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The Jerusalem Kolel

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SEDRA SUMMARY

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Yaakov returns to the Holy Land after a 20-year stay in Charan, and sends malachim

- emissaries to Esav in hope of a reconciliation, but his messengers report that his brother is on the warpath with 400 armed men.

Yaakov prepares for war, davens, and sends Esav a large gift (consisting of hundreds of heads of livestock) to appease him.

That night, Yaakov ferries his family and possessions across the River Yabbok; he, however, remains behind and encounters the malach that embodies the spirit of Esav, with whom he wrestles until daybreak. Yaakov suffers a dislocated hip but vanquishes the supernal creature, who bestows on him the name Yisroel, which means "he who prevails over the divine."

Yaakov and Esav meet, embrace and kiss, but part ways. Yaakov purchases a plot of land near Shechem, whose crown prince—also called Shechem—abducts Yaakov's daughter Dinah. Dinah's brothers Shimon and Levi avenge the deed by killing all male inhabitants of the city, after rendering them vulnerable by convincing them to circumcise themselves.

Yaakov journeys on. Rachel dies while giving birth to her second son, Binyamin, and is buried in a roadside grave near Bethlehem. Reuven loses the birthright because he interferes with his father's marital life. Yaakov arrives in Hebron, to his father Yitzchak, who later dies at age 180. (Rivka has passed away before Yaakov's arrival.)

Our Parshah concludes with a detailed account of Esav's wives, children and grandchildren; the family histories of the people of Seir, among whom Esav settled; and a list of the eight kings who ruled Edom, the land of Esav's and Seir's descendants.

THE POTENCY OF A PRIMAL PRAYER

Parshah

After many years toiling for Lavan, Yaakov Avinu, on his way back to Eretz Yisroel, sends out messengers to inquire whether Eisav is still harbouring feelings of hatred and hostility, and to extend an invitation for peace. Yaakov wanted to ensure *shalom* between himself and his brother Eisav.

The messengers had a noble cause but they returned with unfavourable news. Eisav was approaching Yaakov's camp and with him was an army of 400 men.

Here the Torah relates that when the news reached Yaakov *vayeira Yaakov meod vayeitser lo*,¹ Yaakov feared greatly and he was agitated. It almost sounds like he experienced feelings of panic.

It is important to read the verse with the understanding that we are not talking of average men. Perhaps our own reaction to such news would be of fear or panic, but what of our forefather Yaakov?

Chazal ask, how is it that Yaakov "feared greatly" when he heard the news of Eisav and his army approaching? Why is it that Yaakov fears Eisav, when we are told earlier that Hashem had promised him *hinei anochi imach ve'shmartich bechol asher telech...*,² and behold I will be with you and protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land?

The *Yismach Yisroel*³ of Alexander expands on the words of the Alter Rebbe Reb Yechiel, who quotes the *Chovos Ha'levavos*.⁴ Someone who truly cleaves to Hashem should be at such a high spiritual level, to the extent that he should never harbour any feelings of fear, regardless of whatever situation or test he is confronted with. The *Chovos Ha'levavos* explains this state of being by means of a *mashal*, a parable. A *chossid* was sleeping in the *midbar*, in a place that was overrun with wild animals. When a crew of armed bandits approach him and ask him, how is it that you could sleep so soundly in such a dangerous place, the *chossid* replies that it would be shameful to fear anything at all, but Hashem Himself.

With this *mashal* we learn a *yesod*, a foundation in our faith. If one fears One, he fears none.

This makes *chazal's* difficulty even stronger. Why did Yaakov Avinu suddenly feel this great fear overtaking him?

The *Yismach Yisroel* suggests an answer to this question. When Yaakov Avinu felt himself fearing Eisav he immediately understood that his fear of Heaven and his connection to Hashem were not on the proper level. When Hashem promised Yaakov that He would protect him, it was on the condition that Yaakov should cleave to him, to be true to Hashem. We see this when Yaakov says *katanti mi'kol ha'chasidim*,⁵ I am unworthy of all the kindness that you have you so steadfastly shown your servant.

The Alter Rebbe Reb Yechiel points out that the first thing Yaakov Avinu did was to daven to Hashem *Hitsileini nah...*⁶ "Deliver me, I pray" from the hand of Eisav. Instead of embarking on the long and immersive *teshuvah* process, he turns to the more immediate and primal prayer, fearing that he broke his part of Hashem's covenant.

When one is in the throes of a dire situation he may not have the time to do *teshuvah*, and to be redeemed from the immediate danger one can only call out and *daven* to Hashem. The *Yismach Yisroel* compares this to a soldier who gets wounded in battle. As long as the soldier is capable of fighting he must continue to do so instead of tending to his injuries. So too in many battle-like situations, a person may not have time to dwell on his shortcomings and fallacies and begin the *teshuvah* process. Rather, he too should continue fighting by way of *davening*, and only once in safety can the focus turn to healing the metaphoric wounds and doing *teshuvah*.

When Yaakov Avinu reached out to Hashem in *tefilah*, in prayer, he taught us and our future generations that even when we are far away from Hashem due to our sins, Hashem is there, always, waiting for us to cry out to him. All we have to do is to *daven*.

1. Bereishis 32:8
2. Bereishis 28:15
3. Yismach Yisroel Vayishlach
4. Chovos Levavos, Sha'ar Ha'ahavah 4:86
5. Bereishis 32:11
6. Bereishis 32:12



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