

The Path to Follow

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JACOB'S FIGHT WITH THE ANGEL: A SYMBOL OF MAN'S FIGHT WITH HIS EVIL INCLINATION

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It is written, "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. ... He said, 'Let me go, for dawn has broken' " (Bereshith 32:25-27).

Certain points call for an explanation here, in this description of Jacob's fight with the angel. First of all, we need to understand why the angel sought to fight and harm our father Jacob, the greatest of the Patriarchs, especially since the angels were aware of his greatness and lofty status. In fact his likeness is engraved on the Celestial Throne, and when Jacob slept on Mount Moriah, the angels wanted to descend and look upon him (Yonatan ben Uzziel on Bereshith 28:12). Clearly, this angel had been sent by Hashem to fulfill a mission, and it is incumbent on us to understand what the goal of that mission was.

Let us also examine the timing of this fight and the way it ended. The fight began when Jacob returned to retrieve some small jars that he had forgotten. It was then that the angel found and confronted him. This fight continued throughout the night, without a winner or loser, until the morning. The angel then said to Jacob, "Let me go, for dawn has broken." This means that Jacob had managed to defeat the angel by daybreak, and therefore it asked him to be released so it could go and sing praises before G-d (Chullin 91b). As the Midrash recounts, "Rabbi Berekiah said: We do not know who was victorious, either the angel or Jacob. Yet since it is written, 'And a man vaye'avak [fought] with him' [Bereshith 32:25], it follows: Who was covered with avak [dust]? The man who [fought] with him!" (Bereshith Rabba 77:3).

Our Sages explain that this was none other than Esav's guardian angel, which had come to fight Jacob and weaken him (Bereshith Rabba ibid.). In previous articles, we have already gone into detail concerning the permanent fight between Jacob and Esav (i.e., between good and evil, purity and impurity). At that point in time, Jacob was at the pinnacle of his greatness and glory. He had just returned from the home of Lavan, perfect in heart and soul, for there he had succeeded in observing all 613 mitzvot. It was fitting for Jacob to return to the land of his fathers, yet it was precisely then that the Satan and the evil inclination tried to make him stumble and sin (see the explanation of the Kli Yakar). If it succeeded in making him fall from the heights that he had reached, its victory would have been complete.

We can now explain why the angel committed itself to fighting Jacob precisely as he was going to look for the small jars that he had forgotten. These represent the mitzvot that people typically look down upon. Our father Jacob did not forsake them, nor did he leave them behind. He went off to acquire and merit them, and it was precisely then that the angel came to fight him. It was through these mitzvot that the evil inclination seeks to test man and make him sin, for it knows that if it were to try and lead him directly into sin per se, he would dismiss it without a second thought. Hence it attempts to make people stumble through simple mitzvot, those which people tend to neglect. It is here, at this vulner-

able point, that the evil inclination applies pressure. Once it has managed to enter the domain of man, it becomes easier to make him fail little by little. One day it tells him to do this, and the next day it tells him to do something else (Shabbat 105b), until it eventually leads him into sin itself.

However Jacob did not give in. The fight continued throughout the night, and he was only able to defeat the angel by daybreak. From here we learn that our fight with the evil inclination lasts for the entire night, meaning for the entire duration of our stay here below, as it is written: "You make darkness, and it is night [Tehillim 104:20] – this refers to this world, which is like the night" (Bava Metzia 83b). Even a person who reaches great heights in his service of Hashem is fully engaged in fighting the evil inclination as long as he remains in this lower world, all throughout the night until the break of dawn.

At dawn, the angel grew weak and said to Jacob: "Let me go, for dawn has broken." Dawn symbolizes the World to Come, when G-d will make the sun rise, carry the evil inclination away, and destroy it before the eyes of the righteous, those who defeated and controlled it. It will then be delivered to them for all eternity. That is why the angel could not leave: It was Jacob's prisoner and under his control. Indeed, is it not said that the righteous are masters of their own heart and that they control their own desires?

