Jewish Tribune – Vayishlach

**It’s the effort that counts**

Yaakov Ovinu has his name changed in this week’s parsha. As the possuk says:

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאָמֵר עוֹד שִׁמְךָ כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל,  כִּי שָׂרִיתָ עִם אֱלֹקִים וְעִם אֲנָשִׁים, וַתּוּכָל.

And he said, "Your name will no longer be called Yaakov, but Yisroel,

because you battled with [an angel of] G-d and with men, and you have prevailed." (Bereishis 32,29)

As a result, until today, we proudly bear the name Yisroel. The trouble is, we are all familiar with this episode and with this concept and nod knowingly. Imagine a non-Jewish or non-religious colleague approaches you at work and asks you: “Tell me, where does the name Israel come from?”

You quote the above possuk and your colleague mulls it over and then says: “But isn’t the main point of this verse that Jacob fought the angel and was victorious? Why aren’t you all called “Victory”?

Fair point. Isn’t the key word “Vatuchol”?

The answer often quoted is illuminating and is as relevant as it is powerful.

Yes, Yaakov overpowered the angel, but the main thing is the struggle, not the outcome. Yaakov was renamed Yisroel because of the battle, the struggle, and to a large degree, the outcome is almost irrelevant.

At a siyum, we say: “onu ameilim, v’heim ameilim” - we toil and they toil. The Chafetz Chaim would give the moshol of tailor. You want to buy a new suit and choose material, the tailor measures up and tells you to come back in a couple of weeks. You do so and excitedly try on the new suit. To your dismay, it’s a disaster. It doesn’t fit and you can’t even get your arms in to the jacket sleeves let alone do it up!

And to add insult to injury, the tailor charges you for his work. “No way!” you say. “I asked for a suit and this is not fit for purpose.”

“But it took me ages!” cries the tailor.

“I am sorry, but you just wasted your time. I’m not paying.”

L’havdil, when it comes to Torah, we can shvitz over a Tosfos and after an hour or two be none the wiser. We can push ourselves to attend a shiur despite our tiredness and countless other reasons, but every moment of effort is rewarded.

We are called יִשְׂרָאֵל, not וַתּוּכָל, to reflect that the main thing is the struggle

What seasonal metaphor do we use for youth?

In the wider world, spring is often used as a metaphor for youth: “the spring, when proud … April, dressed in all his trim, hath put a spirit of youth in everything.” (Shakespeare)

L’Havdil, in Yiddishkeit, winter is used. As it says in Iyov (29,4): “ "כַּאֲשֶׁר הָיִיתִי בִּימֵי חָרְפִּי- “As I was in my early days.”

Rav Moshe Shapiro explains that winter is the time for planting and hard work. Spring is already a time of reaping and enjoyment. In our hashkofo, youth is a time for work and effort.

Interestingly, Rav Moshe Shapiro notes that we begin the week on a Sunday and rest at the end of the week with Shabbos. The secular world also begins the week on a Sunday and that is a day of rest, right at the beginning. It’s a different focus.

The Netziv observed that when he was a bochur, he learned 18 hours a day and was just called Naftoli, and when he got married and had more responsibility, he was called Reb Naftoli. When he became a maggid shiur and had even less time, he was called HaRav Berlin and when he became Rosh Yeshiva and had even more responsibilities, he was called HaRav HaGaon, Moreinu Rosh HaYeshiva. And when he became more involved in Klal matters and one of the leaders of Klal Yisroel, it became HaRav HaGaon, Moreinu Rosh HaYeshiva, Sar HaTorah Rav Naftoli Tzvi Berlin.

The Netziv would joke that it should have been the opposite and yet the less Torah he learned the more honour he got!! But the truth is, the later achievements were because of his earlier hard work.

The message remains true. The main thing is our efforts, not the result. Yaakov was renamed Yisroel because of the struggle, and not the outcome. The name we all bear should remind us that HKBH wants our effort and the outcomes are up to Him.

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