The Sweetness of the Parshah

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Parashas Vayishlach 5787

To Win Without Fighting – The Secret of Yaakov Avinu's Strength

Our parashah opens with Yaakov's sending of the messengers to Esav, who comes toward him with four hundred men. As it continues, the Torah goes on to describe Yaakov's great preparation for his meeting with Esav — gift, prayer and war — and likewise the meeting itself, in which Esav continues in his great hatred for Yaakov, and in the end goes on his way.

The holy Torah is not, chas v'shalom, a book of stories of events. The Torah is a Torah of life, a Torah that teaches us the ways of Hashem for every generation, in general and in particular, and the holy Avos are our compass for how we must conduct ourselves in every situation. The war between Yaakov and Esav was not a war for its own time alone; as the Torah describes, Yaakov wrestled with the officer of Esav, with the Sitra Achra, and in every generation the yetzer and its forces try to fight against holiness.

Each person has different difficulties, different yetzers and trials with which he is tested. And we must look closely at Yaakov Avinu — how he stood at a time of difficulty and walked on his way.

First and foremost, we must know that the yetzer hara tries to deceive us at the time of the trial with confusion and uncertainty, and he also magnifies the trial with all kinds of false imaginings — for example, he puts some bug into our heads that the other person's grass is greener, when the opposite is true — and in this way he tries to catch us in his net. But we must remember that we are servants of Hashem, not to be enticed by the temptations of the yetzer, and not to think that we are captives in his hand and have no strength to stand firm according to the will of the Creator.

As explained in the Midrashim, when Avraham Avinu went to bind Yitzchak, the yetzer hara too came with all kinds of trials. He made a great sea, until Avraham Avinu cried out to Hashem, "ba'u mayim ad nafesh"; he also disguised himself as an old man, and more — to teach us that every time, the yetzer hara misleads a person with various temptations, and we must get out of the confusion into which the yetzer tries to bring us, and believe that Hashem will bring us out from the narrow straits to the broad expanse.

And just as we see with Yaakov Avinu that at the time of the trial and the difficulty he stops and prepares himself for three things, so too we must make a reckoning of the soul.

Let us detail the matters. Behold, in the words of Chazal it is said that Yaakov Avinu first turned to the gift and afterwards to prayer, whereas in the verses it appears that Yaakov first turned to

prayer and afterwards to the gift. It is possible to explain that in essence, the prayer of Yaakov Avinu opens with thanksgiving, and this is the gift to Hashem, as it is written: "Elokei avi Avraham v'Elokei avi Yitzchak, Hashem ha'omer elai shuv l'artzecha ul'moladetecha v'eitivah imach. Katonti mikol hachasadim umikol ha'emes asher asisa es avdecha, ki v'makli avarti es ha-Yarden hazeh v'atah hayisi lishnei machanos." Yaakov Avinu does not sink into the difficulty; he stops and contemplates how much good and kindness Hashem gives him, how Hashem watched over his father and his grandfather, and now Hashem watches over him as well — to teach us not to sink into the difficulty as the yetzer hara wishes, but rather to stop and contemplate all the abundant good that Hashem gives us, and the gains we have even within the difficulties.

And there is another point in this. All along the way, the Torah details the struggles between Yaakov and Esav, as the Torah already wrote at the very beginning: "vayisrotzetzu habanim b'kirbah," and Rashi wrote: they were quarreling over the inheritance of two worlds. This continues with the sale of the birthright, with the blessings, with the meeting here, and until the very last day, when the holy Shevatim come to bury Yaakov Avinu in the place that Yaakov Avinu bought from Esav, and Esav again stands and protests against the burial of Yaakov. And Chazal say that this struggle continues until the coming of Moshiach Tzidkeinu, as they expounded on the verse "ul'om mil'om ye'ematz": when Yerushalayim is destroyed, Tzor is settled, and when Tzor is destroyed, Yerushalayim is built.

And here in our parashah, when the confrontation is face to face, the Torah emphasizes to us the conduct of Yaakov Avinu. And the foundation of it all: even though Yaakov Avinu was in a time of great difficulty, as it is said, "vayira Yaakov me'od vayeitzer lo," nevertheless Yaakov Avinu does not lose his composure, chas v'shalom. On the contrary, Yaakov Avinu takes every course of action, down to the details. Just as, when Yaakov turns to prayer, he opens with thanksgiving, "katonti mikol hachasadim umikol ha'emes" — Master of the world, even though I am in a time of difficulty, I see all the good: I had nothing, I came to Charan bare and lacking everything, and now I have a wonderful, great family and great wealth.

