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Encounters with the Enemy

Thirty-six years after fleeing from the murderous Esau, Jacob returns to the Land of Israel. While travelling, he gets word that Esau is coming to meet him with an army of 400 men. "Jacob became very frightened, and it distressed him" (*Bereishis* 32:8).

Why was Jacob afraid? When he fled from Esau many years ago, God promised him that he would protect him: "Behold, I am with you; I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this soil; for I will not forsake you until I will have done what I have spoken about you" (*ibid* 28:15). Hashem certainly keeps His promises, so what was Jacob worried about?

Jacob was concerned that he no longer merited Hashem's protection. As Rashi says (*ibid* 32:11), "My merits have diminished because of the kindnesses and the truth that You have done to me. Therefore, I fear lest I have become sullied with sin since the time that You promised me, and it will cause me to be delivered into the hand of Esau."

What specific transgressions prompted Jacob's self-doubt?

The Midrash gives us the answer: Jacob said, "All these years Esau dwelt in the Land of Israel. Perhaps you will say that he will attack me on the strength of having dwelled in the Land. Furthermore, all these

years Esau remained and honored his parents. Perhaps he will attack me on the strength of having honored his father and mother." (*Bereishis Rabbah* 76:2)

Jacob was afraid because Esau excelled in two mitzvot that Jacob was weak in, namely, *yishuv Eretz Yisrael*, dwelling in the Land of Israel, and *kibbud av va'eim*, honoring parents. Since Jacob lived outside of Israel for 36 years and was away from his parents during that time, he was deficient in those two mitzvot. He was vulnerable to attack by Esau, because Esau had merits in the areas where he was weak.

That Esau was strong precisely in the areas where Jacob was deficient was no accident. Hashem used Jacob's enemy as a means to get his attention and spur him to do *teshuvah*, repent. If we are not internally motivated to grow spiritually and improve the weak areas of our service of God, then God may deploy our enemy's strength to reveal the exact areas we need to grow in and give us an external push to confront our weaknesses.

As a nation today, we can discover where we are falling short by examining the strengths of the enemies that the Almighty has empowered against us. In contemporary times we have two primary enemies that we need to contend with: Christianity and Islam. Each one embodies a strength that Hashem is using to point out where we need to improve.

Each year, the Christian world spends billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of man hours missionizing Jews and other non-Christians across the globe. They are driven by the understanding that if you know you have the truth, you are morally obligated to expend huge resources and effort to reach out to those who are ignorant and unenlightened. Truth is not only for the individual; the Almighty wants His truth spread to the world.

In a perverse manner, the Muslims exemplify the trait of self-sacrifice. They operate according to the principle that if you know you have the truth, you must be prepared to do everything in your power to bring that truth to the world, even it means making the ultimate sacrifice and giving up your life for your beliefs. There are eternal truths that are worth dying for.

The Almighty is talking to the Jewish People through our two primary enemies. It behooves us to take to

heart each of these lessons – to strengthen our efforts in reaching out to the rest of the Jewish people, and to be willing to sacrifice everything to fulfill God’s will.

Preparing to Meet the Enemy

Jacob implements three different strategies in preparation for his fateful confrontation with Esau.

First, hoping to bribe Esau, he sends messengers with an enormous gift consisting of waves of livestock and servants. "I have acquired oxen and donkeys, flocks, servants, and maidservants and I am sending to tell my lord to find favor in your eyes" (ibid 32:6).¹

Next, Jacob prepares to do battle with Esau in case his gifts do not appease him. "He divided the people with him, and the flocks, cattle, and camels, into two camps. For he said, 'If Esau comes to the one camp and strikes it down, then the remaining camp shall survive'" (ibid 8-9). On the words, "then the remaining camp shall survive," Rashi explains: "against [Esau's] will, for I will wage war with him."

Jacob’s third and final preparation is to pray to Hashem to save him. "Then Jacob said, 'God of my father Avraham and God of my father Yitzchak... Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him...'" (ibid 10-12).

The order of Jacob’s three-pronged defense strategy is obviously not random. Why, then, did he leave prayer for last? We know that the Jew’s primary weapon is prayer: "*Hakol kol Jacob* – the voice is the voice of Jacob" (ibid 27:22). Shouldn’t praying to Hashem to save him be the first and most significant act of preparation?

Gifts and Guns

The Torah is teaching us several important lessons through the steps that Jacob took and their specific order.

Jacob first sends gifts to Esau, because if a confrontation can be avoided through bribery, that is the best possible outcome at the least cost. If some gifts can buy peace and avoid bloodshed, that is certainly the preferred route.