Thus as long as a person lives in this world, the evil inclination does not leave him alone. Each day it renews its tactics, its goal being to defeat each person according to his importance and level, as we read: "The wicked one watches for the righteous and seeks to kill him" (Tehillim 37:32). This battle rages in all its intensity until the dawn of the World to Come. The light coming from the sun will then be increased, becoming seven times greater than the light of Creation, and the evil inclination will be destroyed and delivered to the righteous.

I was happy to find support for these remarks in Midrash Lekach Tov. There it is written, "Until the break of dawn – until the break of dawn arrives for Israel. The deliverance of Israel is like daybreak, since exile is compared to the night. The nations of the world and the kingdom of Edom fight against Israel to veer it off the path of G-d, as it is written: 'Return, return, O Shulamite. Return, return, that we may look upon you' [Shir HaShirim 7:1]."

I also found proof for our assertions in the Midrash regarding the verse, "The sun rose for him" (Bereshith 32:32): "Said Rav Huna in the name of Rav Acha: The sun healed Jacob our father, but burned Esav and his generals. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Jacob: 'You are a sign for your children. Just as the sun healed you while burning Esav and his generals, likewise the sun will heal your children and burn idolaters.' For your children, 'A sun of righteousness will shine for you who fear My Name, with healing in its rays' [Malachi 3:20]. As for idolaters, 'Behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace...' [v.19]" (Bereshith Rabba 78:5). This verse speaks of the future, when the sun will shine, a time when the wicked will be judged in their light, and evil will be banished from the earth, as the Gemara tells us (Avodah Zarah).



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This is why the angel wanted to recite praises at dawn. When the evil inclination, which is none other than the Satan, realizes that it cannot make a tzaddik stumble, the accuser changes into a defender and is forced to ascend towards the Celestial Throne. There it sings praises to Hashem, Who possesses such a world, one in which His faithful servants – after having been victorious in battle over the evil inclination, despite its tricks and the obstacles that it puts in their way – have maintained their faithfulness and continue to serve Him

with all their heart and soul. It is clear that the evil inclination is a messenger of G-d, as it is written: “Everyone who is called by My Name, and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have fashioned, perfected” (Isaiah 43:7). It allows Hashem’s Name to be sanctified through the righteous who, despite their battles with the evil inclination, fulfill His word and commandments to perfection. It is in their regard that Esav’s guardian angel, which is the Satan, comes to sing praises before Hashem.

Concerning the Parsha

How to Change the Minds of Others

A group of delinquents once burst into the home of the gaon Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, the Rav of Jerusalem, and threatened to kill him. The Rav was calm and level-headed in the face of this frenzied attack by these thugs. However his composure unnerved them, and they began to lash out even more. When he realized that the situation was getting completely out of control, the Rav tore his shirt and uncovered his chest. He quickly arose from his chair, stood in front of them, and said in a loud and firm voice: “I’m ready to sanctify the Name of G-d. Shoot me! Murder me! I won’t move even a hair’s breadth!”

Confronted by this disconcerting behavior, the aggressors stepped back and fled.

Afterwards, as mentioned in the book *Halsh al HaChoma*, the Rav explained his behavior and the reason why he was saved. It centers on a story that took place in the small Polish town of Sadik.

In Sadik there lived a Jew who was an informer, a man who terrorized other Jews in town. This informer was the cause of great suffering among the townspeople, who were all afraid of him. Furthermore, infused with insolence, he demanded to be seated by the mizrach [eastern wall] in the large synagogue each Shabbat, and to receive the sixth aliyah.

One day, the Rav of Sadik passed away and was replaced by a great man of Torah. When this new Rav heard about the actions of the informer and his brazenness, he decided to apply the mitzvah, “You shall fear no man,” thereby putting an end to the schemes of this accuser in synagogue.

Thus one Shabbat, as the new Rav appeared in the main synagogue, the Gabbai of the community called the informer up to the Torah. At that point, the Rav forcefully struck the pillar before him and exclaimed: “What connection do you have with the Torah? How can an impure and repulsive mouth, which delivers the money and souls of the Jewish people to the authorities, be blessed by the holy Torah?”

