Yeshivas Toras Moshe
ישיבת תורת משה
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PARSHAS VAYISHLACH

תשפ"ז

Facing Eisov while examining yourself

The Ramban teaches us: maaseh ovos siman labonim. Yaakov's going into golus is, in many ways, symbolic of Klal Yisroel going into golus. Now he is coming back to Eretz Yisroel, and he has to confront Eisov.

As I discussed last week, Yaakov had a promise from Hakodosh Boruch Hu. But Yaakov understood that he had to fulfill his side: "והיה ה' לי לאלקים". He had to remain faithful to Hakodosh Boruch Hu. There were tremendous promises, but they could be fulfilled in a small way or in a big way. He could not take anything for granted.

ויתן לך האלקים מטל השמים ומשמני הארץ.

Yes, he has the brochos. But he has to deserve them. He has gone through twenty years of nisyonos in chutz la'aretz. Now he is coming back, and the Torah tells us:

ויירא יעקב מאד ויצר לו.

He is afraid. Why? He has a promise! "Shema yigrom hacheit" – perhaps a cheit will affect the outcome.

What is the first message he sends Eisov? Chazal explain:

עם לבן גרתי ותרי"ג מצות שמרתי.

"Eisov, you think you can start up with me? Realize that I am the same Yaakov. Twenty years in Lovon's house, and I haven't changed. I still have the brochos, and you are not going to be able to do anything to me."

But that is what he tells Eisov. What does he think about himself? He is not so confident. Maybe I slipped. Maybe I didn't. A person has to remember:

אל תאמין בעצמך עד יום מותך.

Don't think you are the biggest tzaddik in the world. Always look for where you can improve, where you can change. Life is growth. Life is not a game. Unfortunately, we live in a world where most people treat it as a game. But it isn't. We take life very seriously.

We say, "ברוך אלקינו שבראנו לכבודו והבדילנו מן התועים", and we ask, "ולא ניגע לריק ולא נלד לבהלה". Some people's lives are 'rik' – empty – and 'beholoh' – confusion. No. Torah is a very serious thing.

Yaakov has to prepare in two ways: how he presents himself to Eisov, and how he examines himself. To Eisov, the message is: I am still Yaakov. Within himself, the question remains: have I lived up to what I am supposed to be?

Where the battle is fought

Then, that night, Yaakov fights the sar shel Eisov, Eisov's heavenly representative. He realizes that this is not simply a question of who is physically stronger. People who put their faith in the army think in terms of physical strength. But that is not what determines who controls the world. Look at Russia fighting Ukraine for years. It is not simply a matter of who is stronger.

We have a mesorah that the battles fought in this world have their spiritual counterpart in Shomayim. The sar of Russia, the sar of Ukraine – the spiritual battle is being played out down here on earth.

Yaakov understands what kind of fight he is facing. What is his strength? His ruchniyus. If his ruchniyus is in place, then everything is good. He is confronting the spiritual forces of Eisov. Will he prevail over them? Yaakov has the brochos, but there is no automatic guarantee of victory. He has to remain Yaakov. If he does not, then "והיה כאשר תריד" – Eisov can throw off his yoke. If Yaakov does not live up to the requirements of being Yaakov, Eisov can win.

Yaakov wins, but not without an injury: "והוא צלע על ירכו". He is limping. Chazal connect the injury to his thigh with the tomchei Torah, those who support Torah. That is a subject of its own.

Having won that spiritual battle, Yaakov comes forward the next morning to confront Eisov with confidence. This was what had made him nervous. Now he has fought and won, and the encounter with Eisov ends successfully.

So the question is not who has four hundred soldiers. The question is whether Yaakov is spiritually strong. If he is, he wins. If Yaakov wants to become Eisov, Hakodosh Boruch Hu says: if you want to be Eisov, I don't need you.

Returning whole

ויבא יעקב שלם עיר שכם.

Sholeim. He is whole in his Torah, whole in his money, and healed in his body. Why did he survive? He remained sholeim beToraso. He did not lose his Torah.

And his money? He had to give Eisov a gift to get rid of him. Yet, when it is all over, he has not lost out. The money was a gift from Hakodosh Boruch Hu in the first place.

והעשר והכבוד מלפניך ואתה מושל בכל.

We say that every day. I don't know how many people believe it when they say it. The money we have comes from Hakodosh Boruch Hu.

Yes, Yaakov worked his head off. "כי בכל כחי עבדתי את אביכן". He worked with all his strength. But as hard as he worked, he became wealthy because Hakodosh Boruch Hu made him wealthy.

He had his plans. He made elaborate hishtadlus with the peeled sticks in front of the sheep. Then Hakodosh Boruch Hu showed him in a dream what was happening. You think your technique is what makes it work? Your plans are a bunch of baloney. Do not think they are the source of your success. It works because Hakodosh Boruch Hu makes it work.

That does not mean Yaakov did nothing practical before meeting Eisov. He prepared a doron, a gift to appease him. He davened, and he prepared to fight if necessary. He had a strategy. But who was running the show? Hakodosh Boruch Hu. Yaakov's strength was that he remained Yaakov, without compromising during twenty years in Lovon's house. The rest was in Hakodosh Boruch Hu's hands.

This is not only a story about Yaakov. The Rambam quotes his example at the end of Hilchos Sechirus. A worker has to work with all his strength, as Yaakov did, and the Rambam tells us that Yaakov was rewarded for this even in this world. It applies to us too.

Something is wrong in the camp

Then comes the story of Dinah. A very strange story. And afterwards, something else happens that we have to understand.

