**SALT – PARASHAT VAYISHLACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayishlach tells of the mysterious assailant who wrestled with Yaakov as he made his way back to *Eretz Yisrael* from Charan. After bringing his family and belongings across the Yabok stream, Yaakov remained alone on the other side of the river and suddenly came under attack. Yaakov sustained a crippling injury, but ultimately prevailed over his attacker, who is commonly identified as an angel, specifically, the angel associated with Eisav and the forces of evil in the world.

The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (91a) notes that the verb “*va-yei’aveik*,” with which the Torah speaks of Yaakov’s struggle against the angel, stems from the root *a.v.k*., which also means “dust.” This word is used in the context of Yaakov’s struggle, the Gemara explains, to indicate that “they raised dust from their legs until the throne of glory.”

The significance of the dust which arose from the ground as Yaakov wrestled with the angel is mentioned also by the Midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabba* 3:6) in reference to the verse in Shir Hashirim (3:6) which compares *Benei Yisrael* to “*avkat rokhel*” – the “dust” of spice merchants. The Midrash explains that just as a merchant keeps all types of spices in stock, *Benei Yisrael* enjoy the full range of blessings. These are referred to with the word “*avkat*,” the Midrash comments, because they are given to us “from that dust which was under his [Yaakov’s] feet.” The Midrash proceeds to specify that *Benei Yisrael*’s material success, their success in battle against enemy nations, and their success in Torah scholarship, are all achieved “in the merit of the dust of our patriarch, Yaakov.”

Why did *Chazal* draw our attention to the dust that Yaakov kicked in the air during his fight with the angel, and why is this dust so significant that it underlies our nation’s success in all areas?

The simplest explanation, perhaps, is that the Midrash teaches that no success can be achieved without hard work and struggle. *Chazal* saw the dust as a symbol of our struggles in life – our struggles against “Eisav’s angel” in all its various forms, such as adversity, pain, and spiritual challenge. In any area of life, we will encounter hardship and obstacles that we will need to struggle to surmount. This struggle will produce “dust,” unpleasant situations and experiences, but these are vital steps that must be undergone along the road to success and achievement. The Midrash teaches that we realize success only by producing “dust,” through our persistent struggle against the “angels” that we confront and that try to derail us as we pursue our goals.

At times we might feel discouraged by the “dust,” by life’s challenges, and we might mistakenly view them as a sign of failure. If we were doing things the right way, we sometimes think to ourselves, then we would not have to deal with the unpleasant “dust,” the challenges that make life difficult. The Gemara teaches us that to the contrary, the “dust” produced as a result of life’s challenges rises “to the throne of glory,” and is lovingly accepted by God. In order to connect to God in our reality here on earth, we need to work hard and struggle. It is only through the “dust” of persistence and perseverance, by “wrestling” with adversity and challenge, that we bond with the “heavenly throne,” and that we achieve success and bring meaning and fulfillment to our lives.

Sunday

Yesterday, we discussed the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Chulin (91a) regarding the word “*va-yei’aveik*” with which the Torah in Parashat Vayishlach (32:25) refers to Yaakov’s struggle against a mysterious assailant as he returned from Charan to his homeland. Noting the connection between the root of this verb (*a.v.k.*) and the word *avak* (dust), the Gemara comments that Yaakov and his assailant kicked dust into the air as they fought, and this dust rose from their feet “to the throne of glory” in the heavens.

Several writers understood the Gemara’s remarks as depicting the notion of sanctifying the mundane, of linking our earthly reality with the heavens, with spirituality. Dust symbolizes physicality, the mundane aspects of our lives, which we must strive to elevate to the “throne of glory,” to connect with the Almighty, to imbue with meaning and value by engaging in our mundane affairs in accordance with Torah law and values. This requires struggling with Yaakov’s mysterious assailant – who is commonly identified as the *Satan*, our natural, sinful impulses and drives. As we go about our everyday, mundane affairs, we frequently come under “attack” by our negative inclinations, and we must struggle to overcome them. And it is precisely through this struggle that we connect the “dust,” our physical reality, with the Almighty.

