

PARASHAT VAYISHLACH



אל תירא עבדי יעקב

Do Not Fear, My Servant Yaakov

■ Yaakov's Fear

Barely a few days have passed after Yaakov's clash with his uncle Lavan the Aramite, and Yaakov is already facing a new/old threat – this time from his brother Esav. The messengers Yaakov sent to Esav in peace return with a dire warning:

בָּאֵנוּ אֶל אַחִיךָ אֶל עֵשָׂו וְגַם הֵלֵךְ לִקְרֹאתְךָ וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ עִמּוֹ.

We have gone to your brother, Esav,

and he is coming towards you with 400 men. (B'reshit 32,7)

Yaakov's immediate reaction, as we read in the next verse, is surprising: *"He was greatly afraid!"* This is precisely the opposite of his grandfather Avraham's reaction upon hearing that his nephew Lot had been taken captive by the Four Kings. Avraham responded then with courage and resolve: *"He led forth those he had trained... three hundred and eighteen in number, and pursued them to Dan"* (14,14). Courageously taking the initiative and setting off to war with the great kings of his day, Avraham hands them a stinging defeat and ends their string of great victories.

Furthermore: How can we explain Yaakov's fearful reaction in light of the Divine promise accompanying him ever since he left the Holy Land many years earlier:

וְהִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ

אֶל הָאָדָמָה הַזֹּאת כִּי לֹא אֶעְזָבְךָ...

I will be with you, and I will protect you wherever you go,

and I will return you to this land, for I will not abandon you... (28,15)

Even if Yaakov had some doubts about whether he was deserving of such a promise, his clash with Lavan should have dispelled them. At the critical moment, when Lavan set off to pursue him, G-d appeared to Lavan in a dream and warned him quite starkly: *"Do not even talk to Yaakov for good*

or for bad" (31,24). Lavan later admitted candidly that if it were not for this Divine admonition, he would have harmed Yaakov.

Yaakov also met up with angels of G-d when he continued along his way, naming the site Machanayim in honor of the event (32,2-3). And above all, just before Yaakov left Lavan's house, Hashem came to him and gave him this guarantee:

שוב אל ארץ אבותיך ולמולדתך ואֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ.

*Return to the land of your fathers and your homeland,
and I will be with you.* (31,3)

In light of Yaakov's perpetual Divine protection, what could he have been afraid of?

■ "Perhaps the Sins Will Cause..."

The Talmud itself asks this question (B'rachot 4a), and R. Yaakov bar Idi answers that Yaakov was not afraid of Esav's military might, nor of his 400 men. His fear was rather on the spiritual/ethical plane: perhaps he had sinned, causing the Divine promise to be revoked. Perhaps he did not meet the standards Hashem expected of him, and thus the vital Divine aid promised to him would be blocked.

This answer raises other questions, however. For one thing, as we noted above, Yaakov has seen over the course of many years that the promise has been fulfilled and that he has received much Divine help and protection. What could have happened to suddenly cause him to fear that the blessings had reached their expiration date?

In addition, the fear that sins may prevent the fulfillment of a Divine promise contradicts an important Talmudic principle. The Gemara teaches:

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Yosi: Every promise for good that G-d uttered, even if it was stated conditionally, He will not revoke.

(B'rachot 7a)

If so, the question still stands: Why is Yaakov afraid?

Maimonides answers this question. In the introduction to his commentary on the Mishna, he states that the above Talmudic principle applies only to Divine promises made via a prophet to the People of Israel. The reasoning is that this is the only way to distinguish between a false prophet and one of truth.

The Prophet Jeremiah sharpens this point in his dispute with Chananya ben Azor - a false prophet who claimed that the 70 years of Babylonian rule would end sooner than Yirmiyahu had predicted. Yirmiyahu warns him:

שְׁמַע נָא הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה... הַנְּבִיא אֲשֶׁר יִנְבֵּא לְשָׁלוֹם,
בְּבֹא דְבַר הַנְּבִיא, יוֹדַע הַנְּבִיא אֲשֶׁר שָׁלְחוּ ה' בְּאַמַּת.

Hear this thing... [Regarding] the prophet who prophesizes for peace: the fulfillment of his words proves that he is a prophet whom G-d has truly sent. (Yirmiyahu 28,7-9)

Yirmiyahu is telling him that if a prophet prophesizes something good, it must come true no matter what; if not, it shows the “prophet” was a fake! But if he predicts a punishment, this test is not valid – for the punishment might legitimately not come about: not because the prophet is fake, but because the people might have repented in the meantime! The most famous example of this is that which occurred with the Prophet Yonah and the people of Nineveh. He announced that their city would be destroyed, but in the end they changed their ways, and the decree was rescinded.

