

Yaakov is left alone the night before meeting Esav. His family already crossed the Yabbouk River (in modern day Transjordan).

וַיִּוְתַר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלֹת הַשָּׁחַר:

“And Yaakov was left alone by himself, and a man wrestled / kicked up dust with him, until the break of dawn.” (Genesis 32:25).

This verse has many implications. Immediately, we see a contradiction in that *he was left alone by himself* and *a man wrestled with him*. He cannot wrestle with a man if he was alone. If the verse meant that he was alone and was vulnerable and then was attacked the verse should have said *he remained behind* or *he was left behind and a man came*. The verse seems to suggest, specifically, with the double expression of “vayeevoser” (left alone or remained) and “levado” (by himself) that indeed he was by himself alone. How, then, can a man wrestle with him?

The passuk also uses the term wrestle or kick up dust. The root of the word “avak” means dust or semblance. It also refers to a struggle. The picture is a down in the earth, feet planted, difficult struggle. Why was Yaakov alone to make himself vulnerable to such a danger? His family already crossed, why did he not cross with them?

The Gemara Chullin 90a says *Even though the prohibition of eating sacrificial animals precedes the prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve, the prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve comes and takes effect upon the offspring of consecrated animals, because the prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve adds an extra stringency in that it applies also to descendants of Noach. The prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve was in effect from the time Yaakov wrestled with the “man” (see Genesis 32:25–33), before the Torah was given. At that time, Yaakov and his sons had the status of descendants of Noach, i.e., gentiles. Therefore, the prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve is broader than the prohibition of eating meat of sacrificial animals, which took effect only when the Torah was given.*

This struggle that Yaakov had ultimately led to a new tradition, of not eating the sciatic nerve. This was not a simple struggle then as it has far reaching repercussions.

The Gemara Chullin 90a continues when it returns to the verse of Yaakov wrestling with the man. *The verse states: “And Yaakov was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of dawn.” (Genesis 32:25). Rabbi Elazar says: The reason Yaakov remained alone was that he remained to collect some small pitchers that had been left behind. From here it is derived that the possessions of the righteous are dearer to them than their bodies. And why do they care so much about their possessions? It is because they do not stretch out their hands to partake of stolen property. The verse states: “And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of dawn.” Rabbi Yitzchak says: From here it is derived that a Torah scholar should not go out of his house alone at night, as Yaakov went out alone at night and was injured.*

Rabbi Elazar’s explanation needs more study at first because Yaakov did not endanger himself by staying on the other side of the Yabbouk River. There was no one there that could harm him. He was coming right across. When taken with Rabbi Yitzchak it is more understandable. A righteous person is susceptible to harm by spiritual entities that can hurt him, too. Even though Yaakov was alone—no person around—this man was not a simple flesh and blood. It was a spiritual entity that can do Yaakov harm. Taken simply, Yaakov relied on his physical senses, sight and sound, to see that he was alone and safe. However, there are elements that mean to do harm to the holy and righteous and put stumbling blocks in their paths. The Gemara is concerned for the safety of those who go out at night.

We note that Bartanura on the Torah and Daas Zekeinim explain the Gemara’s source that Yaakov remained for small pitchers. *The word ‘alone’ can be read ‘l’kado’ in lieu of ‘l’vado.’ For the pitchers.*

Rabbeinu Bechaya says that it was small pitchers. He wanted to save them so that the little children would have what to drink on the journey. Yaakov was concerned with everyone’s needs and he thought of the little details of the needs those under his protection.

Menachem (ben Seruk) explains the term ‘wrestle’ (as quoted by Rashi) “*a man covered himself with dust*”, taking the verb as connected in sense with  $\text{קִדָּח}$  “dust”. *It would mean that they were raising the dust with their feet through their movements.*

Ibin Ezra also learns that it was a struggle and dust kicked up between the two.

Rashi, however, learns that it means “*he fastened himself on*”, and that it is an Aramaic word, as (Sanhedrin 63b) “*after they have joined ( $\text{הִקְדָּח}$ ) it*”, and (Menachot 42a) “*and he twined (the “Fringes”) with loops*”. *It denotes “intertwining”, for such is the manner of two people who*

*make strong efforts to throw each other — one clasps the other and twines himself round him with his arms.*

Ibin Ezra also talks about the breaking of the dawn. *“Until the breaking of dawn” means until the darkness of the night went away. “Alos” mean go up, i.e., to depart, and shacher (dawn) to mean darkness, for this is what the root of shachar means “darkness.” Others say that shachar (dawn) refers to the image of light that appears in the clouds before sunrise. According to this interpretation shachar means dawn and alot the rising. Alos ha-shachar thus means the breaking of dawn. Shacher (light) in wherein there is no light (shacher).* Thus, he is saying that the struggle took place until darkness gives way to light.

