

# VAYISHLACH

## ONE AND ONLY

*Parashas Vayishlach* describes the prelude to what seems an inevitable and deadly battle between brothers – Yaakov and Eisav. Yaakov *Avinu* readies himself for this fight in three ways: by sending gifts, by praying and by preparing for war.

The actual encounter is seemingly not as conflict-ridden as Yaakov *Avinu* feared, although there is a difference of opinion among our Sages as to what Eisav’s state of mind at the reunion was. The Torah tells us, “*vayishakeihu* (and he kissed him)”<sup>1</sup> – and our Sages explain that either Eisav kissed his brother in love, or he kissed him with the intention to bite into his neck, and God hardened Yaakov *Avinu*’s neck to protect him. In any event, after the meeting and a brief exchange of words, Yaakov *Avinu* and Eisav part company, the battle having been averted.

Inside this story about the impending battle between Yaakov *Avinu* and Eisav is the story of another battle, a story within a story. The night before Yaakov *Avinu* was to encounter Eisav, something very strange and important took place. “Yaakov was

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<sup>1</sup> *Bereishis* 33:4.

left alone and a man struggled with him until the dawn. He saw that he could not beat him and he touched his hip and the hip of Yaakov became dislocated in his struggling with him.”<sup>2</sup>

This “man,” actually an angel, asks Yaakov *Avinu* to release him, and Yaakov *Avinu* gives him an ultimatum: “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”<sup>3</sup> The angel complies. He blesses him by changing his name from Yaakov to Yisrael – a name later endorsed by God in Beis-El – for the reason that “You have struggled with the Divine and with men and prevailed.”<sup>4</sup> Several *pesukim* later, the Torah tells us that since the angel touched Yaakov *Avinu*’s hip and the *gid* (sinew, in this case meaning a nerve) within, “*Bnei Yisrael* do not eat the displaced sinew which is on the hip until this day.”<sup>5</sup>

The focus of our questions on the *parashah* is this embedded story. Our first question is simply: What lesson can we learn from the struggle between Yaakov *Avinu* and the angel? Rashi comments<sup>6</sup> that this angel was the “*saro shel Eisav* (ministering angel of Eisav),” also known as the Satan. This mystical battle was not just a clash between Yaakov *Avinu* and an angel. It was a clash between Yaakov *Avinu* and Eisav and everything that Eisav represents – a cosmic battle with implications for every generation.

Second, it is important for us to ask: What is the significance of the fact that we do not eat the *gid banasbeh*, the sciatic nerve? Do we refrain from eating this nerve from the hip of an animal

<sup>2</sup> *Bereishis* 32:24-25.

<sup>3</sup> *Bereishis* 32:26.

<sup>4</sup> *Bereishis* 32:28.

<sup>5</sup> *Bereishis* 32:32.

<sup>6</sup> Commentary on *Bereishis* 32:25.

only because Yaakov *Avinu* was injured in the same place? What are we meant to learn or remember from this prohibition?

Thirdly, why only after his struggle with the angel does Yaakov *Avinu* become Yisrael? What does Yaakov *Avinu* do in this battle to merit this new and exalted name? What about this event makes it more significant than any other in Yaakov *Avinu*'s life?

## All Alone

The key to understanding this archetypal battle is found in one word: *levado* (alone). In addition to unlocking the meaning of the struggle between Yaakov *Avinu* and the angel, *levado* also elucidates the relationship between the Jew and the outside world today. “*Vayivaser Yaakov **levado*** (Yaakov was left **alone**).”<sup>7</sup> Yes, physically Yaakov *Avinu* was alone. Just prior to this battle of a lifetime, he had led his entire family to the other side of the Yabok River, and was then left alone. While this fact might seem at first inconsequential, the Torah disagrees. It emphasizes the fact that Yaakov *Avinu* was alone, and in the same *pasuk* states, “*Vayei’aveik ish imo ad alos hashachar* (a man struggled with him until the dawn).”<sup>8</sup> Apparently there is something about the *levado*, the being alone, that created the struggle.

What is this concept of *levado*? Rabbi Elie Munk points out<sup>9</sup> that according to a *midrash* the phrase “*Vayivaser Yaakov **levado*** (Yaakov was left **alone**)” parallels the statement of Yeshayah, “*Venisgav Hashem **levado***” (God **alone** will be supreme).<sup>10</sup> Here

<sup>7</sup> *Bereishis* 32:24.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *The Call of the Torah, Bereishis*, p. 715.