But a gift alone is a very dangerous strategy. A bribe is effective only if the enemy knows that beneath the velvet cover lies an iron fist. Esau needs to know that if appeasement fails, Jacob is fully committed to waging war and doing whatever it takes to protect his family.

Gifts that are not backed up by a clear readiness for confrontation become a statement of capitulation that breeds contempt, not peace. The enemy smells weakness, and his appetite is only whetted.

This is one of the reasons why the Oslo accords were such a dismal failure. Our Arab enemies realized that the nation of Israel was tired of war. The Israeli government was offering concessions without the readiness to go to war, if need be. As a result, land for peace brought only conflict and escalation. The Arab leaders viewed our concessions as capitulation, and as a result they were emboldened to harden their stance and attack Israel.

Prayer: Escape or Responsibility

Jacob’s decision to make prayer his third and final act of preparation teaches us a crucial lesson about the interplay between prayer and taking responsibility.

Prayer is only appropriate once we have undertaken as much responsibility as we possibly can. In the absence of assuming responsibility, we can cloak ourselves in self-righteousness and use prayer as an escape from our obligations. This is antithetical to what Hashem wants from us.

Imagine stumbling across a butterfly as it struggles to break out of its cocoon. You look in wonder at the metamorphosis that is occurring right before your eyes, and out of compassion, you break open the cocoon to help the poor butterfly break free. You think you are doing a kindness for the emerging butterfly, but in fact you are harming it irrevocably. Hashem arranged it that the butterfly needs to exert its muscles by breaking out of its cocoon, because through this effort it gains the strength to flap its wings and fly.

The Almighty wants us to exert our muscles, to put in the necessary effort and learn what it means to be responsible. Turning to prayer as a quick fix that sidesteps responsibility runs counter to Hashem’s overall purpose in this world because it robs us of the opportunity to emulate Him by utilizing our free will.

Prayer reminds us that ultimately, everything comes from the Almighty. But it is not appropriate until we have done our part and demonstrated to Hashem that we are acting responsibly and doing all that is in our power. That is why Jacob prays only after he has completed the other two steps of preparation, and why we need to ensure that we are doing our utmost in being responsible before relying on prayer to save us.

1. See Ramban on Breishis 32:6



An Ancient Lesson with an Enduring Message

In this week's Torah portion we encounter the epic wrestling match between Yaakov and a mysterious man. Commentaries relate various contrasting explanations. They tell us that Yaakov wrestled with a spiritual being that appeared human. However, the text states that Yaakov was physically wrestling with an actual man. Yaakov overcomes his adversary, but not without sustaining a physical injury. This unidentified man beseeches Yaakov to release him, but Yaakov demands a blessing in exchange for doing so. Such an odd request from what appears to be an attacking stranger. The blessing that Yaakov receives will impact him and his descendants for all time. "No longer will your name be called Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have contended with God and man and have prevailed."

Thus, Yaakov's name is changed to Yisrael. The narrative proceeds to state that Yaakov saw God face to face. What does all of this mean? Rich in symbolism, we can better understand these parallel meanings through the structure of *pardes*.

The Hebrew term *pardes*, which literally means "orchard," is an acronym used by our Sages to refer to a system of interpretation in which the Torah can be understood simultaneously on four levels: **p**, literal meaning; **r**, hint—veiled allusions, such as *gematria*, numerology; **d**, homiletical interpretation; and **s**, mystery, or esoteric interpretation. *Pardes* fleshes out textual hints to reveal underlying messages alluded to within the text.

Although the literal reading of the text describes Yaakov's encounter with a human being, there is more to be revealed beneath the surface. Therein lies an interconnecting link that unifies the divergent themes. Each explanation contains facets of an expansive underlying truth. As they coalesce, we

become aware of how unity can be found within what appears to be disunity. It's a matter of perspective, similar to viewing a puzzle. When you focus only on the individual pieces, your perception is fragmented. As you realize that each piece connects to a greater whole, a picture emerges that is greater than the sum of its parts. If even one piece is missing, the puzzle is incomplete. Likewise, the experiences that shape our lives and our Jewish identities interconnect. Taken out of context, like the pieces of a puzzle, the connections may not seem apparent. Yet, by expanding our perspective, we will heighten our vantage point. Oftentimes, it's only in hindsight that we finally realize how so-called positive or negative experiences were related. Both were actually opportunities for personal and spiritual growth.

