

Jacob into Israel: The Ability to Prevail Through Struggle

Rabbi Avital Hochstein – hochstein@mechonhadar.org

Parashat VaYishlach 5777

בראשית לב, כ"ה-כ"ט

וַיִּתֵּר יַעֲקֹב לְבָדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלֹת הַשָּׁחַר. וַיֵּרָא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיִּגַע בְּכַף יָרְכוֹ וַתִּקַּע
כַּף יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֶאָבֶקוֹ עִמּוֹ. וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ כִּי אִם בִּרְכָתִנִּי.
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַה שְּׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב. וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֹאמַר עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי שָׁרִיתָ עִם
אֱלֹהִים וְעִם אָנָשִׁים וַתִּוָּכַל:

Bereishit 32:25-9

Ya'akov was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Ya'akov's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Ya'akov." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Ya'akov, but Yisrael, for you have striven (*sarita*) with beings divine and human, and you were able (*va-tukhal*).

One of the most poignant moments in the scene is the one in which the name Yisrael is born. What is the meaning of the name Yisrael?

At the heart of our *parashah* we are presented with the arresting scene of Ya'akov wrestling with an unidentified "man." This puzzling scene is

understood by Ya'akov in hindsight as an encounter with God: "So Ya'akov named the

place Peniel, meaning, ‘I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved’” (v. 31).

On a physical plane, Ya’akov struggles, fights, and wrestles with this Man; while on a textual plane, the reader must struggle and wrestle with pinning down the details of this wrestling match. But it seems that one of the most poignant moments in the scene is the one in which the name Yisrael is born. What is the meaning of the name Yisrael? Why does it replace the original Ya’akov? What is the blessing that Ya’akov receives through the name, and what does the last word “*va-tukhal*” (“you were able”) at the conclusion of the wrestling match actually mean?

A *midrash* in the Talmud, tractate Hullin, takes Ya’akov’s personal story and imbues it with more broad, national, meaning. This is done through a comparison of the verses describing Ya’akov’s struggle with Hoshea’s retelling of the story in his prophecy. The *midrash* uses the somewhat murky verses in our *parashah* in order to clarify and illuminate a different text later in Tanakh, a confusing set of verses from from the prophet. Thus the unclear verses regarding Ya’akov’s struggle in our *parashah* turn into interpretare rather than remaining in need of interpretation.

The chapter under discussion in Hoshea opens with a description of the trickery and dishonesty of the nation of Israel:

הושע יב, א'-ג'

סָבַבְנִי בְכַחַשׁ אֲפָרִים וּבְמַרְמָה בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל... וְרִיב לֹה' עִם יְהוּדָה וְלִפְקֹד עַל יַעֲקֹב כְּדָרְכָיו
כְּמַעֲלָלָיו יָשִׁיב לוֹ:

Hoshea 12:1-3

Ephraim surrounded me with denial and the house of Israel with trickery... God has disputes with Judah, and will visit punishment on Jacob according to his ways and give him back according to his evil deeds.

Thus the prophet relates the current reality, but he also claims that this state of affairs is due to a nationally inherited trait. This is typical behavior modeled by their forefather Ya'akov:

בִּבְטֹן עֶקֶב אֶת אָחִיו וּבְאוֹנוֹ שָׂרָה אֶת אֱלֹהִים: וַיֵּשֶׁר אֵל, מִלֶּאךָ וַיִּכַּל, בָּכָה וַיִּתְחַנֵּן לוֹ: (ד'-ה')

Ya'akov wrestled (*akav*) his brother in the womb and when grown he wrestled (*sarab*) with God. He fought with the angel and he was able, he cried and pleaded with him... (vv. 4-5).

The *midrash* focuses its exploration of the connection between the two sets of *pesukim* by focusing on the root *s.r.b.* In the verb form it means “to fight” or “to overcome”, but as a noun it means officer or master. In the name Yisrael these two meanings are merged: the Talmud’s presentation focuses on connecting the noun of “*sar*” within the verb of “*va-yasar*.”

תלמוד בבלי חולין, דף צ"ב ע"א

"וישר אל מלאך ויכל בכה ויתחנן לו" (הושע יב, ה'), איני יודע מי נעשה שר למי! כשהוא אומר: "כי שרית עם אלהים" (בראשית לב, כ"ד), הוי אומר: יעקב נעשה שר למלאך;

"בכה ויתחנן לו" (הושע שם), איני יודע מי בכה למי! כשהוא אומר: "ויאמר שלחני" (בראשית, שם כ"ט), הוי אומר: מלאך בכה ליעקב.

Talmud Bavli Hullin 92a

“He wrestled (*va-yasar*) with the angel and he was able (*va-yukhal*), he cried and pleaded with him” (Hoseha 12:5). I don’t know who became the *sar* (master) of whom (i.e who won the match)! When it says, “for you have striven (*sarita*) with beings divine and human” (Bereshit 32:29), it means to say that Ya’akov became the master of the angel.

[When it says,] “he cried and he pleaded with him” (Hoshea, *ibid*) I don’t know who cried to whom! When it says “he said, ‘Let me go!’” (Bereishit, *ibid* v. 27), it means to say that the angel cried to Ya’akov.

