בס"ד

***פרשת וישלח***

**Parshas Vayishlach**

“For You are with Me:” Alone, Not Abandoned

*וַיִּוָּתֵ֥ר יַעֲקֹ֖ב לְבַדּ֑וֹ וַיֵּאָבֵ֥ק אִישׁ֙ עִמּ֔וֹ עַ֖ד עֲל֥וֹת הַשָּֽׁחַר׃*

*And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. (Genesis 32:25)*

I – Footprints on the Beach

There’s a famous poem[[1]](#endnote-1) about a man walking along the beach with G-d. As they walked, scenes of the man’s life flashed before him, with two sets of footprints – his and God’s. He noticed that many times along the path of his life, at the very lowest and saddest times in his life, there was only one set of footprints.

This really bothered the man, and he asked Hashem, "You said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. Why would you leave me when I needed You most?"

Hashem replied: "My son, my precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

 It’s a beautiful and touching poem, no doubt, illustrating the love and *hashgacha* that Hashem has upon our lives. Indeed, this has been the even when things looked grim, Dovid Hamelech declared “Even when I walk in the shadow of death, I’m will not fear because Hashem is with me.”[[2]](#endnote-2) But there’s something in the life of Yaakov Avinu that seems to directly contradict this message.

II – A Breach of Contract?

In the beginning of this week’s *parsha*, when Yaakov is leaving the home of his father Yitzchak and yeshiva of Shem and Ever[[3]](#endnote-3) for the first time in his life into a world fraught with physical and spiritual threats, Hashem assures him in a dream, “I will be with you and guard you wherever you go…I will never abandon you.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Ok, so far so good.

And G-d seems to keep His word. Time and time again, Yaakov is constantly attributing his success and survival to Hashem’s munificence. Whether it’s when he’s defending his work ethic with Lavan or davening to be saved from Eisav, Yaakov is constantly thanking Hashem for His unending kindness.[[5]](#endnote-5)

So when the climax of Yaakov’s odyssey arrives, the most dangerous and trying ordeal yet, we would expect Hashem to swoop in and carry Yaakov in His arms.

But the exact opposite happens.

When Yaakov fights the Sar Shel Eisav, Eisav’s angel, it was more than a simple wrestling match. It was a comic struggle over which brother was worthy of Yitzchak’s blessing and carrying on his legacy. This what Yaakov’s life had built up to. It was the most critical point in his life. And what does Hashem do?

וַיִּוָּתֵ֥ר יַעֲקֹ֖ב לְבַדּ֑וֹ – Yaakov is left alone to fend for himself.

And he gets hurt too. It’s the only time in his entire life that he gets injured. Only after it’s all over does Hashem bring out the sun to heal Yaakov’s thigh. That’s good, but what happened to G-d’s promise to never abandon Yaakov?! If I were Yaakov, I would argue a breach of contract?

III – An Uneven Playing Field

 To answer this question, we need look at one other strange thing in this climactic battle between Yaakov and Eisav’s angel. Why did they wrestle? If you were fighting your mortal enemy, you would probably insist on a method of combat that you and your foe were both equally skilled at.

We all know that “*yadayim yidei Eisav*,” Eisav lived for physical combat. Yaakov is known for his *kol*, his voice.[[6]](#endnote-6) Now granted that because Yaakov wasn’t a rabbi, he wasn’t skilled enough to talk someone to death, but why did they seemingly give Eisav the home-court advantage of fighting method?[[7]](#endnote-7)

IV – The “No Tights, No Flights” Rule

 To answer these questions, I want to share a story with you. About twenty years ago, film producers Alfred Gough and Miles Millar were faced with a difficult problem. They were trying to pitch an idea to Warner Brothers Television for a show that would chronicle the early life of Clark Kent. They wanted to focus on how he grew into the iconic, selfless hero the world knew as Superman.

But how do you do that? How do you make the struggles of someone who flies around in spandex with a cape and a big “S” on their chest relatable to the average teenager?

 After months of brainstorming, they had an idea. They instituted the “no tights, no flights rule.”

Clark Kent would never fly in their show and never don the iconic suit that he would later wear in the comics. Instead, they reduced Superman to the bare essentials and would examine what led Clark Kent to become the Man of Steel. They stripped Superman of everything to uncover his human essence.