Ramban says that *in line with the plain meaning of the passuk, the verse, “And he took them” and made them pass the brook, (ibid Genesis 32: 24) means that he made them, his family, pass together with him, and he made pass that which was his i.e., his camp and his belongings — by commanding others to do it. He returned to his camp after ferrying his family across, and he commanded that all others pass over the brook before him, and so he remained behind them.*

According to this explanation, Yaakov made himself to cross the river last. Thus, after his camp passed he was left by himself. It was to be only momentarily.

Sforno says, *Yaakov was the last one to leave from the camp as he was busy directing all his family and servants and chattels to cross the fording so that nothing would be left behind.*

Ramban then says that *“Wrestled with him.” In the language of the Sages, avikah is often used to convey the sense of chavikah (loop), as in: “There are avkso (loops) in the punishing scourge;” (Makkoth 23a). “A couch is called dargesh when it is set up and taken apart by means of loops, through which the cords are fastened.” (Nedarim 56b). Similarly the word avukah (a torch) is so called in the language of the Sages because it is made up of small pieces of wood which are tied and bound together. This is because the letter ches is difficult to pronounce in their language and so they used the easier aleph. And it is possible that the word vayei’aveik is actually vayeichaveik, as vayechabkeihu (and he embraced him), (Genesis 33:4) for perhaps it is the way of the Hebrew language to interchange the aleph and ches. In Bereshith Rabbah 77:3 the Chachamim said: “Who became filled with dust? The man that was with him.” This agrees with the words of Menachem ben Saruk, who said that vayei’aveik means “he covered himself with dust” and this is the correct interpretation. Ramban gives many other examples of ches and aleph being interchanged in Gemara and Tanakh, see there.*

Radak says they wrestled so intensely that a cloud of dust enveloped them.

Who was Yaakov struggling with? Who was this man? It cannot be a simple vagabond because that would not make the struggle important. The Midrash explains that *the “man” in our verse was Esav’s guardian angel.* (Genesis Rabbah 77:3).

This comports to a later verse that states that Yaakov saw that Esav’s countenance and said, “You have a godly face.” (Genesis 33:10).

Sforno summates the importance of this struggle between Yaakov and the man. *This was the work of an angel at the instigation of the Lord (that is why he is called מלאך). The description is parallel to Kings II 13:17 It is immaterial whether the instrument of the salvation is a merely symbolic one such as the arrows described in the Book of Kings which Elisha instructed King Yoash to shoot in the direction of the far away Kingdom of Aram. Salvation occurs at the end of a period of ups and downs, and though Yaakov/Israel suffered many reverses in his struggle with Esav, (in the historical global struggle between the two philosophies) in the end Yaakov triumphs. The blessing given by the angel here to Yaakov at the end of the struggle, at daybreak, symbolizes the synopsis of Jewish history.*

The angel is referred to ‘man’ like ‘men’ (Genesis 18:2) who appeared to Avraham and were really angels (as they gave blessings through HaShem and were able to overturn Sodom).

Chizkuni also learns that it was an angel who came to stop Yaakov from overpowering Esav. The angel soon learned that the struggle would not be one that would resolve that day.

Radak says, *the same type of מלאך as in Joshua 5:13, i.e. an angel. This was the angel Gavriel, described as מלאך par excellence in Daniel 9:21.<sup>1</sup> The reason why these angels are called מלאך is because they appear to the people with whom they converse in human guise. The types of angels who speak with man are referred to as מלאך, as they appear either in a vision or while the person to whom they appear is fully awake. The Lord had sent this angel to Yaakov to strengthen his courage, not to fear Esav. If Yaakov could prevail over an angel, surely he had no reason to be afraid of an encounter with someone like Esav! The fact that the struggle lasted until daybreak was an allusion to Yaakov that after a period of night, i.e. problems, adversity, there would come a period of light, peace and prosperity coupled with security.*

<sup>11</sup> Author’s note: Angels do not have names in Tanakh until the late prophets. Until that time they are ‘messengers’ or ‘man.’ They are given names in the late prophets like Daniel. This can be because the Babylonians named their angels so the Israelite exiles in Babylon started to call the angels by their specific names. It can also be that in earlier scripture the exact angel was unimportant to the story as the main lesson is HaShem was running the world. Later, when talking about celestial beings, it is important to differentiate between the different angels.

