



Vayishlach: The Courage to Confront

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

The long awaited reunion was but a day away. The brothers, Yaakov and Esav who had not seen each other for more than two decades were to come face to face. The last time they were together was many years prior; Yaakov had just received the blessings from his father, Yitzchak, as Yaakov was leaving, Esav came in to receive those very same blessings. The fallout is severe, Yaakov leaves home, Esav leaves home, and the family is fractured. And now with his wives, children and accumulated wealth, Yaakov must face Esav. One could only imagine the thoughts going through Yaakov's mind in the hours leading up to this encounter. *Will he try to kill me or harm my family? Has he forgotten or is he still nursing a deep grudge?* Yaakov prepares himself for this encounter in three ways, *Teffilah* (prayer, supplication to God), *Doron* (sending gifts to Esav), *Milchama* (war; he planned to split the camp into two, thereby allowing one to flee if the first is attacked). On the eve of this fateful encounter, something dramatic occurs:

And he arose during that night, and he took his two wives and his two maidservants and his eleven children, and he crossed the ford of [the] Jabbok. And he took them and brought them across the stream, and he took across what was his. And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he could not prevail against him, he touched the socket of his hip, and the socket of Jacob's hip became dislocated as he wrestled with him. And he (the angel) said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking," but he (Jacob) said, "I will not let you go unless you have blessed me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" and he said, "Jacob." And he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you have commanding power with [an angel of] God and with men, and you have prevailed." And Jacob asked and said, "Now tell me your name," and he said, "Why is it that you ask for my name?" And he blessed him there. And Jacob named the place Peniel, for [he said,] "I saw an angel face to face, and my soul was saved." And the sun rose for him when he passed Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh. Therefore, the children of Israel may not eat the displaced tendon, which is on the socket of the hip, until this day, for he touched the socket of Jacob's hip, in the hip sinew (Genesis 32: 23-33).

Yaakov struggles with this mysterious "*Ish*" (man) and is injured in his sciatic nerve. As a result we do not eat the sciatic nerve (*Gid Hanashe*) of an animal. And the question is obvious, *why do we commemorate and memorialize Yaakov's injury? What is the message and meaning of this prohibition?*

In order to answer this question we must first discuss the "*Ish*." Who was this man? Where did he come from? Why did he engage Yaakov? The commentaries explain that the "*Ish*" was no regular man; he was the ministering angel of Esav who was sent by God to keep Yaakov engaged in battle throughout the night. Why? The Rashbam (Rav Shmuel ben Meir, 1085-1158) explains that the point of the struggle was to keep Yaakov from running away. You see, Yaakov has a last minute change of heart – he doesn't want to engage Esav. *I don't want to fight, I am conflict averse.* This is the attribute of Yaakov – he is an *Ish Tam, a simple, peaceful man.* He always chooses the path of shalom and does what is within his power to avoid conflict. And so in the hours before this dreaded encounter with Esav, Yaakov has a change of heart. He begins to pack up his family and possessions and chooses to flee from Esav. And in that moment as Yaakov was crossing the river to get away from Esav, the *Ish* engages him and fights with him until dawn. By that time, it was too late to run from Esav. The Master of the Universe did not want Yaakov to run, He wanted him to engage. To ensure that Yaakov would not flee, God commands the *Ish* to injure him. Yaakov was limping – he could not escape.

Al Keyn Lo Yochlu Bnai Yisrael es Gid Hanashe, Therefore, the Children of Israel will not eat the sciatic nerve – to teach us the lesson that we must find the courage to confront our challenges and resist the urge to flee from them.



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Yaakov had good reason to run, he had to protect his family and he was man of peace. But when you run from your problems, they will run after you. In life we must find the courage to confront our challenges, face our demons and chart a course for success.

We encounter challenges in many arenas of life and the easiest solution is often – avoidance. We make excuses, we procrastinate and all the while our problems get bigger and our challenges become more intense. We must remove the *Gid Hanashe*, we must resist the urge to run and find the courage to deal. And look what happened. Yaakov was so scared about the encounter, he had probably imagined the worst – and yet, when they brothers met, they hugged and kissed. Esav seemed (at least externally) happy with Yaakov's success and Yaakov was able to hold his head high in the presence of his older brother. We often run away from our challenges because we feel there is no possibility for resolution or because we imagine all of the possible terrible outcomes. Yet, when we find the courage to confront, when we remove the *Gid Hanashe* we are often surprised with our ability to navigate and solve many difficult life issues.

Our community has experienced much *tzaar (pain)* this past week; the sudden passing of a precious baby Malka Bracha Goldstein z'l, and a tragic accident that claimed the life of Moshe Moskowitz z'l. Our Teffilos and collective hearts are with the Goldstein and Moskowitz families, and we are continuously davening for Mrs. Tammy Moskowitz (Tamar Adina bas Kayna Shulamis), may she experience a *refuah shleyma b'karov (a complete and speedy recovery)*. These tragedies shake us to our core. We struggle to understand God's master plan – but of course to no avail. The actions of our Father often defy human comprehension. Yet, we believe that all that occurs is part of His plan. All that occurs is guided by His hand and all that we experience is somehow a manifestation of His love. But sometimes the pain becomes so great that we feel the need to turn away. We run, immersing ourselves in other things because the questions are unanswerable, and the difficulties too much to comprehend. Often (sometimes subconsciously), I just want to get away from all of the pain and live in my own bubble of happiness and contentment. But we are the children of Yaakov, and we must resist the urge to run. It is important to remember that although we may never understand the ways of Hashem, although we may never be able to understand or answer the "why" of tragic life events, we must stand ready to answer the "what." *What I am going to do in reaction to these heartbreakingly circumstances? How am I going to grow? What can I do to become a greater baal chessed (someone who performs acts of kindness)? What can I do to become a greater baalas tzedaka (someone who performs charitable acts)? What can I do to grow in my interpersonal relationships? What can I do to improve the way I treat others? What can I do to expand, increase and intensify my relationship with Hashem? What can I do to create a greater connection to Am Yisroel? What can I do to strengthen my self-acknowledged weaknesses?* The "whys" of life are often beyond our reach, but the "whats" are ours to maximize. It is important that we remember that it is God who creates our challenges, and it is God who gives us the courage and strength to face them.

We are *Bnai Yisroel*, the children of Yaakov Avinu. We are the people without the *Gid Hanashe*; we are the people who don't flee. We confront. May we find the strength to confront, engage and run towards our life challenges.