Rav Moshe Litsch-Rosenbaum, in *Lechem Rav*, adds that this might also explain the Gemara’s famous comment there in Masekhet Chulin (91a) regarding the circumstances under which Yaakov came under attack. The Gemara tells that after Yaakov brought his family and belongings across the Yabok river, he returned to the other side to retrieve “*pakhim ketanim*” – “small containers.” Yaakov made a point of going back to bring these relatively insignificant items, the Gemara explains, because righteous people cherish their material possessions, and treat them with great care. As the righteous are exceedingly meticulous in their financial affairs, ensuring not to take any money to which they are not rightfully entitled, they must exercise extreme care in handling their hard-earned possessions. Rav Litsch-Rosenbaum explains that the Gemara here provides the context for the struggle with our evil inclination, represented by Yaakov’s struggle with the angel. Yaakov’s crossing the river to retrieve “*pakhim ketanim*” symbolizes our mundane affairs, our engagement in the material world, in commerce and professional life, our efforts to secure a comfortable livelihood. Our material pursuits will, invariably, result in struggle and challenge. We will come under “attack” by the lure of money, by the desire to earn dishonestly, by common vices such as greed and selfishness, and by the tendency to obsess over money at the expense of religious obligations. As we deal with “*pakhim ketanim*,” the effort to earn a livelihood, we will need to struggle – and this struggle is what connects our mundane pursuits with the “heavenly throne,” endowing them with sanctity and spiritual significance.

Rav Litsch-Rosenbaum adds that this might explain the Midrash’s comment cited by Rashi (32:27) that after Yaakov triumphed over the angel, he demanded that the angel – Eisav’s representative – formally consent to Yaakov’s right to his father’s blessing. Eisav sought to kill Yaakov in revenge for his disguising as Eisav to receive their father’s blessing, and now Yaakov insisted that Eisav acknowledge Yaakov’s entitlement to the blessing. Rav Litsch-Rosenbaum explains that Yitzchak did not wish to grant Yaakov his blessing because Yaakov, the “simple man, dweller of tents” (25:27), lived withdrawn from mundane life, devoting himself exclusively to study and worship. Yitzchak felt that Yaakov lacked the ability to connect heaven and earth, to engage with the physical world in order to elevate it and infuse it with sanctity. Now, however, Yaakov had proven his ability to confront and overcome the challenges that arise from the involvement in “*pakhim ketanim*,” in mundane affairs. After spending twenty years working as a shepherd for his wily uncle, during which time he amassed a large fortune, Yaakov proved himself worthy of his father’s blessing, having demonstrated his ability to elevate the “dust” to the heavens, to engage in the physical world in a manner which lends it sanctity and spiritual meaning.

Monday

The Torah relates in Parashat Vayishlach that as Yaakov made his way back to Canaan from Charan, he crossed the Yabok River, and brought all his belongings across the river (“*va-ya’aver et asher lo*” – 32:24). Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 76:9), explains this to mean that Yaakov “made himself like a bridge,” bringing his possessions from one side of the river to the other.

A number of writers suggested reading the Midrash’s depiction of Yaakov as a “bridge” over a river symbolically, as expressing an element of Yaakov’s conduct and character that serves as an example for us to follow.

One such approach is posited by Rav Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal, in his *Eim Ha-banim Semeicha* (chapter 3). He writes that the image of a bridge in this passage alludes to the connection to the Land of Israel that must be maintained even when Jews find themselves in the Diaspora. Yaakov survived exile, Rav Teichtal writes, because he lived as a “bridge” throughout this period. Despite living far from *Eretz Yisrael*, he never stopped feeling connected to it, viewing it as his eternal homeland, and pining to return. In Rav Teichtal’s words, Yaakov never planted both feet in exile; rather, he stood like a bridge, that has its foundations on both sides of the river. Even while settling in Charan and becoming prosperous there, he proverbially had one foot in his homeland, without ever viewing himself as a permanent resident of Charan.

