



INSTITUTE
FOR
JEWISH
CONTINUITY

Vayishlach: Introspective Identity

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

It was an inevitable reality. Yaakov knew the day would come when he would have to face his brother, Esav. Would Esav be seething with anger or had he moved on? Could Yaakov and Esav rehabilitate their relationship or would they simply go their own ways? We could only imagine that these questions were on Yaakov's mind the night before this fateful encounter. The Torah describes that after Yaakov crossed his family over the Jordan River, he found himself all alone, *Va'yivaser Yaakov L'Vado*. It was at this moment that he is attacked by the "Ish," (a man, Rashi identifies this "man" as the ministering angel of Esav) and they wrestle with one another throughout the night. Yaakov was injured but managed to stand his ground and kept his adversary restrained until morning. When the sun rose, the *Ish* requested that Yaakov release 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" (Genesis 32:27-29)."*

This exchange is perplexing on a number of levels. Firstly, why is the *Ish* asking Yaakov his name? After all, they had been struggling with one another throughout the night. Secondly, it would appear that Yaakov's name is changed twice, once in the above-mentioned verse and a second time when God appears and says: *"...Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." And He named him Israel (Genesis 35:10)."* Why was the second name change necessary?

The Torah (Genesis 2:20) states that Adam named each of the animals. The *Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba Chukas 19:3)* relates that after Adam finished this important task, God approached him and asked, *"... and you, what is your name? He (man) responded, Adam, because I was created from the earth (adama)."* Man named each of the animals based on the qualities and characteristics he perceived in them. When God asked man, *"What is your name?"* He was asking how do you perceive yourself? And man answered, *"I am from the earth."* This was not a statement of origin; it was a statement of identification. Adam identified with the earth. Adam failed to realize that the root of his name is also the same root as the Hebrew word *"adameh, I will resemble."* Man has a choice – he can view himself as resembling the dirt or he can view himself as resembling his Maker and Creator. He can choose to identify with the earth or he can choose to identify with the heavens. The choice is his.

A name captures the essence of an individual. When the angel asked Yaakov, *mah sh'mecha (what is your name)?"* he was asking Yaakov, *"how do you view yourself? What do you see when you look in the mirror?"* Yaakov responded, *"I am Yaakov. I am the one who was trampled on (the root of the name Yaakov is eykev, heel), I am the one who is always running; I am the one who is unable to face others (he runs away from home and later from Lavan to avoid conflict)."* The *Ish* says, *"Yaakov you are mistaken. Your name is no longer Yaakov, you don't have to run, you don't have to fear; your name is Yisrael, ki sarisa, you are a master, you have struggled but you are still standing. You have fought with both angel and man and have stood your ground. You lived in Lavan's home, a spiritually hostile environment for over two decades and yet, you remained true to your Abrahamic values. You wrestled an angel into submission. You don't have to grab at anyone's heel; you don't have to flee in the face of adversity. You are Yisrael. Find the confidence to face your demons, find the confidence to confront your challenges, find the strength to see how much you have grown."*

The angel did not change Yaakov's name. In fact Rashi explains that the angelic *Ish* was foreshadowing what would occur later on when God appears to change Yaakov's name to Yisrael. The *Ish* is giving Yaakov important advice. The only way you will be successful in life is if you begin to view yourself in a different light. You have so much potential, you possess so much holiness but your self-perception is preventing you from seeing it.

Too often we fail to achieve, progress and grow because we have given up on ourselves, we feel unworthy. We are acutely aware of our faults and shortcomings and assume that we cannot achieve greatness. We assume we are *"adama"* and therefore, lower our expectations of ourselves. We must always remember that we are the Children of Israel; we are the people who strive for *"adameh."* Let us find the strength to see the good, the beauty and the holiness that resides within.