Afterwards Yaakov Avinu prays and turns to the gift, for Yaakov Avinu considered that the dispute with Esav would not end well, as it is said: "vayira — shema yeihareg; vayeitzer lo — shema yaharog." Therefore Yaakov Avinu gives good stones and pearls and an abundance of cattle and sheep in order to appease Esav. True, Yaakov Avinu bought the birthright, and the blessings came to him rightfully, and Esav is simply rebelling against him — but Yaakov does not seek to be in the right. Yaakov Avinu wants to finish the story with Esav and send him off to Se'ir without disputes.

On the other hand, with Esav we see that all along the way he feels himself wronged, as he said to Yitzchak Avinu: "vaya'akveini zeh pa'amayim." And afterwards too, when Yaakov came to be buried in the cave that he had bought from him for full payment, Esav again felt himself wronged. For when a person is caught up in a quarrel, when things are not good for him, he has no time even to stop and consider what he is quarreling about, and he is prepared to pay all the money for the sake of his quarrel. Yaakov Avinu, on the other hand, teaches us: invest money and gifts in order to buy peace, even if you are in the right and the one who quarrels with you is mistaken.

In the Midrash it is brought on the verse "chachmas nashim bansah beisah" — this is the wife of On ben Peles, who said to him: "What do you gain from this whole quarrel? Whether Moshe is

the head or Korach is the head, you will be a student; and what do you gain from this whole quarrel?" And everyone asks: is this not a simple matter — what is the great wisdom that Chazal attribute to her? Rather, to stop in the middle of a quarrel — that is the great wisdom, for at the time of a quarrel a person does not think, and he is swept along by the boiling of the blood to be the victor.

And this is what Chazal relate in Maseches Gittin about Nero Caesar: when he reached Yerushalayim, he stopped and considered that Hakadosh Baruch Hu wishes to destroy His house, and afterwards He will exact payment from him. Immediately he went and converted, and Rabbi Meir descended from him. Awe upon awe! In one moment of reckoning of the soul, he turns from a terrible murderer into the ancestor of the great Tanna, Rabbi Meir.

We learn from our parashah that we must be wise and not seek to be in the right. It is worthwhile to lose what looks like a loss, especially when through this we acquire eternal life. And to merit this, one must contemplate and weigh the gains of silence and yielding against the loss that comes to us from the quarrel.

Well known is the story of the Gaon Rabbi Nissim Karelitz zt"l: one of the neighbors demanded a large payment from him for repairing a blockage that had supposedly been caused by painting done in the home of the Gaon Rabbi N. Karelitz. Rabbi Nissim paid him on the spot — even though no painting had been done in his home at all, and even though paint does not block pipes, and in addition they were not even connected to the pipe that was blocked. He explained to those close to him that in order to avoid a quarrel with neighbors, it is worth paying a considerable sum.

And this is not only between neighbors, but mainly within the home. When one stops for a moment, at the moment that anger tries to overpower us, and places the peace of the home or the soul of the child on the scale, one knows that even if the child did something not good, or broke some vessel, nevertheless the words of anger or the hurtful expression that will stick to him are far more serious than the damage caused by his deeds.

And so, instead of anger, one knows how to give direction with wisdom, and to build instead of destroying. As is told of Rabbi Aryeh Levin zt"l, who was a supervisor in the Etz Chaim cheder: every Rosh Chodesh they would distribute chocolate pudding to the children. One child once went past twice to receive pudding, and when the one in charge who was distributing the pudding caught him in the act, he did not give it to him and was angry at him. That child was very hurt and angry, and he overturned the whole pot of pudding, which in those years — years of austerity — was very expensive. The next day, Rabbi Aryeh Levin called the child to his room and served him an extra portion of warm pudding.

There are more such stories about Rabbi Aryeh, who knew with his great wisdom how to build people and to bring out the precious from the worthless. For to raise up souls, strength is not what is needed — what is needed is understanding, as the verse says, "chachmas nashim bansah beisah." Who is wise? One who sees what will come of things — who does not get pulled into the imagination and temptation that he sees at the time of the trial, but looks with a broad view and considers in advance what will come out of the child, what will come out of the peace of my home, which home can I build, and, chas v'shalom, which home can I destroy.

Just as with Avraham, the yetzer hara tested him with all kinds of trials and tried to bring in all kinds of temptations of a sea, an old man and the like, so in every battle of ours the yetzer hara puts an imagining into us that because of the deeds of so-and-so ... the world is destroyed and the sea is burning. Therefore we must "turn back the battle at the gate"; but when one stops and considers, nothing happened at all, and one knows how to react with wisdom and not to break the vessels over every little thing.

The Gaon Rabbi Aharon Leib Steinman zt"l already said: "Na'ar hayisi gam zakanti, and I have not seen one who yields and loses." Once, when two people asked him whether it was worthwhile for them to yield — would the Rav instruct us to lose? — the Rav answered them: "I am not telling you to lose; I am telling you that you will gain, for yielding is all spiritual satisfaction and tranquility, in this world and in the next."

When one stops for a moment, one will understand that it is not worthwhile to walk, chas v'shalom, in the way of Esav, who until the last moment of his life searched for what to quarrel about and what to take. Rather, in the way of Yaakov Avinu — and in this merit we will merit eternal life, in this world and in the next, amen.

Srulik and Yanky Go on a Trip with Grandfather and Grow Wiser

"Dear children, today too I will tell you a nice story with a wonderful lesson for life." This time they all met at the regular meeting place before the trips, and when Motty the driver arrived with the minibus, they all got on for the trip. They all sat down in their places, and Grandfather began: "Today, with Hashem's help, we are all traveling to the sea." "How wonderful!" they all exclaimed. Motty the driver started the minibus and set off toward the sea. Grandfather began with Tefillas HaDerech, and afterwards told everyone Midrashim on the parashah.

Everyone enjoyed the sweet words of the Midrash, and they did not notice how quickly the trip passed. The minibus stopped, and they all looked out the window and noticed the wonderful view of the great sea spread out before their eyes. "Mah rabu ma'asecha Hashem," said Aryeh with excitement. "Wait, wait — we have a special blessing for the sea," said Grandfather. "Who knows which blessing we say when we see the sea?" "Oseh ma'aseh Bereishis," said Moishy and Yanky, while Srulik, Chezky, Zevi and Shimmy'le said, "She'asah es hayam hagadol." "You are both right," said Grandfather. "There is a disagreement among the poskim about this. Now let's get off the minibus, look out at the great sea, and say the blessing with kavanah." They all got off and said the blessing with kavanah, and began walking after Grandfather, who walked toward a tall, large tree.

When Grandfather reached the tree, he sat down under it, and all the children sat around him. Grandfather looked out at the sea and said: "Dovid Malkeinu praised Hashem in Tehillim and said: 'Zeh hayam gadol urchav yadayim, sham remes v'ein mispar, chayos ketanos im gedolos. Sham oniyos y'haleichun, Livyasan zeh yatzarta l'sachek bo.' Hakadosh Baruch Hu created so many wonderful creatures in the sea, and above all the fish that we eat, and we praise Hashem for them."

"And the rain, too, comes mostly from the sea, through the vapors that rise from it; there Hashem sweetens the salty water and brings down to us rain and sweet drops for blessing. Dear children, now I will tell you a wonderful story about the sea. But before that, we will hand out to you cinnamon rugelach that Grandmother prepared, and cold plum juice that Grandmother also prepared. Make a berachah, eat and drink, and I will begin the story. Shimmy'le, this time you hand out the rugelach, and Moishy will pour plum juice for everyone." They all made a berachah, ate and drank, and Grandfather began to tell:

There was once a poor Jew who lived in a small village and worked digging clay for his livelihood. Once, while he was immersed in his work, he suddenly saw something sparkling in the clay. He looked carefully and saw that it was a diamond — a very good stone.

The Jew was very happy, and he immediately went to the house of the gem merchant to ask him how much it was worth. The merchant answered him: "In the whole country you will not find anyone who can buy such a precious stone. Travel to London — there perhaps a great merchant will be found who will buy it from you, and the stone will turn you into a very wealthy man." The poor man gathered all his belongings and went out to the port city.

There was a ship there sailing to London, but the poor man had no money left for the ship. He approached the ship's captain secretly and said to him: "I have a very precious stone," as he showed him the great, precious stone. The captain understood that he was speaking with a very big merchant, and immediately invited him to sail on the ship and arranged a special room for him, as befits a big merchant like him.

