

Parshas Vayishlach – Yitzchok Landau (reprinted)

ט"ז כסלו תשע"ו – 28 November 2015 שבת פ' וישלח

The beginning of this week's Parsha finds Yaakov sending a message of reconciliation to Esav, hoping thereby to douse the flames of hatred he believed Esav still felt towards him. He also prepares for battle by splitting his entourage into two camps and, finally, he offers a prayer to Hashem – "Rescue me please from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav".

The first words of Yaakov's message to Esav were "im Lavan garti" – I have sojourned with Lavan (and have lingered until now). There is a famous Rashi on the word "garti" in which he quotes two apparently contradictory midrashic interpretations as to Yaakov's meaning. The first midrash uses the word to convey impermanence. In other words, despite his father Yitzchak's blessing, Yaakov remained a "ger" – a wanderer and a stranger who had been unable to put down any roots. In this respect, Yaakov's message was one of unassuming meekness.

The second midrash meanwhile makes an anagram of the word "garti" and changes it to "taryag" (Hebrew letters obviously!) as if to warn Esav that, despite his living in a spiritual wilderness whilst with Lavan, he nonetheless kept the taryag (613) mitzvos and was therefore a force to be reckoned with. In this respect, Yaakov's message would appear to be one of triumph and confidence.

Commenting on these seemingly diametrically opposed midrashim, the Nesivos Shalom, the previous Slonimer Rebbe, suggests that Yaakov's message to Esav actually contained both of the explanations brought down by Rashi and that, in the final analysis, there is in fact no contradiction.

The struggle between Yaakov and Esav is often seen as representative of our battle with the yetzer harah. Yaakov, through his apparently contradictory messages to Esav, his subsequent splitting of his entourage and also the language of his tefillah to Hashem, was in fact showing us how the yetzer harah actually adopts a two pronged method of attack in attempting to persuade a person to sin. Importantly however, Yaakov also shows us how to thwart the yetzer harah's designs.

The yetzer harah's first method of attack is via "conventional" means i.e. urging a person to commit all manner of wrongdoing. This form of attack is representative of "Esav" – pure, unadulterated evil. However, it also has a straightforward if not always easy to implement method of defence. This is described in the words of Dovid Hamelech in Tehillim Chapter 34 – "turn back from evil and do good"; in other words, we can help ourselves to turn away from wrongdoing by standing up to the yetzer harah and immersing ourselves in Torah, Mitzvos and other good deeds, thereby weakening his hold on us.

To offset this however, the yetzer harah adopts a second, very different strategy, approaching us not as "Esav" – the pure evil described above, but as our "brother". He offers no resistance to our performance of Torah and Mitzvos, preferring instead to try to lessen the effect of our divine service by lacing it with pride and ulterior motives and thereby nullifying their powers of protection. The antidote to this method of attack is to remain humble and self effacing at all times as it says in Pirkei Avos Chapter 3, Mishnah 1 – ". . .

. Consider three things and you will not come into the grip of sin: know where you came from, where you are going and before Whom you will give justification and testimony. Where you came from – from a putrid drop; where you are going – to a place of dust, worms and maggots; and before Whom you will give justification and reckoning – before Hashem . . ."

The two camps which Yaakov set up as a strategy against attack by Esav, thus represent the two approaches we must take to protect ourselves against the yetzer harah. Firstly, to work on our humility in order to better resist the yetzer harah's attempts to contaminate our mitzvos with pride and ulterior motives. Secondly, to stand up to the yetzer harah directly and battle his seductive appeals to our baser instincts, through learning Torah and performing mitzvos.

The battle against the yetzer harah is not an easy one and certainly requires divine assistance. This too can be learned from the response of Yaakov Avinu who, despite having the necessary tools to battle Esav / the yetzer harah, nonetheless davened to Hashem – "rescue me from the hand of my brother" i.e. the yetzer harah in his alternative guise – "from the hand of Esav" i.e. the yetzer harah's all out conventional method of attack.

Finally, returning to our original question of the seemingly contradictory midrashim brought down by Rashi in explanation of the word "garti", we can now understand what the Nesivos Shalom means when he suggests that Yaakov's message to Esav actually contained both meanings. Firstly, Yaakov demonstrates that, whilst living with Lavan he did so simply and discreetly, as a temporary lodger would and he did not become haughty and self-important. This humility made room for him to then "boast" that he had nonetheless stood up for what he believed in and kept all the mitzvos and that, as a result, he was a force to be reckoned with.

Whilst these two qualities, self effacing humility on the one hand and unyielding strength on the other, would appear to be incompatible with one another, when it comes to spiritual matters, they in fact serve as different but equally important means to the same end, an end which unites rather than separates them. The contradiction is thus its own resolution.

With this in mind, we can also suggest that Yaakov's two camps represent not two different groups of Jews but, rather, each individual's requirement to divide his internal forces between these seemingly opposing strategies which, as we have seen, in striving for spiritual improvement are not in fact contradictory at all.