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Parshat Vayishlech The Power to Reinvent Yourself

Prior to his confrontation with his brother Esav, Ya'akov famously engages in a nighttime wrestling match. While the passuk simply refers to his adversary as an “ish” (a man), our rabbis teach us mi-drashically (Bereishit Rabbah 77) that the man was the angel of Esav. As they battle through the night, neither seems able to overcome his opponent. As the sun begins to rise, Ya'akov demands a blessing and receives the name “Yisrael” because “you have a commanding power with G-d and with men, and you have prevailed” (Bereishit, 32:29).

The timing of this encounter seems quite significant. Why does Ya'akov receive the new name Yisrael immediately before seeing his brother? Why does he receive specifically this name?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that the answer lies in the appropriate name he received when he was born: Ya'akov (heel). For his entire life, Ya'akov was at Esav's heel: grabbing on to him at birth, stealing his right as the oldest child, deceiving his father Yitzchak using the words “I am Esav, your firstborn” (27:19) and eventually taking his bracha. Ya'akov always wanted what Esav had, namely his strength and his father's love.

As the story of Ya'akov progresses, we see him try to unnaturally assert himself in the house of Lavan and struggle in confrontations. Now, immediately before the reunion with his brother, Ya'akov is thrust into another battle, one he cannot win. But at the end of the night, Esav's angel delivers a key message to Ya'akov. No longer shall his name be a reference to his stature relative to Esav; now Ya'akov is his own man. His is Yisrael, a man who has feet in both the physical and spiritual worlds. He no longer has to compete with others. Ya'akov can realize his own unique strengths and potential.

Many of us today struggle with our own self-worth relative to other people around us. We constantly look to see what others have and what we don't and we assign great value to those things. Ya'akov emerged from his battle not only with a new name, but a new self-image. With the confidence of being true to oneself, he was able to face his older brother. Sometimes, we need to remind ourselves of our own value and to be confident that we can each significantly impact the world around us with our own uniqueness.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Aron Srolovitz