



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

Parshas Vayisfilach 5771 פרשת וישלח תשע"א

CONTINUING THE STRUGGLE

Ya'akov's encounter with the angel is a momentous event in this week's *parshah* (*Bereishis* 32:25-33). Ya'akov becomes embroiled in a fierce struggle with an angelic being, generally identified as some type of celestial agent of his wicked brother and rival, Esav. And while the precise mechanics of this obviously profound chapter remain somewhat beyond our comprehension, there is still much we can take out of this episode. In a very general manner, it is reflective of the greater struggle with which we must contend on a daily basis.

R' Shimshon Pincus, *zt"l*, explains the matter with a modern-day parable, which drives the message home in a most powerful way:

IN THE ARENA

There was an individual who was basically ignorant of the concept of the sport of boxing. One day, he was invited by a friend to witness just such a spectacle. (The propriety of this activity is not the topic of our current discussion and was employed in the parable for illustrative purposes only.)

The new spectator stared in wonderment as the two opponents faced off against each other. Before long, one of the contenders was quite obviously prevailing. The other maintained a more defensive posture, as he attempted to shield himself – as best he could – from the unrelenting rain of blows. Yet the fight continued, and the following conversation ensued between the viewers:

“What do you think so far?” asked the more knowledgeable viewer.

“I just don't understand this,” his friend answered. “It makes no sense at all.”

“What's seems to be the problem?” the veteran asked.

“It's that fellow,” said the newcomer, as he pointed to the one receiving the blows. “I just don't get it. Why is he allowing himself to take such a beating?”

“What do you want him to do?” asked the first.

To which his perplexed friend responded, “Well, he's just standing there, while someone is attacking him. What's wrong with him? Why doesn't he just simply... run away and go home? He is going to get hurt!”

The obvious ridiculousness of this scenario is that the viewer missed the entire point. The whole purpose of this event, the sum total of all of the training, the reason why everyone is assembled in and around the ring, is for this single aim – to participate in the contest! Leave the fight? The notion is completely preposterous. That's the whole reason why he's there in the first place! He *came* to fight!

In the course of our service of Hashem, we must deal, constantly, with a most wily and persistent foe – the *Yetzer Hara* (Evil Inclination). Often, unfortunately, it is he who prevails, and an earnest Jew – striving for perfection – might be given to waves of discouragement. R' Shimshon explains, though, that the individual should bear in mind the analogy of the match. One must not forget that although there are difficulties, and even losses, the struggle cannot be abandoned. In fact, that itself is his purpose for being on this earth – to be engaged in the fight. He might be taking a beating from his

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משנת היום

the Tosefta agrees with our Mishnah, the *halachah* is presented there with a bit of a “twist.” As recorded in the Tosefta, when teaching the rule, R’ Yochanan ben Zakkai purposely taught the wrong one. He stated that the set of *golden* vestments should be used. His disciples reacted with respect: “Our Master, didn’t you previously instruct us that the *white* vestments should be used (like the Mishnah)?” R’ Yochanan conceded.

The Tosefta proceeds to explain that R’ Yochanan did not really “forget”; rather, the entire incident was a ruse. Not that R’ Yochanan was merely playing games, of course; rather, he took the opportunity to convey a vital lesson to his students concerning the proper approach to Torah study. R’ Yochanan staged this “mistake” in order to encourage them to reapply themselves to their learning. He demonstrated how a failure to do so will result in a transmission of Torah that will be prone to errors.

To underscore this idea, the Tosefta proceeds to quote the teaching of R’ Yehoshua: “One who learns but does not toil is likened to a farmer who plants seeds but does not harvest the resulting crops.” For one to succeed in the endeavor of Torah study, he must be ready to *shvitz* (sweat) for it.

R’ Yeruchem Olshin pointed out a most noteworthy aspect of R’ Yehoshua’s parable to the farmer. And the message that emerges lends great emphasis to our *parshah*’s lesson of life’s continuing “struggle.”

Notice – R’ Yeruchem explains – exactly what is being compared here. To learn Torah properly, one must exert himself and apply effort, just as one who plants must reap the products. In other words, it is the *effort itself* that is the end result.

We might have thought that toil is a necessary precondition to achieving results; but if after investing time and effort, one still does not understand or has not attained clarity or prowess, his attempts were in vain. R’ Yehoshua’s statement clarifies: it’s the toil itself that is the final product. The effort is the goal and the ultimate mark of success.

Yetzer, but that’s no reason to throw in the towel!

WHEN THE MEANS ARE THE ENDS

A similar message emerges from a progression of Tannaitic statements. The idea emerges from a discussion of the laws of *Parah Adumah* (the Red Heifer, used to remove ritual defilement). The Mishnah in Parah (4:1) details which priestly garments were to be worn by the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) administering the appropriate rites. The Mishnah states:

בְּמַחְסַר בְּגָדִים, פְּסוּלָהּ. וּבְכֵלֵי לְבָן הֵיחָה נַעֲשִׂית.

“If the rites (of the *Parah Adumah*) were performed (by the *Kohen Gadol*) without the appropriate vestments, the *Parah* is rendered invalid. And it was with the white garments that the rites would take place.”

Although this was an open-shut matter in our Mishnah, the question of the priestly clothes receives more elaboration in the Tosefta (*Parah* 4:4). While

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