

On the way back home, Yaakov prevails against an attacker on the road.

וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם פְּנִיֵאל כִּי־רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים וַהֲנַצֵּל נַפְשִׁי:

“And Yaakov called the place Peniel [face of the Lord] ‘Because I saw the Lord / judgment face to face and my soul was saved.’” (Bereishis 32:31).

This episode was so important that Yaakov and his descendants took on the prohibition to not eat the *gid hanashe*. This is a prohibition outside of the Torah’s mitzvos. Why was this episode so important and why is refraining from eating a part of an animal the vital way to remember it?

To understand the pasuk the rest of the episode must be taken in context. Yaakov took his family across the Yabbok ford. (Bereishis 32:23). He then sent across his possessions. (Ibid 32:24). After having been left alone, without family, servants, or possessions, he was attacked by a man – an assassin or bandit. (Ibid 32:25). He fought with this man until daybreak. (Ibid). At this point, the man wanted to leave, and when he saw he could not overcome Yaakov, he injured Yaakov’s hip. (Ibid 32:26). Despite this, Yaakov still restrained the man. (Ibid 32:27). The assassin or bandit asked to be released, but Yaakov – having no need to kill a man or jail him – asked to be blessed by this ruffian. (Ibid). The man asked for Yaakov’s name. (Ibid 32:28). He then blesses him by changing his name to Yisroel. (Ibid 32:29). When Yaakov asked for the attacker’s name, the reply was: “Why do you ask for my name?” and he departed. (Ibid 32:30). Then we come to our pasuk: And Yaakov named the place Peniel.

The Torah uses the double expression that Yaakov was left alone *and* by himself. (Ibid 32:25). This connotes that he had to face a trial and an episode by himself. He would have no help from his family or servants. If the attacker needed Yaakov alone, then saying ‘alone’ would suffice. Alone *and* by himself is a double expression that says more about Yaakov’s state than the attacker’s. The attacker did not know Yaakov’s name. (Ibid 32:28). If this was an angel it would know Yaakov’s name. Angels have specific tasks. It could not attack a random person. It would have to attack a specific person, and thus, would know that person’s name. If Eisav sent the assassin, the assassin may not know Yaakov’s name, just that he was to look for a Semitic man, matching a certain description, who was coming down from the northeast. If this was a bandit, then surely, he would not know Yaakov’s name.

Why did the angel have to leave at dawn? Avraham saw three men during the “heat of the day.” (Ibid 18:2). The same line of commentary that this was an angel is that those were angels, too. A bandit would need to leave at dawn to avoid detection. Similarly, if an angel attacked Yaakov, it does not follow logically that an angel would come down to earth, assume a human form, wrestle physically, and then be concerned about Yaakov knowing its name. A desperado would be concerned. Finally, the attacker

kicked up dust while wrestling with Yaakov. (Ibid 32:25). It is one thing to assume a physical form with the target person, but then it does not seem very angellike to also be so physical as to kick up dust of the *earth*.

Still, our pasuk says “Peniel” and “I saw the Lord face to face.” That seems to mean it was a heavenly being. Yet, if it does mean the Lord or even an ethereal being, then this leads to a problem. “And there was no other prophet who arose in Yisroel like Moshe, that he knew Hashem *face to face*.” (Devarim 34:10). The Torah tells us that no one saw Hashem or witnessed Hashem with such clarity as a *face to face* other than Moshe. Even Avraham did not. When he was tested it was “An angel of Hashem” that spoke to him. (Bereishis 22:11). Yaakov, then, did not see Hashem face to face.

