

Parsha Vayishlach

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1. The Infrastructure of the Jewish People

The Torah tells us that after Yaakov met Rachel, he raised up his voice and cried. Rashi cites the Midrash that the reason Yaakov cried was that G-d revealed that Rachel would not be buried with him (in the tomb of Machpela, which was meant to contain only four couples). The question is – why did Hashem reveal this to Yaakov? Secondly, why was it revealed at this particular moment?

Yaakov, the future Patriarch of the Jewish people, understood that Rachel was meant to be his soul mate and the Matriarch of the Jewish people. He perceived Rachel as the embodiment of all Twelve Tribes. The reason this perception was correct and accurate was that in fact Rachel was the mother of Yosef. We find that although Yosef's children, Ephraim and Menashe, were the grandchildren of Yaakov, they were also considered the equivalent of his children. The Gemara tells us that initially Yosef had the capacity to father twelve sons. It was only because of the incident with the wife of Potiphar (who attempted to seduce him) that he had lost ten droplets of semen (each potentially generating a Tribe). Thus, Yosef only had two sons.

If in fact Yaakov's perception of Rachel was correct – that she would be the Matriarch of all Twelve Tribes – then why was she not going to be buried with him? Seemingly, Hashem was communicating to Yaakov that there was a deficiency in Rachel and therefore she could not be **the only** Matriarch of the Klal Yisroel. The fact that Rachel would not be buried with Yaakov was an indication that there would be another Matriarch, who was meant to be the mother of some of the Tribes. Thus, that other Matriarch would be the one to be buried with Yaakov.

The question is – if Rachel had the spiritual dimension to be the Matriarch of all Twelve Tribes, then why did Hashem decree that the twelve sons of Yaakov should emanate from four wives rather than from one?

The Maharal of Prague says that if one were to describe the essence of G-d, the only descriptor that can be given is Echad (He is the Only One). Nothing exists outside of G-d. The Maharal explains that thirteen is the numerical value of the word *echad*. The Jewish people are comprised of thirteen tribes– twelve were given a share in the Land of Israel and one (Levy), was not. He explains that the thirteen tribes of the Jewish people reflect the Unity of Hashem, which is *echad*. The Maharal explains further that even within the context of the thirteen tribes there is a more specific allusion to *echad*.

The most spiritual of the thirteen tribes was Levy because it was chosen to officiate for G-d. Therefore, in order to indicate its uniqueness, we would classify Levy as *aleph (number one)* – a level unto itself. Of the four wives of Yaakov, two of them were considered Matriarchs (Rachel and Leah) and two were considered concubines (Bilhah and Zilpah). The Matriarchs, who were of special spiritual status, bore Yaakov eight sons; Leah mothered six and Rachel two. The number **eight** is denoted with the letter *ches*. The concubines of Yaakov (who were of lesser spiritual dimension) bore him **four** sons, which are denoted with the letter *daled*. The following identifies the various levels of spirituality contained within the tribes of Israel. We have the tribe of Levy (*aleph*), the sons of the Matriarchs (*ches*), and the sons of the concubines (*daled*), spelling – *echad*. The Maharal explains that not only do the tribes numerically reflect the unity of Hashem but also the innate spiritual structure of the tribes themselves reflects *echad* (*aleph ches daled*).

In order to establish an entity, which reflects the Unity of Hashem both in number and in structure

it was necessary for Yaakov to father the Tribes through four wives (as explained above). Initially Yaakov, our Patriarch, did not understand this. When he saw that Rachel would not be buried with him he feared that it was because there was a spiritual defect in her. However, with the Maharal's explanation regarding the number thirteen, we are able to understand that not being buried with Yaakov was not the result of a spiritual deficiency on the part of Rachel or her capacity to mother the Tribes of Israel.

