

PARASHAT VAYISHLACH

**Ya'akov's Encounter with Esav
and His Struggle with the Angel**

(32:4-33:20)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

I. A STRANGE INTERLUDE

Parashat Vayishlach begins with the story of the encounter of Ya'akov and Esav, the antithetical brothers who have not seen each other for twenty years. The first half of the narrative (32:4-24) describes the anticipatory tension preceding their fateful meeting, while the second half (33:1-20) details the actual meeting and its aftermath. However, as we read this narrative, we are struck by a difficulty: in the middle of the story (32:25-33), we suddenly find a mysterious wrestling match between Ya'akov and an unnamed foe, an "ish" who suddenly appears out of nowhere. From these verses, it becomes clear that the ish is not a human being, but an angel.[1] (The term "ish" can refer to either.) What is the meaning of this "story within a story?"

Despite the different topic of this scene, it fits well into the surrounding narrative both in terms of time and space. Ya'akov and his camp are within continuous movement from Machanayim to the Yabbok Ford, and from there to Sukkot. The nocturnal wrestling match takes place in Penuel, which is exactly along this line of travel.

In the dimension of time, the first half of the story (the preparations for the encounter with Esav) takes place at night. The Torah mentions three times that Ya'akov slept on the eastern bank of the Jordan that night (v. 14, 22, 23), indicating that despite his anxiety the patriarch manages to catch a few hours of shut-eye. Still, he rises while it is still dark to transport his family and his possessions across the Yabbok. He did this in order to be prepared at day's light for the encounter with Esav, so as not to be caught in a position of weakness - i.e., halfway through the process of fording the wadi.

At the end of that same night, the struggle with the ish begins, and it continues "until dawn" (v. 25). When Ya'akov emerges from this struggle, the sun is rising (v. 32). It is understood that the encounter with Esav, which will be described in the continuation of the narrative, occurs during the day. Indeed, the opening words, "Ya'akov looked up and saw..." indicates that the light of day had already filled the area.

It thus emerges that this scene which so troubles us, in terms of its place within the narrative, actually fits neatly in terms of the setting. Is there anything to indicate a thematic link between the interlude and the narrative that surrounds it?

II. THE PARALLELISM OF THE TWO HALVES

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Let us turn for a moment to consider the encounter between Ya'akov and Esav. The first half of the story creates a great tension in the heart of the reader, which parallels Ya'akov's own growing anxiety. This feeling begins with the very first words of Parashat Vayishlach: "Ya'akov sent emissaries to Esav his brother..." In Parashat Vayetze, Esav's name had never been mentioned, but now his name appears once again, to our surprise - and our dismay. All of the tension of Parashat Toledot returns, and it is as if the intervening twenty years of exile have been erased.

The reply of the emissaries, "We came to your brother, to Esav, and he is also coming to greet you - and four hundred men are with him" (32:7), ratchets the tension up further: why is Esav coming to greet his brother in such a terrifying manner? Four

hundred men constitute a battalion of warriors in Scriptural logistics (see I Shemu'el 22:2, 30:10, 30:17); for what reason do they accompany Esav to the family reunion?

Indeed, in the following verse, we find that "Ya'akov was very fearful, and it troubled him," as he recognizes the degree of danger we too feel. The action that Ya'akov then takes, splitting his camp into two, underlines the severity of the danger. The danger of extermination hovers over them all, as Ya'akov himself grimly calculates, "If Esav will come to one camp and strike it, the remaining camp will escape." His poignant prayer to God (32:7) further emphasizes his great terror: "Save me please from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav, for I fear him, lest he come and strike me, mother upon children!"[2]

The night was a terror-stricken period, full of frantic action to beat the clock ticking down to Ya'akov's cataclysmic confrontation; as Rashi notes (32:9), "He prepared himself for three things: tribute, prayer, and war." The wealth acquired through years of toil becomes worthless in light of all the imperiled lives, and Ya'akov sends flocks upon flocks during that night in order to appease his brother Esav. At the end of these preparations, Ya'akov finds time for a few moments of stolen sleep. The following morning, after crossing the Yabbok and emerging into the light of day, the moment of truth arrives: Esav, with his four hundred men, has arrived (33:1).

After the overwhelming tension of the night, the dramatic climax of the encounter surprises us: "Esav ran to greet him and he embraced him; he fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (33:4). Can anyone read this touching encounter, describing brothers finally reunited after twenty years, as the same one which had Ya'akov (and the reader) so gripped by terror during the narrative's first half? It appears as if Ya'akov's suspicions were overwrought and unjustified, and that all his preparations were superfluous. The division of the camp, the prayer - they all seem unnecessary by the glaring light of day and Esav's sincere emotion, and Ya'akov seems guilty of impugning his loving brother with the most horrific of intentions. Even the tribute does not fulfill its original purpose, both in terms of the fact that it is not needed, and in terms of the fact that Esav has to be persuaded to accept it.