<sup>10</sup> *Yeshayah* 2:11.

too *levado* is used, but this time to describe God. By making this comparison, the *midrash* is teaching us that just as God is alone and exalted in the heavenly spheres, so too *Am Yisrael*, the children of Yaakov, are set apart among the nations, an “*am levadad yishkon* (a nation that dwells alone).”<sup>11</sup>

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz offers<sup>12</sup> a more specific explanation of this *midrash*. He maintains that the concept of *levado* refers not only to the Jewish people as a whole, but particularly to Yaakov *Avinu*. Just as God is *levado*, so too is Yaakov *Avinu*.

Clearly, the quality of *levado* needs deeper exploration. Rabbi Levovitz writes that *levado* is not just an aspect of God, referring to His uniqueness and singularity; it is also an attribute of God, meaning that He needs no help from anyone. As it is stated in the prayer *Adon Olam*: “*Ve’acharei kichlos hakol, levado yimloch nora* (when all is done, He **alone** will rule in an awesome manner).” *Levado* in this context means complete: self-sufficient, not lacking anything. This is exactly the quality that Yaakov *Avinu* personified at the time the angel came to wrestle with him, and it was with that quality that Yaakov *Avinu* triumphed. Yaakov *Avinu* had the ability to emulate God in this way, standing alone, needing no one but himself.

What does it mean to rely only on oneself and on no one else, to be wholly self-sufficient? How can we as individuals emulate this quality of God? Rabbi Jeremy Kagan says<sup>13</sup> that this struggle for selfhood is a battle we fight every day. Often we perceive our self as a multitude of selves, multiple desires clamoring for our attention. If we decide to do a project and put out entire selves into it, we feel at that moment defined by that project. Then, distracted, we turn

<sup>11</sup> *Bamidbar* 23:9.

<sup>12</sup> *Da’as Torah*, p. 208.

<sup>13</sup> *The Jewish Self*, p. 97.

our attention to a second project and suddenly feel consumed by this new venture. A third demand materializes and we end up a collection of fragmented selves. We really do not know who we are. We direct our energies in many directions and whichever one captivates us at the moment defines us!

However, according to Rabbi Kagan, the true self is one and unified, just as God is one and unified. This is a consequence of being created *betzelem Elokim*. Thus we can say that *levado* means having one self, one focal point in life. It means becoming a centered person. This state of being reflects God and allows us to connect with the godliness in each other and ourselves.

How do we access this oneness in ourselves? First we must understand what makes us unique among the rest of creation. What constitutes the soul of a human being? *Bechirah chofshis* (free choice). This is what distinguishes the human being from the animal.

Animals are reactive, their actions entirely a product of environmental stimuli. To be a person means not to react, but to act. That is what responsibility is about: the ability to choose a response, the ability to make choices while understanding the consequences of those choices. When one chooses, one owns one's self. If one is reactive, one is not using one's free choice and will be unable to develop one's self and individuality. Our experiences in life are not what make us who we are, but rather opportunities to make ourselves into who we can be. God provides the environment, the background for our choices; He leaves it up to us to choose, to create ourselves.

Rabbi Abraham Twerski sees<sup>14</sup> this concept in the *pasuk* "Na'aseh adam betzalmeynu kedmuseinu" (Let us make man in our

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<sup>14</sup> *Let Us Make Man*, p. 72-75.

image, as our likeness)”<sup>15</sup> and the famous question: If God is One, why does it say “**our** image”? Rabbi Twerski says that the plural here refers to the individual together with God. God says to man: *I will give you experiences, I will give you opportunities – but that is not who you are. Those are the givens. Who you are is what you make of those givens.* Hashem is watching to see what we will do, what kinds of decisions we will make, with everything He gives us. Our lives should be about making decisions that help us gain a sense of self, become an individual, *levado*. That is what it takes to “make man.”

