



Parashat Vayishlach: The Struggle for Life

Dear Friends,

This week Yaakov becomes Yisrael - **“Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled (שָׁרִיתָ) with beings, Divine and human, and have prevailed.”** (Bereishit 32:29)

What was Yaakov struggling with? What is worth struggling for that commands such a formative moment, in which we - Israel - receive our name for all eternity?

In Parashat Vayishlach Yaakov returns home. But he has changed.

On the western bank of the Jordan his twin brother Eisav awaits him, together with 400 men. The meeting between the brothers is powerful and moving, and it reflects the transformation that Yaakov has undergone.

We can all breathe easier now. Eisav does not kill Yaakov as he once swore he would. Now that Yaakov's tremendous fear has passed, everything will undoubtedly be different, even better, and it is time to live!

But is this indeed so?

Deep within us there is an illusion that if and when X or Y happens, then finally all will be well and we can truly live “happily ever after.”

Deep within us we believe this.

But as we see later in the parasha, problems never go away. In Yaakov's case, they even get worse, and his experiences until this point will seem insignificant compared to what is in store for him.

When did that Hollywood idea of “happily ever after” become our universal expectation? We read about it as early as the prophets, in verses such as: **“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard lie down with the kid; The calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together”** (Isaiah 11:6) and **“they shall beat their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up Sword against nation; They shall never again know war; But every man shall sit Under his grapevine or fig tree With no one to disturb him.”** (Micha 4:3-4)

I was raised with the unwavering belief that a day will come when peace will reign in this region. It was so clear that it's just a matter of time, and the question was only what price we would be willing to pay. If we only do X, and if they only agree to Y, then the vision of the prophets will come true for us all. Sa'adat was the first to confirm this belief, and the rest of the heads of Arab states would surely follow. I remember clearly the day I realized that this may never happen - not in our lifetime and perhaps not in the future either. It was a very cruel and sad awakening.

The illusion of a good end is probably an important component in human evolution, and therefore serves an important survival mechanism: once humans became thinking creatures, the "good end" illusion provided us with a reason to get up in the morning, to make an effort! Yes, life is worth living!

So, if we now realize that life is actually an endless series of challenges and struggles, and the end is known to all, and it is not necessarily good - what is the point? Why bother and for what purpose?

Yaakov's story of exile, return, and ongoing struggles throughout his stormy life contains an answer to this question.

The reason to get up in the morning is not because life is good, or will be at some point. Quite the contrary. ***The reason to get up in the morning is because it is good to live!***

Indeed, sometimes life is good and sometimes it isn't. Sometimes everything just flows and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes dreams come true and sometimes they don't. But unrelated to how good things are, living **can** always be good.

Can? Yes, because it is a decision we make. We can also decide that it is not good to live.

But what does it mean "good to live"? And what is the difference between "good to live" and having a "good life"?

The Torah is very clear on its attitude towards life: life=good=purity=holiness. **"I have set before you life and goodness, death and evil... the blessing and the curse. Now choose life"**(D'varim 30:19). In Vayikra too, there are two key terms that express the choice of life over death and the command to live. The phrases are **tum'a and tahara (impurity and purity)**. The two are opposites. The ultimate tum'a, according to the Torah, is death (a corpse is "tameh"). The ultimate form of tahara is life.

Life and death are the two ends of a spectrum, and we are always somewhere in between. If our body is alive but our soul is exhausted, down, or burnt out, then we are closer to the side of death, even if clinically the body is entirely alive. On the other hand, if the body is shutting down - on a deathbed, for example - but the soul is alive and kicking, then we are very much alive, even if physical death is close.

At times of crisis it is especially difficult to choose life. **It is then a kind of struggle, and I am suggesting that perhaps Yaakov's struggle was of this kind, and it is what gave him the name Israel.**

Indeed, most of his life Yaakov struggled. He chose life even when things were very difficult and the future did not look very bright.

But Yaakov, too, had a deep moment of crisis in which he almost gave up. When his sons showed him Yoseph's blood-stained garment, Yaakov's will to live wavers. Luckily for us, even when we are tired of life, life does not tire of us. It appears that life is much more powerful than our crises. And it's a good thing, because eventually Yaakov reunites with his lost son in Egypt and reconnects to life: **"And they [his sons] told him, "Joseph is still alive; yes, he is ruler over the whole land of Egypt." His heart went numb, for he did not believe them. But when they recounted all that Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to transport him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived."** (Bereishit 45:26-27)

The Torah tells us that the struggle for life is a good struggle, a pure struggle. Love of life, the choice of life, the recognition that it is good to live even when life isn't very good is a cornerstone of the Jewish tradition. Throughout history, it has been hard to be Jewish; sometimes even terrible. But being Jewish is choosing life even when things are difficult. Being Jewish means raising a glass of wine in high up in the air and declaring loudly, "LeChayim!" To Life!

Recognizing that it is good to live is an internal decision. It is one which sometimes involves a struggle with the forces that pull us down, towards despair, towards pessimism, towards pointlessness.

The awareness that it is good to live does not depend on our condition or state of mind. It is possible to foster such an awareness, regardless of how good life is, and unconnected to a promise of a better future. This state of mind is not a concept, it is a **physical sensation!** It may be found, and even awakened and enhanced. Like every sensation, it happens only in the here and now. Sensations don't know the future, they are to be found only in the present, in presence.

So play with the phrase "it is good to live", roll it on your tongue. Suggest it to your body, to your experience. Notice the sensation that arises in your body - your thoughts should be secondary! You may experience resistance - physical, emotional, or cerebral. Recognize it. Appreciate it, for this is THE struggle, after all. Our brains will put up a good fight, but keep looking for this sensation and try to awaken the awareness of "it is good to live" until it is alive and present.

And remember that it is always available, ready to be connected to, in every situation in life. It is good to live even when life is not that good.

"LeChayim!", and Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha