

# הַמַּחְלָה THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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## STRATEGIES FOR WARRING AGAINST THE EVIL INCLINATION

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

**I**t is written, "And Jacob sent messengers [angels according to one interpretation] ahead of him ... to the land of Seir, the field of Edom. And he commanded them, saying, 'Thus shall you say to my lord, to Esau: "Thus has Jacob your servant said, 'I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now' (Genesis 32:4-5). Further on it is written, "And Jacob was greatly afraid, and was distressed" (v.8).

The Sages explained, "Jacob feared Esau, which is why he was prepared to do three things: To offer him gifts, to pray, and to wage war" (Rashi on Genesis 32:9).

These passages raise many questions that should be answered.

1. Why did Jacob send angels to appease Esau? He knows that Esau hates him, as his mother said, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself regarding you to kill you" (Genesis 27:42). Esau hates him for having deprived him of his birthright and blessings, and all the gold in the world would not have sufficed to assuage his hate. Sending angels before him could seem like a provocation and a declaration of war. In order to avoid meeting Esau, whom he had not seen for a long time, would it not have been better that Jacob take another route to get to his father Isaac? In that way they would never have met, and Jacob would not have had any reason to be afraid.

2. If Esau hated Jacob for so long, why did he do nothing up to that time? During those 22 years, he could have gone to Haran and wage war against Jacob, for really now, Esau did not lack audacity. Was it therefore Laban that he feared?

3. Why did Jacob fear Esau? When he left his father's house, G-d promised him, "I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this soil, for I will not forsake you" (Genesis 28:15). And while at Laban's, G-d also promised Jacob that "I will be with you" (ibid. 31:3). Why then was he afraid of Esau? And if in fact he had no reason to fear, why did he need to prepare himself for all eventualities by means of gifts, prayer, and waging war?

4. Jacob's intentions when he told Esau, "I have sojourned with Laban" need to be explained. Did Esau not know that Jacob had lived all this time with Laban?

In fact, all the time that Jacob stayed with Laban, he was surprised that his brother did not come to Haran to

declare war against him, for Esau was not afraid of Laban and he had the power to fight both Jacob and Laban at the same time. However, when Jacob understood just how much a liar and wicked man Laban was, he correctly understood that Esau had no intention of killing him by taking his life. Rather, Esau wanted to kill him in another way – not physically. If Jacob would have allowed himself to be influenced by his uncle Laban, he himself would have also become wicked, and since "the wicked are dead even during their lives," that would have been his end. It necessarily follows that Jacob would have, in that case, lost all the advantages of Isaac's blessings. This is why Esau had no reason to go to Haran and to declare war against him, since Laban would accomplish what he himself wanted, and Esau was happy with every passing minute that Jacob spent in Haran in the presence of that awful man (Rashi on Genesis 24:50), called by everyone "the king of liars" (Tanhuma Vayishlach 1).

This is the reason why Jacob had him told, "I have sojourned with Laban," which means "I observed the entire Torah and I have not become wicked as you think. On the contrary, during all that time I continued to follow the path of the Torah. Even more, I learned from Laban how not to act, as it is said, 'Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies' [Psalms 119:98]. All the goods that I possess, I acquired them by hard work, and consequently the blessings of my father have not been diminished, and they remain good for myself and my descendants until the end of time" (Midrash Haggadah, Tanhuma Vayishlach).

It remains for us to explain why Jacob did not prefer to take another route to arrive at his father's, rather than to confront Esau.

The reason for this was that Jacob wanted to instruct all the generations on how to serve G-d. He teaches us that it is forbidden to flee from the Satan, "who is the evil inclination, who is the Angel of Death" (Bava Batra 16a). On the contrary, one must confront and dominate it, as it is said, "One must always make the good inclination dominate the evil inclination" (Berachot 5a), which Rashi explains to mean, "One must wage war against it" (Rashi ibid.) in order to destroy it forever. In addition, it is possible to put it to work in the service of G-d, as it is written: "You shall love the L-RD with all your heart" – with both