There is another pasuk and use of the word “*elokim*” that provides the final context. When Yaakov meets Eisav they embrace and make peace. He insists that Eisav accept all the gifts that he sent ahead to his brother. (Ibid 33:11). **כִּי עַל-פְּנֵי רֵאִיתִי פְּנֵיךָ כְּרֵאֶת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים וַתְּרַצְנִי** “Because on occasion that I have seen your face which akin to seeing the face of judgment, and you have accepted me.” (Ibid). Yaakov is not saying that Eisav’s face is like the face of the Lord. Yaakov is using the term that is synonymous with judgment and judges. (See Shmos 21:6, 22:8, Shmuel I 2:25). Even if those places refer to the “judge” as a surrogate on earth for Hashem – following His Laws – it is similarly used here. Yaakov was talking in terms of Divine judgment. Facing the attacker and Eisav proved to Yaakov that Hashem was with him all the time. Yaakov left with a shaky faith. “If the Lord (Elokim) is with me...then Hashem will be my Lord.” (Ibid 28:20-21). He then returned having seen how Hashem provided for him, knowing that his faith was lacking all this time. “I am small! From all of the *kindness* and *truth* that You did for Your servant.” (Ibid 32:11). Yaakov admits he is the younger brother (I am small). Yet, he became rich like his father’s bracha promised. Yaakov realizes then that Hashem has bestowed on him great kindness – his riches and family – and he has to reckon with the truth – how he absconded with his brother’s bracha. Yaakov fears all this is coming to an end. His lack of faith and his questing of Hashem’s promise – saying *if the Lord is with me* – is now leading him to lose it all. However, when he was left to just his own devices, without help from anyone else, he prevailed over his adversary. Then he realized *I was never alone to begin with. I was not left alone by myself. I had Hashem with me all the time.*

“And he called the place Peniel.” Yaakov struggled with a simple vagabond, so he did not have to memorialize the event by naming the place. He named it because it was named after more than the struggle. It was named after his new found faith.

“Because I saw the Lord / judgment face to face.” He saw judgment from Hashem face to face, as clear as recognizing a friend even in the dark – or the limited visibility of the dawn. Yaakov commenced with saying *If Elokim is with me* and concluded the journey with “I see Elokim” in every day events, in all of life’s challenges and successes. This also answers a final puzzle piece on the episode. How is changing Yaakov’s name to Yisroel a response to Yaakov’s request for a bracha? The name Yisroel is chosen because “you have contended with the Lord (Elokim) and with people and you have prevailed.” (Ibid 32:29). But did Yaakov fight with Hashem? Now it can be

understood to mean that Yaakov fought against believing in Hashem's assistance. He wrestled with his faith like he wrestled with Lavan and with this attacker.

A better explanation is in the wording of the pausk. לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֹאמֶר עוֹד שְׁמִי. "Don't Yaakov say further my name." The words seem to be mixed up. It should have said לֹא יֹאמֶר יַעֲקֹב עוֹד שְׁמִי. *do not say further 'Yaakov is my name.'* Additionally, what is meant by כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל "because with Yisroel." With Yisroel what? If Yisroel will be with Yaakov then why say "no more Yaakov?" This is how to translate the Pasuk. The man was saying "No Yaakov. Say your name has an addition. Because with Yisroel it is." שָׂרִית can mean contend but it also means prince. Yaakov is now a prince *with* the Lord and with men. He is now worthy of being everything in Yitzchok's bracha to Yaakov. It was all about how nations will bow to him, his brother will serve him, and all the blessing given to Avraham (ruling this Land) will apply to Yaakov. The assailant clearly saw something special in Yaakov. Yaakov asked for a bracha from this man because he wanted to prove to himself that everything was Divinely ordained, even this hooligan. That this man would say exactly about Yaakov that Yaakov heard before (and will hear again the exact name – *ibid* 35:10) proved to Yaakov that everything in his life was Divinely inspired. In fact, even his children refer to themselves by this name. (*Ibid* 34:7).

"My soul was rescued." נִצָּל means saved and also snatched away. Here, it can mean both. My soul was rescued and snatched away from defeat. Yaakov had a new soul now. Not the actual soul, but life purpose. He was now entrenched in *emuna* and *betochon*, understanding that Hashem runs the world and guides Yaakov every step of the way. That is why he enacted the family custom to leave over the *gid hanashe* when eating meat. Meat is a sign of satiety and success. By removing that from the animal it is a sign for all his descendants that this food is prepared by a higher authority. Even if caught with human hands it was provided by Divine assistance. It is a lesson in *enuma* that predates and is a prerequisite to the accepting of the Torah.