Understanding that choosing defines our selfhood, we should now ask if this includes all decisions or only those concerning particular areas of our life. Rabbi Kagan says<sup>16</sup> that to be balanced people, we must make choices related to three central aspects of our selves: physical desire, intellectual desire and the desire for power. Each aspect has a place in our lives, but when they dominate the self instead of expressing it, we lose our humanity. In order to find a balance between these forces, we must tap into a fourth force: the self itself – the unifying force that sees each of these forces as a component of a larger entity and enables us to make decisions in areas that contribute to the expression of the self’s unity. When we achieve awareness of this unity, this *levado*, we become an expression of the higher, Divine root of our selves.

However, often this fourth component in us becomes weak, speaking in barely a whisper. Without effort and discipline, the other three forces can overwhelm us and distort our perspective, our *levado*. Paradoxically, what brings us back to *levado*, to a centered self, is the feeling we get when we are losing that self to the demands of the other drives. The fear we feel in being overwhelmed operates as

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<sup>15</sup> *Bereishis* 1:26.

<sup>16</sup> *The Jewish Self*, p. 110-114.

a check on those desires, a boost to the self-force, and an inspiration to return to our relationship (through self) with God.

Understanding *levado* on a personal level – that every individual has a mandate to balance and center himself – we are better equipped to reexamine the battle between Yaakov *Avinu* and the angel, a battle that is also really about *levado*. What Eisav's angel represents is loss of self. Eisav symbolizes Roman society and the contemporary Western culture that grew out of it. This culture provides countless distractions and amusements, prime causes for a splintering of the self.

To better understand the host culture we live in and the experience of living under the influence of the Roman exile, let us examine all four kingdoms that dominated the Jewish people at various periods in our history: Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome.<sup>17</sup> Each had a primary strength, which it used in order to conquer and rule over its neighbors. The Babylonians had a desire for power, the Persians a desire for pleasure, the Greeks a desire for honor and knowledge. The Romans were motivated by insecurity, which caused them to act in a tyrannical fashion. Each nation tried to force the Jewish people to adopt its primary characteristic.

The Torah alludes to these four nations and their characteristics when describing the four types of non-kosher animals. Rabbi Aharon Feldman explores<sup>18</sup> this connection. He reminds us that for an animal to be considered kosher, it must have two signs; it must chew its cud and have cloven hooves. Both of these features are characteristic of animals that are not beasts of prey. Most animals that hunt other animals are endowed

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>18</sup> *The Juggler and the King*, p. 198-200.

with a set of claws for tearing up their prey, along with a voracious, insatiable appetite, while the kosher animal is satisfied with whatever it eats, chewing it again and again. It needs only hooves, as it does not kill other animals.

The maxim “you are what you eat” becomes meaningful when we consider this pattern. If we are, in fact, influenced by what we consume, it makes sense that the Torah would instruct us to eat only animals that have characteristics that we would want to acquire and avoid those that have undesirable characteristics.

The Torah identifies only four animals that have one sign but not the other: the camel, the rabbit, the hare and the pig. All but the pig chew their cud, but do not have cloven hooves, while the pig has cloven hooves, but does not chew its cud. Through these four animals, says Rabbi Feldman, the Torah is teaching us about different types of spiritual impurity. Cloven hooves are an external sign of *kashrus*, and chewing the cud is an internal sign. Camels, hares and rabbits – the animals that have the internal sign, but not the external one – represent a frustrated spirituality. While they possess an inner longing for holiness, these beings lack the appropriate expression, or conduct, to achieve it. The pig, with its external sign but not the internal one, represents those who act like they are spiritual, but internally have no interest in spirituality and serving God.

Each animal represents one of the four kingdoms that subjugated the Jews through history. From reflecting on the signs of *kashrus* that each animal possesses, we learn that three of these four nations were good on the inside. Apparently, they wanted to have a relationship with God, but lacked the external spiritual expression to make it happen. Rome, however,

according to Rabbi Kagan,<sup>19</sup> was different. Rome was empty. Though it had the appearance of being a moral society – the cloven hooves, so to speak – it had no real internal life, no depth. Rome did not “chew its cud.” Because their selves were limited, detached from the true source, the Romans engaged in endless physical and material consumption in order to fill their internal emptiness, just as the pig eats without stop.

In the same way that Rome appeared moral from the outside, but lacked any real principles or ethics, contemporary culture is defined by a void. It is a losing struggle to define and sustain a core set of values.