ויאמר אלקים אל יעקב קום עלה בית אל ושב שם ועשה שם מזבח לק-ל הנראה אליך בברחך מפני עשו אחיך.

Hakodosh Boruch Hu reminds Yaakov of his promise. Go back to Beis El, the place where you made your neder when you were running away from Eisov. I kept My promise to you. Now you have to keep your promise to Me.

Then Yaakov gives his household an interesting instruction:

הסירו את אלהי הנכר אשר בתוככם.

Get rid of the avodoh zoroh. What is this avodoh zoroh business? Yaakov has a tremendous household: his family, servants, maidservants, flocks, cattle – a massive estate. Somehow, he knows that there is avodoh zoroh among them.

Read the next pesukim:

ויתנו אל יעקב את כל אלהי הנכר אשר בידם.

There was avodoh zoroh! They hand it over, and Yaakov buries it. How did he know?

Yaakov understood that if something like the maaseh with Dinah had happened, something was wrong in the ruchniyus of his camp. He had arrived sholeim in Shechem. But now something had gone wrong, and he could not dismiss it as merely a material matter: she was beautiful, this happened, that happened. No, no. We have to look at our ruchniyus. Something is interfering with our protection.

What had Yaakov told his sons after they took the spoils of Shechem? You have put us in danger. Who knows how the surrounding nations will react? They could gather against us and wipe us out.

Then they remove the avodoh zoroh, and what happens?

ויסעו ויהי חתת אלקים על הערים אשר סביבותיהם ולא רדפו אחרי בני יעקב.

Now they travel safely. The surrounding cities are afraid of them, and they do not pursue them. Get rid of the avodoh zoroh, and the situation changes.

What do we say every Shabbos?

גבור לא ינצל ברב כח. שקר הסוס לתשועה וברב חילו לא ימלט. הנה עין ה׳ אל יראיו למיחלים לחסדו. להציל ממות נפשם ולחיותם ברעב.

A strong man is not saved by his great strength. The horse is not the source of salvation. Hashem's eye is on those who fear Him, those who wait for His chesed.

That is the thread running through the parsha. Yaakov's fear before meeting Eisov: "shema yigrom hacheit". The battle with Eisov's sar: a spiritual battle. Then the danger after Shechem: something in the camp has to be corrected. This is a very, very deep lesson for us.

Alone before Hakodosh Boruch Hu

There is another point in Yaakov's encounter with the malach. He was given the name Yaakov at birth. Now the sar shel Eisov tells him:

לא יעקב יאמר עוד שמך כי אם ישראל כי שרית עם אלקים ועם אנשים ותוכל.

What does "im Elokim" mean? You don't fight Hakodosh Boruch Hu and win. The word can refer to a malach, and there is a halachic question about whether "Elokim" here has kedushas Hashem when it is written. But look at how Onkelos translates the posuk:

ואמר לא יעקב יתאמר עוד שמך אלהין ישראל ארי רברבת קדם ה' ועם גובריא ויכלתא.

"Kodom Hashem" – before Hakodosh Boruch Hu. Yaakov achieved greatness before Him. That is a very powerful thought.

When Yaakov fought the malach of Eisov, he was alone. Nobody else saw it. There is a very interesting pattern here. When a person reaches the highest point in his avodas Hashem, it happens in private. Nobody is watching.

What was the high point in the spiritual lives of Avrohom and Yitzchok? The Akeidoh. What did Avrohom tell the two people accompanying them?

שבו לכם פה עם החמור ואני והנער נלכה עד כה.

You stay here. Who is going up the mountain? Avrohom and Yitzchok, by themselves. Nobody else is coming to watch.

Where is Yaakov when he fights Eisov's sar? "ויותר יעקב לבדו". Alone.

And when the Kohen Godol enters the Kodesh Hakodoshim on Yom Kippur?

וכל אדם לא יהיה באהל מועד בבאו לכפר בקדש עד צאתו.

Nobody else is there. At a certain point, you have to stand directly before Hakodosh Boruch Hu. There is no chevrah. There is no shtick. Nobody is looking at you. It is you and Hakodosh Boruch Hu. That's it.

This is what Onkelos brings out: "kodom Hashem." Yaakov is alone before Hakodosh Boruch Hu. And later, at Beis El, Hakodosh Boruch Hu Himself gives him the name Yisroel.

Redeemed from one stronger than he

A person has to understand the source of his strength and the source of his weakness. It all revolves around his ruchniyus. 'Maaseh ovos siman labonim' means that this is about our lives. Hakodosh Boruch Hu is with us on a regular, ongoing basis.

Later in the parsha, the Torah describes Eisov taking his wives, his children, his household, his animals, and all his possessions:

וילך אל ארץ מפני יעקב אחיו.

Eisov leaves. Yaakov does not have to fight him. He picks up and walks away.

What do we say every day in Maariv?

כי פדה ה׳ את יעקב וגאלו מיד חזק ממנו.

Who is the one stronger than Yaakov? Lovon was stronger. Eisov was stronger. It does not say that Yaakov was so powerful that he defeated them by his own strength. In their eyes, he is a shlemiel, a yeshiva bochur. But Hakodosh Boruch Hu redeems him from the one who is stronger than he is.

We are coming up to Chanukah. What is Chanukah about? Who won the battle against the Greeks?

Today there is an IDF unit called Chashmonaim, presented as a frum army unit. But what made the real Chashmonaim who they were? They were me'atim – a small group. They were tzaddikim, tehorim, oskei Torasecho. And they were chaloshim – weak.

But they won. They won! That is the story of life. The story of all our lives.