

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS VAYISHLACH

Yaakov's Struggle with the Angel

וַיִּתֵּר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיִּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר

*And Yaakov was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.*¹

INTRODUCTION: A DUEL WITH NO DETAILS

The Torah's account of Yaakov's struggle with the angel is extremely cryptic. Not only are we not informed who this "man" is, we are also not told what the struggle was about. All the verse tells us is as a prelude to this episode is that "Yaakov was left alone," and then, abruptly, someone is wrestling with him.

The word the Torah uses to describe the struggle – "וַיִּאָבֵק" – also requires our attention; how does this word come to denote a struggle? Rashi explains that it is derived from the word "אֲבָק", dust, for it is the way of people who wrestle to kick up dust. Understandably, this explanation itself needs to be explained. Why refer to the struggle in terms of what is essentially a secondary effect, and even then only relevant when the struggle is taking place where there is dust? The Gemara² takes this matter even further, stating:

שֶׁהֵעִלוּ אֲבָק עַד לְכֶסֶד הַכְּבוֹד

They raised dust until the Heavenly Throne of Glory

These words, too, require our contemplation. Dust cannot naturally rise up that high; what is the meaning of it doing so here, especially considering that Hashem's Throne of Glory is not a physical entity to which dust could rise in any event?

¹ Bereishis 32:25.

² Chullin 91a.

FORGOTTEN VESSELS

The sages inform us that the reason Yaakov was left alone is that he went back for some small jars that he had forgotten. The next thing we know someone is wrestling with him. R' Yosef Salant³ explains that the reason we are provided with this background to the fight is because the fight was actually about those jars! The reason Yaakov went back for some small vessels of seemingly insignificant value is because his sense of Divine Providence was so strong and all-pervasive that it was clear to him that if he owned them, they must have some purpose in his pursuit of higher spiritual living.

Esav's angel, representing his ideology, rejects the notion of Divine Supervision over man's affairs, a stance that allows him to act as he please without any sense of accountability. Whenever a force of evil wishes to attack a righteous person, it will do so at the farthest extreme of that person's spiritual level. For a person who prays three times a day without fail, the *yetzzer hara* will not attempt to lower him to two times; he will, instead encourage him to pray a bit quicker or in a more distracted way. Here, too, when the angel wishes to wrestle with Yaakov over his sense of connectivity to the Divine, he begins with the most trivial of items, as if to say, "Even if you subscribe to a connection with Hashem in a *general way*, does that really have to extend to these small jars?" As we can appreciate, a conversation that begins about small jars can graduate to a discussion about larger jars and from there on to matters of greater and greater significance. In a sense, therefore, we could say that Yaakov's struggle throughout that night was to remain firm on the extent of his connection with Hashem and not waiver even on those small jars.

The concept of insignificance is epitomized by the most insignificant entity that exists – dust. By contrast, the idea of Hashem's Throne of Glory represents His supervision over all of man's affairs, as mundane as they may be.⁴ We can now return the Gemara's statement that they "raised dust until the Throne of Glory" and appreciate that this is not a description of the *effects* of that struggle, but of *the struggle itself*. Yaakov's task was to remain firm in his insistence that even matters that one might term "dust" are also under the supervision of the Hashem's Throne of Glory".

TEN TO SIX – FROM PENIEL TO PENUEL

The conflict between Yaakov and the angel, while spiritual and ideological in nature, had its ramifications on Yaakov's physical state and left him limping the following morning. The transition from the spiritual plane of conflict to the physical plane afterwards can be seen in the following fascinating way. The Torah relates that Yaakov named the place where the struggle took place in order to express his gratitude from having survived the ordeal. Verse 31 reads:

וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם פְּנֵי אֵל כִּי רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פְּנִים אֶל פְּנִים וַתִּנָּצֵל נַפְשִׁי

Yaakov called the name of the place Peniel – "For I have seen the Divine face to face, yet my life was spared."

Most interestingly, in the very next verse, the name of the place shifts slightly from the one Yaakov had bestowed upon it:

וַיִּזְרַח לוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָבַר אֶת פְּנּוּאֵל

The sun rose for him as he passed by Penuel.

Why does the first verse call it Peniel, and the second call it Penuel?

3 *Be'er Yosef*, Parshas Vayishlach.

4 This idea finds expression in the *asher yatzar* blessing, which we recite after performing the most mundane of bodily functions, in which we say, "It is known and revealed before Your Throne of Glory" that if any part of the body that should be open would close up or vice versa we could not endure. This is to emphasize that even such basic matters are subject to ongoing Divine supervision, represented by the Throne of Glory (Vilna Gaon, commentary *Inrei Noam* to Maseches Berachos 60b).

Rabbeinu Bachye explains that these two names reflect the two different planes Yaakov was on at those respective times. To understand how, let us preface by considering the different connotations of the letters yud and vav.

- ▷ The letter *yud* represents spirituality. It is the letter with the smallest physical presence, and the only one which does not rest on the surface of the line, but rather floats above it. Moreover, *yud* represents the realm of thought, reflected in the fact that verbs in the future tense – which denote things that a person is thinking of but which do not yet physically exist – begin with the letter yud.
- ▷ The letter *vav* represents physicality. In a sense, it is a *yud* with its leg extended so that it reaches the ground. The numerical value of *vav* is six, corresponding to the six days of physical creation. Additionally, the word *vav* itself means a hook or link, denoting the sequential cause and effect of physical actions.

The first verse describes Yaakov when he was yet on the spiritual plane where he had wrestled with the angel. As such, the name he gave to the place was **פניאל** with a *yud*, representing that sphere. The second verse describes the transition from the spiritual plane to the physical, which then left him limping. This transition is marked by the change in the name of the place itself from **פניאל** with a *yud* to **פנואל** with a *vav*!

GID HANASHEH – HALACHIC REMOVAL AND HASHKAFIC TAKEAWAY

As we know, the injury that Yaakov sustained on that occasion translates into one of the mitzvos of the Torah, namely, that of not eating the *gid hanasheh* (sciatic nerve) of the animal. Practically, for those of us who do not prepare our own meat, this mitzvah is one we routinely fulfill without ever having to think about it, as the *gid hanasheh* is removed long before the meat becomes available to the kosher consumer. However, perhaps studying Parshas Vayishlach can provide us with an opportunity to contemplate this mitzvah – one of the first we ever received.

The commentators explain that the blow the angel was able to inflict on Yaakov's thigh, with its proximity to his reproductive organ, represents the fact that his descendants would not all be on the level he was in terms of his sense of connection with Hashem. By placing the *gid hanasheh* off-limits for consumption by Yaakov's children, the Torah is providing us with a reminder of the gap we should be looking to close, developing the connection between our lives and the Throne of Glory. Indeed, the verse later on informs us that Yaakov's limp healed at a certain stage, allowing him to walk fully upright. This reflects the idea – and provides the inspiration – toward a time when Yaakov's descendants will free themselves of their limp, arise to reclaim their heritage of connectivity with the Divine, and stride steadily and confidently toward redemption.