We see evidence of this void in our *parashah* in the way Eisav, Rome’s forebear, characterizes his life. When Yaakov *Avinu* insists that Eisav take gifts from him, Eisav refuses at first by saying, “*Yeish li rav* (I have much).”<sup>20</sup> By using that phraseology, he implies that while he has plenty, there is always room for more. What does Eisav then do? He takes the gifts, after all. How does Yaakov *Avinu*, in contrast, speak about his lot? “*Yeish li kol* (I have everything),”<sup>21</sup> he says. Did Yaakov *Avinu* really have everything? – the *Sefas Emes* asks.<sup>22</sup> No, he didn’t. But when a person has the ability to connect whatever he has to a transcendent source, to realize that it all comes from God, Who encompasses everything, anything he does have is “everything.”

In summary, writes Rabbi Moshe Wolfson,<sup>23</sup> Roman society, the father of all Western civilization, including our own, is

<sup>19</sup> *The Jewish Self*, p. 143.

<sup>20</sup> *Bereishis* 33:9.

<sup>21</sup> *Bereishis* 33:11.

<sup>22</sup> *Sefas Emes*, *Vayishlach* 5631.

<sup>23</sup> *The Jewish Self*, p. 146.

characterized by a sweeping denial of the Creator's ongoing participation in the life of the individual or the affairs of the world. What results is a culture that obscures reality, making it very difficult for one who lives within it to sense God and spirituality both in his internal and external lives. It is in this environment that we now have the challenge to develop an internal awareness, to use true choice and find the true self – to achieve a state of *levado*.

## Becoming Whole

The struggle of Yaakov *Avinu* and the angel is really a struggle about *levado*. *Levado*, the quality of self-containment and oneness, cannot but evoke God Himself. This is Yaakov *Avinu*. The *saro shel Eisav*, on the other hand, represents everything that is the opposite of *levado*. He does not want Yaakov *Avinu* – and by extension us – to be focused on true self. Instead, he wants the trappings of this world to distract us from our inner being and center. That is what Yaakov *Avinu*'s struggle with the angel is all about. And it is also why the angel injures specifically Yaakov *Avinu*'s hip.

Our Rabbis explain that the hip is the juncture between the upper and lower parts of a person. It is, on a deeper level, the connection between our physical drives and our spiritual drives. Eisav wants these two aspects of man divided. His goal is to create a rift in man that will prevent him from integrating his spiritual and physical qualities.

It is no accident that the prohibition that stems from this incident – that of eating the sciatic nerve – concerns a part of an animal. The animal signifies our animal desires. By abiding by this prohibition, we exercise control over our desires, thus

asserting that we are not animals, that we will not let these drives overwhelm us. In observing this commandment, we affirm that we are above the animals, that we have the ability to temper the animal drives within us, and this helps us create a centered, *levado* self.

## It Takes One to Know One

Directly after receiving the blow to his hip, Yaakov gets the name Yisrael. The *Kli Yakar* explains<sup>24</sup> that one aspect of the name *Yisrael* is *Yashar Kel*. *Yashar* here comes from the root meaning sight, as in the verse, “*Ashburenu velo karov* (I shall see him, but it is not near),”<sup>25</sup> indicating that now Yaakov *Avinu* “sees God.” If a person achieves *levado* and can demonstrate this by truly prevailing in a battle that threatens his selfhood, taking a unified stand against an onslaught of strong and competing desires, he will move toward godliness. The person becomes a platform on which to reach toward God, to see Him.

Yaakov *Avinu* was tested on this level of *levado* and was successful. Thus, he was renamed *Yisrael* – to see God, to be one with Him. Moreover, Yisrael chose to see Hashem as the center of his world. Every decision he made was dependent on whether it would bring *nachas ruach* (pleasure, so to speak) to Hashem. Those who choose to live like this and to control themselves rather than be controlled by outside forces can earn the spiritual acquisitions that *Yisrael* earned. Such people will be able to perceive godliness at every turn.

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<sup>24</sup> Commentary on *Bereishis* 32:29.

<sup>25</sup> *Bamidbar* 24:17.

How do we reach this level of *levado*? The *parashah* aids us by telling us of Yaakov *Avinu*'s journey right after his encounter with Eisav: “*Vayavo Yaakov shalem ir Shechem* (Yaakov came to the city of Shechem intact).”<sup>26</sup> Rashi there points out that he was intact physically and financially as well as spiritually.

