



Parashat Vayishlach: When Abundance Meets Essence

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin

Dear Friends,

Whenever my son and I drive in the car together, we tune into Yehonatan's favorite radio station. When the hourly news broadcast comes on I turn off the radio for a few minutes, naively protecting him from things he does not need to hear yet. A few days ago, while driving, I turned off the radio as usual, and Yehonatan asked if we could listen to "the song with the piano that we really like" (on youtube) until the news is over. The song "with the piano" is called "Katonti", written and performed by Yonatan Raz'el. We hadn't heard it in quite a while. How appropriate, I thought, that Yehonatan should ask for this song on the week in which its words appear in the parasha. I love coincidences, mainly because I don't think that's what they are...

We listened to the song about four times (even though the news was long over) until we finally reached his school (thank God for traffic). I was singing along with my usual gusto. We parked in the parking lot and listened to the song one more time, reluctant to release ourselves from the spell the song had cast on us. Five times was definitely enough for me to realize that I had actually misunderstood its words until that morning.

The backdrop for the song is Yaakov's journey home after 20 years of exile. He is petrified of the reunion awaiting him with his twin brother, Eisav. He sends gifts, and even splits his large family into two groups, hoping that at least half the tribe will survive the fit of anger and revenge he is anticipating from his brother.

All of Yaakov's great achievements are teetering on the brink of possible annihilation.

And then Yaakov begins to pray. This is the first spontaneous prayer in the Torah: "O LORD, who said to me: 'Return to your country, and to your kindred, and I will do you good'; I am not worthy of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which You have bestowed upon Your servant; for with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two camps. Deliver me, I pray Thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav; for I fear him, lest he come and smite me - mothers along with the children. And You said: I will surely do you good, and make your seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'" (Bereishit 32:10-13)

At first glance, this prayer is pretty straightforward: save me from the hand of my brother! Keep the promise you made to me 20 years ago from the top of that ladder, when I left my homeland! You promised me a brilliant future. While it's true that so far you have kept your word, what is the point if it is all to be destroyed?

But the opening words of the prayer - which are the words of the song we heard on the radio five times that morning - are somewhat bewildering: **I am not worthy (Katonti) of all the graciousness, and of all the truth, which You have shown to Your servant.**

Yaakov seems to be saying that because he is not worthy of all of the abundance with which he is blessed and has not legitimately earned, he therefore needs God's protection. This makes perfect sense.

Yet, I would like to suggest a slightly different interpretation: Yaakov is not saying that he is not worthy, but rather that **he cannot contain all of the abundance with which he has been blessed.** He is overwhelmed! He feels that he cannot safeguard all the blessings that God has promised him, and has indeed delivered. You, God, promised to make my seed as plentiful as the grains of sand on the beach – too numerous to count – but I cannot guarantee their safety, and it is too much for me to handle alone! Ya'akov is now longing for the time when it was just him, scared for his life, but at the same time also carefree, with only a staff in his hand, and no blessings/responsibilities to protect.

Are you familiar with the strange sensation of yearning to return to simplicity? Longing for the person you were before you grew up and accumulated possessions? As Rabbi Hillel the Elder said in Sayings of the Fathers: **he who has many possessions also has many worries.** This longing for simplicity is not a nostalgic yearning for the past. It is an entirely different kind of longing. With so many possessions and so much responsibility we tend to lose sight of our essence, of who we essentially are. We find ourselves busy with paperwork; responsible for children, mortgage, insurance, and financial security. Once upon a time, when we had very few possessions, we may not have felt blessed, but our worries were small, simple, and more innocent. It was possible to dream and fantasize about the future that awaited us. Besides, when you are alone, it is easier to run, to escape, to make quick decisions. You feel altogether lighter...

