

Parashat Vayishlach, 5772, 2011:

Encountering the Torah

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Rav Saadiah Gaon (882-942) was one of the greatest of the Babylonian Gaonim. His approach to Torah study was direct and to the point: Analyze the *pasuk* (verse) on its own terms based upon the actual language presented therein. In other words, instead of approaching the verse with pre-conceived ideas that will most likely determine its interpretative outcome, examine it in its most pristine form. In practical terms, this means that before we automatically apply Rashi's (1040-1105) or another commentator's analysis, we need to encounter the *pasuk* as it was given to *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our Teacher Moshe) at that great and ineffable moment at Mount Sinai. This, perhaps, is one way of understanding the famous verse: "*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe morasha kehilat Yaakov*" ("Moshe commanded us the Torah, it is the inheritance of the entire Congregation of Yaakov," *Sefer Devarim* 33:4). In sum, this means that since the Torah is our inheritance, each of us is duty bound to exercise personal ownership, and expend our greatest cognitive efforts to interpret the Torah on our own - before relying upon *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory).

I would like to apply Rav Saadiah's approach to the subject of *Yaakov Avinu's* name change from "Yaakov" to "Yisrael" in one of the two instances that appears in our *sedrah* (Torah portion). The passage that I will discuss depicts Yaakov's wrestling match with an

unnamed opponent throughout a long and portentous night. (*Sefer Bereishit* 32:25) Once the unidentified man saw that he could not defeat Yaakov, he injured his sciatic nerve and asked Yaakov to release him because the dawn was breaking. Yaakov then told his assailant that he would release him solely upon the condition that he would first give him a *bracha* (blessing). The following narrative then ensued:

And he [the anonymous man] said to him [Yaakov]: “What is your name?” And he said: “Yaakov.” And he [the unnamed man] said: “The name ‘Yaakov’ will no longer be said as your name, but, rather, ‘Yisrael,’ because you have contended with [an angel of] G-d and with men and have prevailed.” (Ibid., 28-29)

These *pasukim* (verses) raise a number of salient questions:

1. Who was the nameless man?
2. By what right did this mysterious individual change Yaakov’s name?
3. What is the substantive significance inherent in the name change from “Yaakov” to “Yisrael?”
4. What does it mean to “contend with [an angel of] G-d?”
5. Who are the men with whom Yaakov fought?

The Nameless Man:

The identity, but not the name, of *Yaakov Avinu*’s mysterious attacker becomes clearer two verses later (32:31): “And Yaakov called the name of the place ‘Peniel’ because I have seen an angel face to face and my life [has nonetheless] been saved.” This verse teaches us that Yaakov’s anonymous assaulter was none other than an angel of Hashem. Within Judaism, an angel has the status of a *shaliach* (messenger) who serves, so to speak, as G-d’s emissary in this world. The angel is charged with a unique and highly specific task to perform and, unlike man, acts without free will in the performance of his obligation. Thus, Yaakov’s assailant literally had a G-d-given right, and the responsibility, to change our patriarch’s name to “Yisrael,” since this is precisely what he

had been commanded to do.

The Name Change and Contending with an Angel of G-d:

The name “Yaakov” is etymologically based upon the word “*ahkave*” (“heel”). Yaakov received his name, at least in part, as a result of the manner in which he was born: “And afterwards, his brother emerged, and his hand was grasping Esau's heel, and he named him ‘Jacob.’...” (*Sefer Bereishit 25:26*, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

A heel is the rearward part of the foot and metaphorically represents that which has already transpired, i.e. the past. In addition, it symbolically connotes weakness and vulnerability. Thus, Yaakov’s futile grasping of Esau’s heel at the moment of his birth may be viewed as a desperate, pathetic, and ineffectual gesture to somehow alter the course of events yet to come.

Yaakov, however, was transformed into a heroic and world-shaking spiritual persona when he received the name “Yisrael.” From our perspective, he suddenly became recognized in Heaven as the *Sar* (prince) of G-d (*A-le*), and thereby the namesake of our people for evermore. His new appellation, moreover, inspires us until our own historical moment, and contains a promise and potential that is yet to be fulfilled. This, then, is part of the significance of the name “Yisrael” that Yaakov received subsequent to wrestling with G-d’s angel. Yaakov–Yisrael was now the leader of our nascent nation, and stood ready to impart to us the secrets and mysteries of Jewish survival for all time.

Yaakov’s Earthly Enemies:

A careful reading of Yaakov’s narrative until this juncture in time reveals that he

successfully battled two enemies, namely, Eisav and Lavan. The victory over Eisav took place on two different occasions. The first was when Yaakov wrested the *bechorah* (Right of the First Born) from him. The second took place, under the direct command of his mother, Rivka, when Yaakov convinced Yitzhak that he was none other than Eisav and received the latter's *bracha* (blessing):

And Jacob said, "Sell me as of this day your birthright." Esau replied, "Behold, I am going to die; so why do I need this birthright?" And Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day;" so he swore to him, and he sold his birthright to Jacob. (*Sefer Bereishit* 25:31-33)

And he [Yitzhak] said, "Your brother came with cunning and took your blessing. And he [Eisav] said, "Is it for this reason that he was named Jacob? For he has deceived me twice; he took my birthright, and behold, now he has taken my blessing." And he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" (*Sefer Bereishit* 27:35-36, this and the following Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The Haggadah of Passover teaches us in no uncertain terms that Lavan wanted to destroy Yaakov, his entire family, and everything for which they stood:

Go forth and learn what Laban the Aramean wanted to do to our father Jacob. Pharaoh had issued a decree against the male children only, but Laban wanted to uproot everyone - as it is said: "The Aramean wished to destroy my father; and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation - great and mighty and numerous."

(http://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/1737/jewish/Maggid.htm)

Therefore, Yaakov's triumph over Lavan reached its pinnacle when our forebear escaped from his father-in-law with his beloved family and fortune fully intact:

And Laban arose early in the morning and kissed his sons and daughters and blessed them, and Laban went and returned to his place. And Jacob went on his way, and angels of G-d met him. (32:1-2)

Lavan's relatively peaceful departure from Yaakov was nothing less than a stellar achievement for our forefather. Following his encounter with the unnamed angel of G-d, he unflinchingly faced this terrestrial enemy and subdued him. This, however, was not merely a physical victory, it was in fact a triumph of the spirit: "And Jacob went on his

way.” In my estimation, this means that Yaakov’s faith-structure, religious world-view, and commitment to G-d’s word remained fully intact – even after his years of downtrodden misery in Lavan’s household. Beyond a doubt, Yaakov taught us how to live, survive, and ultimately thrive in *galut* (outside the Land of Israel).

With Hashem’s help, may we emulate *Yaakov Avinu* and overcome both adversity and our adversaries with the ever-burning light of the Torah as our guide. As *Yeshiyahu Hanavi* (the Prophet Isaiah) so beautifully stated: “O house of Jacob, come and let us go in the light of the L-rd.”(2:5) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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