In the case of Yaakov, we can see the connection between his wrestling with a man who is also a spiritual being. It is written in the Torah that we are created "in the image of God," for human beings possess spiritual attributes. The dichotomy of the physical and the spiritual drives of man is an ongoing source of inner struggle. Being human means being at odds with one's competing higher and lower wills. Try as we may, we don't always succeed in taking the higher road. Likewise, our Sages tell us that Yaakov's wrestling match represented an inner struggle with his own identity. He wrestled with self-doubt and conflicting traits within himself. Was he ready and able to assume his role as the spiritual heir to his father, Yitzchak? We also wrestle with spiritual doubts and conflicts. Do you ever struggle with your Jewish identity? Are you ready and able to assume a role in shaping the Jewish future? If not, could it be due to a lack of accurate information or of a better understanding of what it means to be a Jew? Does your affinity with secular culture and values sometimes conflict with your innate sense of what is right? How do you react when struggling with your own competing wills? How often have you prevailed? Anyone who can relate to these questions can likewise identify with Yaakov's experience. Yaakov's struggle mirrors our own.

Rashi offers another view that illuminates a different facet of this timeless gem. Yaakov wrestled with a spiritual force and angel that represents his brother, Eisav, and thereby foreshadows the future exiles of the Jewish People. Throughout the unfolding of Jewish history, we have been oppressed by the hand of Eisav, which symbolizes the European gentile nations. Eisav's diabolical and destructive role has taken on two approaches. The first has been physical extermination through oppression and war. Even

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more insidious is the second approach: when Eisav appears to reconcile with his brother and reaches out his hand in friendship. This tactic strives to attack and to decimate the Jewish People through assimilation and intermarriage. Both methods have left the Jewish People wounded and limping, much the same way that Yaakov was after encountering his opponent, Eisav's angel.

The text goes on to relate that Yaakov's name is changed to Yisrael. This is the Torah's first reference to the name by which the entire Jewish People is known for all of time. It is interesting to note that Yaakov's grandparents also had their names changed by God. Originally known as Avram, the patriarch's name was changed to Avraham. Sarah's name previously was Sarai. From the moment that God changed their names, they never again were referred to as Avram and Sarai. In contrast, both the names "Yaakov" and "Yisrael" continue to appear throughout scripture and history, implying that Yaakov hadn't fully internalized the inherent qualities of the new name into himself. What was the significance of changing Yaakov's name at this particular time? What did this change imply? As noted earlier, the name "Yisrael" means "one who has contended with God and man and has prevailed." We are taught that a person's name expresses his or her spiritual essence and potential. The name "Yisrael" would come to best express Yaakov's, and every Jew's, ongoing struggle between self and God, symbolizing the perpetual struggle between one's ego and one's spirit. The emerging entity known as "Yisrael" likewise would struggle with its fellow man.

Although we are fortunate to live at a time when it is illegal to openly discriminate against Jews or Jewish practices, diversity and religious freedom have their inherent challenges. Living in friendly coexistence with non-Jewish cultures can threaten Jewish continuity. As we develop close relationships, challenging questions may emerge. Powerful, knowledgeable, honest answers to these questions will become crucial to Jewish survival. How would you respond to these frequently asked, heartfelt questions?

- Why must I marry a Jew?
- What's wrong with falling in love with a non-Jew who shares my interests and values and is a good person?
- Judaism doesn't own the exclusive rights to being a "good person," so why not marry a good

person who I love, who happens not to be Jewish?

All too often, questions such as these are asked to someone who, at best, will provide inadequate answers. These questions represent a search for deeper understanding that both the one questioning and the one answering sadly lack. In essence, they are really asking the fundamental question "Why be Jewish?" Rejecting shallow, irrelevant answers is not an outright rejection of the Torah and of one's Jewish identity. It's a plea for deeper insights and explanations that speak to him or her. For, through his or her eyes, Judaism appears to be lifeless, lacking, and static.

Jewish beliefs are being challenged everywhere—on college campuses, in the media, and elsewhere—by attractively packaged alternatives. Assimilation is camouflaged as an inviting, enticing table set to attract you. Do you sit down, relax, and taste the wine? Everyone seems so friendly and nice, but beware, lest you become intoxicated and soon find yourself unable to resist the allure.

Even the belief in one God—the hallmark of Judaism—is being challenged. What is the authentic Jewish view of God? How does the Jewish view differ from that of our neighbors, and why? The answers to these essential questions inform a Jew's view of himself and of his place in the world. Without them, he is spiritually vulnerable—open to the allure of other beliefs that offer him friendship and a sense of purpose. While it seems that many Jews are submerged within the great American "melting pot," exposure to the light of authentic Torah can be the inspiring catalyst that will ignite the spark of a Jewish spirit.