2. How does One Deal with the World Despite its Unlimited Pitfalls

The Portion of Vayishlach begins with Yaakov sending agents to inform his brother Esav that he is returning after being away for many years. The Torah states, **“To my lord, to Esav so said your servant Yaakov: I have sojourned with Lavan and lingered until now – *im Lavan gartie.*”** Rashi cites the Midrash, which gives two interpretations of **“*im Lavan gartie* – I have sojourned with Lavan.”** The Midrash explains that the word “gartie,” which means “stranger,” is to communicate to Esav that despite his father's blessing for good fortune, Yaakov remained a stranger - a man without status. The second interpretation cited by Rashi is that the word “gartie” is numerically equivalent to “taryag,” the 613 mitzvos of the Torah. Yaakov was communicating to Esav that although he had lived for a period of twenty years in the home of his evil father-in-law, Lavan, his spirituality had not diminished as much as an iota. Yaakov was as much a tzaddik now as he was when he left for Charan.

The question is why would Yaakov need to communicate to Esav that he was a “stranger” – a man without status? Or that he remained devout despite the influences of his father-in-law, Lavan? Esav, being a man who had no interest or regard for spirituality, could not care less whether Yaakov was devout or not - or whether he was a person of status for that matter. Esav despised the essence of Yaakov and only wished to kill him. With this understanding of Esav's position vis-à-vis Yaakov, what is the significance of Yaakov's message?

After Yaakov had rightfully received the blessing from his father Yitzchak, Esav said to his father “That one (Yaakov) tricked me twice.” Yitzchak responded, “Your brother came and took the blessings with wisdom.” Yitzchak realized, through the dialogue with Esav, that Yaakov was justified to have taken the blessings despite the manner in which they were taken. The fact remains however that Yaakov deceived Yitzchak by impersonating Esav in order to take the blessing. Yaakov is referred to as the “ish Emes – the man of Truth.” He was concerned that by behaving in a deceitful manner, his characteristic of Truth was diminished and that he had to re-establish it to an untainted level. In order to accomplish this Yaakov dedicated fourteen years of uninterrupted Torah study in the yeshiva of Shem V'Aver before departing to Charan – the home of Lavan. Yaakov understood that his characteristic of Emes needed to be free of deficiency in order to survive the evil environment of Charan and to perceive even the slightest nuance of Evil fully.

When Esav realized that Yaakov had used deception (which was his own characteristic) to take the blessings, he believed that Yaakov had become weakened and could now fall prey to him. If Yaakov breached his standard of Truth, then he was vulnerable to Esav's attack. The only way Esav could have killed Yaakov is if his characteristic of Truth was compromised.

Esav believed that after spending twenty years with a man such as Lavan, who epitomized and personified evil and deceit, there was no way that Yaakov's characteristic of Truth could not have been eroded and compromised. Because of this, Yaakov sent a message to Esav communicating to him that he was a “stranger in the house of Lavan.” Meaning, despite the fact he was exposed to Lavan for many years, he did not have any relevance to Lavan or his evil surroundings. Yaakov was truly a stranger. He always felt that he did not have any interest in physicality as an end – but only as a means to do the will of Hashem. Similarly, the Torah refers to Patriarchs (Avraham and Yitzchak) as “*gareim*- strangers” because they also utilized existence as a means and not as an end. By communicating that he was a stranger to Esav, Yaakov was informing him that although he had been exposed to the evils of Lavan, he was not subject to their influences. Thus, Esav would understand that Yaakov was not vulnerable to his attack.

The more one sees himself as a “stranger” vis-à-vis existence, the more he has a chance to succeed in the realm of spirituality. A wealthy Jew once visited the Chofetz Chaim z’tl and observed that he lived in a residence, which was the equivalent of a hovel. The furnishings of his home were far from impressive. The wealthy man was surprised that a man of such renown as the Chofetz Chaim would be living in such impoverished surroundings. Upon seeing the visitor’s perplexed look The Chofetz Chaim asked him, “Where are you staying locally?” The wealthy man responded, “In the small inn down the road.” The Chofetz Chaim asked him to describe his room at the inn. He responded by saying that his room was small and non-descript. The paint in the room was peeling and the furniture was in a state of disrepair. The Chofetz Chaim responded by saying, “I thought that a man of your wealth would have more luxurious accommodations.” To this the wealthy man responded, “Rabbi, you must understand that I am only passing through and therefore it is o.k.” The Chofetz Chaim said to his visitor, “I am also only passing through and therefore the accommodations are irrelevant.” The wealthy man now understood who the Chofetz Chaim was. The world to him was only a means and not an end to any degree.