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inclinations of your heart, the good and the evil" (Berachot 54a). Just as we are afraid to wage war, we must fear the war against the evil inclination, all while maintaining our full trust in G-d, the Creator of the world, and know that He will come to help and provide us with victory. This is what Jacob did when he intentionally went out before Esau, in order to meet, confront, and defeat him. However Jacob feared that some sin on his part would make him lose this war (Berachot 4a), as it is written, "My sin is before me always" (Psalms 51:5). Why? Because Esau observed to perfection the commandment of honoring one's parents (Shemot Rabba 46:3), whereas Jacob, during his long absence, was not able to honor his father, and this sin could have caused his defeat. And thus when Jacob attacked Esau, he began by repenting for not having served his father. Even though Jacob had no reason to fear Esau, since G-d had promised to watch over him, he nevertheless feared that in meeting Esau he would forget, albeit for just a moment, G-d's protection, and this sin would cause his downfall. This is why he prepared to offer gifts, to pray, and to wage war.

The behavior of Jacob is a lesson for his children. It comes to teach them that one should always be in a position to employ these three methods: Gifts, prayer, and waging war. How can we do this?

In studying Torah and by following its ways, one is assured of being able to overcome the evil inclination, since "Torah is the remedy for the evil inclination" (Kiddushin 30b) and "it protect and saves" (Sotah 21a). Despite this, when we fight against the evil inclination, we risk breaking away from G-d, albeit for just a moment, which could seal our defeat. Therefore Jacob warns us that even in the heat of action, we should not forget the fear of G-d, and that any break in our connection to G-d can make us lose the battle. One should therefore be ready for three things: To wage war, meaning to attack the evil inclination (as we said earlier); to pray that G-d saves us from the grip of the enemy; and to, above all, give gifts, which means to seize the Torah, which is a gift.

In fact it is written, "And from Mattanah to Nahaliel; and from Nahaliel to Bamoth" (Numbers 21:19). Basing themselves on the fact that Mattanah means "gift", the Sages have said, "The Torah is called a gift" (Berachot 5a) and it is a teaching, as it is written, "I give you a good teaching, do not forsake My Torah" (Proverbs 4:2). In remaining constantly attached to the Torah, it will definitely help us to defeat the evil inclination. Even though we have G-d's promise, if we separate our thoughts from Him, even for a moment, that promise may not be realized. This is what Jacob feared, and it is this lesson that he transmitted to his descendants for all the generations.

There is another lesson to draw from Jacob's behavior with Esau. One must pursue the evil inclination everywhere it hides, and this because it has several appellations, as the Sages say: "The evil inclination has seven names" (Sukkah 52a). It is called "a mighty king" (Ecclesiastes 9:14), David called it "Sinner" (Zohar I:165), and it is also named "Impure" and "Base" (Zohar III:101b). It can therefore appear under forms as diverse as they are various, and it can be present even without us being

aware of it. We must always be wary of and watch for it on all sides, as we recite in the daily prayers: "Remove the Satan from before us and from behind us," meaning, from whatever side it may come. This is because the evil inclination may present itself to us in the form of a man who is full of merits, just as it may attack us from behind like a wicked man who wants to kill us.

Examples illustrating these facts are not lacking. Sometimes the Satan presents itself to us in the early morning: It awakens us for prayer, and we in fact wake up and do all that we have to do. However afterwards, the evil inclination makes us proud, as we tell ourselves, "I woke up early this morning and I prayed." It then infuses evil thoughts within, making us say, "I woke up so early this morning. I'm so tired!" and thus it makes it impossible for us to study during the rest of the day.

We must therefore stay ahead of the evil inclination and strike the first blow, as it is written, "When you will go out to war against your enemies" (Deuteronomy 21:10) act with the fear of the sins that you have committed. Do not become boastful, and do not break your connection with G-d at the moment of battle.

This is what Jacob said to Esau: "I have sojourned with Laban, and I did not learn from his evil ways. However you lived with Isaac, a righteous man, and you remained wicked. You did not learn from his good ways." As the Sages say, "Esau lived with two upright people and did not learn anything from their behavior" (Yoma 38b). Jacob added: "I remained up to now," meaning: Do not think that I mimicked Laban's evil ways because of the fact that I lived with him a long time. On the contrary, I lived with him for 22 years and, despite that, I remained upright and I did not sin as he did.

