

## »So Yaakov called the name of the place Peniel...The sun rose for him as he passed Penuel"... (32:31,32)

*Horav Yosef Konvitz, z.l.*, one of the early pioneers of Orthodoxy in America, applied this *pasuk* to explain the dismal state of Jewish observance in the early part of the twentieth century. Most Jews at the time viewed every aspect of religious life with a haphazard, begrudging, even antagonistic attitude. Many were ignorant of *Torah* law. Some even acted *l'hachis*, deliberately transgressing *Torah* and *mitzvos* for profit or power. *Kashrus*, which in Europe was accepted by everybody, was unreliable at best. America was devoid of spiritual hope, posing an alarming threat to *Torah*-based Judaism. The European immigrants who came to the American exile, quickly became acculturated, adopting the attitudes and lifestyles of American life while retaining minimal ties to Judaism. As time went on, they assimilated into the American mainstream, ignoring their religious background and upbringing.

This was the scene that confronted the *Torah* Jew. What was he to do? Indeed, why was the American *galus*, exile, different from the previous exiles to which the Jewish People had been subjected? Never in our history had so many rejected the ways of their ancestors. Was America different, or were we different?

*Horav* Konvitz suggests that the answer to this riddle lies in Yaakov *Avinu's* struggle with Eisav's guardian angel and the apparent change in the name of the place in which their struggle occurred: from "*Peniel*" to "*Penuel*." When Yaakov was confronted with the challenge of finally coming face to face with his estranged brother, Eisav, he took his children, and "*he brought them across the stream*." He was separated from his children. The *Torah* states, "*and Yaakov was left alone*" (32:25). He was without his children, and his children were without their father. Being alone, away from the support of his children, "*a man wrestled with him*." Eisav's angel succeeded in detaining Yaakov all night until dawn, causing his children to be alone, without direction, without protection all through the night.

At first, Yaakov did not notice any change. Indeed, he was full of joy at having triumphed over Eisav's evil. Furthermore, he had spared his children from this frightful encounter. He, therefore, referred to the place as "*Peniel*," which means, "I saw Hashem and He turned to me, and saved me." Regrettably, his joy was short-lived. When he saw the light of day, when the sun shone brightly illuminating the sky with its brilliance, Yaakov experienced a shock. He realized that leaving his children alone all through the bleak darkness of the night was a grave error. The chasm and void that now existed between these two generations was enormous. Suddenly, the "*Peniel*" transformed to "*Penuel*," which means, "they (his children) turned away." Yaakov was now "*limping on his hip*;" there was a hindrance in his ability to move, a rift had developed between him and his children.

This exposition of Yaakov's encounter with the angel, and consequent alienation from his children,

is a homiletic exegesis. It, nevertheless, conveys a profound perspective on the significance of intergenerational relationship, the importance of parents and children maintaining a bond that is inseparable. The American exile was unique in comparison to our People's past exiles. In the past, entire families were always banished – together. We went as a People, we were driven out as a community. The heritage of the past went with us to our new home. Parents were not separated from their children, and children were not separated from their parents. Despite the bitterness of the exile, the persecution and pain notwithstanding, parents were present to guide, encourage and inspire their children. *Chazal's* dictum, "Everywhere *Klal Yisrael* was exiled, the *Shechinah* went with them," applied. We may add that parents need and thrive on having their children with them. More often than not, a parent will refrain from acting inappropriately out of respect for, and in deference, to his children. One who does not is manifesting significant relational issues.

The American exile separated families. In some instances, the parents remained in Europe while the children came to these shores to make a "better" life for themselves. Indeed, in most cases the material aspect of their lives changed drastically. Because there was no parental support and guidance, however, their spiritual dimension was destroyed. In other situations, the father came to America, leaving his children in Europe while he earned enough money to send for them. The children were without their father, and the father was without his children. He would work long, hard hours under the most inhumane conditions to eke out a living. Regrettably, without the support and encouragement of his family, his loneliness and slave-like labor took its toll on his spiritual status-quo. The American exile was an exile that took its toll on our People, precisely because we entered it not as a people, but as lost individuals, without leadership and guidance.