Caught off-guard, the informer first tried to strike the Rav, but the faithful prevented him. Humiliated and enraged, he furiously headed towards the exit and left the synagogue, but only after pointing a threatening finger at the congregation and shouting: “I’ll teach you all a lesson!”

A few months later, the Rav was invited to perform a circumcision in one of the surrounding villages. On the way, the two students accompanying him suddenly noticed the notorious informer on his horse, galloping their way! They were then seized by great fear, but the Rav remained calm and serene.

The horse galloped towards them, and the man hastily descended and quickly approached the Rav. To the utter astonishment of his students, the informer stood to the Rav’s side, bent down at his feet, and implored him: “Rabbeinu, forgive me. Forgive me for having sinned against you!”

He then jumped back on his horse and disappeared into the distance.

As they continued on the way to their destination, the Rav said to them: “Let me explain this astonishing turn of events to you.

“Upon seeing him on his horse galloping towards us, I tried to find some deliverance in a verse of Torah. Thus a verse from Mishlei came to me: ‘As water reflects a face back to a face, so one’s heart is reflected back

to him by another’ [Mishlei 27:19]. I then immediately began to look for arguments in favor of this person: ‘How miserable he must feel for having descended to such a low point! He certainly needs compassion and mercy. Who knows, perhaps if he had received a better education in childhood, he would not have reached the point where he is today?’ I continued to judge him favorably, until I had compassion on him and erased all traces of animosity from my heart. As a result, this principle – ‘As water reflects a face back to a face’ – began to take effect, and he in turn began to think: ‘Perhaps the Rav is right. He certainly didn’t act as he did in order to be hurtful. Instead, his actions probably stemmed from pure intentions and a love of Heaven.’ Thanks to these good thoughts, his heart softened and he came to ask me for forgiveness.”

When Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld finished recounting this story, he added: “This is precisely what I was thinking when I saw those delinquents threatening me with their fists. I learned this concept from the Rav of Sadik, true, but I also found a source for it in the Torah.

“The angels went down to see Jacob and said to him, ‘We came to your brother, to Esav,’ on which our Sages explain: ‘[The one about] whom you said, “He is my brother,” however he acts towards you like the wicked Esav. He still harbors his hatred.’ Thus Esav detested Jacob, and furthermore Jacob also detested him on account of the verse, ‘Hashem, I hate those who hate You’ [Tehillim 139:21].

“Following this, the Torah states: ‘Jacob raised his eyes and saw – behold, Esav was coming, and with him were 400 men.’ What did he do upon seeing this approaching danger? ‘He bowed to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.’ Jacob prostrated himself, directed his thoughts, and sought arguments in favor of Esav until he actually considered him as a ‘brother’ [‘until he came near his brother’]. It was because of these favorable thoughts that a feeling of brotherhood was awakened in him.

“The consequences, moreover, did not take long in coming, for the Torah tells us: ‘Esav ran towards him and embraced him.’ Here Rashi relates the words of the Midrash: ‘Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: “It is a well-known Halachah that Esav hates Jacob. However his pity was aroused at that point, and he kissed him wholeheartedly.”’

“It was precisely in this way,” concluded the gaon Rabbi Yosef Chaim, “that I acted with those delinquents, and afterwards they acted in accordance with my own attitude.”

Guard Your Tongue

Protecting Yourself from Harm

Even if a person has accepted Lashon Harah, meaning that in his heart he believed it to be true, it is still forbidden by the Torah. Whatever the case, the Sages have said that one may still be cautious about what he has heard.

This means that, in order to protect himself and avoid being harmed, he may accept what he heard as a simple suspicion. He may not even view it as doubtful, for in general we consider the person in question as being honest.

A Sign for All Your Descendants

It is written, "For with my staff I crossed this Jordan" (Bereshith 32:11).

