

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Vayishlach)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

Cold. So cold it cuts through the rags that were once clothes, straight to the bone.

There was a time this cold so occupied your very being, that you could concentrate on nothing else. But that was long ago.

Darkness. So dark it sometimes seems more than the mere absence of light; it feels almost tangible. You vaguely recall a time when you were obsessed with determining exactly where you were, pacing in the darkness to examine your environs. You figured out you were in some sort of a concrete cell, perhaps six feet square, but not much more than that. You used to wonder what color the walls were, never having been allowed to see them, but that curiosity has long ago been replaced with more basic needs.

Something scurries across the stone floor, running across your bare foot. There was a time your screams would then echo into the darkness, but you no longer have the energy to even react.

You don't know what time it is, you don't know what day it is; you're not even sure what year it is. You used to try to figure out what season it was, and whether the cold damp on the walls and in the air was an indication of winter, but it seems to be cold here year-round. And even if you could figure out what season it was, or even what year; what difference would that make?

Does anyone know you are here? Could today be your birthday? Is anyone still thinking of you? Do they remember you? Does anyone still care?

A sudden noise, the sound of metal on concrete, as a tray with some undistinguishable food substance slides through a slot in the cell door. You never figured out how they do that without making a sound, or letting in any light. You used to call out, screaming into the darkness, hoping for any response, any human voice... Do the guards wear padded shoes? And is your cell within a cell that prevents any light from entering with the opening of the grate in the door?

Sudden panic; what if you are blind? What if they blinded you only it was so long ago, you just don't remember? What if you are mad? The panic begins to rise, threatening to overwhelm you, and not for the first or even the thousand time, you manage to get a grip, and hang on. But for how long? And to what end?

If your name was Zack Baumel, Tzvi Feldman, Yehuda Katz, or Ron Arad, this could well be your daily routine; a routine you might still be living with, since the battle of Sultan Yaakov, in 1982.

Israel's MIA's represent the challenge of being alone. There is little in this world that is more challenging, more painful, and more overwhelming, than the feeling of being alone.

Indeed, the only thing ever described in the Torah as being 'not good', is being alone.

"Lo Tov heyot Ha'Adam levado" (Genesis 2:18)

"It is not good for man to be alone."

All of which makes Yaakov's experience in this week's portion all the more challenging.

"Va'Yivater Ya'akov Levado, Va'yeavek Ish imo ad alot Hashachar"

"And Yaakov remained all alone, and wrestled or struggled with a man until dawn."

(Genesis 32:25)

Who was this man? And what was this struggle? And most of all, how did Yaakov come to be left all alone in the middle of the night?

Yaakov, finally returning home to Israel after 22 long years of exile, is confronted with the imminent encounter with his brother Esav. The same Esav who, 22 years earlier, upon discovering Yaakov's deception and usurping of the birthright blessings Esav thought were rightfully his, swore he would count the days until he could gloat over Yaakov's corpse.

And Esav isn't just 'out there somewhere' to be considered; he's heading Yaakov's way with four hundred fighting men. And it appears to be that they mean business.

So Yaakov is terrified:

"Vayira Yaakov me'od, vayetzer lo".

"And Yaakov was very afraid, and a panic seized him." (Genesis 32:8)

Recognizing the need for action, Yaakov splits his camp in two, reasoning that if Esav and his men mean harm they will confront one of the camps, and the other will be able to escape, ensuring that the Jewish people will survive this night.

So how is Yaakov then left all alone? Why is he not with at least one of the two camps, taking responsibility for the struggle and delegating the other camp to one of his sons?

And what is Yaakov so afraid of? How can Yaakov, having been promised by G-d that all will be well, and that he will father the Jewish people, be afraid? The same Yaakov promised by G-d *"I will be with you"* (*"VeE'heyeh Imach"*; Genesis 28:15) is 'filled with fear'? And who is he afraid of? Esav??

Rav Soleveitchik, z"l, suggests a fascinating answer. The identity of the 'man' who Yaakov struggles with is so unclear in this story, because that man is none other than Yaakov himself. Yaakov's struggle here is with himself. When all is said and done, Yaakov realizes that he is alone.

After 22 years in the house of Lavan, perhaps Yaakov is struggling to figure out who he really is. As we read in last week's portion, Yaakov goes down to the house of Lavan

dreaming of ladders with angels, but he leaves 22 years later dreaming of sheep and money. Has Yaakov, the dweller of tents, (which tradition teaches us refers to Yaakov's spiritual nature), become Yaakov, the 'man of the field' and consummate businessman he never intended to be?

This question is one Yaakov has been struggling with all his life.

Yaakov is described in the Torah as "a pure soul, a dweller of tents", nearly the antithesis of his brother Esav, (the "hunter, and man of the field"; Genesis 25:27) And when Yitzchak their father wants to give the blessings to Esav, Yaakov's mother, Rivkah convinces Yaakov that he needs to 'become' Esav, in order to receive the blessings. One wonders how much of 'Esav' Yaakov has become, and how Yaakov must feel, knowing that his own mother wants him to 'become' his brother.

