referring solely to the past. Perhaps the angel's statement is more prophecy and prediction than history. Yaakov will successfully contend with Esav that very morning.

Alternatively, the angel's statement does indeed refer to the past and to the men that Yaakov has just been struggling with. But who are these "men"? I think we already know the answer. They are the mythic and murderous Esav of Yaakov's imagination, and Yaakov himself, his fears, his prior character

and his past actions. These are the struggles in which Yaakov has been engaged. As argued previously, Yaakov already contends with Esav even before meeting with him. He already struggles with the problem of how to achieve reconciliation and atonement. He already contends with his fear, sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully. Furthermore, the entire story of the meeting of Yaakov and Esav consists of Yaakov's struggle with his past self. It is about his struggle with the Yaakov of misdirection, tricks and wiles, the Yaakov who could never confront his self, the brother he has tricked or the moral-divine imperative of repentance.

For Further Study

To pull all of this together, God sends the angel to struggle with Yaakov and thereby force Yaakov to confront and make up with Esav. That very struggle with the angel constitutes a physical manifestation and metaphor of the numerous external and internal struggles that animate the character of Yaakov both before and after the nighttime wrestle. In the course of his attempt to be more than the Yaakov of tricks and wiles, he contends with the angel, with his clan-brother Lavan, with his flesh-and-blood brother Esav, with his fear, with the divine imperative of seeking atonement, and with his very own self and character. His renaming by the angel captures this past, present and future theme precisely. He will no longer be Yaakov, bent like the heel he once grasped, the one who garnered blessings by latching on to others, by the means of deals and tricks. He will no longer be known as the one Esav justly accused. Rather he will be Yisrael, he who has struggled in so many ways and proven able. He will be known as Yisrael, a man whose blessedness stems from his struggles.

VI

To conclude, I would like to pick up on the theme of journeys developed in our discussions of Avraham, Yitzchak and Rivka. At the end of parashat Vayishlach, Yaakov finally returns home to his father (35:27), ending the journey that commenced at the beginning of parashat Vayeitze. Like all of Avraham's journeys, Yaakov's journey begins with a command and involves the stem heh-lamed-khaf (28:2,10). Like Avraham's first journey, Yaakov's journey involves "going out" of a particular place, and "going to" a different place, those places being Charan and Canaan (12:4-5, 28:10). But what is Yaakov's journey about? Is it Avraham's first journey, the journey for nationhood and future? Is it the second, the journey for religion and ethics? Or is it the third, the journey of the Akeida, of self-negation?

In fact, each of these themes can be picked out in the journey of Yaakov. Nevertheless, the dominant motif, and the one that unites all the others, is the theme of struggle. Yaakov's journey constitutes a fourth journey paradigm, the journey of struggle. Yaakov indeed struggles against his adversaries, against

Lavan, Esav and an angel, but even more so, he struggles to become Yisrael, he struggles against his very self. His journey is also the journey of repentance. He is the father of not just the nation of Israel, but of struggle, change, self-making and repentance.

1. The shiur above diverges from Rashbam's interpretation on a crucial point. According to Rashbam, God prevents Yaakov from fleeing in order to force him to witness the rescue of God. If so: a) Reread 32:10-13. What does Rashbam's reading do to Yaakov's status as a "man of faith"? Does our reading suffer the same defect? b) How would Rashbam's version explain the naming? See his striking comment on 32:29.
2. Rashi (32:25) cites a midrash opining that the angel is the "sar shel Esav," the celestial being appointed to guard the destiny of the nation of Edom. Can any textual justification be found for this identification? Does this conflict or agree with reading of the struggle presented above?
3. See 32:21,31 and 33:10. Does Yaakov refer to the meeting with the angel in 33:10? Does this provide support for the "sar shel Esav" theory? If Yaakov does indeed refer to the meeting with the angel, why does he do so? See Rashi 32:10. Can you think of a different reason?
4. Reread 32:21, with the comments of Ibn Ezra and Ramban. How does the issue of internal vs. external speech disagreement link up with the false front vs. sincere reconciliation controversy discussed above?

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