

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayishlach)

Dedicated to the memory of Rav Yaakov Don, a good friend and an incredible educator, and Ezra Schwartz, an American teenager studying here in Israel this year. Both were murdered in the terrible events of this past week; both taken from us far too soon. May their memories be a blessing for us all.

We have no words to ease the pain of such a terrible loss, and our hearts go out to the families and friends of these special people.

May Hashem grant as well a speedy recovery to the wounded, and the hope that they may know no more pain....

Prince Charming doesn't always find Cinderella, and stories do not always have 'happy' endings, as most of us learn the hard way. I remember once, after a harried chase, catching a masked Arab who had been heaving rocks and cinderblocks at an IDF position in Hebron. Directed by a 'spotter' up on a rooftop I was running down a narrow alleyway to try & catch him, with my gun cocked and a bullet already in the chamber. Recall that in the Intifada of the late Eighties, these masked terrorists were the assassination squads and suicide bombers, and chances were good that if you didn't take them off the streets they would most probably kill again.

Coming around a corner in an alley and almost face to face with one of these masked gunmen, it was definitely an act of willpower to keep my finger off the trigger in order to at least try and apprehend him, rather than just open fire.

When I finally caught up with him and pulled his mask off, I was shocked to discover that he was actually a boy of no more than seven or eight. I can still recall the emotions raging inside of me as we took him back to base in our jeep, extremely relieved I had not killed this boy. On the one hand, how can you really be angry at an eight year old kid, even if he is throwing cinderblocks? Obviously he was educated to hate, right?

*On the other hand, every human being, even children, know the difference between right and wrong, because we are born with that ability to distinguish, so how can one **not** be enraged at the sight of a child of whatever age who is willing to murder? Do we dare not view such a child as our mortal enemy?*

As confusing as that thought process was, it entered a whole new level when we finally got to base. Somehow, the father of the boy had found out that his son was being taken by soldiers to the local IDF base. Now mind you, the IDF does not imprison children of that age, even when

they commit serious crimes. However, the parents are made to pay a steep price (in this case approximately \$1,000 for throwing rocks, another \$1,000 for wearing a terrorist hood, and an additional \$1,000 for refusing to obey army orders. One could make a case (though obviously a debatable one) that this policy was a major factor in the eventual quelling of this intifada. \$3000, after all, was a huge amount of money for such an Arab family.

I remember struggling with a natural inclination to feel sorry for the boy, who was still sitting in the back of the jeep, with a very frightened expression on his face, and give him some of the gum I had in my pocket, while at the same time realizing that this very boy, given the chance, might well be willing to kill me or my family.

None of this prepared me for what happened, however, when we got out of the jeep. I had naturally assumed that this boy must have been frightened of the Israeli army troops, as his head had probably been filled with stories of evil Israeli soldiers.

His father spotted his son in the back of the jeep, as the reality of the penalties he would have to pay were sinking in, and he strode over to the jeep and gave his son a back-hand that sent him flying into the windshield. I have seen many things in my life, but I had never seen a child being beaten by an adult, much less his father. We had to pull his father off him literally to save his life. And when everything finally calmed down, I walked away struggling with the question of who the real villain here really was.

We often question why bad things happen to good people, but no less challenging is the question of why basically good people (at least initially, with the assumption that every person is basically born good) do such bad things? How can we battle a population that is willing to teach its children to stab other children, or strap bombs on themselves and blow up mothers and babies?

This week's portion, *Vayishlach*, finds Ya'acov preparing for his date with destiny. Twenty-two years after fleeing his own home in the night, to escape the wrath of his brother Eisav, Ya'acov is now told that this same brother, who had vowed to kill him, is coming his way with an army of four-hundred men.

So what goes through your mind in such a moment? How tragic on the one hand, that two brothers, from the same womb, twins no less, are engaged in a conflict that may result in the death of one of them. And yet, Eisav, as portrayed in Jewish tradition, is as close to evil incarnate as one gets. Eisav is described early on as the "*Ish Sadeh*", the man of the field (Genesis 25:27). His domain is the *Sadeh*, the same 'field' from whence comes the snake, itself the ultimate depiction of evil and cunning.

One cannot help but wonder, how, from the same womb, two brothers grow to be so different. In fact, this is the essential question when confronting the evil that men do: how could someone, created in the image of G-d, sink to such base evil?

Most puzzling in this entire story, is the strange episode that occurs in the middle of the night which precedes Yaacov's fateful meeting with Eisav.