Contending with God and with man often initiates a personal search. Every great quest starts with a great question. What is God and what is God not? It continues with refining and redefining one's perception. Just as you've outgrown your childhood clothing, so too has your mind expanded its capacity for understanding. With greater maturity it becomes necessary to reexamine beliefs that have not been developed or clarified. What does the contemporary Jew need to know and believe in so as to live and thrive Jewishly? How would your life be enhanced by receiving answers to these questions? The answers are to be found within the Torah's timeless wisdom. To live in our ever-changing world, a Jew must be spiritually inoculated by undiluted Torah truth. This spiritual immunization will help safeguard him or her. It will infuse within him or her a powerful

spiritual antidote—the Torah view to counteract other ideologies to which they will be exposed.

By keeping up with the latest technology, the contemporary Jew recognizes the importance of staying informed. He will read the manual that explains how to operate his latest gadget. Yet how much greater is the need for instruction in operating his most valuable possessions: his life and his soul.

A Jew needs answers to fundamental questions: Why am I here and what is my purpose? How do I achieve it? What makes me different? In the journey of life, “a great quest starts with a great question.” The questions and answers to life’s many challenges are to be found within the Torah and the commentaries of our Sages. Look inside, learn, and integrate its enduring wisdom into your life. Always remember that a great question is more valuable than gold, but a great answer is priceless.

Life’s tests can help us refine our abilities to actualize our inner potential. Adversity can be viewed as the vehicle through which we come to expand ourselves and thereby overcome our self-perceived limitations.

The tough times can ultimately come to reveal our inner greatness. They serve to elevate us beyond what we thought we were capable of being. Conversely, we are equally tested through times of happiness and success. When things are going very well, do we recognize the source of our abundance, or do we arrogantly attribute our good fortunes solely to our own efforts and skill?

Life’s tests are multidimensional. They elevate us and can heighten our vantage point to access the latent inner resources we all possess. Various expressions have been used to describe such experiences, such as “an awakening” or “a defining moment.” The best criteria for evaluating an epiphany, however, are its long-term effects. How much of the initial impact endures? Does it help you develop yourself to become more than you were? Moments of inspiration provide the impetus, but it is the momentum that we maintain that yields positive growth and enduring change. “Seeing God face to face” is a metaphor that illustrates how God’s Presence is revealed throughout life’s details. We need to become mindful of them. God’s involvement in our lives should thereby be clear and obvious to us. Just as we recognize and identify someone by seeing his face, likewise we should recognize and be aware of God’s Presence and involvement within our daily affairs and encounters.

The Jewish struggle includes contending with one’s fellow Jew. Many of us have been wounded by others—in other ways, through hateful, insulting words, or as a result of their improper behavior. Divisiveness corrodes our people. Rather than being unified and strengthened, our lack of cohesiveness weakens the Jewish People from within. By estranging one another, we turn against ourselves. There has never been a greater need for Jewish unity than now. Unity is expressed through love of one’s fellow. It is the barometer of our people’s spiritual health. It may seem nearly impossible to genuinely love every Jew, especially one who is very different from you. Perhaps the place to start is simply by trying to relate to one another. When we despise, or worse yet, not even care about, another Jew, it is we who inflict pain and injury. As Yaakov was wounded by Eisav’s angel, likewise we can wound ourselves through acts of callous indignation.

Regardless of our many differences, the name “Yisrael” expresses our common heritage and identity. Whoever you are, regardless of your religious practice or background, at some point you may find yourself immersed in an existential struggle. Whether or not you choose to acknowledge it, the God of Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivkah, and Yaakov, Rachel, and Leah has made an eternal covenant with the Jewish People. Collectively known as “Yisrael,” their unfolding destiny includes you. What role will you play? Will it be positive or negative? Or will you play your role at all? Yes, we have been given free choice to activate our spiritual potential. Regardless of upbringing or quality of Jewish education, we all have to make the choice as to whether or not to develop ourselves into optimally functioning Jews.

What do I mean by “optimally functioning”? It means a Jew who identifies positively with being Jewish, a Jew who strives to continually grow in understanding and observance of the Torah and mitzvos regardless of his starting point, a Jew who continues to try to strengthen his connection to the Jewish People—beyond his own affiliations and personal preferences. Despite negative past experiences, an optimally functioning Jew will continually strive to develop a deeper relationship with God. Cultivating the attributes of endurance, fortitude, and resilience are tantamount to achieving these goals, for prevailing means overcoming formidable challenges and obstacles. Sometimes it may even require reeducating and redefining ourselves.

