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ON THE WINGS OF EAGLES*

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In parasha (weekly Torah reading) Vayishlach we encounter a familiar scene. After 20 years of residing with his uncle Lavan, Yaakov is coming home. And his brother Eisav is coming out to greet him . . . with an army!

Yaakov manages to get his family and all their stuff over to the other side of the stream Jabok. And then he comes back for one last look around. If you've recently moved, you know this feeling: Did we get everything? Did we forget anything? Our rabbis tell us that the righteous see something holy in even the smallest thing that they have acquired honestly, which they may neither squander nor allow to be wasted.

And then Yaakov is left alone. And he begins to think. He thinks about how little help he can count on against the force of 400 men that Eisav is bringing against him. Oy! The very thought of it causes him to cry out in anguish to God. You know, an "emergency bailout communication to heaven." We've all made them.

But God's answer comes back to Yaakov—and to us—in a very strange form, in the form of a wrestling match. Our verse tells us, someone ". . . wrestled with him until the break of dawn." (Genesis 32:25)

But who is this someone? Eisav? An angel? God?

It's helpful to remember that the word *malach*, often translated as "angel," really means messenger.

But if our mystery visitor really is a messenger, then what's the message?

We have our clue in the Hebrew for the English words "and he wrestled"—*vayeiaveik* (ויאבק).

Avak is dust. It's the kind of dust that floats upwards at the slightest cause. You know, the kind of dust you see in the theatre in front of the projector. So the Hebrew *vayeiaveik* means that the wrestlers try to bring each other to a state of dust, that is, to make the other lose his footing. And our sages say, the dust that floats up from these "two wrestlers" is a dust that rises to the very Throne of God. For this fight is a prototype of the fight that lasts through all of world history.

But why hold a wrestling match in the dark?

Again, our verse says that someone ". . . wrestled with him until the break of day"—*hashachar* (השחר) in Hebrew. The root of *hashachar* is ש-ח-ר. And it means to seek. It's the time in the morning when we still have to seek for things. It's the time when we stub our toe because we're feeling around in the dark for the light switch. But what it means here, our rabbis tell us, is that as long as the minds of humankind are confused, as long as we're still stumbling around in the moral darkness and don't recognize things clearly for what they really are, it will be one long night on earth. And as long as that night lasts, Yaakov and his opponent will do battle. And the opponent, they say, is the spirit of Eisav. It isn't Yaakov who is the aggressor. Yaakov only fights in self-defense.

So what does this spirit of Eisav want with this fight?

What Eisav and his descendants—who ultimately become Rome—really want, is to take the ground out from under Yaakov's feet, to give him no standing at all; that is, to have *no claim to exist at all* on earth. That, as we know from world history, he will not succeed in doing—but not for lack

* Based on the commentary of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888).

of trying. And when he sees that he will not succeed in throwing Yaakov down, Eisav grips Yaakov on his hip-joint, and as Yaakov resists him, the muscle is torn from its ligaments, so that it can no longer control the leg, and that Yaakov is left limping.

But the spirit of Eisav can only fight as long as it is night. As soon as the day begins to dawn, the winner begins to lose. And the spirit of Eisav says to Yaakov: “Let me go, for the sun is coming up.” But Yaakov says to him: “Throughout the whole long night, you have continuously attacked me. Now that daylight has come, you give up the fight, but I will not do so until you have acknowledged me—by blessing me.”

Now, why would you ask for a blessing from the person who is least likely to give it to you?

You would if the point of the whole thing is to get the Eisavs of this world to recognize that those who behave like Yaakov deserve a blessing, and that in blessing such a person, the nations are only blessing themselves.

But while Yaakov wanted a blessing, all Eisav wanted was to win the wrestling match. And that is the relative position of Yaakov and Eisav for all time. In politics and religion, the Eisavs of this world get their noses out of joint with anyone or anything that doesn't acknowledge them. Yaakov, on the other hand, concedes to all pure human beings the right to be left untouched. Moreover, he declares all pure human beings to have the highest meaning and destiny if they accept the basic principles for human life that he brings to them.

At this point, the messenger says to Yaakov: What is your name? Of course, he replies: Yaakov. And the messenger tells him: Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, meaning the one who comes at the heels of another. From now on, your name will be understood as Yisrael. From the root יִשְׂרָאֵל, this word literally means: God is the all-conquering one. In the womb you may have held on to the heel of your brother, but now you have become—with God—superior to an angel. And he did bless him.

Our sages note that, 20 years previously, when Yaakov was leaving the land, the sun had set for him at the border. The whole time he had been away with Lavan had been a period of dark conditions for him, and now at his return the sun rose

again for him. He was not beaten, not broken, but limping.

And because of this limping, the children of Israel are not to eat the sinew that is on the joint of the thigh, *gid hanasheh* (גִּיד הַנֶּשֶׁה). But if the memory of this event is to be commemorated for all time, it surely does *not* mean that we should remember that as a result of a wrestling match, our ancestor limped. What it does mean is that the spirit of Eisav will not be able to conquer us. He will not be able to throw us down during the long fight against him, during the long ages of darkness on earth. But he, or they, will be able to hamstring us, to prevent us from standing firmly on both feet. And that is how we go through history.

And this lack of stability is ultimately a necessary factor to open Eisav's eyes. If Yaakov had stood, like Eisav, at the head of his 400 warriors, the fact that we cannot be conquered would never show the Finger of God in history. And in not eating this tendon, we will be reminded not to feel less protected, less certain of enduring through the ages, because we do not go through this world like Eisav, armed with the sword, except, of course, in our own defense.

We have a modern version of this story. Our rebbe, who now is retired, once served a synagogue located in a residential neighborhood. The owner of the house directly across the street from the synagogue put up a huge swastika on his garage door. As it happened, the man would spend time in his garage every day, with the door up. One day our rebbe decided to go over and talk with the man as he worked in his workshop. Perhaps he stood in the driveway. Knowing our rebbe, he might even have stood out on the sidewalk. But he made it his business to talk with the man day after day, until finally, somehow, he convinced the man that our existence was not only not a threat, but also—we're imagining—a blessing. The man took the swastika down.

Strength for Yaakov-Israel, for us, lies in factors that cannot be weakened by Eisav. If we do fall it is not because we are not equal to Eisav in material power. And if we stand, it is not because of our strong material power—but because God bears us aloft on the wings of eagles. And that is the word that was sent to Yaakov, which is to find its home in our hearts.

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