“And Ya’acov remained alone, and a man wrestled with him until the coming of the dawn. And he saw that he could not overcome him...And he said: ‘release me, for the dawn has come’ and he said: ‘I will not release you unless you bless me’”
... And he said: ‘no longer will your name be said as Ya’acov, but as Yisrael, for you have battled with G-d and with men and have prevailed.” (Bereishit (Genesis) 32:25-30)

Who exactly, is Ya’acov struggling with here? And why are they doing battle? The Torah does not seem to explain how this life and death struggle began. It is interesting to note that in many of the verses here it is not immediately apparent just who is speaking and who listening. In fact, the verses seem to give the energy of confusion alluding to the nature of such types of wrestling matches in the dark, where it is not clear exactly who is who, in the fury and the chaos of the struggle. Further, what exactly is the fascination with Yaacov’s name here, and why does Ya’acov allow himself to be named by the enemy he has just defeated, even asking him for a blessing!?

Rav Soleveitchick suggests that Ya’acov was really struggling with himself. After twenty-two years in the house of Lavan, he has gone from dreaming of ladders and angels, to dreaming of sheep (31:10). Perhaps Ya’acov isn’t really sure exactly who he is anymore. First he was the dweller of tents, exploring the world of mono-theism as bequeathed to him by his grandfather Avraham. And then he had to ‘wear’ the hands of Eisav and apply the cunning ways of the *sadeh*, the field, in order to acquire the blessings. And now after twenty-two years in the field of Lavan, he may be wondering whether he has actually become Eisav, having lost ‘Ya’acov’ a long time ago.

This inner struggle is critical, because before Ya’acov can confront Eisav, he must determine who Ya’acov really is. How, indeed, are we meant to contend with the evil world of Eisav?

There is perhaps no better resource with which to explore this question, than the **Aish Kodesh**, (Rav Klonimus Kalman Shapira) one of the last Rabbis in the Warsaw Ghetto, who struggled with this topic in the face of perhaps the darkest and most evil regime the world has ever known.

Broadly speaking, in Jewish tradition there are essentially two approaches to the problem of evil in this world. One approach suggests that evil is its own force, which will someday be conquered and vanquished. This of course, presents a very obvious problem: how could G-d create evil? There must be some good in this evil, if it comes from G-d?

Chassidic thought, therefore, suggests a different approach: Evil is rather a perverse manifestation of something good gone terribly awry, and ultimately, this evil may yet revert to its initial goodness. In other words, evil can be raised up to its former goodness, and thus, even in the midst of my struggle with it, can be sweetened to actually become good again.

And this is precisely what the Aish Kodesh suggests here. Why, indeed, does Yaakov want his enemy to bless him? Because there will come a time when the very evil we do battle with will revert to the good from whence it originally came.

Ultimately, here in the Middle East, we are cousins from the same source, all created in the image of G-d, and what the Aish Kodesh was suggesting, from within one of the darkest places in human history, is that no matter how dark, and how evil something or someone may be, it still has the possibility of becoming a source of light in the future. And that possibility, however far away, changes everything.

What is challenging perhaps for Yaakov, is the fact that as much as Eisav is evil, he is still of the same flesh and blood. And hidden in this struggle, is the promise of a new level of salvation. Because there will come a day when there is no longer a struggle. Then, Eisav will no longer see us as *Yaakov*, but as *Yisrael*, the people that have struggled with themselves, and know exactly who they are. One day the struggles we had with Eisav will end up being our greatest blessings.

This week was a difficult week for the Jewish people; Ezra Schwartz, H'y'd, an innocent American teenager studying in Israel for the year was brutally murdered and laid to rest; cut down in the midst of doing chesed, acts of loving-kindness for others, and Rav Yaakov Don, a personal friend and magnificent educator, was murdered as well in the same incident. We cannot begin to understand.

We live today in a challenging world, where children are taught to hate, in a war that makes no sense. They hate us for who we are, and all that we represent; because for those who live in the darkness of evil, it only takes a little bit of light to dissipate a sea of darkness.

May Hashem bless us, in these difficult times, to make sure we do not get consumed by darkness. After two thousand years of dreaming we are blessed to live in a generation that has finally seen the light at the end of a very long tunnel. We are not there yet, but let us ensure that terror does not prevent us from continuing to seek out and revel in that magnificent light, of Jewish living and learning, in a Jewish land

Shabbat Shalom,

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