The Patriarchs’ relevance to existence was that they were “gareim – strangers” in this world. They were only passing through this world. The physical world was only a means and not an end. Therefore, Yaakov was able to communicate to Esav that he had not compromised any of the 613 precepts of the Torah. His spirituality was uncompromised.

3. Yaakov’s Sensitivity to His Own Spirituality

The Torah tells us that Yaakov was informed that his brother was coming towards him with 400-armed men and that despite the length of time that had transpired, Esav’s hate had not waned. Yaakov began to pray. He said, **“I have been diminished by all the kindnesses and by all the truth that You have done Your servant; for with my staff I crossed this Jordan and now I have become two camps. Rescue me...”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Yaakov was concerned that his merits may have been depleted. He says, **“I have been diminished,”** because when he crossed the Jordan on his way to Charan his only possession was his walking staff and now because of the kindness of Hashem, Yaakov is returning with great wealth and a large family. Therefore, he believed that since Hashem had bestowed such kindness upon him, that perhaps he did not have sufficient merit remaining to protect him from his brother Esav. This is the simple understanding of verse as explained by Rashi.

Perhaps one can say that Yaakov was concerned that his merits had been depleted because he had crossed the Jordan in an impoverished state and was now returning with great wealth. However, at the same time, Yaakov was alluding to the fact that despite his successes, his merit was not be depleted. When Yaakov left his father’s home, his parents entrusted him with great wealth. Yaakov needed this wealth to negotiate with Lavan for the hand of his daughter in marriage, just as his grandfather’s servant Eliezer was entrusted with great wealth to negotiate for the hand of Rivka for Yitzchak. Rashi cites the Midrash that Yaakov (at the time of the crossing of the Jordan) was impoverished because Esav had sent his son Elifaz to kill him. In an attempt to save his own life, Yaakov relinquished all of his wealth to Elifaz and explained to him that this was based on a principle, which he had learned from his grandfather Yitzchak, that “one who is impoverished is considered as if he is dead.” Thus by taking his wealth, Elifaz would have minimally fulfilled the dictate of his father to kill Yaakov. Consequently, Yaakov’s sole possession was the clothing on his back and his walking staff. This is what Yaakov meant when he said, “I have crossed the Jordan with my walking staff.”

It is interesting to note that when Yaakov first saw Rachel coming from a distance with her flock of sheep, the Torah tells us that the well that was used by the community to water the flocks was covered with a large boulder. Usually, this boulder was removed when all the shepherds would gather to water their flocks. However, when Yaakov understood that Rachel’s flock would have to be watered, he single-handedly plucked the rock from the opening of the well. Rashi explains in his commentary that he removed the boulder as one removes a cork from a bottle. In this way, the Torah is informing us of Yaakov’s enormous strength. The question is – why is it important for us to know that Yaakov possessed nearly super human strength? We do not find that his physical

strength factored into his role as a Patriarch.

There is a principle in Jewish law that if one rises to kill you then you are obliged to rise and kill your attacker. Based on this principle, we must understand why Yaakov did not kill Elifaz when he was confronted by him. One could say that Yaakov had no choice because he did not have the physical strength to overpower Elifaz. However, by revealing Yaakov's superhuman strength, the Torah is telling us that he could have killed him. If so, then why did he relinquish his wealth to Elifaz rather than kill him? The consequence was that Yaakov had to spend twenty years of hard labor earning the hands of his wives and re-establishing his family's fortune. Yaakov understood that as the future Patriarch of the Jewish people his own level of spirituality would determine the spiritual viability of the Jewish people until the end of time. He understood that although he was permitted to kill Elifaz, he nevertheless chose to relinquish his wealth rather than take a life in self-defense. Yaakov understood that the act of killing would diminish him as a spiritual person and thereby diminish the potential of the Jewish people. Yaakov's relinquishment of wealth was in fact a Kiddush Hashem (Sanctification of G-d's Name) because he chose to give away all of his wealth at the expense of having to spend twenty years in an environment which was antithetical to his being. Yaakov's statement, "I have crossed the Jordan with my walking staff" was in effect a badge of honor for Yaakov.