The *midrash* explains Hoshea 12 through Bereishit 32, but in the process, both are illuminated on the basis of the other. The verses in Bereishit make the verses in Hoshea more particular and specific, regarding the person Ya’akov/Yisrael, while at the same time the verses in Hoshea make the verses in Bereishit more expansive and universal, referring to the national manifestation of Israel. The continuation of the *sugya* in Hullin makes this relationship more explicit:

"כי שרית [עם אלהים ועם אנשים]" (בראשית, שם),
אמר רבה: רמז רמז לו שעתידים שני שרים לצאת ממנו: ראש גולה שבבבל, ונשיא שבארץ
ישראל.

“For you have striven (*sarita*) [with beings divine and human].”

Rabbah says: He hinted to him that two masters (*sarim*) will emerge from him in the future—an Exilarch in *Bavel* and a Patriarch in *Eretz Yisrael*.”

The Exilarch and the Patriarch in Rabbah’s day are both leaders of their respective communities in the two major Jewish centres. Thus, on a national plane there are two masters (*sarim*) that have power (*srara*), and they also struggle with each other (*shorim*). In order to understand and reveal the full implication of the expansion of meaning to national significance, the verses from Bereishit require close attention.

Let’s return to the scene of Ya’akov and the man/angel struggling. At its center the man/angel asks or requires that Ya’akov release him, and Ya’akov responds with a demand: “Then he said, ‘Let me go, for dawn is breaking.’ But he answered, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me’” (Bereishit 32:27). The response is: “Said he, ‘Your name shall no

longer be Ya'akov, but Yisrael, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and you were able” (v. 29). One can think of this verse of blessing actually as a description of a few significant transformations: One is from *sarita*, you have struggled, battled, → into *va-tukhal*, you have managed, you were able. And the second is from Ya'akov → into Yisrael. Ya'akov who has struggled (*sara*) turns into Yisrael who is able (*yakhol*). Through these transitions the verse creates parallels: between the word connoting battle, struggle, *sarita*, and the name Ya'akov as two parallel starting points; and between Yisrael and ability, *va-tukhal*, as two parallel end points. But the two parallel transitions raise an important question. The starting point of one transition is *sarita*, you have struggled, while the end point of the other is Yisrael, he who struggles. This juxtaposition, despite coming to reflect a transition, a blessed transition, actually seems to reflect stagnation!

It seems that the ability, *va-tukhal*, that ends the blessing is also key to understanding the significance of move from Ya'akov to Yisrael. In addition it explains the shift of perspective when we move from the individual Ya'akov to the corporate Israel. It is helpful here to return to Talmudic analysis for this step. There, the reality of struggle and strife of Ya'akov is presented as internal conflict and national conflict simultaneously:

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It's important to notice that the Exilarch in *Bavel* and the Patriarch in *Eretz Yisrael* are the leaders of one people. They are two masters inside the corporate body of Israel. Two different leaders who clash with one another, yet are both within Yisrael, within Ya'akov. Having two leaders of one people is the national manifestation of what we would call an

individual's internal conflict. A house divided against itself. If so, Rabbah suggests that the name Yisrael indicates an internal struggle, and when speaking about internal struggle the language of winning or losing is not sufficient; it is neither relevant nor accurate. Maybe this language doesn't necessarily imply either victory or loss, but rather more simply ability, possibility, or even a stance of "nevertheless".

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Now we can turn to find new meaning in the blessing that the Angel gives. Perhaps it is not the change of name, but rather the promise of ability. And this is not the ability to win or lose, but the ability to continue to struggle, internally and

externally, and to survive. A struggle that is constant and essential, a struggle that ends up as the destiny of an entire people. Maybe both the name Yisrael and the verb "*va-tukhal*" need to be read in the future tense, "You will wrestle and you will be able to wrestle". The ability to withstand conflict that the angel promises to Ya'akov is also a blessing for his progeny and namesake people.

When Ya'akov becomes Yisrael that is a deep and meaningful transition. Ya'akov is no longer a trickster, someone who is looking for the Achilles heel (*akev*) of those who surround him, someone who advances himself through conflict and deceit. But he is not blessed to become a victor and someone who never has to fight again. He is instead blessed to have the fight move inward, to be a person who wrestles with himself, with his God, face-to-face. A move from a battle in which there are winners and losers, blessed and unblessed, to above all being someone who is able. A person who survives and thrives despite his life's tensions. He is aware of them and is constantly trying to conquer them, not out of a fear of losing, but out of a recognition of their value and his own ability—*va-tukhal*.

And this is a blessing that is passed on to Ya'akov's blessed progeny, the people of Israel. They are the children of a person who began his life working on the sly, fighting and tricking his way through the world and ends up with the blessing of Yisrael, a person whose life is continued to be marked by conflict, but a conflict of substance, meaning, interiority, and divinity. Yisrael as a name and as a people testify to the existence of a range of possibilities of what it means to live a life of conflict. There may be victory, but more important, there is the complex reality of "*va-tukhal*."