

“And Yaakov Remained Alone”

In this week's parsha, the Torah says that Yaakov battled with a mysterious 'Ish' [man], who Chazal tell us was Eisav's guardian angel, who was also the embodiment of the Evil Inclination (Yetzer HaRah) and the Satan. The Medrash here in Bereshis Rabbah associates the pasuk describing Yaakov's battle with Eisav's angel, with the pasuk in Parshas Zos HaBracha "There is none like G-d O Jeshurun, a rider of the heavens at your assistance, and in His majesty, the skies." [Devorim 33:26]. The Medrash expounds homiletically: "Eyn k'Kel" means there is no one like G-d. But who IS like G-d? Yeshurun (Israel) is like G-d! There are members of Klal Yisrael (the Jewish people) who are similar to the Almighty.

The Medrash then gives examples. Everything that G-d is going to do in the future in this world was already done by the righteous of Klal Yisrael in this world. Just as G-d will bring the dead back to life, so too Eliyahu already brought back to life (the son of the Shunnamite woman); G-d has the ability to cause a drought, so too Eliyahu caused a drought; G-d can bless a small quantity and make it into a large amount; Eliyahu blessed a small quantity and made it into a large amount. G-d can make barren women have children; Eliyahu made barren women have children; etc. etc. Finally the Medrash concludes its list of comparisons between the Almighty and the righteous of Israel with the statement: Just as G-d is by Himself as it is written v'Nisgav Hashem L'vado baYom haHu [Yishayahu 2:11; 2:17], so too the "Jewish Grandfather" (i.e. — the Patriarch Yaakov) remained alone as it is written ("And Yaakov remained alone." [Bereshis 32:24]).

This last "example" does not seem to fit into the pattern of the earlier items. It is one thing to cite situations which are supernatural and miraculous — resurrection, stopping the rain, barren women conceiving, and so forth are indeed acts which require G-d-like abilities. However, the Medrash is saying that G-d's ability to be alone is itself a G-d-like quality! "And Yaakov remained alone" is itself as miraculous as resurrection, as cessation of rainfall, as conception for a barren woman. There must be something very supernatural about being alone.

What does that mean? Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky says (in his sefer) that the reason Yaakov Avinu was attacked when he was alone is because most human beings are unable to maintain their spiritual level and stature when they are alone. Most people need a support system, a society, a "chevra" to keep them on the straight and narrow path of righteous behavior. To go it all alone, without peer pressure and peer support, without losing one's "level" (madreigah) is a phenomenon which is extremely difficult for the average person to attain.

No one knew that better than Eisav's guardian angel. The Satan = Yetzer Harah = Saro shel Eisav attacked Yaakov specifically when he was alone, thinking "Now I got him because he's alone." When one is alone, he does not need the support of others. But the Angel saw "that he was unable to defeat him". He saw that Yaakov Avinu was so strong and so perfect that he could not affect him. Yaakov was the personification of humanity in the Divine Chariot upon which the Shechina resides. But the Angel was able to touch the hollow of the thigh of Yaakov. That meant that Yaakov is untouchable. He can't be affected even when alone, but his children can be affected. They do not have that capability of maintaining their spiritual strength and honesty even when alone. The children will not be like that. If there is ever a way to bring down a human being, it is when he is isolated, when he does not have "chevra", when he does not have a society. At that point, he is vulnerable to fall from his spiritual level.

That is why this incident is immediately followed by the statement "Therefore the Children of Israel shall not eat the sinew of the thigh-vein (Gid haNashe)." [Bereshis 32:33] What is the connection? The connection is that at that moment, the Almighty instituted something which would require that Jews always stick together: the prohibition of eating forbidden foods.

The prohibition to eat the Gid haNashe and the subsequent mitzvos regarding forbidden foods reduce our ability to relate to so much of society. If we cannot eat with people, we cannot socialize with them, and we cannot be with them. But people need socialization, so who will they go to? They will go to other Jews — people they can eat with and therefore people who they can socialize with. They will stick together. They will have their chevra, their society that keeps them straight. This is the brilliance of the mitzva "Therefore the children of Israel will not eat the Gid haNashe."

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky writes, before the destruction of the Second Bais HaMikdash [Temple], when the Jewish people were about to go into exile, our Sages, in their great wisdom, extended the list of forbidden foods in the Torah and instituted their own category of forbidden foods: They forbade the bread of a non-Jew, they forbade the cooking of a non-Jew, they forbade wine touched by a non-Jew. The rationale for all these Rabbinic prohibitions is to limit socialization with non-Jews. Jews who cannot drink with their Gentile friends, neighbors, and business associates and who cannot eat with them will have no other choice but to socialize with their fellow Jews.

This is our insurance policy. This is the antidote of “And Yaakov remained alone.” (*Rabbi Frand, torah.org*)