Rabbeinu Bechaya also explains how “man” can be referring to an angel. *It is well known that had it not been for the original sin in Gan Eden there would not be a noticeable difference between man and angel. On the contrary, man would outrank the angel in every respect. We base this on Sanhedrin 93 “the righteous are greater than the angels.” Accordingly, the “angel” came to try and find a sin Yaakov was guilty of in order to use the sin as a weapon to overpower him. However, he did not succeed. The only “sin” he could find was that Yaakov had married two sisters during their lifetime, something which had not yet been forbidden. The Torah alludes to this when writing: “he inflicted an injury on Yaakov’s hip joint.” This was a euphemism for his sexual organs and the seat of sexual desire. The “punishment,” such as it was, was administered near that organ so that Yaakov limped for a while.*

This last explanation needs further study as the part of an animal that we learn is now forbidden is not that organ but a nerve on the leg. It does not follow logically that the sciatic nerve will be forbidden to be eaten simply because it is a euphemism for a certain organ. To me, it is more akin to “place your hand under my thigh” to swear. (Genesis 24:2; 47:29). The angel here was trying to attack the Blessings, the promise made to Yaakov. By injuring his thigh he was trying to ‘dislodge’ the promise, break it. It was a physical act manifested by a spiritual being for a spiritual purpose.

Rashbam gives context to the timing of this struggle with the man/angel. *After Yaakov had transferred all his belongings to the other side of the river he remained alone. This was so that the only one still to be brought across was he himself. The reason that he wanted to cross only after everyone else had already crossed was that he intended to flee in a different direction so as to avoid a face to face encounter with Esav. “ויאבק” means an angel engaged him in a physical fight, his purpose being to prevent Yaakov from fleeing. Only in this way could the Lord’s promise to Yaakov that Esau would not harm him be fulfilled.*

We can take the Rashbam to mean that Yaakov was afraid. If so, what happened to the man of perfect faith, the ish tam? It can also mean that it was a strategy. He wanted to lure Esav away from his family, to avoid a face to face encounter of Esav and his family. I would suggest that the journey route Yaakov was taking is important for this explanation. Instead of coming down south from Padam Aram, and traveling through the breadth of the land of Canaan, Yaakov came down on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Yabbouk is a river to the east of the Jordan, perpendicular to the city of Shechem. Mount Seir, the dwelling place of Esav, is due south of the

Jordan. Esav hears about Yaakov returning and can come up through Canaan or through Transjordan. Yaakov crossed his family over the Yabbouk and they can then follow that river west to the Jordan and into Canaan. Esav would pursue Yaakov on the eastern side of the Jordan, thereby keeping his family safe.

To resolve our verse, we ask how come no one came to Yaakov's aid. Yaakov struggled in a cloud of dust with an angel (who looked like a man) for a long time. We do not know when exactly the tussle commenced but 'until the break of dawn' indicates it was a while. No one in Yaakov's camp—not his wives, teenage children, slaves, servants, or messengers came to Yaakov's rescue.

We also recognize that dust is something physical from the earth. That Yaakov and an angel would wrestle and that the physical world will be affected is this passuk's point. Yaakov crossed his family over the Yaabouk. He was now close to entering the Land again. *He was left alone*: Yaakov is the last remnant of the house of Avraham. The duality and splits were over. Yitzchok departed from Yishmael. The remaining children of Keturah had their own separate inheritance and heritage. Yaakov departed from Esav. Now, Yaakov's children would all be united to create the tribes of the People that HaShem promised Avraham so long ago. (Genesis 17:21). Thus, the thread of the rope from Avraham was unraveled and now the branch left of this family tree is Yaakov and his children.

*By himself*: He was now the sole heir of Avraham's heritage. *And a man wrestled and kicked up dust with him*. Esav, or Satan, or any other detracting power that was there to test Yaakov's worthiness, came to either entangle itself onto Yaakov or to break the promise of HaShem to Yaakov that was promised through Yitzchok and to Avraham. This, however, was not a mere spiritual war. This had great manifestations on the physical well-being of Yaakov's descendants. Dust kicked up during the struggle. The very earth—the polar opposite of angelic and spiritual matter—was kicked up and affected. The Promise was that Yaakov's children would be like the sand/earth (Genesis 22:17; 32:13). This wrestling determined their very survival.

*Until the break of dawn*: we do not know how long the struggle was, as Yaakov remained by himself at nighttime. The break of dawn symbolizes redemption. Through the night of exile Yaakov's descendants will struggle with those who seek to destroy them. They will continue that struggle but they will survive and exist through the exile. They will then come to the break of

dawn when the struggle will end. The *shachar* 'darkness' will be *shachar* 'light,' dawn. Dark will turn to light. The exile will turn into redemption.

Yaakov sought to protect his family, leave them and lure danger away from them. HaShem's lesson here is that he cannot hide from his destiny. Destiny will find him. The struggle was his alone. His children will eventually struggle similarly through generations but his was his to set right. It will be a spiritual and physical struggle. Yet, he can and will prevail. Thus, he was now ready to create the People, the Nation. "Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have striven with divine and human beings and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:29). Your name shall no longer be "clinger to Esav." You shall be Yisrael, for you can prevail physically (Lavan) and spiritually (the angel). Yaakov now has the tools and the recipe for his children. The Blessings can be fulfilled and they can face the future. His children now can become the Israelites.