

STANDING PROUD LIKE YISRAEL

Category: Bereishis, Vayetzei

How did Yaakov change before his encounter with Eisav, and how does that help us stand tall in our Jewish observance?

Yaakov's Early Life

Good Shabbos!

On Simchat Torah, the Jewish world was shocked and horrified to witness the atrocities committed in the Land of Israel. Since then, there has been a newfound resolve among the people of Israel—to stand up to terror and put an end to it once and for all.

I couldn't help but notice how relevant this week's parsha was to our story.

In recent weeks, we've been reading about the life story of Yaakov Avinu, our Patriarch Jacob. When he was born, the Torah (Bereishis 25:26) tells us, "his hand was holding Eisav's heel"—which the commentators explain was a miraculous event; an infant that hasn't yet even been born having the capacity to consciously grab onto someone else is not your standard occurrence.

So, firstly, let's understand why Yaakov was really holding onto Eisav's heel. What was really happening? Well, what was happening was simply that Yaakov was trying to hold Eisav back—Yaakov wanted to come out first. He reasoned that the birthright belonged to him and, as Rashi explains, "He was justified in holding onto him to hold him back because Yaakov was formed of the first drop and Eisav of the second; like a narrow tube into which you insert two pebbles, one on top of the other—the one you insert first comes out last and the one inserted last comes out first. Thus, Eisav—who was formed last—came out first and Yaakov—who was formed first—came out last. But Yaakov tried to hinder Eisav and be born first just like he was formed first, opening her womb and taking the birthright justifiably" (Rashi, Bereishis 25:26).

And so Yaakov reasoned that the right of the first-born belonged to him—but he never dared going up to Eisav to say that he was the first-born and that the

birthright belonged to him.

So instead, one fine day, when Eisav came home exhausted and starving and asked Yaakov to give him some of the bean stew he was cooking, Yaakov offered Eisav a “steal”—he offered Eisav a deal: if he would sell him the birthright, he’d give him the beans. And so, Yaakov got the birthright.

Over 60 years go by.

Yaakov then hears that Yitzchak, his father, is about to present the blessings that he got from Avraham to his son Eisav. Now, Yaakov thought that the blessings were due to him because he was the firstborn—but he didn’t have the courage to go to Yitzchak and tell him “the Saga of the Selling of the Birthright,” and in the process also point out that his own father was mistaken, and that his son Eisav was not following in the ways of Avraham and Yitzchak.

But Yaakov was a man who stayed far away from confrontation. He was not the type to get up in front of Yitzchak and say such things to him. So with his mother’s guidance, —he disguised himself as Eisav, went into his father Yitzchak with a tray of food, and declared, “It is I, Eisav, your firstborn; please rise, sit, and eat of my game so that your soul will bless me” (Bereishis 27:19).

And indeed, Yaakov got the blessings—but how did he get them? As Yitzchak himself later defined it: “Your brother came with cunning and took your blessing” (Bereishis 27:35). And when his brother Eisav wanted to kill him, Yaakov was not ready to fight with him face-to face, so instead, he fled to Charan.

Avoiding confrontation seems to be a common theme in Yaakov’s life. When Yaakov gets to Charan, he agrees with Lavan that he’ll work for seven years “for Rochel, your daughter, the younger one” (Bereishis 29:18). But when he discovers that Lavan tricked him, he doesn’t divorce Leah and go to court to press charges against Lavan for misrepresentation by virtue of not upholding the conditions of the agreement. Rather, the moment Lavan suggests that he work for another seven years and then get Rochel, too, he gave in to the trickery and indeed went to work for another seven whole years.

After 22 years in Lavan’s household, when he already had a large family with four wives, 12 sons and one daughter, along with a lot of wealth, he was still afraid to come to Lavan and say: “Listen here, my friend, it’s time for me to go back to the

Land of Israel.” Instead, he waited for the opportunity when Lavan would be away on a “business trip.” As the Torah (Bereishis 31:19-21) tells us, “And Lavan went to shear his sheep... And Yaakov concealed from Lavan the Arami by not telling him that he was fleeing.”

