

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

VAYISHLACH

Ya'akov was left alone and a man wrestled with him until dawn. When he perceived he could no longer overcome him, he struck the socket of the hip... Then (the man) said "Let me go, for dawn has broken." He said "I will not let you go until you have blessed me"... He said to him "Your name shall no longer be called Ya'akov, but Yisrael, for you acted most honourably... and you succeeded"... (32:25-8).

Who was the man who wrestled with the Ya'akov Avinu? The Navi (Hoshe'a 12:5) says it was an angel. The Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 77:3) brings the tradition that he was the guardian angel of Eisav. The Ramban likewise links the man with Eisav and sees the whole struggle in the context of MAASEI AVOT SIMAN LABANIM; what happens to the Avot indicates similar on a larger scale for their descendants. In this case, the offspring of Ya'akov would suffer many gruesome outrages at the hands of the offspring of Eisav, but every time they would eventually emerge in the sunshine as one nation; bruised and badly battered, but still able to pick up and carry on.

The Rashbam, however, explains our story differently. Ya'akov was 'left

alone' - he separated from his extended family and his entourage of servants. And all his possessions were on the other side. He was alone because he was terrified of Eisav and he wanted to run away. Notwithstanding G-d's promises of protection, Ya'akov's instinct was to make off in another direction so that the dreaded confrontation would never happen. G-d therefore sent an angel to wrestle with him. From that struggle, Ya'akov learned an important lesson: how to face up to his fears, confront them, struggle with them, persist with them, and finally defeat them. So that Ya'akov Avinu would achieve SH'LEIMUT, full development, becoming the best possible version of Ya'akov Avinu.

The Torah introduces us to Ya'akov Avinu as an ISH TAM; as Rashi explains, a straightforward person who sought to live with simple honesty. That is a good personal quality, but by itself it is not enough to make a GADOL B'YISRAEL, or in his case even more than that, an AV, the patriarch of Am Yisrael, the nation that was to bear his name. Virtuous as it is, in its raw state, just being a good person is not SH'LEIMUT. Unchallenged it can leave to naivety, and becoming easy prey for selfishly ambitious, greedy, and vindictive people. As David HaMelech was to charge his son Shlomo in taking over the kingdom:

"You must be strong, and you must be a man!" (M'lachim Alef 2:2).

Though he was an ISH TAM, we repeatedly learn Ya'akov Avinu's fears of the unknown. He was apprehensive as he impersonated Eisav to obtain the b'racha, even though he was doing what he had to do. He worried en route to Lavan that he would have enough to eat and the wherewithal to keep going. He was fearful, as we read this week, that Eisav was on his track from far-away Edom even though G-d promised him support all the way and his messengers didn't return-report any hostile intent.

Fear is one thing. But achieving SH'LEIMUT means facing fear by following through with courage and confidence despite the fear. Ya'akov Avinu was not born with those qualities, these were things he had to struggle with and build himself. G-d gave the prompts; he put in the effort. And as the angel confirmed, the struggle made him a different man worthy of a different name: He said to him "Your name shall no longer be called Ya'akov, but Yisrael, for you acted most honourably... and you have succeeded."

As the Ralbag explains, he demonstrated his role as the third of the Avot with the words: "You have become a prince among the angels and among men." And following his

meeting with Eisav, it was he, Ya'akov, who set the tone as he tactfully but firmly, defined the nature of their present and future interactions.

This gives an insight into what we read straight afterwards: "Ya'akov arrived SHALEIM into the vicinity of Sh'chem" (33:18). SHALEIM meaning SH'LEIMUT, a complete person ready to lead and ready to take on whatever needed to be taken on. And to set standards for the future Am Yisrael for posterity.

As people, we have individual G-d-given strengths. Yet we can identify skills and qualities that can raise our existence to a whole new level, but feel that we're more comfortable staying where we are. It is fatally easy to resign oneself with an "it's not me". Especially when stepping up to the plate in everyday situations and scenarios. It can be opening a friendly yet non-intrusive conversation with someone new in shul who doesn't quite appear to be your, er, 'type'. Especially if you'll be doing most of the listening rather than the talking and possibly be asked to lend a hand. It can be sensitively and skilfully building a bridge between two family members that 'won't talk' to each other. It might be spending regular and extended time with an close elderly relative in poor health so that he or she can live among those they love

instead of among strangers: something that typically develops the skills of empathy, patience, and capacity to bring crucial reason to live to someone at the twilight stage of life. It could be something quite different like going back to class to learn something beautiful and constructive and yet never got round to doing, such as self-expression through watercolour painting, cooking and baking, or learning the skills of a SOFER STAM.

We learn from this parasha that greatness involves striving for SH'LEIMUT: things that can make us initially uncomfortable but leave us afterwards with sense of growth have greatly added to what we have already achieved. 🌱📖