Yaakov was concerned that he was vulnerable to Esav's attack because the kindness that was bestowed upon him might have depleted his merit. However, at the same time he was saying, "I am deserving of Your protection because I gave up all of my wealth and it was later restored - only as a result of my sanctification of Your Name."

4. The Uniqueness of Yaakov

The Torah tells us that when Rivka, our Matriarch, was pregnant with Yaakov and Esav, she experienced "rumblings within herself". Chazal tell us that when Rivka would pass before a temple of idolatry, Esav would bolt to leave her womb. When she would pass before the yeshiva of Shem V'Aver, Yaakov would do the same. Another interpretation cited by Rashi was that the "rumblings" experienced by Rivka, was Yaakov and Esav battling one another in the womb over the physical and spiritual world. Yaakov as the representation of "good" and Esav as the representation of "evil" were a counter balance for one another. Yaakov was naturally inclined to spirituality and holiness, while Esav was inclined to physicality and desire. They were diametrically opposed to one another. Being the ultimate representation of good and evil, Yaakov and Esav had to come into existence simultaneously because one force could not exist without the counter force.

The Torah tells us that after transporting his family across the river, Yaakov was left alone – "levado". The Torah states, "**Yaakov was left alone (*levado*) and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.**" Chazal explain that at that moment, Yaakov wrestled with the archangel of Esav (Esav's spiritual counterpart). The question is why the angel of Esav attacked Yaakov at that moment and not in the home of Lavan or at some other time.

Yaakov communicated to Esav through his agents that the reason he was delayed all these years and was not able to engage with him sooner was because "*im Lavan gartie*"- which indicated that although Yaakov was exposed to Lavan for twenty years, he observed all of the 613 mitzvos of the Torah meticulously. He was returning spiritually unscathed, despite all the negative influences of that community. Yaakov's dimension of spirituality at this moment was exponentially greater than it had been originally because he had not compromised it despite all the difficulties that he had faced.

The Midrash tells us that just as Yaakov is referred to as "*levado* – alone/unique," we find that Hashem is also referred to in this way. As stated in the verse, "Hashem is exalted *levado* – at a level unto Himself." Hashem is alone/unique at that level and one-of-a-kind. It is only after Yaakov departed the house of Lavan that the Torah identifies Yaakov as the person who is *levado* - indicating that it was at that moment (after leaving the home of Lavan) that Yaakov achieved that

unique spiritual dimension that was one-of-a-kind. Now he was at a level of spirituality that he was able to deal with the archangel of Esav. This was going to be the ultimate test – will Yaakov defeat the angel and subdue him or will he be defeated?

Sforno in his commentary states that the angel was not able to defeat Yaakov because there was not a moment during the struggle that Yaakov was detached from Hashem in thought or speech. Every aspect of Yaakov cleaved to Hashem. He was levado. Because of the victory over the angel, Yaakov actualized his spiritual potential and was thus called “Yisroel”. As the Torah states, **“You (Yaakov) have striven with the Divine and with man and have overcome.”** Yaakov had overcome the Divine by defeating the angel and he lorded over “man” because he succeeded despite Lavan and Esav. At this moment, Yaakov had achieved a dimension that would forever be a part of the spiritual infrastructure of the Jewish people.

The Jewish people are the B’nai Yisroel – the Children of Yisroel. We have eternal relevance to the (*levado*) uniqueness of Yaakov our Patriarch. Whenever the Jewish people incur a diminishment it is only in our physical number - our essence remains constant and intact. Since Yaakov had established himself as a unique, spiritual individual, who reflects the Unity of Hashem, the essence of the Jewish people has been set until the end of time. Because the Jewish people share the quality of levado, as Hashem is levado, we were taken to be G-d’s people.

We learn from the incident of Yaakov, that despite being at the most advanced level of spirituality, he was confronted with the most difficult challenge of his life – the confrontation with the archangel of Esav. We can never rest on our laurels despite the level of our own spiritual accomplishments. Whatever our personal level may be, we must be positioned and ready to deal with the upcoming challenge.

5. One’s Perspective of Life Determines One’s Happiness

When Esav met Yaakov, after not seeing him for many years, he noticed the camps of Yaakov’s people and asked, **“Who are these (people) to you?”** Yaakov responded, **“The Children who G-d has graciously (*chanina*) given to your servant.”** Esav then asked Yaakov about the purpose of the gift that was sent to him. Yaakov answered that it was sent to find favor in his eyes. Esav responded to Yaakov by saying, **“I have much. My brother, let what you have remain yours.”** Esav initially rejected Yaakov’s gift because he had felt that it was given to him because he was needy. Yaakov urged his brother to accept the gift as an expression of his reverence for him. He urged Esav saying, **“Please accept my gift which was brought to you, inasmuch as G-d has been gracious (*chanina*) to me and inasmuch as I have everything.”** Esav then accepted Yaakov’s gift.

We find that Yaakov repeatedly expressed himself in a manner that reflected that he felt unworthy of G-d’s blessings. He did not feel deserving or entitled to all the blessings that were bestowed upon him. This is why he referred to his children as, **“The Children who G-d has graciously (*chanina*) given to your servant.”** Regarding Esav’s concern that Yaakov was giving him a gift because he was in need, Esav commented by saying, “I have much.” Yaakov then urged Esav to accept his gift because he himself has “everything”. The question is why did Esav express himself in one manner and Yaakov in another?

Yaakov expressed himself regarding the blessings he received from G-d in the context of having “everything” because Yaakov had no sense of entitlement and therefore whatever he had was more than he felt he deserved. However, Esav who epitomized physicality – the man of power and lust, believed that all that he had was due to his deservingness and was a result of his own accomplishment. In terms of his self-perception, Esav believed he was entitled to all of existence.

If a person were truly a tzaddik, he would have no sense of entitlement. When Moshe Rabbeinu prayed to Hashem to annul the decree and allow him to enter into the Land of Israel, his expression of prayer was. “Through Your graciousness (*chanina*) allow me to enter.” He understood that it would only be through the graciousness of Hashem that he would be allowed to

enter the Land. Chazal tell us that had it not been for Moshe, the Jewish people would not have ever left Egypt. Despite this, Moshe felt that he was not worthy or entitled to demand anything from Hashem. Moshe understood that the purpose of his existence was to be the Redeemer of the Jewish people and the communicator of G-d's Torah. Moshe did not pride himself in any of his accomplishments. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers) states, "If one studies much Torah, he should not pride himself because it is for this that he was created."

If a person feels that he is not entitled to anything then he could subsist on bread and water. He is able to sleep on the ground and live a life of deprivation without any difficulty. One only has a problem with having less if he believes he deserves more than he receives.

The question to be asked is – if Esav's perception of life was diametrically opposed to that of his brother Yaakov (in terms of entitlement) – why did Yaakov express himself in a manner that Esav would not be able to comprehend by saying "I have everything"? The answer is - Yaakov could only express himself in a manner that was the truth. Even in the situation when Yaakov was posing as his brother to receive the blessings, he did not change his manner of expression even though it caused Yitzchak to become suspect of Yaakov. When Yaakov receiving the blessing from Yitzchak, he spoke to his father in a gentler manner than Esav would have by saying, "please father". Additionally Yaakov said to his father that, "Hashem has provided me with the game that I caught." Esav never used the name of G-d. By expressing himself in this manner, Yaakov revealed his true identity, which could have jeopardized his chance of receiving the blessing. Nevertheless, expressing himself differently would have been considered a Chilul Hashem (desecration of G-d's Name). He could not have expressed himself differently. Saying that his success was unrelated to the graciousness of G-d was a falsehood. It would have been considered a heretical statement for Yaakov. Therefore, Yaakov had to express himself in this context regardless of Esav's understanding.

Often Jews try to express themselves in a manner that is meant to conceal their true beliefs to others who may be sensitive to religion. The question is how could one express himself differently and not acknowledge that whatever he has is only due to the graciousness of Hashem. Therefore, we must always remain true to our beliefs, as Yaakov was when he expressed his perspective to Esav.