Rav Natan of Breslav, in [*Likutei Halakhot* (*Hilkhot Tefillin*, 5:41)](https://he.wikisource.org/wiki/%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%98%D7%99_%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%AA/%D7%90%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%97_%D7%97%D7%99%D7%99%D7%9D/%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%AA_%D7%AA%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%9F/%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%94_%D7%94#%D7%90%D7%95%D7%AA_%D7%9E%D7%90), explains the depiction of a Yaakov as a bridge based on the celebrated teaching of his mentor, Rav Nachman of Breslav (*Likutei Moharan*, *Tanina*, 51), comparing life in this world to a narrow bridge. Just as a person crossing a dangerous, narrow bridge can easily fall and get hurt, we, too, must exercise caution to follow the proper path throughout our lives, without veering to either side. Yaakov is commonly associated with the quality of *emet* – truth and honesty, as alluded to in the final verse of Sefer Mikha, “*Titein emet le-Yaakov*” (“Grant truth to Yaakov”). Rav Natan thus suggests that the image of Yaakov forming a bridge over a river symbolizes the seminal role of *emet* in our effort to safely traverse the “bridge” of life. The key to remaining steady and properly balanced is remaining true to our ideals and principles, and avoiding delusions and self-deceptions. Over the course of life, we will be subjected to numerous different forces that could easily “blow” us off the narrow “bridge” and make us fall. We resist these pressures, lures and influences through the attribute of *emet*, through genuine conviction, by knowing precisely who we are, who we want to be, and how we are to live our lives. As long as we are sincere, honest, and committed to the truth, we are capable of withstanding even the gusty “winds” that blow around us, and safely cross the “bridge” to a successful, fulfilling life.

Tuesday

Parashat Vayishlach begins by telling of Yaakov’s preparations in advance of his feared reunion with his older brother, Eisav, who had set out to kill him many years earlier. In the messages Yaakov sent to Eisav, he spoke with great humility and submissiveness, lowering himself before his brother. He repeatedly referred to Eisav as his “master” and to himself as Eisav’s “servant” (32:4-5,18,20), and during their encounter, he bowed to Eisav seven times (33:3). Although his father had blessed him that he would be “*gevir le-achekha*” (27:29) – that he would assume a position of leadership and authority over his brother – Yaakov nevertheless lowered himself before Eisav in an effort to ease tensions and avoid conflict.

While the circumstances surrounding Eisav’s hostility toward Yaakov were certainly unique – Eisav was enraged over Yaakov’s having deceptively taken the blessing which had been intended for him – nevertheless, Yaakov’s efforts to assuage Eisav’s anger are perhaps instructive for interpersonal relationships generally. Yaakov’s example shows that the most important ingredient for avoiding tensions and conflicts is humility, foregoing on honor even when it is rightfully deserved. Many, or most, interpersonal conflicts result from a preoccupation with receiving respect from other people. When people find it necessary to be given honor, they are fragile, such that they react to minor infractions that do not warrant a reaction, and argue over matters that do not warrant an argument. They protest and complain unnecessarily, objecting to trivial grievances, because of their desperate need to have other people look upon them with admiration. Yaakov, who is associated with the quality of *emet* (truth and honesty), sets for us an example of disregarding honor and respect for the sake of peace, a willingness to grant others honor in the interest of avoiding conflict. When we live with a commitment to *emet*, pursuing and concerning ourselves with things that really matter, living true to our values and principles, we will not feel the need to win other people’s admiration or honor, and we will thus spare ourselves the aggravation and angst of unnecessary tensions with the people around us.