When Jacob reached the Jordan, he didn't know what to do. He raised his eyes to G-d and said, "O Hashem, You know that I have nothing with me but this staff."

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Strike the Jordan and pass through," which is what he did.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: "This is a sign for all your descendants. Just as the Jordan split before you, likewise it will split before your descendants."

– Midrash Yilamdeinu

Heal Him!

It is written, "When he saw that he could not overcome him, he struck the socket of his hip" (Bereshith 32:26).

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the angel Michael: "What right have you to cripple My kohen?"

He replied, "Master of the universe, am I not Your kohen?"

He said to him, "You are My kohen in the world above; Jacob is My kohen in the world below."

Michael immediately summoned Raphael, the angel of healing, and said to him: "My friend, please help me with this difficulty, for you are responsible for healing. Descend and heal him!"

– Midrash Avkir

For the Sake of Jacob

It is written, "Esav ran towards him and embraced him" (Bereshith 33:4).

When Esav went to meet Jacob, he only went to strike him with the 400 men accompanying him. So what happened at that point?

Rabbi Berekiah said, "When the Holy One, blessed be He, saw how worried Jacob was, He sent four legions of angels to fight against Esav during the entire night.

"When the first legion arrived, they told Esav and his men: 'To whom do you belong?' He replied: 'We are the descendants of Abraham.' They began to strike them. When he said, 'I am the brother of Jacob,' they left them alone for the sake of Jacob. The same thing happened with the second legion, and then with the third, but the fourth legion struck them. When Esav said, 'I am the brother of Jacob,' they left him alone, saying: 'For the sake of Jacob, we are leaving you alone.' When Esav saw all the damage that these angels had caused, both to him and his men, he was very frightened of his brother Jacob. He therefore went to welcome him in peace, as it is written: 'Esav ran towards him and embraced him.'"

– Tanchuma HaKadum

Brother, Stranger

It is written, "My brother, may what you have remain yours" (Bereshith 33:9).

When the Children of Israel experience misfortune, the nations of the world treat them like strangers, pretending to have never known them. Yet when they succeed, the nations of the world crown them and pretend to be their brothers.

Thus when Esav saw how successful Jacob had become, he said to him: "My brother, may what you have remain yours." Likewise, Hiram said to Solomon: "What are these cities that you have given me, my brother?" (I Kings 9:13).

– Sifre, Devarim

In the Throes of Death

It is written, "As her soul was departing – for she died – she called his name" (Bereshith 35:18).

Being dead, did she begin to speak?

This happened when she was almost, though not actually dead, being in the throes of death.

– Midrash Shemuel

The Study of Torah Protects Against Forces of Impurity

It is written, "Jacob sent angels ahead of him to Esav his brother in the land of Seir, the field of Edom" (Bereshith 32:4).

Jacob was afraid of sending human messengers to Esav, who was an expert in deception, lest he succeed in causing them to sin. Even tzaddikim can commit sins as a result of what they hear, which is why Jacob sent him angels, who do not heed the words of men.

What was the real reason that Jacob sent angels to Esav? The answer is that he wanted to lead him to repentance (Bereshith Rabba 75:11). This was Jacob's habit – trying to bring people closer to G-d and lead them beneath the wings of the Shechinah. He even succeeded in bringing idolaters closer to G-d, as he learned from his father Isaac, who in turn had learned this from his father Abraham (ibid. 84:4). Jacob was telling Esav: "You lived your entire life with a father and mother who were tzaddikim, and yet you did not learn to emulate them? Furthermore, you deceived our father and made him believe that you were a tzaddik as you took care of him, but did reprehensible deeds when you left. There was no evil that you did not commit! I beg you, repent so that angels of destruction do not cleave to you and take your soul, as they do to those who act like you. I have sent you these angels to remind you of this."

