

Birshut Harav,

Quoting Sleeping Beauty: “I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream  
I know you, the gleam in your eyes is so familiar a gleam...”

If Yaacov were only able to sing this song!

Vayivater Yaacov levado, vayeavek ish imo ad allot hashachar. Yaacov was left alone on the other side of the Yabok and a man wrestled with him until the rise of dawn. An ‘ish’ Yaacov had met before...once upon a dream! According to chazal this was the Sar Esav, the Guardian Angel of Esav, a.k.a. the Yetser Harah or the Evil Inclination, and the only angel, who, years ago, went up the ladder in Jacob’s dream, but didn’t seem to come down...

So not entirely the Disney version: This wasn’t quite the love of his life, nor, unlike Ms Beauty, was Ya’acov able to sense anything familiar. Ad allot hashachar - until it literally dawned on him whom he was fighting with. Velo yachol lo, the angel was unable to overcome him and asked to be released. Quite puzzlingly, Yaacov asked him for a blessing! The angel obliged, after informing him: lo Yaacov yeamer od shimega ki im Yisrael ki sarita im Elokim veim anashim, vatuchal. “No longer is Yaacov your name - it will be said - but Yisrael, for you wrestled with God and men and you prevailed”. Chazal point out that ‘yeamer’ – it will be said, means the angel merely foretold Yaacov that God himself was going to give him this new name soon. R’ Lichtenstein, however, points out the angel uses a little twist: as angel puts it, his name will only be Yisrael, whereas God later indicates his name is to remain Yaacov, and Yisrael will be an additional name.

The episode raises many questions:

- Why wasn’t Yaacov able to recognize this ‘ish’ until dawn?
- After being blessed by God Himself more than once, why ask a bracha from the Sar of Esav, the Yetser Harah?? What blessing was he expecting?
- You fought with God and men, and prevailed. Men perhaps, including the angel who was called an ‘ish’, but where do we find him fighting with God?
- Why did the angel slightly twist the message and add ‘Vatuchal’ – you prevailed? What does that really mean?

To answer these questions we need to first scrutinize some of Yaacov’s past.

Yaacov is said to represent Emet, ‘truth’. However, his forming years were more a struggle being truthful. Rabbi Liebttag explains how Yitschak thought to build the Jewish Nation with both sons: Esav in charge of national affairs, i.e. a king, and Ja’acov being the spiritual leader, i.e. a kohen gadol. Rivka, on the other hand, had received prophecy that both sons would become great nations, but only

Ya'acov was God's chosen one. Without telling Yitschak, she took matters in her own hand to "help" this prophesy along. Yaacov wheedled the birthright out of Esav and Rivka coaxed him to deceive his father to get the blessing of the first born.

These family dynamics and manipulations made Ya'acov ignore his inner compass of Emet, truth, creating what we'd call cognitive dissonance. As the Torah points out, his actions became obsessive, being suspicious and often downright fearful of others. On one level, the fight with the angel may have taught Yaacov how to deal with his fear for people, like Lavan, and Esav, and prevail.

But the angel taught him much more than that. Both Rivka and Yaacov had the illusion that, given the prophesy, the end justified the means, and tried to manipulate that, which was not in their control at all. A state of mind, a self-centeredness, that made Yaacov unaware of what was truly going on around him, and replace God's will for him, with his own designs. At least three times we find the Torah hinting at him being oblivious to the spiritual world around him and failing to understand God's directives; abilities his forefathers had mastered to perfection...

When he came to Bet El the first time on his way to Lavan, the Torah states 'Vayifga bamakom'. He literally bumped into the place, unaware of its holiness, and camped out for the night. After God's revelation in his dream on top of the ladder, Yaacov exclaimed: yesh Hashem bemakom haze veanochi lo yadati. God is in this place and I didn't know. His grandfather Abraham had visited Beth-El when he entered Israel and had spontaneously prayed on the spot, keenly aware of the kedusha emanating from this place.

Ya'acov made an oath: "If God will safeguard me and return me in peace to my father's house then Hashem will be for me God. And this stone that I placed as a monument will be a Bet Elokim - house of God... and everything which You give me I shall tithe for You". At the end of last week's parasha: God tells Yaacov to remember this oath, leave Lavan and go back to Israel, i.e. Bet El to build this Bet Elokim. But Yaacov halach ledarko –he went his own way, orchestrating and devising a meeting with Esav. At the border of Israel, Gods angels came out to greet him – vayifge'u bo – the same verb as used before in connection to Beth-El - they literally bumped into him before he could see them.

