

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Vayishlach

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yocheved *bas* Moshe *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The Instruction Manual for *Galus* (Exile)

To build and maintain a thriving Torah enterprise, the efforts of the Ponovezher Rav were intensive and legendary. Thus, he was often forced to visit various far-flung locations across the globe on fundraising excursions. One occasion in New York City found the Ponovezher Rav travelling the subway, carrying around his cache of donations.

Knowing the *Parshah* Can be Good for Your Health...

Suddenly, he discovered that a group of hoodlums, with malice in their eyes, was closing in around him. Although famed for his intellectual acumen, it didn't take a genius to figure out their designs.

An idea suddenly surfaced in the Ponovezher Rav's mind. In a nonchalant fashion, he slipped out a piece of paper on which was inscribed a certain address (one the Rav knew was close by). Turning to the "gathering crowd", he addressed his would-be attackers with (what appeared to be) all innocence. "Excuse me," he said, "would any of you happen to know where I must get off to arrive at this address?"

For their part, this development was a boon to the marauders. Much better to attack an elderly man in some dark, quiet alleyway than on a public train in front of a car-full of onlookers. "Well, of course," answered the leader of the pack, with noticeable relish. "That's the next stop. And wouldn't you just know it... We also happen to be getting off at that stop; right, fellahs?"

The car slowed; the bell rang; the doors opened; and they all arose to depart the train. At the last moment, the Ponovezher Rav, turning to his "travelling companions", made a courteous gesture: "After you, gentlemen," he indicated. Out they went; the Rav tarried for a few moments; the doors shut again; and the train continued on, leaving behind a group of frustrated thugs.

When later recounting this episode of deliverance, the Ponovezher Rav was careful to clarify the source of his idea. "Do not think," he explained, "that I came up with this on my own. Rather, I learned it from our forefather, Ya'akov." He went on to relate an event from this week's *parshah*. When Esav and Ya'akov finally met, and the threat of war between them receded, Esav suggested that the two should join together. "And he said, 'Let us journey... and I will travel opposite you'" (*Bereishis 33:12*). What was Ya'akov's response? "Let my master journey ahead, before his servant; I will continue at my slower pace..." (*v. 14*).

It could be that the Ponovezher Rav was actually aided by a whole gamut of Chazal's teachings in this matter. They cautioned to be wary in our dealings with Esav and his descendants, as the danger expressed in the axiom "Esav despises Ya'akov" is ever-present. Thus, for example, the Mishnah states in *Avodah Zarah (2:1)*:

לֹא יִתְיַחַד אָדָם עִמָּהוּן, מִפְּנֵי שְׂחָשׂוּדֵינָן עַל שְׂפִיכוֹת דְּמִים.

"A Jew should avoid seclusion with an idolator, for he is suspected of homicidal tendencies."

Elaborating on this theme, the Gemara (*Avodah Zarah 25b*) addresses a situation reminiscent of that of the Ponevezher Rav: “If they ask him where he is headed, he should respond by widening the distance between them.” As proof, the Gemara proceeds to cite none other than the verse mentioned above, whereby Ya’akov implores Esav to continue on without him (*cf. Peninim Mishulchan Gavohah, parshas Vayishlach*).

The Magic Words

In actuality, from time immemorial Klal Yisrael has consulted our *parshah* for guidance in navigating the perils of *galus*. The Ramban states explicitly that Ya’akov’s dealings with Esav will duplicate themselves throughout the generations, as *b’nei* Yisrael live under the dominion of the children of Esav. Thus we find, for example, that the Midrash records how R’ Yannai – upon his periodic visits to the Roman capital on a communal endeavor – would first peer into *parshas Vayishlach* for guidance (*Bereishis Rabbah 78:18*).

Perhaps one of the best known examples of a generational leader who utilized the lessons of this *parshah* to aid his brethren was the venerated R’ Chaim Volozhiner. Many times his intervention was necessary to prevent the implementation of yet another of the many harsh decrees being promulgated in Russia at that time. Of course, he engaged in heartfelt prayer, emulating this measure used by Ya’akov when he anticipated the meeting with Esav.

And then there was the other aspect of Ya’akov’s preparatory measures.

One time, R’ Chaim journeyed to the halls of power in St. Petersburg, in the hopes of beseeching the notorious prime-minister of Czar Alexander I. The Jew-hatred of this particular official was so intense, that he had declared he would not speak to or even look at a Jew. Nevertheless, as he was the driving force behind the latest anti-Semitic decree aimed at stifling Jewish education, R’ Chaim was determined to secure a meeting.

To entice the minister, R’ Chaim sent a message upon his arrival in the capital city. He made it known that he wished to see the official, and tell him only two words. To “sweeten the deal”, R’ Chaim added that should he go over the count by even a single word, the prime minister would be authorized to kill him.

This caught the minister’s attention. He summoned the Jewish sage before him – no doubt eager for R’ Chaim to falter in his challenge. Appearing before the official, R’ Chaim laid down a bag stuffed with silver coins on the table, and proceeded to relate two Russian words: “*Byeri I’molchi*” – Take, and be quiet.

The decree never came to fruition. R’ Chaim had duplicated the strategy employed by Ya’akov, who sent Esav an elaborate gift in order to appease his anger (*Avi Hayeshivos*).