Every day, while the Jew was eating, he would gaze at the precious stone and be filled with joy, thinking about the great wealth he would have when he sold the stone. One day, as he was eating breakfast and gazing at the stone as usual, he dozed off and fell asleep. While he was sleeping, the waiter came into the room

to clear away the leftover food. He took the tablecloth with the crumbs on it, without noticing that the good stone was also on the tablecloth, and threw all the food into the sea.

When the poor man woke from his sleep and understood what had happened, everything went dark before his eyes. All his possessions and all his joy had been the good stone, and now he did not know what to do. He also thought that when the captain discovered that there was no good stone, he might even kill him for having sailed with him without any money to pay.

But afterwards the poor man thought to himself: "The Torah commands us to always be joyful, for everything that happens to us is the will of Hashem, and everything is for the good. If so, there is certainly no reason to be sad." And so he began to be joyful, as if nothing had happened.

The next day the captain came in to the Jew as usual, and did not sense that anything had happened, for he truly was joyful.

The captain approached him and said: "I have a secret to tell you. I know that you are a wise and honest man, and therefore I am asking you to help me. I want to buy a large quantity of grain in order to sell it at a great profit in London. But since I also work in the king's treasury, I am afraid that people will say I stole the money from the king's treasury, and therefore I want to register all the grain in your name."

They agreed, and all the grain was registered in his name. Suddenly the Jew was informed that the captain had died suddenly, and all the precious grain remained in the hands of the Jew. And so he became a very great rich man — far richer than he would have become from the good stone.

"Dear children," Grandfather raised his voice and said, "if the Jew had grieved over the good stone that he lost — which was not truly his — he would have lost even what was truly his, namely the money that came to him through the sale of the grain. But because he was wise and did not grieve over what was not his, he merited to receive what truly belonged to him."

"This teaches us to always be joyful, and not to grieve over what we don't have and others do, or over things we thought we would receive and in the end did not, or over what we lost — for whatever is meant for us will reach us."

"Hakadosh Baruch Hu tests us: if we complain about what we don't have, we may lose even what is truly ours; but if we are happy with what we have and are not sad about what we don't have, Hakadosh Baruch Hu will bring us more and more good. And now let's all get on the minibus and go home."

Chapter 2

"Dear children, baruch Hashem, Hashem has granted us to finish all of Maseches Shabbos. Whoever is tested on the masechta and knows how to answer will receive a special prize, and in addition will enter a raffle for a gift card worth two hundred shekels, with which to buy books at the big seforim store near the Talmud Torah." The melamed finished speaking, and all the children were filled with a great desire to review and go over the whole masechta and to be tested on it successfully, with Hashem's help.

Srulik also heard the melamed's words and said in his heart: "There are lots of seforim I really, really want to buy. With Hashem's help I'll review well and know all of Maseches Shabbos thoroughly, and then, besides the reward for learning Torah, with Hashem's help I'll win the raffle, and I'll be able to buy all the seforim I really, really want."

And indeed, Srulik made good use of his time and learned all the mishnayos of Shabbos with joy. He reviewed again and again until he knew the whole masechta thoroughly.

When the day of the test arrived, Srulik came to the test with a prayer to Hashem that he would succeed, and indeed, with siyata d'Shmaya, he succeeded in the test and entered the raffle. He could not believe his ears when the melamed raised the slip and announced his name. He went up to the melamed, and the

melamed gave him the card with which to buy seforim. Srulik took the card happily, and at the end of the learning day he went together with Yanky to the seforim store to see which seforim to buy. They looked and became confused, and did not know what to choose. "Maybe we'll buy a Chumash Mikraos Gedolos," suggested Yanky.

"That's an excellent idea," answered Srulik, "but I was thinking of buying a deluxe set of Shishah Sidrei Mishnah, and I don't have money for both." "And maybe we'll buy a Mishnah Berurah." "That's also an excellent idea, but I don't have money for everything, and I so much want to buy lots of seforim that I don't know what to buy. The truth is that I really, really want to have a Shas Talmud Bavli of my own, but it's really expensive and I don't have all the money for it."

"Wait, wait — I see it's starting to get late. Maybe our parents are worried about us. Let's go back home, and come back tomorrow to see what to buy."