Hence Jacob said to him, "I have sojourned [garti] with Lavan" (Bereshith 32:5) – I observed the 613 (taryag) mitzvot. In other words: "You were living with our father, you saw him learning Torah and serving his Creator, and yet you did not learn from his good deeds. As for me, I lived in the home of Lavan for 20 years, but I did not learn from his evil ways. Not only that, but I observed all the mitzvot. If you ask how I succeeded in not learning anything from Lavan's wickedness, it is because of the Torah that was in me, which I toiled to learn in the Beit HaMidrash of Shem and Ever, when I did not sleep in a bed for many years [Bereshith Rabba 68:11]. And so, just as you cannot have a harmful influence on these angels or lead them into sin, likewise you cannot have a harmful influence on me, for I studied a great deal of Torah and have become like an angel, which cannot be enticed. The term mitzvah has the same numerical value as malach ["angel"], and because I toiled in observing the 613 mitzvot, I am certain that you can do nothing to harm me."

This is a great principle: It is impossible for a person to protect himself against the influence of the wicked unless he puts an effort into learning Torah, which protects and saves. However if he learns Torah without exerting himself, it will not protect him. Hence Jacob told Esav, "I have ox and donkey" (Bereshith 32:6) – an allusion to Joseph and Issachar, telling him that he spent his entire life progressing in the service of G-d, and without being content with what he achieved on the previous day. Indeed, he advanced more and more each day. Not only that, but he also put a great deal of effort into learning Torah, like a donkey that carries a heavy burden on its back.

What burden is this? It is the Torah that one toils to study, and which protects a person if he does not become proud of it. If he does become proud – if he thinks that the Torah he learned will earn him a crown and honors – he will have no further protection, neither from Hashem nor from the Torah. That is why Jacob said, "I am too small for all the kindnesses" (Bereshith 32:11). That is, "Despite the fact that I have done all this – having studied much and forsaken regular sleep during all these years – I still have done nothing at all. It is as if I have accomplished nothing, and I am not worthy that a miracle should be done for me."

The prayers of the great men of Israel must be examined and studied. Numerous books have been written in order to allow future generations to understand how the tzaddikim served Hashem, books that discuss their prayers, which were poured out like the words of a slave imploring his master. For the tzaddikim, the words emerging from their mouths were like costly jewels which they counted, making sure not to lose a single one, not to mention the other noble and lofty character traits of such men. This opens a window that allows us to peer into the palace of their prayers, which our Sages describe as “the service of the heart.”

What follows are a few customs and accounts that were written about the Vilna Gaon, may his merit protect us.

When Rabbi Israel Salanter went to the Beit HaMidrash of the Vilna Gaon (known as the “Kloiz”), he heard many things concerning the extraordinary spiritual level of our teacher. An old man who studied in the Kloiz often recounted an incident that he himself had witnessed, one that demonstrated the Vilna Gaon’s greatness, for “the tzaddikim are greater in death than they are in life.”

It happened in the year 5572, during Napoleon’s military campaign in Russia. French forces, which had crossed the border, reached the outskirts of Vilna and wanted to establish a military camp for the winter. Their objective was to launch an offensive in the spring.

French military leaders began looking for a suitable place to locate such a camp, which necessitated terrain that was sufficiently large and flat, with several access points that were easy to use. The old cemetery in Vilna appeared to meet these requirements, and the residents of the city were ordered to immediately relocate the graves and leave the area in the hands of the army.

Obviously, the leaders of the Vilna community protested this order. However the French military paid them no heed, threatening to move their forces into the cemetery, destroy the graves, and rework the terrain so as to make it suitable as a military camp if they did not comply with their order by a certain date. Vilna began to grieve, recounted the old man. Everyone was crying and mourning, for each family in the city had parents or relatives buried in the old cemetery. The residents of Vilna were especially afraid that the grave of the Vilna Gaon would be desecrated. Thus with the support to the community’s rabbis and leaders, a day of fasting and prayer was proclaimed. In parallel to this, people did all they could in order to obtain help from officials in high office, hoping to have this cruel decree rescinded. In fact people even tried finding another area in the Vilna region to suggest to the military leaders instead of the cemetery.