And then Yaakov, having found his true love Rachel, is forced by her father Lavan to marry her sister Leah instead. So for seven years Yaakov ends up being the husband he doesn't want to be instead of the lover he wishes he were.

In fact, Yaakov is born trying to be someone he isn't. The Torah tells us he is called Yaakov because he is born clutching the heel ('Akev' in Hebrew) of the first-born Esav (Genesis 25:26). Yaakov, even in birth, wants to be the first-born, the bechor, but is relegated to being the younger of the two. So who really is Yaakov?

Perhaps Yaakov is struggling with who he is meant to be.

Maybe Yaakov is wondering: am I still that same Yaakov? Or have I become the Eisav I ran from? Has Lavan, whose name means deception, ended up influencing me far more than I had imagined?

If Yaakov, the dweller of tents, has really become Eisav, paragon of cruelty and blood lust, then the dream of a Jewish people, an ethical role model with the potential to bring light to the entire world, may well be lost forever.

Sometimes we look back at who we thought we wanted to be, the model of who we dreamed we could become, and we wonder where that person got lost.

Maybe we wonder whether that dream is lost forever. Perhaps we even wonder, given that the dream seems long gone and so far away, whether there is any purpose to all that we have done, all we have created. If the dream is gone, then what is it all for?

There is nothing lonelier than trying to decide who I really am. How often do we have one of those days where we wonder what it's all about? You look around, and wonder how you became the person you seem to be. Where did all the time go? What happened to all those dreams? How did it get so complicated? And what's the point? All the running and the work, the challenges and the endless stream of new issues and problems; what *really* are we here for? And why do we bother?

These questions and the inevitable feeling of loneliness that accompany them are all about figuring out who we really are.

If Hashem created me for a purpose, then how much I am in touch with that purpose is how much I am in touch with my creator. And of course, how much I am in touch with myself. If I know who I am, then I know why I am, and I am never alone; Hashem is always with me.

That is why being alone is the only thing the Torah describes as 'no good'. Because if I think I am alone, then I just don't get it. And the world loses a partner in creation.

When Hashem created the world he saw it '*was good*'. Which is strange, because almost immediately, we started doing all sorts of things that weren't so good. We ate from the wrong tree, Cain killed Abel, and pretty soon there is a flood that destroys the world. Obviously G-d created an imperfect world; He didn't finish the job. So what was so good?

What was good was and is the potential we have to be partners in making it better. If everything was created perfect, if it was all already as good as it could get, then what purpose would we have in this world? And if we had no purpose then who and what are we? That existence would have been terribly lonely. And to be lonely is '*no good*'.

Very often, people think that they can do it all alone. Disease is often a function of cells that think they can function alone, subsequently killing off their own hosts and themselves in the pursuit to 'function alone'. Prior to World War II, America pursued a policy of isolationism, believing each nation should be responsible for its own affairs. Imagine how different the world would be if America had realized the fallacy of this approach a mere three years earlier, standing up to Hitler in 1939, instead of 1942. Quite possibly, we would be 20 million lives richer.

Isolationism wasn't invalid because it was wrong. It was invalid because it just isn't true. We are not and cannot be isolated nations. That is, ultimately, a diseased way of looking at life.

We are really one world, all a part of, and affected by, everyone else. And the more we learn to discover who we are, and how we can help & give to each other, the more we create the type of world we are meant to build. And that was both the struggle and the dream of Yaakov.

That is why ultimately Yaakov is given a new name. Yaakov, in realizing who he is meant to be, becomes Yisrael.

Our story ends with an encounter that leaves Yaakov explaining to Esav he cannot join him. In the end, Yaakov does not become Esav, he remains true to who he is meant to be, and therein lies the future of the Jewish people. Yaakov becomes Yisrael. He has become the man who is ready to be the father of a great nation; a nation that will ultimately teach the world what a difference one man can make.

Yisrael, the name he is given, means to struggle with G-d; The G-d inside each one of us. The part of me that is unlimited.

The Jewish people have always, ultimately, stood alone. And when we think we are alone, then we are Yaakov; alone in the night. Only when we realize we are not and have never been alone, do we become Yisrael; the people of Israel.

Hashem's original promise of 'I will be with you' is always true. Hashem is always there, inside each one of us. The only question is, do we find Him. And if we do, thus unlocking the tremendous potential we have to offer in this world, what remains, is to tap in to the part of Hashem already inside each one of us. To ensure that we become who we are meant to be, and not the Lavan or the Esav we could so easily end up being.

Twenty-two years after Yaakov dreamed of ladders and angels, after a long bitter journey of deceit and exile, the man who has learned how to live in the field, gets back in touch with the dweller of tents he had once been. Struggling in the night, in the darkness of lonely introspection, Yaakov demonstrates that it is never too late to get back in touch with the 'me' we all once dreamed we could be.

May Hashem grant us all the strength to re-discover our dreams, to re-connect with who we are, and to become all that we were ever meant to be. Because every time an individual achieves his or her potential in this world, then we all get a little closer to the world we all dream could be.

Shabbat Shalom

Rav Binny Freedman