Srulik put the card in his pocket and went home together with Yanky. On the way, Srulik said to Yanky: "We have a whole day now. We'll talk it over, think, and see what we decide, and with Hashem's help tomorrow we'll go buy the seforim."

As soon as Srulik came home, he said excitedly: "Abba and Ima, baruch Hashem, I succeeded in the test on Maseches Shabbos, and I even won the raffle and got a gift card for the seforim store worth two hundred shekels." Abba and Ima were very happy, kissed him on his head and said to him: "Hashem loves you very much because you learn Torah, and we are very happy that we merited such a righteous child; and we are also happy about the prize you received."

In the morning Srulik got up happily, thinking about the card in his pocket with which he would buy the seforim. "The truth is that I still haven't decided what to buy," Srulik thought to himself. "Okay, I'll think about it during the break in cheder, and with Hashem's help, at the end of the day I'll already be able to buy."

Srulik put his hand into his pocket to feel the card — but oh no, the card was not there. He searched in the other pocket, and also in the pocket of his shirt and his coat, but the card was nowhere to be found. Srulik was truly distressed.

His mother, who saw Srulik's distress, tried to find out from the little children whether they had seen the card. "Actually, I saw Mordechai'le playing with a card yesterday. I didn't know it was Srulik's card — I thought it was a card that wasn't being used anymore," said Dassy.

Srulik immediately went over to Mordechai'le and asked him: "Did you play with a card yesterday?" And Mordechai'le answered, "Flew, down," while pointing to the other side of the window. Srulik understood that Mordechai'le had thrown the card down, and he immediately ran downstairs to look for it, but he did not find it. Srulik was very upset and thought in his heart: "I don't know if the melamed will give me a new card, and who knows if they'll do that for a lost card. Maybe the garbage truck took the card along with all the garbage on the street."

Suddenly Srulik remembered the story Grandfather had told about the poor man with the good stone, and said to himself: "The poor man also should have been very upset when he lost the good stone, which fell into the sea — but he chose to be happy, and in that merit he received much more. I, too, will choose to be happy, and surely in that merit Hashem will give me everything good." And so Srulik strengthened himself with joy and went off to cheder.

In class he sat and learned with great joy. Suddenly the supervisor came into the class and looked over the students who were sitting and learning. At the end of the learning, the melamed called Srulik and said to him: "The supervisor wants to speak with you."

Srulik did not understand why the supervisor had called for him, but he did not become sad, and hurried over to the supervisor's room. He knocked on the door, and the supervisor opened it for him and showed

him in to sit on the chair. When Srulik sat down, the supervisor said to him: “When I came into your class today, I saw that you were learning with real joy. You must have bought seforim with the card the melamed gave you, and you are happy with them.”

Srulik remembered the lost card and said: “Actually, I didn’t buy anything, because I lost the card.” “And even so, you are happy?” asked the principal.

“Yes,” answered Srulik. “I decided that losing the card would not make me lose my joy, because whatever Hakadosh Baruch Hu does is surely good, and whatever is mine, Hakadosh Baruch Hu will give me.” The principal/supervisor was moved to hear Srulik’s words and said to him: “You should know that yesterday I met one of the cheder’s donors and told him about the test you were all tested on, on Maseches Shabbos. The donor was very moved, took six hundred shekels out of his pocket and said: ‘Here are six hundred shekels for you to give to an outstanding student who learns Torah with joy, so that he can buy seforim in abundance.’ After that he took out another sum of money to distribute gift cards worth two hundred shekels to all the children who learned and knew the material.”

The principal/supervisor continued and said: “When I came into your class today, I saw that you were learning Torah with great joy, and I decided to give you the card — especially now that you tell me you lost your card and are happy nonetheless. Surely the card belongs to you.” Srulik took the card shyly, thanking the principal/supervisor and the donor as well.

During recess, Srulik ran to Yanky: “The principal/supervisor gave me a card for six hundred shekels, and now we can buy lots of seforim — for me and for you too.”

In the afternoon they went back to the store and bought a Shas, and Mishnayos, and Chamishah Chumshei Torah Mikraos Gedolos, and more. On the way home Yanky said: “I really see in real life what Grandfather taught us from the wonderful story: when we stay happy, we always receive much, much more. When we don’t think about what we don’t have, but are happy with what we do have, we are much happier.”



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