Hashem saw the distress of the Jewish people, and suddenly there was a change in the war. Napoleon decided to fight immediately, and so he marched into the interior of Russia, towards Moscow. His forces left Vilna and the surrounding region, and Jews breathed a sigh of relief. Some of them gathered in synagogues and houses of study, while others went to pray by the graves of the tzaddikim who were buried in the cemetery, especially the grave of the Vilna Gaon, giving thanks for this deliverance sent by Hashem.

As for Rabbi Israel Salanter, who heard this extraordinary story from the old man, he drew the following conclusion: “I’m sure that if the Vilna Gaon’s holy body had been uncovered, it would have been as intact as on the day he was buried, without any trace of decomposition.” He added, “This is quite obvious, given his greatness.”

These words proved accurate some 150 years later, during the Second World War, when the Vilna community was forced by Soviet authorities, which had conquered Lithuania along with its capital at Vilna, to relinquish control of the old cemetery. The coffin of the Vilna Gaon was thus brought to Vilna’s new cemetery, and when his remains were transferred, they were found to be intact!

Proof from Heaven

The Vilna Gaon recounted how Heaven had shown him the great importance of prayer. A certain passage in the Zohar concerning Rosh Chodesh was particularly difficult for him to understand, despite having put a great effort into learning it. For about three months, he was unable to explain or discern its true meaning.

Then on Rosh Chodesh, in the middle of Shacharit, as he was standing up to recite the Amidah, his thoughts were suddenly illuminated, allowing him to understand the passage in seven different ways. He was extremely moved at that point. Although he was in the middle of prayer, he felt that he could pause a little in order to gather his thoughts, believing that it did not constitute a disruption of prayer.

“All this lasted only a quarter of a minute,” he recounted. “I organized all my thoughts, and then immediately returned to prayer.”

“After the Amidah, I wanted to review my ideas, but then I discovered that I had nothing to review – I had forgotten everything!” He was extremely unhappy: “For almost half an hour, I had to console myself over this misfortune in order to continue with Hallel and Musaf.”

As he was praying Musaf Amidah, the Vilna Gaon remembered the seven interpretations, just as before. “This time,” he added, “I didn’t turn my thoughts away from prayer for an instant, for I paid them absolutely no regard. However when I finished my prayer, the seven interpretation were there before me, properly ordered in all their truth.”

Left With Nothing

Rabbi Israel of Shklov recounted how hard the Vilna Gaon worked at possessing the proper intentions during prayer.

The incident occurred when the Vilna Gaon decided to return home after several years of self-imposed exile. He was so weak that he rented a special wagon to return him and his bags to Vilna. He paid the wagon driver at the outset, and he even offered him a supplement on the express condition that he would stop when the time for prayer arrived. This enabled the Vilna Gaon to get off and pray, without having to rely on the permission given to travelers to pray in a moving vehicle if they have the proper intentions.

During one stage of this journey, when the wagon driver realized that the Vilna Gaon was immersed in prayer and oblivious to what was going on around him, he left at full speed, taking with him the Vilna Gaon’s bags, which contained everything he possessed.

The Vilna Gaon was thus forced to continue on foot, having been left with nothing.

I Am Prayer

Sincerely Spoken Prayer

The power of prayer is immense, and the abode of prayer is the conduit through which we receive abundance throughout the year. In fact we can gauge the magnitude and strength of our desires by a sincerely spoken prayer.

“A broken and contrite heart, O G-d, You will not despise” (Tehillim 51:19). Regardless of a person’s spiritual state, a sincerely spoken prayer is never ignored. If we were aware of the power of a true prayer, our entire lives would take on a different appearance.

The argument which states that a generation as feeble as our own cannot exert any kind of influence in Heaven makes no sense, if only because of what the Sages teach in the Gemara: “Jephthah in his generation is like Samuel in his generation” (Rosh Hashanah 25b). Even in our time, if a person puts a sincere effort into praying as he should, the gates of Heaven will open and he will obtain an abundance of good things from the abode of prayer.