It is the same concerning Jacob's encounter with Esau's angel. After having sent his message to Esau, Jacob confronted and fought with Esau's angel, whose goal was precisely to make him forget G-d by causing him great pain in his thigh. This fight occurred during the night, for the Satan and evil and destructive spirits reign during this time (Bava Kama 60b). Yet it is stated, "And he [the angel] saw that he could not prevail against him" (Genesis 32:26), meaning to say that the Satan did not succeed in turning Jacob from his attachment to G-d, and he but injured his leg. Jacob remained righteous during the entire fight.

The angel then told him, "Not Jacob shall your name be called any more, but Israel, for you have fought with G-d and with men and have prevailed" (v.29). Israel (יִשְׂרָאֵל) has the meaning of יָשַׁר ("right"), for during this fight Jacob remained upright and attached to G-d, which is why he won. Esau's angel was forced to surrender, and in particular to agree to the blessings that Jacob received from his father (Bereshith Rabba 78:2), as Esau conceded to afterwards: "My brother, let what you have remain yours" (Genesis 33:9). Jacob, who was victorious in this war, teaches his children and his descendants that "through strategies, you can wage war" (Proverbs 24:6) – with gifts, with prayer, and through combat. In this way you will manage to crush the evil inclination and you, the Jew, will survive and progress in a life of spirituality and piety.

## THE MORAL OF THE STORY

### *From the Maggid of Dubno*

**I**t is written, “And Jacob sent messengers ... I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now. And I have had oxen and donkeys, flocks and servants and maidservants, and I have sent to tell my lord to find favor in your eyes” (Genesis 32:4-6).

Many commentators have been interested by the phrase “I have sojourned with Laban” (v.5), and have asked what role it serves in the context of the passage and what Jacob meant by it. That which follows (“And I have had oxen and donkeys ...” [v.6]) is incomprehensible, for one only expresses oneself as such concerning something that has just happened – for the appearance of some new creation (as in “And there was light”) – or in recounting some new event. Yet this is not the case here, and he would have been more exact in saying, “I have oxen and donkeys.”

To understand this, I have the feeling that we should start by asking a major question: How could Jacob imagine that he could find grace in the eyes of Esau by showing him the magnitude of his wealth? On the contrary, would this not be – when Esau understood the amazing effects of their father’s blessing – the best way to kindle the fires of jealousy within him?

All this can be explained in light of one of the principles that we have already mentioned. It consists of the two ways by which Hashem governs the world: By natural means and by miracles. We have already shown that at the moment when Jacob fled before Esau, which meant becoming a stranger in a strange land, his father gave him “the blessing of Abraham” (Genesis 28:40). This consisted of the relationship that Hashem had with Abraham before blessing him “in all”. We shall illustrate this by a parable.

A poor man left his home for a distant country. After staying there several years, he returned home with a fortune. Naturally, we attribute his success to natural circumstances: He

undertook a business that prospered over the course of the years, or he succeeded in the work that he was engaged in. On the other hand, if he comes back with a fortune after only six months, we will understand that something extraordinary happened to him. A third scenario is also possible, which is that he stayed in that distant country for a long time without earning much, to the point that he decided to come back home empty-handed. Then, at the last minute, by miracle he laid hold of a fortune. Since no one knows what he did during all that time there, one would definitely think that all his money came to him by natural means, by conducting business and by putting money aside. At that moment, should he not relate his story in order that no one should get the wrong impression and try to imitate him, an undertaking that would probably be without hope?

Jacob stayed quite a long time with Laban, and he came back from there loaded with livestock large and small. When Esau would note the extent of his wealth, his jealousy would awaken in recalling the material blessings that his brother had received, and he would begin to pursue him. Yet this interpretation would not in any way correspond to reality, since Jacob owed his wealth only to supernatural events, which is why he wanted to explain it to Esau. Jacob received absolutely nothing from Laban during all the time that he stayed with him, as the verse itself testifies: “Unless the G-d of my father, the G-d of Abraham, and the Fear of Isaac, had been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty” (Genesis 31:42). However, “I have had oxen and donkeys” – it was only at the end that chance miraculously smiled upon me, as it is written, “G-d has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, and he decided last night” (ibid.). Esau thus understood that the blessings were for nothing, which is why “I have sent to tell my lord to find favor in your eyes” (ibid. 32:6).

## IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM RAV SAADIA GAON

**R**av Saadia Gaon was the Rosh Yeshiva of Sura in Babylon. He was very wealthy, but also merited teaching Torah to numerous disciples.

The story that we shall recount occurred in the month of Nissan. There was much work to be done in the home of the Rav. As part of his duties, one of the Jewish servants journeyed to the river located at the other end of the city. He went there to immerse some cutlery in order to make them usable for Passover. In arriving by the river, he set down some precious crystalware, but before having time to immerse them, he saw a large wave arise from the river and carry them off into the depths. The servant looked on stunned as he saw them disappear, his heart filled with grief. However he quickly reassured himself by thinking, "Certainly no one will notice the loss of a few plates at my master's home. He has a great deal of cutlery, and who will think to look for these exact ones? Besides, even if someone notices that they're lost, why would anyone suspect me? It's better if I keep all this to myself and that I relate it to no one." He continued to immerse the rest of the cutlery, and when he was finished he went back to the Rav's. Several days passed, and no one figured out the servant's secret. He himself almost forgot the incident.

When the holiday of Passover returned the next year, he was again sent to immerse the cutlery in the river. Immediately, the incident of the previous year came to mind, and he was seized with freight that this should happen to him again. When he went down to the river, what should he see in the current but some crystal cutlery floating and making its way the shore, finally being tossed up onto land! The servant approached, and he saw that it was the same actual cutlery that had sunk into the depths the year before. What's more, not one of them was missing!

His joy was immense, but his surprise was greater still. He decided to recount everything when he went back to his master's. When he arrived at the house, he went to find Rav Saadia Gaon and admitted everything to him. At the end he added, "Apparently, success smiles upon the Rav. He has merited having everything of his recovered." Now instead of the joy that the servant expected, a large sigh escaped the Rav's lips, and his servant remained mute with astonishment.

Not long afterwards, Rav Saadia Gaon began to become poor, to the point that he no longer had anything to eat and had to resort to charity. When his house was seized, his servants found themselves dispersed, and the servant mentioned above went down to Egypt, where he settled and established a flourishing business.

One day, during the course of his travels, Rav Saadia Gaon arrived at the home of his servant in Egypt, who, appalled at seeing him in poverty, invited the Rav to stay there with him. The invitation came from the heart, and the Rav accepted. The servant gave him a special room and provided him with everything he needed, yet tranquility did not last. As soon as the next day, the Rav became sick with a grave disease, one that brought him to the threshold of death. The host cared to the utmost for the needs of his guest and called in the best doctors, but without success. One day, the doctors ordered that he should drink a very concentrated broth in which several fattened chickens were repeatedly cooked, concentrated to the point that it was boiled down to a single spoonful. Without discussing these instructions any further, the concentrate was prepared and brought to nourish the patient, his heart filled with hope. Yet at the exact moment that the spoon was brought to his mouth, a cobweb fell into it from the ceiling, and the solution that had been so carefully prepared was lost.

The residents of the house began to lament over having done all this work for nothing. The servant looked upon Rav Saadia with disappointment, yet there he was with a smile on his lips! At that moment, the servant recalled the previous incident – the Rav's sigh when he told him the story of the cutlery that had washed ashore. He could not contain his curiosity, and so he asked, "May the Rav explain two astonishing things to me: The first, why he sighed at that moment; and the second, why he is smiling now, when the precious solution has been lost."

The Rav answered, "I know that in the same way that riches are not forever, neither is poverty. When you told me the story of the crystal cutlery that the river had returned, I understood that this was a supernatural occurrence, and I feared that I had arrived at a summit of wealth and had benefited of too many good things. I realized that the wheel risked turning at any moment, and that is why I sighed."

"Now, however," continued the patient, "when the medicine was ruined after all the trouble we had gone to, I suspected that I had arrived at the height of my suffering and henceforth salvation would arrive. That is why I smiled."

This is effectively what happened, as the Rav was healed a few days later. He immediately got up and left for Sura, his city, and at the end of a short time he regained his exalted position, that of Gaon of Israel, of whom he was the glory.