The same occurred when he got to the Land of Israel, as we are told at the beginning of Vayishlach. Yaakov heard that his brother Eisav was coming with a private army of 400 men, and he got very scared and he sent a very big gift to Eisav first—“and after that I will see his face; perhaps he will favor me” (Bereishis 32:21); maybe he’ll compromise with me.

But this all ended the night before he was supposed to finally see his brother after so many years. As the Torah tells us (Bereishis 32:25), “And Yaakov was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.”

That night, before he met Eisav, it was the first time that Yaakov had to fight for himself.

Until then, he had always ducked or ran away from problems—but now, no more. He could no longer bend over backwards. Now, he took a stand against evil and had to confront it face to face.

And then, something unbelievable happened: “He saw that he could not prevail against him”— the man, who was really Eisav’s guardian angel, realized that he’d never succeed in overpowering Yaakov.

So Yaakov and the man, really an angel, wrestled all night—and at dawn, Yaakov finally overpowered him. The angel asked Yaakov to set him free—but Yaakov stubbornly refused: “I will not let you go unless you have blessed me!”

And then the angel said to him: “Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but Yisroel.” Why? “Because you have commanding power with [an angel of] G-d and with men, and you have prevailed.”

Until that day, Yaakov’s name evoked *eikev*, the heel—a person upon whom everyone could walk all over, a person everyone could step on and a person who was below everyone, with everyone above him. But from that day on, he was to be seen totally differently—here was a man who could wrestle with an angel and defeat him. No longer was he the same Yaakov who was afraid of confronting an

enemy or opponent—rather, he was now Yisrael, *ki sarisa*— “because you have commanding power,” which evokes victory, “with [an angel of] G-d and with men, and you have prevailed” (Bereishis 32:29).

So, when Eisav then came with his militia of 400 mercenaries to physically attack his brother, he encountered a totally different brother. This was not the same brother who always shrunk back from confrontation at any price—this was not “Yaakov,” the “innocent man, dwelling in tents” but rather, “Yisrael.” So Eisav saw that it’s not worth picking a fight with this guy, and so he changed his tune and ran to hug him instead.

Should We Fight Back?

This past Simchat Torah, we met the angel of Eisav face to face. No more trying to appease them and fleeing from confrontation with terror—from that day on, its open war.

So what’s the lesson for us?

The lesson, my friends, is that every Jew sometimes needs to act like Yaakov and sometimes like Yisrael.

Let’s take, for example, a Jew who has just begun to start keeping kosher. He goes out with his friends to a restaurant but he doesn’t tell them that he’s keeping kosher. Instead, he tells them that he’s a vegetarian and so he doesn’t eat meat. Why? Because he’s not interested in confronting them—he has no desire to fight.

Later, they invite him to go to a show on Friday night—so he tells them that he has lots of work to finish and he just doesn’t have the time to go out with them. The real reason, of course, is that he’s now keeping Shabbos with his family—but to him, it’s not nice to squabble. He’s afraid that they’ll laugh at him, “Hey, look! He’s suddenly become religious!” or “What happened to you?” And he doesn’t need the grief. And so it is with anything Jewish that he takes on—he tries to avoid confrontations and conflict with regards to his Judaism.

But then the night finally comes when he has no choice, when he finally must stand and declare that he indeed has gotten closer to Judaism—and that from now on, they should not invite him to non-kosher restaurants or to Saturday afternoon

birthday parties, and that no one should be offended if he doesn't answer the phone on the weekend. And then, he suddenly discovers that even others become respectful to him, running up to him, hugging and kissing him with all his heart.

Be a Yisrael

With each one of us, there are times in our lives when we are like Yaakov, when we try to avoid confrontation regarding Jewish issues. But there are other times when we are like Yisrael—which, if you rearrange its letters, gives you “Li rosh,” or “I have a head,”—and we hold our heads up high and are proud of our Judaism.

The Rebbe quotes from Likutei Torah, which says on weekdays, a Jew is on the level of Yaakov, but on Shabbos, he is on the level of Yisrael—he is more openly Jewish (Toras Menachem, Vol, 35, pg. 162).

That means that on Shabbos, it's easier to be an open Jew—but our primary mission, of course, is that throughout the week, we should be at the level of Yisrael, proud to be openly Jewish.

Good Shabbos!