That essence, the struggles and angst of adolescence, was something any teenager could relate to. Thus, the television show *Smallville* was born and went on to become one of the most successful and critically acclaimed television series of its decade.[[8]](#endnote-8)

V – Yaakov’s Essence

 That is why Yaakov wrestled. Eisav was known for his skill with weaponry.[[9]](#endnote-9) This was something totally different. Yaakov and the Sar Shel Eisav weren’t merely engaged in a physical altercation. It was “*vayeavek*,” a word which Rashi relates to *chibbuk*, hug, because the wrestlers embrace each other. [[10]](#endnote-10)

 When you hit someone, you use your arm. When you kick someone, you use your foot. These are just body parts. But when you wrestle, you use your entire body. It’s a confrontation of two people releasing their essence in the most primal and fundamental way possible, trying to see which one is stronger. Yaakov wrestling Eisav’s *malach* was really a struggle between who Yaakov was and who Eisav was. Whose *mahus*, whose core identity, was worthy of the *bechora.*

 Such a struggle by definition means that you need to be alone. You need to strip down Clark Kent to see if he is capable of becoming Superman. Similarly, you need to strip down Yaakov from all that he had gained during his time in Charan: His family, his wealth, and even his G-d. Because now was the time to see whether any of that stuff had sunk into Yaakov’s essence. Was Yaakov’s *mahus*, stripped of all tangible and circumstantial crutches, worthy of transforming into the “superman” Yisrael? Let’s throw it against Eisav’s essence – the Sar – and see what happens.

VI – A Different Kind of Help

 So, yes. There was a point that Yaakov was alone. But Hashem didn’t abandon him. It’s like a parent teaching their child to ride a bike. They’ll buy them the bike, helmet, and training wheels. Then they’ll spend weeks teaching them the theory and practice of riding.

But sooner or later the child will need to ride by themselves. So the parent will take off the training wheels and step back to watch if their child *absorbed* all that the they had been given. Is his essence someone who can ride a bike?

That’s not abandonment! The parents are standing right there with hope, fear and pride! It’s just that the time has come for the parents to take a step back and watch their child *use* all the help they’ve already given.

Similarly, Hashem had already given Yaakov everything he needed to overcome the Sar Shel Eisav. He *had* been with Yaakov wherever he went. He gave Yaakov a family, prosperity, and physical and spiritual protection. But those are just external blessings and lessons. Ultimately, Hashem wasn’t the one riding the bike. Yaakov was. He needed to internalize all that to transform his essence into Yisrael – the father of the Shevatim. Someone who could survive the challenges and temptations of exile and return *shalem*.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Thus, Hashem did all He could and then took a step. He stripped Yaakov down to his core and stood off to the side watching with same pride and concern of that parent whose child is riding bike, waiting to see if His child Yaakov could do it. And Hashem wasn’t disappointed.

 Just like our father Yaakov, Hashem doesn’t abandon us. Sometimes He walks with us, and sometimes He carries us. He gives us all the tools and resources we need to succeed.

But once in a while Hashem will take a step back. He will leave us alone, strip away everything around us for us to see our essence. To see if we have absorbed what Hashem, our parents, friends, and community have given us.

And this is our moment to shine! That is what everything in our lives has been building up to!

We shouldn’t be afraid. Because even though we’re alone, we’re not abandoned. Hashem is right there watching with pride like that parent, confident that we have what it takes to succeed, and standing by with an outstretched arm to catch us if we fall and hug us when it’s over and the sun rises again.

1. Hanoch Teller’s Souled (61). For a discussion on the authorship of the poem, see Rachel Aviv’s “Who Wrote Footsteps?” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68974/enter-sandman> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Psalms 23:4 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. B’reishis Rabbah 68:11 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Genesis 28:15 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Genesis 28:30, [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Genesis 31:10-13, 42. Lavan also acknowledges Hashem’s role in Yaakov’s success – see Genesis 28:22, 31:29. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. One could say that it was a two stage fight and that the second part, the meeting with the real Eisav was a war of words – an intellectual fight. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. “NO FLYING, NO TIGHTS FOR `SMALLVILLE' SUPERMAN,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer (Seattle, WA). July 17, 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Genesis 27:40 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Rashi Genesis 32:25 s.v. “Vaye’avek” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Genesis 33:18 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)