

VAYISHLACH (GENESIS 32:4-36:43)

Name that Angel

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Life would be so much easier if things would go the way we'd like them to. As Rashi quotes the Midrash on next week's Torah portion, "*Jacob wanted to live in peace...*," but G-d just wouldn't let him. Every juncture of his life was filled with frustrating challenges and difficulties from his brother and his uncle and his wives and his daughter and his sons.

The night before confronting his brother Esau for the first time in decades, Jacob was met by Esau's guardian angel. The two fought through the night, neither one able to subdue the other. At dawn, the angel asked to be released so that he could return to Heaven. Jacob insisted that the angel bless him first.

He did, but before doing so, he informed Jacob that his name was to be changed to Yisrael (Israel). When Jacob asked the angel for HIS name, he responded, "*Why do you ask my name?*" (Genesis, 32:3)

What kind of a response is THAT?!

What is in a name? Our Sages tell us that there is great spiritual significance in the name that is given to a person. When G-d created the world, He brought all the animals to Adam, who gave them names, each of which summarized what that animal was all about. He even named himself. He called himself "*Adam*" because he had been fashioned from the Earth ("*Adamah*" in Hebrew), reminding himself that despite his potential for spiritual greatness, there is an "earthy" tendency in man that can bring him down. He also named G-d "*Adon*", which means, "Master."

Back to Jacob and the angel. What does "*Yisrael*" mean? The Commentaries disagree. The angel told him that the name change was because "**SARISA IM ELOKIM** and man and you have succeeded." (Genesis 32:29)

The Targum translates this phrase to mean, "*you have become great (SARISA) before G-d and man and you have succeeded. ('Yisrael' -- He who will be great before G-d.)* Midrash Rabbah explains it to mean, "*you have struggled (SARISA) with angels and man and have succeeded. ('Yisrael'-- He who will struggle with angels.)*"

Does "*Yisrael*" mean one who struggles or does it mean one who becomes great? I think it means both.

We all know people who have gone through difficult times and have overcome adversity and become successful. We are inspired by these "rags-to-riches" stories of hard work and dedication. But these are often situations not just of poverty but also of tragedy. People like cancer survivors and heartbreak survivors who pick up the pieces and keep going. People like the Holocaust survivor who built a new family and a new life. These people are the heroes who give us the motivation to keep going.

With this we can understand the angel's reply to Jacob's inquiry about his name. "*Why do you ask my name?* I'm an angel! I have different assignments at different times. Different assignments mean different names. But I am never a '*Yisrael*.' Angels don't have struggles. We don't have challenges that threaten to overcome us. We don't have within our personalities the temptation to sin. We don't get sick and we have no enemies or financial headaches. We are Heavenly 'robots' who are programmed to do G-d's will and we do it! Therefore, we don't possess *Yisrael*'s human potential to grow to greater heights. In that respect, you, *Yisrael*, are greater than we!"

We should never ask G-d to give us ordeals that test our faith and fortitude. However, when life does get tough, we should try our hardest to use this as an opportunity to grow. We will never understand why G-d does what He does. It is not within the scope of our mortal minds to comprehend the Divine Agenda. But it is the struggle to do so that makes us great.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2000 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.