We are not meant to all be alike. It is within our diversity that the greatest unity can be achieved. Every Jew possesses the potential to make a unique contribution. The first step is finding and availing oneself of inspiring Torah educators, for they can help you understand the messages that the Torah is conveying to you. Then you can be a positive influence for others as well.

As individuals, we play many roles. Each role expresses a different aspect of who we are. Yet only when viewed in totality can we truly see and perceive ourselves. Our actions put into motion a ripple effect that extends beyond us. The choices that we make can affect generations. We influence and are influenced. Every new generation of Jews is challenged

in ways that previous ones could not have envisioned. The name Yisrael describes a nation that has come to embody disparate beliefs. Yet, no matter what kind of Jew you are, whatever you profess, the name of Yisrael describes your essence—that intangible inner sanctum, where Yaakov’s struggle resounds. It awaits you to activate the spark that will ignite your inner yearning to prevail. This one momentous choice can profoundly change your life and bring about positive—and far reaching—results.

Beneath the surface, within the ever-changing morals and values of the era and place in which you live, runs an undercurrent—an unrelenting current that activates your soul to react in response to the flow of pre-vailing beliefs. You may struggle with yourself—with your thoughts and what others expect you to believe.

You may not yet have experienced your own “moment of truth.” And then it comes—that defining moment in which, as if by surprise, you encounter something or someone with whom you are compelled to wrestle. You might find yourself grappling with a moral dilemma, a test of character, commitment, or identity. The time has arrived. As you engage in what will become a struggle for your very survival, you will also wrestle with yourself.

You will wrestle with your belief in God, or lack thereof, and you will struggle with the doctrines and the philosophies of men. All the while you will question if you have the strength within yourself to actualize your spiritual potential. Just when you suffer what appears to be a crippling blow, you’ll gather all the inner fortitude you’ve got. You will transcend yourself and your limitations to overcome

this attacker. Then you will control him—and yourself.

For what initially appeared to be an “actual man” has revealed to you its mission to spiritually overcome you. But, instead, you’ve prevailed, not allowing him to succeed in infiltrating your sanctified core beliefs. Through this defeat, you have generated your own blessing—a blessing that you have earned by virtue of this very struggle. The angel has tested your brawn and your brain, the very mettle of which you are made. In the struggle you were wounded, yet you have emerged intact, victorious, and strengthened by your newfound resolve. You’ve transformed the struggles and the beliefs of your Jewish forebears into your own, by virtue of your own will. You will have wrestled with God and with man and have prevailed. As you come to grips with what this actually means, it will take time to fully integrate it into your soul. Eventually you will grow into your new name and you will come to feel a stronger connection to other Jews, including those unlike yourself.

Like your forefather Yaakov, you too are an integral link in an eternal chain of spiritual warriors. Their spiritual DNA has been passed on to you. Never alone, you need only activate your inner will and you’ll discover the collective strength of generations. The very birthright that once appeared to you as a mere accident of birth will ultimately come to define you.

This is not a capricious fantasy, but a realistic possibility for any Jew who is striving to become more than he presently is. We all have the potential within us to reach great spiritual heights. Those who have succeeded maintain that it was well worth the struggle.

And now, the final questions: Why are we called “B’nei Yisrael”? Why not the children of Avraham or Yitzchak? Surely Avraham’s and Yitzchak’s influence on the Jewish People are equal to that of Yaakov. The answer is relevant to all. Yaakov struggled with the same everyday challenges that we do. Herein exists the eternal link that we all share. Being a Jew requires taking one’s Jewishness into the daily grind. It asks us to infuse Jewish spirituality into the seemingly mundane activities that we do every day. It inspires us to recognize the opportunity for renewal in each moment. Sometimes we will succeed, and sometimes we won’t. Yet as long as we continue to try, as long as we strive to ignite that spark within and direct its light outward, we are growing. Eventually, we will grow into our collective

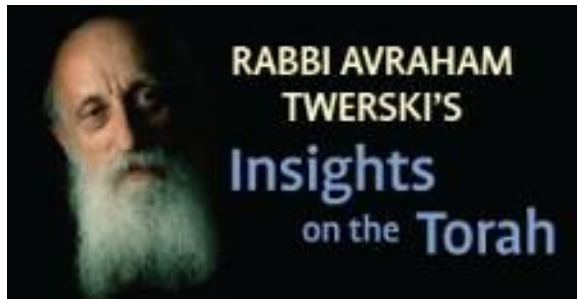
name—the name “Yisrael.” It has become the name and symbol for all Jews—past, present, and future.

Find your unique place within that “work in progress” known as B’nei Yisrael. Recognize your integral role in fortifying the eternal chain. Only you can determine how well you play that role.

The impact of Yaakov’s life-altering encounter continues to reverberate. A profoundly relevant message is being sent to every Jew, every day. But are you able to hear it? How do you access the signal? You need only plug in, recharge, and respond to the Torah’s call. For through actualizing your spiritual potential as a Jew, you will come to experience the ultimate joy—the joy and exhilaration of becoming who you truly are meant to be.

1. The name “Yisrael” means “one who has struggled with God and man and prevailed.” Recall your own personal struggles with others and/or with your inner belief in God.

2. How can you overcome negativity and doubts while going through difficult life experiences? What should you keep in mind?



A Key to Self-Esteem

Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn (32:25)

The Midrash states that the person who attacked Jacob was the guardian angel of Esau. The commentaries add that this angel represents the yetzer hara, the prime spiritual force of evil that wished to vanquish Jacob and his descendants.

The rabbi of Slonim interprets this verse to provide us with an important lesson. He points out that the Hebrew word *vayivoser* – was left – can also mean “to be superfluous,” and the message of the verse is that Jacob felt that he was superfluous when he was alone, isolated and detached from others.

The Psalmist says, “For I have said that the world is built upon *chesed* (loving-kindness).” The Chassidic writings interpret this verse as a reason for Creation. Although we cannot have any concept into the essence of the Divine attributes, we are told that God created the world because “it is in the nature of the good to do good” and without a world, there would be no recipients for God’s goodness.

We are supposed to emulate the Divine attributes, and the foremost obligation of man is to do *chesed*. But *chesed* cannot be done in a vacuum. The phrase, “God said ‘It is not good that man be alone,’ ” (Genesis 2:18) means not only that a person should not be without a spouse, but also that “there can be no goodness when man is alone.” Goodness requires that there be a relationship, a recipient of one’s *chesed*. Inasmuch as the purpose of creation was for man to emulate God in doing *chesed*, failure or the inability to do *chesed* leaves a person unfulfilled.

In my writings on self-esteem (Angels Don’t Leave Footprints) I pointed out that we value things for one of two reasons: (1) they are functional or (2) they are ornamental. If you have a grandfather clock whose mechanism breaks down, you may keep it as a handsome piece of furniture. If your can-opener no longer works, you discard it. Since it has no esthetic component, it has no value if it is not functional.

On what basis can a person have a sense of self-worth? Few people are so handsome as to be ornamental, and even those who are exceptionally handsome lose their beauty as they grow old. Man’s true worth is in his function, and inasmuch as a major function of man is to do *chesed*, the inability or failure to do *chesed* deprives a person of a source of self-esteem.

One of the tactics of the yetzer hara is to crush a person by depriving him of the ability to do *chesed*. The person who is isolated from others and cannot give of himself to others may lose his sense of self-worth. My years of working with people who are addicted to drugs or alcohol has convinced me that one of the factors that lead to addiction is self-centeredness. One recovered alcoholic expressed it this way: “I could look up at people or I could look down my nose at them. They were either far above me or beneath me, but I never felt that I belonged. Alcohol gave me the feeling that I belonged.” This person escaped from the distress of isolation via the anesthetic effects of alcohol.

Feeling that one does not belong causes a person to feel superfluous. The rabbi of Slonim found this

message in the verse which he translated as, “Jacob felt superfluous because he was alone.” The low self-esteem and depression incident to isolation renders a person vulnerable to the attack of the yetzer hara.

Doing *chesed* is not only a great mitzvah, but it also helps a person to have a sense of worthiness and self-esteem.



What is the Purpose of Evil?

After enduring 20 years of manual labor under his swindling father-in-law Lavan, Jacob journeys back to Israel with his growing family and flocks, seeking a brighter future. But as this week’s Torah portion opens, Jacob finds himself on a crash course with Esau, his estranged twin brother who still harbors murderous intentions. On the eve of this dreaded encounter, Jacob ventures alone to retrieve some final possessions. In this moment of vulnerability, Esau’s angel – his guiding spiritual force – strikes.

This was no ordinary celestial being. Our sages reveal that this opponent was none other than the Angel of Death; the Satan; the Evil Inclination. What followed would become perhaps the most consequential wrestling match in history.