Given the Rambam’s differentiation between personal and national prophecies, we now understand that the promise made to Yaakov might not necessarily be fulfilled – for it was not made to a prophet speaking to the Nation of Israel, but rather only to and about Yaakov. He therefore has good reason to fear that it may be revoked.

But this explanation, too, leaves us with a question mark. The Gemara, when asserting that beneficial promises will always be fulfilled, cites as proof a personal promise! Hashem was angered at Israel after the Sin of the Golden Calf, and told Moshe that He would destroy them and give him another great nation in their stead. Moshe prayed for this decree to be revoked, and in fact it was. However, the “good” promise – that Moshe would become the father of many descendants – was fulfilled. We see from this, the Gemara tells us, that positive Divine promises always come true.

But this was a personal promise given to Moshe, not to the entire nation! If, as the Rambam says, we are to distinguish between beneficial promises given to the Nation (which will always be fulfilled) and those given to individuals (which might not be fulfilled), why does the Gemara cite an example of the latter as one that was fulfilled?

The Gemara thus implies that all beneficial Divine promises are to come true – and as such, we do not understand why Yaakov Avinu feared that

Hashem's promise to him might not come to fruition. Let us seek another explanation.

■ The Vow

Let us return to the vow Yaakov made after his dream, on his way from his parents' home to Haran (B'reshit 28,20-22). He said that if G-d would be with him and would protect him, he, in turn, would dedicate himself to G-d. But, as we explained in Parashat Vayetze,¹ these conditions set by Yaakov were exactly the promise given to him earlier (28,13-15) by Hashem! Yaakov simply repeats, almost word for word, G-d's promise to him during the night, but with the addition of the word **if**!

- G-d said, *"I will be with you,"* and Yaakov said, *"If G-d will be with me..."*
- G-d said, *"I will protect you wherever you go,"* and Yaakov said, *"If He will protect me on this journey..."*
- G-d said, *"I will return you to this land,"* and Yaakov said, *"If I return in peace to my father's house..."*

It sounds clearly as if Yaakov is already doubting Hashem's promise! Why?

The answer appears in the way Yaakov refers to G-d in this passage: *Elokim*. All of G-d's promises to Yaakov had been given using the Divine Name based on the root *alef-dalet-nun*, which we pronounce today as "Hashem" (or, in prayer, as *Ado-nai*). It is the Divine Name signifying G-d's mercy - as opposed to the name *Elokim*, which is based on the Hebrew word for "judges" and stands for the Divine Attribute of strict judgment.

By using the *alef-dalet-nun* name for these promises, as in verse 13 - *I am the Lord G-d of Avraham your father and of Yitzchak* - G-d is expressing His compassionate love for Yaakov in the merit of his righteous fathers Yitzchak and Avraham. But for Yaakov, this is not enough. He wants to be a third leg in this triangle; he wants G-d to also be the "G-d of Yaakov." He therefore asked that all of His promises should be made with the name *Elokim* - indicating that he would deserve them by right and not by mercy; by his own merits and deeds, and not those of his holy forefathers. He began his request with *"If Elokim will be with me..."* and concluded with:

וְהָיָה ה' לִי לְאֱלֹהִים.

Hashem [the Name of Compassion] will then be Elokim [the Name of Judgment] for me. (28,20-21)

1. "The Heart's Desire" to Parashat Vayetze.

Yaakov thus places himself on a much higher status than before. By his own request, his actions will now be scrutinized very carefully, and only if they are found to be meritorious, will the Divine promises to him be fulfilled.

■ I am Esav, Your Firstborn

During Yaakov's 20 years of working for the trickster Lavan, he had to be extra cautious. In principle, when working with a scoundrel, one may resort to counter-tricks in order not to fall victim. But extra care must be taken not to use deception when it is not necessary.

For instance, Yaakov's complex maneuver for increasing the speckled and spotted sheep, involving the placing of certain sticks in front of the sheep, required the approval of a Divine angel. As the angel told him in a dream:

שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה כָּל הָעֲתָדִים הָעֲלִים עַל הַצֹּאן עֲקָדִים וְנֶקְדִים וּבְרָדִים
כִּי רָאִיתִי אֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לָבֵן עֹשֶׂה לָּךְ.

*Lift your eyes and see the bucks mounting the sheep are ringed,
spotted and speckled - for I have seen what Lavan
is doing to you. (31,12)*

The angel said that because he saw Lavan's wickedness, he would therefore give Yaakov a genetic secret by which he could bypass the trickery and walk away with fair earnings.

Rachel did not know of Yaakov's vow and of the high ethical stature it demanded and represented. She also tried to trick her father, for good reasons, by taking his idols and hiding them - but this did not meet the high moral standards that Yaakov had set for himself. He could not imagine that one of his household members would engage in theft. He therefore told Lavan, "*The one with whom you find your gods shall not live*" (verse 32), causing Rachel to pay with her life; she died while giving birth to Binyamin.

Now, when Yaakov looks back in time, he remembers the very painful experience of discovering that Lavan had tricked him by giving him Leah instead of Rachel. He recalled that the Divine promise did not protect him from the anguish of that episode, nor from the seven additional years of work it caused him.

When Yaakov looks back further, he remembers how he himself, at his mother's urging, disguised himself as his older brother. Could it be, Yaakov asks himself, that Lavan's trick, in which he disguised Leah as her younger sister Rachel, was a punishment for his own deception of his father? And

now here he is, facing Esav and his 400 men, and he recalls the deceptive manner in which he received the blessings his father meant to give Esav. Yaakov now fears that the Attribute of Judgment might once again recall the past and block the promise of Divine protection.

Yes, it is true that Yaakov was fulfilling his mother's unequivocal command when he disguised himself as Esav. But still, we have learned that Yaakov has clearly asked that Hashem judge him according to his own actions. Perhaps he should have insisted that his mother find another creative solution by which he could receive the blessings?

This, then, is the sin that Yaakov fears, in light of his request to be judged according to the letter of the law: his deception of Yitzchak when receiving the blessing. He wanted to have G-d's name proclaimed upon him, and not only upon his father and grandfather – and now he wonders if he is truly worthy of direct Divine protection.

This is why Yaakov, with Esav bearing down upon him, changes his mind and prays not for G-d's judgment, but for His compassion – in the merit of his forefathers:

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב: אֵלֹהֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֵלֵי אָבִי יִצְחָק,
ה' הָאֵלֵם אֵלַי שׁוּב לְאַרְצְךָ וְלִמְוֹלָדְתְּךָ וְאִיטִיבָה עִמָּךְ.

*Yaakov said: Hashem, the G-d of my father Avraham
and of my father Yitzchak, Hashem Who says to me,
'Return to your land and I will be good to you.'*

קִטְנֹתִי מִכָּל הַחַסְדִּים וּמִכָּל הָאֱמֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת עַבְדְּךָ...
*I am unworthy of all the mercies and all the truth
that You have shown Your servant...* (32,10-11)

We see clearly how Yaakov mentions the name Hashem, and not *Elokim*; notes the merits of his forefathers; and in general, asks for mercy, and not strict judgment. By mentioning his forefathers, he is also alluding to the fact that what he did was at the express command of his mother.

■ What is Your Name?

When does Yaakov rectify his sin? When the angel comes to wrestle with him. Yaakov overcomes him and demands that he give him a blessing. The angel - the angel of Esav - asks him (32,28), "*What is your name?*" Unlike the last time, when he told his father that he was Esav, Yaakov now responds

without hesitation: “[*My name is*] *Yaakov!*” He identifies himself by his true name with his head held high.

The angel then tells him: “*Yaakov will no longer be your name, but rather Yisrael*” (verse 29). This again brings up the past, when Esav complained about the name Yaakov: “*Is he not rightly named Yaakov? For he has tricked me twice*” (27,36). But now, with his name no longer Yaakov, this claim is no longer relevant; Yaakov’s deception is no longer an issue.

From here, let us turn to the ringing words of the prophet Isaiah:

כֹּה אָמַר ה' עֹשֶׂה וְיִצְרָה מִבֶּטֶן יַעֲזֹרָה, אֵל תִּירָא עַבְדֵי יַעֲקֹב וְיִשְׂרוּן בְּחַרְתִּי בּוֹ.

Thus says the Lord Who made you and formed you from the womb, and Who will help you. Do not fear, my servant Yaakov, and you, Yeshurun, whom I have chosen. (Yeshayahu 44,2)

Yaakov’s fear was so strong that a special prophecy was required to assure him that he need not fear – for he is “*Yeshurun, whom I have chosen.*” Hashem declares outright that it was He Who chose Yaakov; it was not just a case of mistaken identification by Yitzchak. There is therefore no longer any reason for Yaakov to fear that his sin of that time might change things. The replacement of Rachel by Leah is connected with other Divine calculations, and is not a punishment.

Hashem also refers to him here as Yeshurun, from the root *yashar*, meaning “straight and upright.” From Hashem’s standpoint, Yaakov has met the standards of honesty and integrity. This is why he turns to him and says: “*Do not fear, my servant Yaakov.*”