We must clarify our question, which is not on Ya'akov's suspicions per se, as he had no way of knowing what would happen, and prepared for the worst. The question is on the literary presentation of the narrative: how can Scripture open with such a tense picture of the dramatic confrontation about to be presented, and then at the end disappoint us by presenting a totally normal encounter, showing our anxiety to be unnecessary, even silly?

The lack of dramatic tension in the second half of the story, all the more frustrating after the nerve-racking first half, is expressed in the structure of the narrative. The two halves parallel each other in a straight (not chiasmic) form. Each one contains five elements, appearing in the exact same order. Below is a representation of these commonalities:

- 1) Threat
- 2) Division
- 3) Encounter
- 4) Gift
- 5) Movement

I: Preparation (Night)

- 1) 32:4-7 "Ya'akov sent emissaries... 'WE CAME TO... ESAV, and he is coming to greet you AND FOUR HUNDRED MEN ARE WITH HIM.'"
- 2) 8-9 "Ya'akov was very fearful... and HE DIVIDED the people with him..."
- 3) 10-13 Prayer to be saved
- 4) 14-22 Sending the gift: "I will atone HIS FACE with the gift that goes before MY FACE, and then I will see HIS FACE; perhaps he shall raise MY FACE." (21)
- 5) 23-24 Crossing the Yabbok

II: Actualization (Day)

- 1) 33:1a "Ya'akov looked up and he saw: ESAV HAD COME, AND FOUR HUNDRED MEN WERE WITH HIM."
 - 2) 1a-2 "HE DIVIDED the children to Leah and to Rachel..."
 - 3) 3-7 A touching reunion
 - 4) 8-11 Debate and Esav's acceptance: "Therefore I have seen YOUR FACE, like THE FACE of God, and you have graced me." (10)
 - 5) 12-17 The Parting
- 18-20 Entering Canaan

This parallelism emphasizes many interesting points. Firstly, the encounter between the brothers is not at the central point of the narrative, but rather deep within its second half, paralleling Ya'akov's desperate prayer, which paints a very different picture of the impending meeting.

Secondly, exact parallelism between the first two elements of each half reveals that the second half of the story begins without the tension of the first half. When the emissaries which Ya'akov hsent return in the first half and telhim that Esav is coming to meet him with four hundred men, "Ya'akov was very fearful, and it troubled him" (32:8). However, when this imposing group finally arrives, the verse describes no fear on Ya'akov's part.

Thirdly, Ya'akov's division of the camp into two in the first part is accompanied by the statement "If Esav will come upon the one camp and strike it, the remaining will escape" (32:9), and afterwards Ya'akov prays. The division of his wives and children in the second half does not include the division of his wealth, and it is accompanied by no prayer. It appears this time that the division has quite a different purpose (as indicated by the appearance of the word "machaneh," camp, four times in the account of the division in the first half, and its non-appearance in the account in the second half). This is not a preparation for war, but rather a ceremonial preparation for the

reception of Esav, so that he may survey at his leisure his brother's family. Thus, there was no reason this time to split the wealth.

These distinctions between the two halves of the story, even before Esav's intent becomes clear, are astounding. What has overcome the tension at this point in our story?

It is difficult to say that all of Ya'akov's fears in the first part are simply an error, for why does Esav travel with a full battalion to meet his brother? And why should Ya'akov's first emissaries return with such terror, instead of allowing for a positive interpretation of the events?

If there was no mistake in Ya'akov's evaluation, and if Esav had the intent to attack, what changed his mind? It is clear that it was not the large gift that Ya'akov sent to his brother that effected this change, for he did not even want to accept it. It also appears that no last-minute change of heart motivated Esav when he saw Ya'akov's wives and children, or their prostrations - it was while Ya'akov was arranging these niceties that Esav ran to greet and embrace his younger brother, and only afterwards did he look up and see the women and children, asking "What are these to you?" (33:5). Thus, if a change occurred in Esav, when did it begin? What motivated it? The second part of our narrative does nothing to address these questions.

III. THE RESOLUTION

A. One solution resolves all the problems raised heretofore - viewing Ya'akov's "wrestling" with the angel as an integral part of the unfolding drama, the central axis around which the story of Ya'akov and Esav's encounter revolves.

Our analysis of the story's structure in the previous section - the defining of the two halves and their parallels to one another - highlights the centrality of the wrestling

scene. It stands precisely in the middle of the story. The first half provides the necessary background, whereas the second flows directly from this pivotal scene. The wrestling scene is the central hinge of our story, containing the key to understanding the entire story.

