

Parshas Vayishlach

For the week ending 16 Kislev 5756
8 & 9 December 1995

This issue is dedicated in the memory of Shulamis Gittel*

Summary

Returning home, Yaakov sends angelic messengers to appease his brother Esav. The messengers return, telling Yaakov that Esav is approaching him with an army of four hundred men. Yaakov takes the strategic precautions of dividing the camps, praying for assistance, and sending a tribute to mollify Esav. That night, Yaakov is left alone, and wrestles with the angel of Esav. Although Yaakov emerges victorious, he is left with an injured sinew in his thigh (which is the reason that it is forbidden to eat the sciatic nerve of a kosher animal). The angel tells him that his name in the future will be *Yisrael*, signifying that he has prevailed against man (Lavan) and the supernatural realm (the angel). The brothers meet and are reconciled, but Yaakov, still fearful of his brother, rejects Esav's offer that they should dwell together. Shechem, a Caananite prince, abducts and violates Dinah, Yaakov's daughter. In return for Dinah's hand in marriage, the prince and his father suggest that Yaakov and his family intermarry and enjoy the fruits of Caananite prosperity. Yaakov's sons trick Shechem and his father by feigning agreement — however, they stipulate that all the males of the city must undergo *bris mila*. While weakened by the circumcision, Shimon and Levi, two of Dinah's brothers, enter the town and execute all the males. This action is justified by the city's tacit complicity in the abduction of their sister. Hashem commands Yaakov to go to Beis-El and build an altar there. His mother Rivka's nurse, Devorah, dies and is buried below Beis-El. Hashem appears again to Yaakov, blesses him and changes his name to Yisrael. While traveling, Rachel goes into labor and gives birth to Binyamin, the twelfth of the tribes of Yisrael. She dies in childbirth and is buried on the Beit Lechem Road. Yaakov builds a monument to her, which is still there today, as the Torah predicts. Yitzhak passes away at the age of one hundred and eighty, and is buried by his sons. The Parsha concludes by listing Esav's descendants.

**We have the
technology...
We can do
ANYTHING!**

Commentaries

THE HOUSEWIFE AND THE CAT

"And Yaakov was very frightened and distressed" (32:7).

Rashi comments that Yaakov was *frightened* lest he or members of his family be killed, and he was *distressed*, that he might be forced to kill others. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein asks: Why was Yaakov distressed that he might be put in a position of having to kill Esav or one of his four hundred wicked companions? Wasn't this an opportunity to rid the world of evil — a reason to rejoice, and not to be distressed? Reb Moshe answers with the words of Beruriah to her husband Rabbi Meir (Berachos 10a): "better to pray that evildoers repent, than to pray that the wicked die." Yaakov was distressed that he might have to kill to remove evil from the world. There is an inherent danger in using undesirable methods to achieve desirable goals — that one can become tainted by the means. Rabbi Chaim Brisker pointed out that there are two kinds of zealots in the world, who are comparable to a housewife and a cat. Both the housewife and the cat want to rid the house of mice. The only difference is that the housewife hopes that there will never be another mouse to eliminate, and the cat hopes there will be many more. Before we are zealous to attack the evils of the world, let us make sure that we are acting as housewives and not cats...

(Adapted from Rabbi Z. Leff in *Shiurei Binah*)

*Sara Miriam writes about her sister:

Shulamis Gittel was born on December 22, 1976 with brain damage and was severely mentally retarded her entire life. She was a very special child and was loved by everyone who came into contact with her. Although I was never able to speak with her, she taught me so much about caring for people and not judging them by their appearance. She had, I believe, a very pure neshama. She died suddenly, very peacefully in her sleep. My family is not religious and there is no one to say Kaddish for her. I would appreciate it if everyone who learns through your publications could learn in her zechut.

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"WITH FRIENDS LIKE YOU..."

"Deliver me please, from my brother, from Esav" (32:12).