(Based on Rav Eliezer Hershler and Rav Yosef Chanun’s *Noam Ha-Torah*, Parashat Vayishlach)

Wednesday

Parashat Vayishlach begins with the message that Yaakov sent to his brother, Eisav, as he made his way back from Charan to the Land of Israel. This message began, “I have dwelled with Lavan, and I have delayed until now” (32:5).

Some editions of Rashi’s Torah commentary include a famous passage bringing a Midrashic interpretation of the term “*garti*” (“I have dwelled”) in this verse, reading it as an allusion to the 613 *mitzvot* of the Torah (as “*garti*” in *gematria* equals 613). According to this reading, Yaakov was indicating to his brother that although he had been living with their idolatrous, corrupt uncle, “*taryag mitzvot shamarti*” – he remained faithful to the divine will as taught to them by their father and grandfather. Yaakov avowed that he was not influenced by Lavan’s sinful conduct, and succeeded in meeting his religious obligations even in the spiritually hostile environment of Lavan’s home.

Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel, in *Hegyonot El Ami*, explains that this Midrashic reading of the word *garti* is closely related to its plain meaning. The root *g.u.r.* implies normal, day-to-day living. “*Garti*” thus connotes ordinary life, the basic routine of caring for one’s basic needs, earning a livelihood, and tending to one’s family. By associating this word with the observance of the 613 Torah commands, Rashi is emphasizing that proper fulfillment of the *mitzvot* does not require us to live as angels, to try to live an “otherworldly” existence. To the contrary, such attempts are bound to fail, because we are, after all, human beings, with physical needs that must be met. We fulfill the divine will through “*garti*,” by living normally as ordinary human beings, in accordance with the Torah’s laws and values.

Rav Amiel adds that this concept is indicated also several verses earlier – toward the end of the previous *parasha*, Parashat Vayeitzei. There we read that after Yaakov and Lavan made a truce and parted ways, “…Yaakov went along his way, and angels of God encountered him.” Rav Amiel suggests explaining the phrase “*halakh le-darko*” (“went along his way”) as referring to ordinary, day-to-day living, without trying to extend beyond our human realities. Specifically when we live “*ka-darko*,” normally, as ordinary human beings, conducting our day-to-day affairs in accordance with the principles of the Torah, we will encounter “angels of God.” We become worthy of God’s special protection not by making a futile effort to live beyond our limits, but by accepting our human realities and tending to our normal affairs in the refined, dignified manner prescribed by the Torah.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Vayishlach of the mysterious assailant who wrestled with Yaakov as Yaakov made his way back to *Eretz Yisrael* after having spent twenty years with his uncle in Charan. This attacker turns out to be an angel, and after his unsuccessful attempt to subdue Yaakov, Yaakov refused to release him until he conferred upon him a blessing. Afterward, Yaakov inquired about the angel’s name, and the angel replied, “Why would you ask about my name?” (32:30). Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 78:4), explains the angel’s response to mean, “We [angels] do not have a permanent name; our names change in accordance with the command regarding the mission for which we are sent.” According to the Midrash, the angel explained to Yaakov that angels have no “name,” and are rather given a temporary name each time they are assigned a task to complete.

The Midrash’s interpretation of the angel’s response is likely intended to draw our attention to the contrast between angels and human beings. A name perhaps represents a person’s core essence, the foundation of his being. When the Midrash speaks of the angels not having a permanent name, then, it means that an angel’s core essence is determined exclusively by the current mission assigned to it. When an angel is dispatched for some purpose, the entirety of its being is defined by this task. It experiences no inner resistance, no desire to disobey, and no clash between competing interests and concerns, because its core essence becomes synonymous with the role it has been given. This depiction of angels contrasts with human beings, who are inherently complex. Our “name,” the core essence of our beings, remains constant throughout the innumerable “missions” and responsibilities that we assume at different times during our lives, and even in a single day. Living a Torah life entails a wide array of different responsibilities, ranging from family obligations, to communal obligations, prayer, Torah study, kindness and charity,and the countless *mitzvot* that arise on different occasions. Neither single obligation signifies the core essence of an individual; a person is defined as a composite of countless different elements. (See Rav Elya Meir Bloch’s *Peninei Da’at*, Parashat Vayishlach.)