As stated, the mysterious man who confronts Ya'akov is clearly an angel. What is his mission? As we know, Rashi (32:25) cites Chazal's explanation that the "ish" is "the heavenly angel of Esav." The origin of the concept of a "sar" - a heavenly angel corresponding to each nation on Earth - appears in the book of Daniel, which speaks of the "sar" of Persia (10:13) and that of Greece (10:20). The actual, real-life existence of any given nation merely reflects the spiritual power embodied by an angel, the "sar" of that particular nation. The stature of a "sar" in the heavens determines the fate and power of its corresponding nation down below. Thus, Esav's "sar" means the spiritual embodiment of Esav, the essential element and quality of his existence.

Although this explanation may appear to be derash (and thus scared off peshat-oriented commentators such as Rashbam and Radak), it actually constitutes a "depth of peshat" approach, since it is the only possible solution which can answer all the questions we raised earlier.

B. We already demonstrated how the wrestling scene forms the bridge between the two units of time - night and day - which reflect the two halves of the story. The first half occurs during the night, appropriate for the dread Ya'akov and his family experienced, and the ominous, dreary future awaiting them. Having brought all his possessions across the river and now standing alone by the riverbank, in the dead of night, Ya'akov has reached the low point of the story. Here the dramatic reversal occurs.

The "sar" of Esav - his spiritual image, the sum-total of his existence - suddenly attacks Ya'akov. Rather than fleeing, Ya'akov garners all his strength and fights. The confrontation continues through the rest of the night, thus forming a most appropriate conclusion to this night of terror. As the sun rises, Ya'akov continues his struggle, despite having been seriously wounded in his leg. His stubborn resilience brings him to the first sign of redemption, the early-morning rays of light.

The angel recognizes that Ya'akov's dark night is over and the light of redemption has broken through. He thus offers to end the match in a stalemate: "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." Ya'akov, however, revitalized by his successful campaign against his combatant and the promising rays of the dawn, refuses to give in: "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Clearly Ya'akov refers here not to any blessing, but to THE blessing, on account of which Ya'akov must face this entire crisis. Esav's aggressive march towards Ya'akov indicates his insistent protest against Ya'akov's seizure of the blessing. Ya'akov thus compels the angel (i.e. Esav) to concede Ya'akov's rights to the blessing. (See Rashi.)

The angel responds by changing Ya'akov's name to Yisrael. As Rashi explains, the renaming signifies that the blessing is no longer considered to have been taken through deceit (as suggested by the name Ya'akov). Rather, he is now "Yisrael" - an expression of prowess and grandeur, implying that Ya'akov rightfully earned his father's blessing.

Thus, the struggle that began in the womb and progressed throughout the brothers' lifetimes has now reached its climax. The one who began by grabbing his brother's ankle has now defeated his brother entirely; he has overcome the spiritual embodiment of Esav.

The Midrash (Bereishit Rabba 78:3) suggests that Ya'akov defeated both the heavenly "Esav" as well as his brother Esav: "For you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" - "divine" refers to the "sar," while "human" refers to Esav. Even before his final confrontation with Esav, Ya'akov learns of his victory. He has already won, even before the actual confrontation.

This verse - the name change based on Ya'akov's two-tiered victory over his brother - constitutes the pivot of the wrestling scene. (There are four verses prior to this verse, and four verses afterwards.) As such, it serves as the focal point of the entire story of Ya'akov's confrontation with Esav. Ya'akov's victory has now been established in all possible dimensions: past - the final authorization of Ya'akov's right to the blessing;

present - his victory over his late-night attacker; and future - his imminent confrontation with Esav.

C. We have thus reached the final climax of the story. The tension has already dissipated, since Ya'akov no longer fears Esav or his army. His continued submission to Esav - he prostrates himself before Esav, refers to him as "my master" and to himself as "your servant" - serves merely to fulfill the formal requirement of "hishtadlut," of taking necessary measures to ensure one's safety. The fear, however, is gone.

Esav appears bereft of the hatred and animosity that had motivated him until now. The change in him occurred towards the end of the night, as Esav made his way with his four hundred men. He himself is unaware of what passed over him and brought about such a drastic change of heart. By daybreak, the change has been completed, and Esav decides to greet his brother warmly. His impassioned running to his brother, the hug and kiss to the point of tears, all result from the angel's peaceful departure from Ya'akov.

Ya'akov leaves his brother and enters Eretz Canaan. Thanks to his victory along the riverbank at the Yabbok crossing, the obstacle to his return has been removed.