To elaborate on this point, the *Shem MiShmuel* directs<sup>27</sup> us to the four parts of the human being which together can become a chariot for godliness: the physical, the emotional, the intellectual and the *tzelem Elokim*. It is the *tzelem Elokim* that consolidates all of man's other disparate parts. Yaakov *Avinu* was complete in them all.

*Pirkei Avos* expands<sup>28</sup> upon how one can become complete in these essential parts of a human being, each part represented by its own drive: the drive for physical pleasure, the drive for honor and the drive for intellectual gratification. “Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? He who learns from every person... Who is mighty? He who conquers his evil inclination... Who is rich? He who is happy with his portion... Who is honorable? He who honors other people...”

On this familiar *mishnah*, Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz points out<sup>29</sup> in the name of the Maharal that *Pirkei Avos* is telling us how each of the four qualities mentioned above can be achieved independently and individually, without any external help. Regarding wisdom, the *mishnah* does not say that a wise person is someone with a good teacher or a brilliant mind. On the contrary, it teaches that the wise person is the one who learns from

<sup>26</sup> *Bereishis* 33:18.

<sup>27</sup> *Shem MiShmuel*: Selections on the Weekly Parsha and Festivals, p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> *Pirkei Avos* 4:1.

<sup>29</sup> *Da'as Torah*, p. 208-209.

everyone and every experience, and that it is the desire to learn that defines someone as wise. It is within the capacity of every human being to achieve this desire – and up to him alone to do so.

Regarding strength, the *mishnah* does not indicate that it is only a person with physical prowess. No, says the *mishnah*: power does not have to be measured against the strength of another. When we are able to overcome our evil inclination, we become strong. Acquiring strength depends on the person and his efforts alone. So it is with the concept of honor. A person may be shy and never receive recognition for his accomplishments. Yet by giving honor to others, he becomes an honored person. Likewise, wealth is the internal ability to view what we have with satisfaction.

This perspective leads to *levado*. *Levado* is using oneself as a standard by which to measure all things. One does not need others in order to achieve self-definition. If we are forever looking outside of ourselves to assess how smart, how rich, how talented or how powerful we are, we will be in a perpetual state of reaction. If, instead, a person sees himself as independent and judges his status against himself alone, only then will his choices be true choices, his actions true actions, his achievements true achievements.

## The Best Company

Our Sages tell<sup>30</sup> us that each person must realize that, “The world was created for me.” We must know: *from the beginning of time to the end of time, no person will be like me*. Here the Talmud is asserting that we are all individuals for whom the world was worth creating.

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<sup>30</sup> *Sanhedrin* 37a.

The question is: how do we view our individuality? How do we feel when we are alone with ourselves? Are these opportunities for distraction, or are they moments we use to build ourselves, and thereby the world? It is interesting to consider how we spend our quiet moments late at night. Are we afraid to be alone and therefore always doing something to fill the silence? Or do we use the quiet as an opportunity to think? Can we be alone with ourselves?

If we cannot be alone in the car or in the house without turning on a tape or picking up the phone, it is a sure sign that we have not yet acquired *levado*. Only by learning to be alone without fear will we come to realize that we are in fact not alone, that God is with us and within us.

*Levado* is the path that Yaakov *Avinu* forges for us – a path through the confusing tangle of diversions and amusements offered by society today, a path leading us to see God. Yaakov *Avinu* is telling us that if we go to battle with the world outside, we must do so with the strength that comes from our uniqueness as a nation and as individuals. Our motivating factors, our strength, must come from within. If they do not, we will be easily swayed and pressed upon by multiple distractions, internal and societal.

The key to life is to have a sense of self, of centeredness, and to know one's priorities. It is to know one's particular mission or course in life. From Yaakov *Avinu*, we learn to unite the upper and lower aspects of ourselves, to resist the pressure of the outside world that seeks to divide us at the hip joint and to sever the connection between our bodies and souls.

Striving for this wholeness will bring us to a state of *levado*, and then no matter what comes to interfere with our course, we will stick to it and not be overwhelmed by the obstacles. We will be able to live up to our name Yisrael, the name we inherited from Yaakov

*Avinu.* As true *Bnei Yisrael*, we will act independently, exercise our free choice, and take the opportunities in life to see God.