Two profound truths contradict each other here, and they are both valid, like two sides of the same coin: One truth is that with children come fears and anxieties, and with possessions come worries. Life is much, much simpler, lighter and safer without all of these! The other truth is that it is our inevitable nature to create, develop, grow, express ourselves, and bring children into the world. As a result, we become "heavy" with belongings and responsibilities. Yaakov, it appears, is dealing not only with his fear of Eisav, but with the worries that are part and parcel of being a successful man.

The two seemingly contradictory truths are fueled by two forms of longing: the satisfied, wealthy man seeks to return to his original essence, to the time before he became big and strong, before his innate abilities manifested themselves. The second,

is the longing that same man had as a young man, when he aspired to be successful and wealthy - to express himself and materialize his inner wealth; to actualize his potential, preferably in a big way.

We flow constantly between these two points, between longing for actualization and yearning for simplicity. Every crisis we experience is an expression of one kind or another of the tension between this longing and this yearning.

However, we do not have to feel like helpless pendulums, pulled in two opposing directions, suffering and feeling torn. Instead, this tension can be used for growth. **The essence of who we were before is still there.** Underneath the mountains of possessions, actions, and achievements, that essential flame of our inner essence is still burning. Like everything Divine, it eludes definition, but it is there, whispering, churning at every point in our lives, and it can be tapped.

Tapping into and listening to one's inner voice is an art. This, I would like to suggest, is exactly what Yaakov did on that fateful night, as he was trying to reconnect with his essence. He connected with his essential identity, "Israel" - the one who wrestles. Yaakov has always been wrestling with God and with people; he just did not realize it. The dark and scary night described so powerfully in our parasha, is the night on which he feels so burdened with responsibilities, that he is forced to retreat into himself, and to reconnect with his essence.

From this point and until the end of his life, Yaakov will vacillate between his inner world in which he is Israel, and his external one, in which he is Yaakov. The Torah continues calling him by both names, but mostly by Yaakov, because, like us, he lives most of his life in the external world.

Avodah Sh'Balev: Service of the Heart:

For those among us who are open to spiritual exercises, please close your eyes and sit quietly. Take a few gentle breaths. Notice your body – not your mind! Feel your body! The essence we are after is not in your mind, it is stored in the body (just trust me on this one). At first you may feel pain or discomfort here and there, or perhaps you will not notice anything at all (though, of course, there is always sensation if only we are attuned to it). Gradually allow yourself to feel the more delicate, internal sensations, those that are beyond the immediate and noticeable aches and pains. These delicate sensations carry the "whisperings" that we are after. They are there all the time, much like the delicate bluish-purple color at the base of a fire. "Listen" to these sensations. It is within them that you will find a formative message. It is there that the essence stirs. Listen carefully to the voice or the conversation that bubbles up from this place.

If you don't feel anything, don't worry. That essence is there. It is simply covered by layers of achievements, possessions and actualization. Keep listening. Know that we don't have to return to who we were 30, 40, or 50 years ago. Who we were is alive and kicking within us every day, at any age.

This is the blessing that Yaakov asks for and receives from the Creator on that wonderful night. It is the blessing bestowed upon him by that unnamed man/angel, and it is following this experience that Yaakov feels he is able to handle the emotional reunion with Eisav. Even Ya'akov didn't imagine that this exercise will work so well. When Eisav sees Ya'akov, he sees a man who is deeply connected to his essence. You cannot resist a person who is connected this way to his potent inner being. Nothing is standing in their way now - no accumulated layers of life - as the twins run towards each other, hug, kiss, and cry on each other's shoulders.

Essence hugs essence, and between one essence and another peace always reigns. Wars are the result of being overwhelmed, of noise, of the baggage that each side carries and brings to bear upon the other.

Before Ya'akov ever accumulated anything, all he had was his staff. We will learn in next week's parasha that one's staff symbolizes one's core identity. Until next week, may we all flourish and be wealthy, and at the same time, may we never lose touch with the essence that underlies all that wealth and those accomplishments, with the staff that we had before we had it all.

Wishing you a Shabbat of essential peace,

Elisha