Meet the Contenders

We can imagine the cosmic announcement:

"Making his way into the ring... He studied Torah without sleep for 14 years!... He remained truthful while living under the master of deceit... He’s the father of the 12 tribes... The one and only... Jacob!!!" [Crowd erupts] "And, the challenger of all challengers... The force of all death and destruction... Pure evil incarnate... Please allow him to introduce himself (Rolling Stones reference)... the

Yetzerrrrrrr Hara (Evil Inclination)!!!" [Crowd recoils]

Ok, maybe not quite, but all joking aside, the profound implications of this conflict demand our attention. The *Yetzer Hara* – the Evil Inclination – is the force that unleashes all misery, anxiety, and suffering in our world. On an individual level, it is the negative inner voice driving our endless mental chatter, self-doubt, and reckless pursuit of fleeting pleasures. At its most destructive, it fuels both self-hatred and hatred of others, bringing out the very worst in mankind.

The wrestling match between Jacob and the Evil Inclination thus represents humanity’s most fundamental battle: the eternal struggle between our highest aspirations and our darkest impulses.

The Battle and Its Aftermath

As the dawn breaks after the night-long struggle, the angel pleads with Jacob to release him. Jacob stands firm: “I won’t let you go until you bless me.” Acceding, the angel declares: “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with Elohim (God) and with men, and you have prevailed.” The name Israel derives from שרית עם-אלהים (*sarita im Elohim*) – “struggles with God.”²

This extraordinary encounter raises three profound questions:

1. Why does the Evil Inclination refer to itself as *Elohim*? Surely Jacob wrestled with the devil, not the Divine!
2. Why does the Evil Inclination seek release at daybreak?
3. Why does our nation bear a name commemorating the struggle rather than the victory?

To begin solving the mystery, let’s discuss something we can all relate to: ever wonder why nearly all great stories have a villain? On a simple level, the villain infuses the story with drama. But dig deeper, and you’ll discover that the villain serves an even more essential purpose: the villain pushes the hero to achieve his greatest potential. Only when trapped and battered do heroes reach within to unleash their true capabilities, forging the legends we know and love.

Like our heroes, each of us has our own arch-nemesis; a force that constantly works to thwart our highest aspirations. That villain is our Evil Inclination. Why does it exist? Like any villain worth

his salt, its plan is world domination (and if we look around, it's doing a pretty good job). But let's ask the question more precisely: why would God create such a force? Doesn't God want a world filled with goodness and blessing? Why engineer a being responsible for suicide, war, and genocide?

We now know the answer: Just as an author introduces a villain to bring out the best in the hero, God provides us with the ultimate opposition to bring out our greatest potential. Every day, we wake up into a battlefield – a beautiful, holy tug-of-war between our good and evil inclinations. Through this daily combat with our lesser selves, we build ourselves into the heroes of our own life story.

This insight resolves our first question: The Evil Inclination identifies itself as "*Elohim*" because it ultimately serves as God's agent, specifically tasked with catalyzing our growth toward greatness.

The answer to our second question follows naturally: Why must the angel depart at dawn? Rabeinu Bachya, one of Rashi's contemporaries, explains that, upon completing its mission, an angel returns to God to sing praises.³ How did the *Yetzer Hara* fulfill its purpose through wrestling with Jacob? It got beat. That's right - the Zohar tells us that the *Yetzer Hara* fulfills its purpose precisely through defeat.⁴ It presents as our greatest enemy until we actively resist – then it reveals its true nature as a divine messenger, ascending to heaven to celebrate our victory over its challenges⁵.

Finally, why does Israel's name commemorate the struggle rather than the triumph? Because victory over the *Yetzer Hara* is only ever temporary. Each defeat prompts it to return stronger, smarter, more cunning. True victory lies not in final conquest but in commitment to the endless struggle, fighting to improve ourselves day after day. The name Israel reminds us to prepare for a lifetime of confronting our inner adversary, perfecting ourselves and our world through each engagement.⁶

This daily battle can take many forms, as illustrated by a famous story about the Chofetz Chaim, the leader of European Jewry in the pre-war era. One cold winter morning, as he rose early to pray, his *Yetzer Hara* whispered, 'How can you get up so early? You're an old man and it's freezing outside!'

The Chofetz Chaim replied with characteristic wit: 'You're a lot older than me, and you're up already!'

Practical Applications

The battlefield of good and evil exists first and foremost within our minds. We choose which thoughts to embrace and which to reject. What we believe, we strengthen. When we empower negative thoughts, we aid the *Yetzer Hara* in creating a darker reality, ceding ground in life's ultimate wrestling match.

Today's challenge: stand guard over your thoughts. When you catch a negative thought arising, meet it with a smile and declare: "You're here to make me better!" Then consciously choose the positive alternative. Each victory, no matter how small, brings you closer to your highest potential.