In preserving Jewish continuity, we are threatened by two kinds of dangers from the nations of the world: On the one hand, the physical threat of illogical hatred, expressed as crusade, pogrom and holocaust; and on the other, the spiritual threat of the welcoming arms of acceptance, which turns into the asphyxiating embrace of assimilation and intermarriage. These two dangers are expressed in Yaakov's prayer here: "Save me from my brother..." when he behaves with friendship and brotherhood, threatening the spiritual uniqueness of the Jewish People; and "from Esav", when he reveals the naked malice of the Jew-hater, seeking a *final solution*. Of the two threats, history has shown that the spiritual danger of assimilation is more formidable than the physical peril of annihilation, and for this reason, Yaakov first prays for divine assistance to overcome the threat of his "brother".

(Beis HaLevi)

THE THIRD PILLAR

"Yaakov was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn" (32:25).

The man/angel that Yaakov wrestled with represents the *yetzer hara* — the evil inclination. Why is it that neither Avraham nor Yitzhak were assailed in a similar way? *The Chafetz Chaim* said that "the *yetzer hara* doesn't mind if a Jewish person prays and gives charity all day long, *provided that he doesn't learn Torah*." Yaakov is the Patriarch who epitomizes the Torah. The Sages teach us that the world is built on three pillars: *Chesed*, kindness — the characteristic of Avraham; *Avodah*, service — Yitzhak; and *Torah* — Yaakov. Without Yaakov's pillar, the pillar of Torah, all the *Chesed* and the *Avodah* will not be sufficient for the Jewish People to fulfill their mission. Jewish history tragically bears out this point: Communities that were unstinting in giving *tzedaka* and building synagogues, but neglected Torah learning are now institutions that assimilated and are moribund, but those who built the third pillar — Yaakov's pillar — of Torah, have remained strong and connected to their heritage.

(Artscroll Stone Chumash)

Haftorah: Ovadia 1:1-21

THE EAGLE HAS LANDED

The entire book of Ovadia, the shortest in all of the *Tanach*, is this week's Haftorah. Ovadia was a convert to Judaism from the nation of Edom. Esav lived among two *tzadikim*, Yitzhak and Rivka and failed to learn from them — Ovadia lived among two of the wickedest people, Ahav and Jezabel, yet he remained a *tzadik*. His prophecy follows Esav/Edom through various periods of history until its eventual downfall in the times of the *Mashiach*.

"If he will rise up like an eagle and if he will make his nest among the stars — even from there I will bring him down" (1:4).

In last week's Parsha, Yaakov has a dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder. The *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* explains that these angels represent the four nations who will exile the Jewish People. At first, Yaakov saw the guardian angels of Babylon, Persia and Greece ascend and descend in succession. Finally, the protecting angel of Rome/Edom climbed up the ladder, but *he didn't come down*. Yaakov feared that this final exile would never end until Hashem said, "If he will rise up like an eagle and if he will make his nest among the stars — even from there I will bring him down." We are still in that final exile. If a single moment in recent history epitomizes the over-confidence of our age, it is arguably the Moon landing in 1969. It seemed at the time that "we have the technology — we can do anything!" (Since then there has been the rude awakening of unimaginable mindless violence, urban poverty and pandemic disease to knock the gloss off that arrogant assumption). The first words broadcast from the moon were "Houston, this is Tranquillity Base. *The Eagle has landed*." Nearly two thousand years ago, Ovadia predicted: "If he will rise up like an eagle and if he will make his nest among the stars — even from there I will bring him down."



Insights into the Zemiros sung at the Shabbos table throughout the generations.

Ki Eshmera Shabbos - `ca vmat If
"If we observe Shabbos..."

גם מלדבר בו דברי צרכים - Gam mildabayr bo divray tz'rochim

"Also from speaking about matters of necessities"

Your speech on Shabbos, say our Sages, should not be like your speech in the weekdays. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai had an elderly mother who was extremely loquacious. When he would remind her that it was Shabbos she would become silent. This is an indication that not only should one be careful not to speak about weekday matters like business on the Shabbos but also to limit the amount of talk even about permissible matters. It therefore required great deliberation before our Sages permitted the greeting of "Good Shabbos" to be used in such widespread fashion on the Day of Rest.

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