6. Infusing the Physical with the Spiritual

The Torah tells us that when Esav approached Yaakov's family, each of Yaakov's wives, followed by their children came forth to pay their respects to Esav, except for Rachel. It says that when Rachel approached Esav to acknowledge him, her son Yosef went before her. Rashi cites Chazal that Yosef said, "My mother is an exceptionally beautiful woman, and perhaps the eye of this evil man (rasha) will gaze upon the beauty of my mother. Therefore I will block his view so that he will not be able to gaze upon her." Chazal tell us that because Yosef demonstrated such sensitivity towards his mother in this situation by shielding her from the gaze of Esav, he merited from his father Yaakov the special blessing of "*Alei aayin* - You are above the eye," meaning that he was not susceptible to the evil eye. The blessing that Yosef's children Menashe and Ephraim received from their grandfather Yaakov was, "May you proliferate abundantly like fish in the midst of the land." Chazal explain that the meaning of this blessing is that Yosef and his sons will not be susceptible to the evil eye - just as fish are not seen by man because they are covered by water, so too, Yosef and his sons will not be susceptible to the gaze of the human eye.

The question is - why Yosef did not want Esav to gaze upon the beauty of his mother Rachel. Why did Yosef merit such an exceptional blessing for obscuring Esav's gaze? Was it because he was concerned that Esav would be attracted to his mother and thus cause Yaakov difficulty by trying to take Rachel? We find that this was not the case because when Yaakov left Charan, he was not concerned with confronting Esav. As the verse states, "the house of Yaakov is fire, the house of Yosef is flame, and the house of Esav is straw." Meaning that with the birth of Yosef, Yaakov was not concerned with defeating Esav because with their combined spiritual energy they would consume Esav (who is straw).

It is against Jewish law for a man to gaze upon a woman in a lustful manner (especially a married woman). Perhaps one may say that Yosef did not want Esav to transgress this law and if he did not obscure Esav's gaze his mother would be the cause of Esav's transgression. This is based on the law "Do not put a stumbling block before a blind man." However, this cannot be the case because Esav was not a Jew and therefore was not bound by the law prohibiting the lustful gaze upon a woman even if she was married. Thus, this is not the reason Yosef obscured his mother.

Yosef, himself in the physical sense was the ultimate in beauty. As the Viceroy of Egypt, when Yosef would pass through the streets on his chariot, the women would gaze upon his beauty. In addition, the Torah tells us that Yosef's mother, Rachel, was extremely beautiful. In fact, the Gemara tells us that she is considered one of the most beautiful women who ever lived. Why is it so important that the Torah reveal that Yosef and Rachel possessed such exceptional beauty? The Talmud in Tractate Bava Basra says, that the "progeny of Esav could only fall through the progeny of Rachel." Apparently, the offspring of Rachel (and not Leah) possess a spiritual energy that can incapacitate and bring about the downfall of the offspring of Esav. Why is this so?

Esav personified physicality at the most exaggerated level. The Torah refers to him as, "the man of the field." No one in the history of this world was able to appreciate physicality in the way that Esav did. He was the consummate hedonist.

Yosef and Rachel both epitomized the ultimate in physical beauty and perfection. However, rather than succumbing to vanity and living a life of physicality, they consecrated that exaggerated beauty and physicality to the service of Hashem. Yosef and Rachel subjugated and subordinated their beauty to spirituality.

The fact that Rachel was able subjugate her beauty, which was unequaled in existence, indicated that she had the ability to dominate, subjugate and subordinate anything within the physical realm. This is why Esav, who represents the ultimate in physicality, is dominated and subjugated by the progeny of Rachel. Yosef was able to dominate Egypt, as its Viceroy, because it epitomized physicality.

If Esav was allowed to gaze at the beauty of Rachel he would have only perceive her as a physical being. To perceive someone who is so infused with holiness and spirituality as Rachel (Our Matriarch) as merely a physical object would have been a Chilul Hashem (desecration of the Name of G-d). Yosef would not allow Esav to gaze upon his mother to prevent this desecration. Since Yosef prevented a Chilul Hashem by obscuring Esav's gaze upon his mother, he merited the blessing of "*Alei aayin*- You are above the eye". Until the end of time, no human eye can negatively affect Yosef or his offspring.