D. Thus, the wrestling scene blends into the overall story not only in the dimensions of time and place, but also in terms of plot: it is the key to the reversal that occurs between the first half of the story and the second half. Several stylistic similarities underscore this scene's relationship with the two halves that surround it on either side:

1. The verb "vaye'avek" (wrestled) relates to the first half of the story, which occurred in a place called "Yabbok," a word likely related to "vaye'avek." The word also connects to the second half, the reunion between the brothers: "vayechabkehu" (he embraced him - 33:4). As a result of the angel's inability to subdue Ya'akov during their struggle ("ma'avak"), Esav was forced to embrace ("lechabek") his brother.

2. Ya'akov employs the term "hatzala" (rescue, escape) twice in the story. In the first half, he pleads with God, "Please SAVE ME ['hatzileni na'] from my brother..." and then after his confrontation with the angel - "for I have seen God face to face, AND MY LIFE WAS SAVED ['vatinatzel nafshi']." The answer to his prayer came not only in his peaceful encounter with his brother, but also - and primarily - through his triumph over the "sar." Ya'akov was granted salvation only because of his heroic effort during his confrontation with the angel, effort which resulted in ongoing pain and suffering.

3. Ya'akov's proclamation after his defeat of the angel - "for I have seen God face to face" - parallels his insistence that Esav accept his gift - "for I have seen your face like one sees the face of God, and you have graced me." The Midrash cites this latter verse as a source for its identification of the angel as the "sar" of Esav.

4. Ya'akov's new name, Yisrael, conferred upon him in the central verse of the central episode of the story, reemerges at the story's climax, as part of the name of the altar he constructs. Thus, Ya'akov's names form the framework for the entire story. The narrative opens - "Ya'akov sent..."; the core of the narrative tells of the changeover from Ya'akov to Yisrael; and the final word of the story is the new name, Israel.[4]

IV. CONCLUSION

Our story is one of the few instances in Tanakh where the veil lifts and we see how earthly reality, which generally fills the Biblical stage, depends on another, sublime and concealed reality. In fact, normal reality is merely a reflection of that more sublime reality. Why does this phenomenon occur specifically here, in this story? Why was Esav's "sar" sent to wrestle with Ya'akov, thus determining the continuation of the story - the actual encounter between Ya'akov and Esav?

Given the respective strengths of the two sides, a physical struggle between Ya'akov and Esav could not have occurred. Against Esav's well-trained army stood Ya'akov and his young children. God must therefore intervene with His infinite kindness and

establish new rules for the confrontation, transforming it into a fair "one-on-one" contest. The results of this battle will determine the natural, real-life results thereafter.

But if it is true that Ya'akov required supernatural intervention to have even a chance of emerging triumphant, why did God send a single angel to combat him? Could God not have performed a miracle allowing Ya'akov to defeat his brother's army? The answer is that it would not have been befitting for Ya'akov to be saved from Esav through miracles. His honor required that he be saved specifically through a struggle, and thereby earn Esav's recognition that "You have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

FOOTNOTES

(1) The fact that the "ish" is indeed an angel is clear from 1) his very appearance, sudden and in the dark of night; 2) Ya'akov's request that the ish bless him; 3) the name change of Ya'akov to Yisra'el, which God is destined to repeat at Beit El (35:10); 4) the ish's response "Why do you ask for my name?" (32:30, see Shofetim 13:18); and 5) Ya'akov's remark "For I have seen God face to face, yet my soul was spared" (32:31; see also 32:29, Shofetim 13:21-23, and Hoshea 12:4-5).

(2) This final expression appears only two other times in Tanakh (Devarim 22:6, Hoshea 10:14), and it symbolizes the ruthlessness that Ya'akov feared.

(3) Note that the names of all the places mentioned throughout this saga bear significance in the context of the story: the meanings of "Machanayim," "Penu'el" and "Sukkot" are explicated in the text; "Yabbok" relates to the confrontation with the angel; "Shalem" signifies Ya'akov's success in overcoming all his crises.

(4) An additional parallel involves the term "berakha" (blessing). When Ya'akov insists that Esav accept his gift, he refers to it as a "berakha:" "Please take my

berakha..." The implication is that Ya'akov here foregoes his blessing, the rights to which he had just demanded from the angel. Why? The answer can be found in Rashi's comments at the beginning of the parasha, that Ya'akov in fact never saw the realization of the agricultural blessings promised by Yitzchak's berakha. Thus, Ya'akov here forgoes on the blessing of the present - "God shall give you from the dew of the heavens..." - in exchange for the blessing of the future, the blessing of Avraham and Yitzchak.

[Translated by Yoseif Bloch and David Silverberg]

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