This contrast between human beings and angels perhaps teaches the importance of consistency, and warns against compartmentalizing in life. Although we might wear many different proverbial hats, fulfilling many different kinds of roles, our core identity as devoted servants of God must remain constant throughout our day and throughout our lives. Even when we tend to responsibilities that appear mundane and distant from religious life, our “name” must not change. We are to infuse our everyday routine, including our ordinary affairs, with meaning and sanctity, viewing them as part of our obligations as God’s servants, and conducting them in accordance with His laws and values. We are to retain our “name” wherever we go and whatever we do over the course of any given day; our core essence must remain the same, whether we find ourselves in the synagogue, at home, at work, at a social event, on a recreational trip, or in any other setting. Our “names” are not temporary, but must rather inform the full range of activities that we perform each day of our lives.

Friday

We read in Parashat Vayishlach of how Yaakov was gripped by fear upon hearing that Eisav was approaching with an army of four hundred men. A number of passages in the Midrash set out to explain why Yaakov was afraid even after having received God’s explicit promise of protection. When Yaakov left his homeland after Eisav threatened to kill him, God appeared to him and promised to protect him – “I will hereby be with you, and I will protect you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land” (28:15). Later, in Charan, God appeared to Yaakov a second time, commanding him to return to Canaan and promising, “I shall be with you” (31:3). Nevertheless, despite these promises, Yaakov was afraid that Eisav would kill him and his family. One Midrashic source (*Bamidbar Rabba* 19:32) explains that Yaakov feared “lest I have become soiled with Lavan in some small matter.” Yaakov worried that he might have become unworthy of the protection that God had promised, as he perhaps had become “soiled” by some improper conduct during the years he spent with Lavan.

The Midrash makes a similar comment regarding Moshe’s fear when *Benei Yisrael* came under attack by the army of Og, king of the Bashan (Bamidbar 21:34). This attack came on the heels of *Benei Yisrael*’s stunning military victory over the Emorite kingdom, and the Midrash explains that Moshe feared that *Benei Yisrael* might have “become soiled through sin” during the war against the Emorites, thus becoming unworthy of yet another miraculous victory.

The common denominator between these two situations – the years Yaakov spent with Lavan, and *Benei Yisrael*’s battle against the Emorites – is that both involved struggle against an evil party. Lavan was corrupt and immoral, and he repeatedly tried to swindle Yaakov, even changing the terms of their work agreement ten times (31:7,41). Yaakov avowed that he would have left Lavan impoverished if not for God’s supernatural intervention, enabling him to prosper (31:42). And *Benei Yisrael* fought the Emorites after the kingdom’s leader, Sichon, launched an unprovoked attack in response to *Benei Yisrael*’s respectful request for peaceful passage through his territory (Bamidbar 21:21-25). When we are forced to struggle and wage battles against evildoers, we run the risk of being “soiled” by improper conduct. Even when the conflict is inherently legitimate and necessary, nevertheless, we are prone to compromising our values and moral standards in the process. Yaakov was forced to engage in clever planning and strategizing in order to outmaneuver his crooked, wily uncle, and his descendants were later forced to take up arms to defend themselves against the senseless assault launched by the Emorites. These struggles were valid, but they posed the danger of “filth,” of impropriety, of excessive hostility, of a lowering of moral standards, and of the loss of integrity, dignity and refinement. The Midrash here alerts us to the need to work towards avoiding becoming “soiled” over the course of “warfare” of any kind. Even when it becomes necessary to oppose and resist wrongdoing, this must be done cleanly, in a manner that does not entail any compromise of our moral or religious principles.