And thirdly, the fight with the Sar Esav: He was so fretful about meeting Esav and preoccupied with orchestrating the event that he didn't recognize the angel Hashem had sent to fight with him; let alone understand God's hint to stop this obsession with Esav and remember his oath: to build a house of God in Beth-El.

The Midrash Tanchuma supports this idea and takes it even further: "Yaacov went and became rich in Charan, and came back and settled himself without fulfilling his vow. God brought upon him the prospect of Esav with his murderous intent... he did not understand the message. He brought upon him the angel who battled with him, but he did not understand... Since he did not perceive God's message He brought upon him the trouble with Dina and Shechem. Since he did not perceive even this He brought upon him the trouble of Rachel (she eventually died giving birth to Benjamin)... God said, For how long will this tzaddik be punished without understanding his sin? Behold, I shall inform him. As it is written after the episode with Shechem, "And God said to Yaakov, Get up, go up to Beit-El and dwell there and make a bizbeach for God Who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esav." God points out Ya'acov's issues by referring to Himself as the God Who appeared when fleeing Esav: you were self-absorbed in trying to manage prophesy which no one can control but Me. But it did cause you to flee out of fear for your brother Esav, to become even more obsessed with your own designs, fearful of people and oblivious to My messages. This, I think was the fight with God the angel hinted at.

Vatuchal. He would prevail.

In many AA and other support groups a beautiful prayer is used to address fears and help let go of obsessive and self-centered behavior: God, please grant us Serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference.

Three virtues called upon to deal with fear and obsession: Serenity to accept what is not in our power to change; let God be in charge of prophesy, the end does not justify the means; Courage to fight for what is our responsibility to change, and Wisdom to know the difference between those two. It is a prayer to invoke mindfulness for others, instead of a myopic focus on ourselves.

These three virtues, Serenity, Courage and Wisdom, I think, are hinted at in the Torah by the many three-fold repetitions: Three times Hashem spoke to Yaacov at Bet El: 1) in his dream of the ladder, 2) when he gave him his name Yisrael and 3) when giving him the blessing to inherit the land and become a great nation. Three structures Ya'acov built at Bet El- a matseva, a mizbeach and a second matseva. At all three occasions Yaacov changed its name, from 'Luz asher be erets kna'an' being merely a reference to its geographical location, to Bet-El, referring to Hamakom: the place where God appeared, its kedusha, in connection to the Holy Land. At the end of the third occasion the Torah repeats three times the phrase 'bamakom asher diber ito': at the place where Hashem spoke with him": Hashem

went away from him (after giving the blessings) bamakom asher diber ito, Yaacov builds that last matsevah bamakom asher diber ito and calls the place hamakom asher diber ito, Bet El. God gives Yaacov his name Yisrael with three repetitions: 1) your name is Yaacov, 2) your name will no longer be (called) yaacov, but Yisrael will be your name and 3) He called his name Yisrael...

Rav Lichtenstein explains the names Yaacov and Yisrael as follows: Yaacov was introduced as ish tam, yoshev ohalim: a simple guy of torah study, a follower, holding on to unadulterated faith, but too naïve to survive in the real world. Yisrael means power to be victorious, the courage to fight and prevail.

For Hashem: the traits of Yaacov are equally if not more important: learning Torah, Faith and acceptance that God is ultimately in control.

For the Sar Esaf physical power is paramount. He couldn't bear the idea to have lost to a Yaacov, a powerless naïve guy. For him his name would only be Yisrael. It was also this Yetser harah who told Yaacov: You fought with God and man, vatuchal – and you prevailed! Prevailed over whom? It doesn't state 'vatuchal lo', or 'lahem' – you prevailed over him or over them. This may be the ultimate lure of the Yetser Harah! We need to be aware what we are trying to fight as there are things we just have to accept and let go. The idea of 'vatuchal' by its self can lead to a false sense of being in control, self-absorption and a focus on our own designs instead of what Hashem really wants from us.

It takes wisdom to know the difference. Wisdom, Yaacov asked for, the angel blessed him with as he prevailed, but was only granted once he fulfilled his vow: And Hashem said 'shev sham'- dwell there. Build a community and a bet-Elokim, a Darchei No'am', a makom, a place of worship, to pray for Serenity to accept the things we cannot change (prophesy, elections, etc.) – only God can, to be Yaacov. A place to pray for Courage to stand up for our values and fight for the changes we can and must make, to better ourselves, our family, Darchei No'am our community, our Nation, to be Yisrael. Vatuchal: because in those we will prevail! And a place to pray for wisdom to know the difference.

Shabbat shalom!