Remember: these battles aren't meant to break us – they're designed to build us. The *Yetzer Hara* may appear as our greatest enemy, but in truth, it's an angel created for one purpose: to help us unlock our true greatness.

Wrestle on, fellow Israelites!

1. Rashi on Genesis 28:11 - "AND [HE] LAY DOWN IN THAT PLACE —The word *והוא*, that, has a limitative force: in that place he lay down to sleep, but during the previous fourteen years when he sat under his teachers in the School of Ever he never slept at night for he was incessantly engaged in the study of the Torah."

2. Genesis 32:28

3. Rabeinu Bachya, Bereshit 32:27

4. Zohar: A metaphor for the force of evil: A king wants to test his son so he sends him with money and everything he needs to live on his own. Then, he sends a harlot after him to try to entice him. The harlot tries her best. When the son successfully resists, she celebrates. That's Jacob wrestling with the angel.

5. There's one very important distinction: this *Yetzer Hara* is different than any other villain. The Shaarei Teshuva, one of the greatest Mussar (personal development) training manuals of all time, tells us "The *Yetzer Hara* comes at you like a tidal wave, but shout at it and it disappears into the sand." Similarly, the Chovos HaLevavos, another of the great Mussar manuals explains: "Don't be afraid of the *yetzer hara* – all it does is make falsehood look true. The second you identify it, it's gone." The message is simple: the whole game of the *Yetzer Hara* is to appear big and important – unconquerable. But all we have to do is engage with it – fight back, and he reveals that he was all smoke and mirrors. When we face him and struggle against his attempts to pull us down, he gives us the nod – the blessing – and he's off to sing our praises!

6. The gematria of Jacob (Yaakov) + Satan = Israel

7. *To my star pupil, I am writing this letter to let you know what I think of you. Up here in heaven things are not like they are down on Earth. Over there, people only know what they can see. If they see a person is "successful", they think that he is the greatest guy. When they see somebody struggling, they think he might be one of the weaker elements. Let me tell you something. Hashem gives every person certain abilities that nobody knows about down where you live. Some people are capable of tremendous things, while others were put there for much smaller purposes. Only Hashem in His infinite wisdom is able to give every person exactly what he needs, to reach his potential. I am very misunderstood. Most people hate me, and I don't really blame them. Most people*

think that my job is to make sure that they fail in all aspects of Mitzvos, and that I rejoice every time they sin. This is the furthest thing from the truth. Have you ever watched a boxing coach train his student? It is really a funny sight. The coach will put on gloves, and fight against his student. At first, he won't hit him so hard, or throw his best punches. But, as the student gets better and better, the coach will start to fight him harder and harder. He does this so that the student will improve his skills, and become the best boxer he can be. This is where it gets strange. Every time the coach knocks down the student, the student gets yelled at!! But finally, when the coach throws everything he has at his student, and not only does he withstand the beating, but he knocks the coach down, there is nobody in the world happier than the coach himself! This is exactly how I feel. If you fail right away, and don't even try to fight back, I see that there is not much talent to work with, and so I take it easy on you. But if you get back up swinging, I realize that I may have a real winner here, and so I start to intensify the beating. With every level that you go up, I increase the intensity of the fight. If you finally deal me a blow that knocks me out, I will get up and embrace you and rejoice with your success. Sometimes my job is very disappointing. I see a person with a lot of potential and I start right in on him. He fights back for a while, but when the fight gets too tough, he quits and just remains on whatever level he was on. (And he usually ends up going down!) I feel like yelling at him, "Get up you fool! Do you have any idea how much more you could be accomplishing?!" But I am not allowed to do so. I just leave him alone, and go try to find another promising candidate. If I have chosen you to be the target of my more fierce battles, it was not for no reason! You have tremendous ability! You were born into a very special family, you have Rebbeim who really care about you, and parents who would help you grow in Torah and Mitzvos. You are a very respectful and kind person. Always remember one thing: you have a secret weapon at your disposal. I shouldn't really be telling you – but I will anyway. Hashem himself is watching our "training" sessions very closely. I'm pleased to inform you that He's rooting for you! If things should ever get tough, almost too tough to bear, just call out to Him with a prayer, and He will immediately come to your aid. I wish you the best of luck, and I hope that after 120 years when your time is up in that world of falsehood, you will come up here to the world of truth, where I will be waiting for you with open arms, to congratulate you on your victory, and personally escort you to your place next to the Kisei HaKavod. Sincerely, and with great admiration I remain, Your Yetzer Hara