

Yaakov was left alone and a man fought with him until the break of dawn... and he struck Yaakov's thigh... and Yaakov was limping. (32:25,26,32)

The encounter between Yaakov *Avinu* and the mysterious man is fraught with questions. First, how can the Torah say that our Patriarch was left alone? A Jew is never alone. *Hashem Yisborach* is always with us. *Melo kol haaretz k'vodo*, "The entire world is filled with His Glory." Furthermore, Hashem promised Yaakov, *V'Anochi eheyeh imach*, "I will be with you." Yaakov might have been distant from human encounter, but he certainly was not alone. Second, in the battle that ensued between Yaakov and the "*ish*"/angel of Eisav, why did the angel choose specifically to strike Yaakov's ability to move, i.e. his *gid ha'nashe*, sciatic nerve? Third, was he not afraid to attack Yaakov, the *Bchir haAvos*, chosen, elite of the *Avos*? Apparently, the angel saw a weakness which encouraged him to fight Yaakov. He saw a chink in Yaakov's spiritual armor. What was it? Last, we rarely find the Torah singling out a *mitzvah* with an explanation, as it does with the prohibition against eating the *gid ha'nashe*. Why is this *mitzvah* different?

The *Avodas Hissashar*, *Horav Yissachar Dov Ber, zl, m'Veibroz*, offers a novel approach to this encounter. He explains that Yaakov was guilty of misused humility. He was too humble, to the point that it (sort of) backfired. Humility is a positive trait as long as it prevents a person from becoming arrogant and also infuses a person with a sense of gratitude. Through the lens of humility, a person comes to realize that: a) whatever success he has enjoyed is a far cry from what is expected of him, b) he has a Benefactor – Hashem, Who has provided him with all that he has. He must never forget this. His life and all of his achievements are gifts to him – gifts which he must always recognize and appreciate.

A truly humble person understands that it is all a gift. He deserves nothing in his life. Thus, he is grateful for whatever he has. Such healthy humility is a positive tool to circumvent arrogance, pride, smugness and vanity. One, instead, rejoices with his lot and is impelled to reiterate his thanks to Hashem.

Humility, however, can ricochet backwards, so that the person feels so puny, insignificant to the point of worthlessness, that he becomes depressed until he hits rock bottom – alone. When a person feels that he is not part of anything, when he feels totally alone – no one cares and worse, he does not care – he has misused his humility. Such small-mindedness, such humility, is a detriment to the person and all those around him. One who is alone loses hope. One who has no hope defaults to depression. Such a person has no life.

Yaakov *Avinu* declared, *Katonti mikol ha'chassodim*; "I have been diminished by all of the kindnesses" (Ibid. 32:11). In his own eyes, the Patriarch felt small as a result of all that Hashem had bestowed upon him. He never thought of his own spiritual achievements. A life of contention with Eisav; pursued by Elifaz and stripped of his material assets; cheated by Lavan for twenty

years. In the end, he was the progenitor of an extraordinary family, and he became materially wealthy. Yet, it meant very little to Yaakov, since he measured himself against the barometer which his father and grandfather established. Avraham was thrown into a fiery furnace. Yitzchak stretched out his neck to be sacrificed. Thus, he calculated that Hashem's beneficence to him far outweighed his contribution. He feared that he had received his reward in this world, that Hashem might not want to maintain a future relationship with him. He would "pay him off" and that would be the end. When such dark thoughts course through one's mind, he begins to feel alone. It was only at that low point, when Yaakov felt so abandoned and dejected, that Eisav's angel now had the ability to strike. When Yaakov's thoughts catalyze a feeling of isolation, friendlessness and abandonment, then Eisav and the forces of evil have the ability to harm us.

This is why the angel failed. He thought that Yaakov had truly given up hope. How wrong he was! Our Patriarch had never for one moment relinquished his faith. He battled the negativity, overcame it, and defeated the darkness – Eisav's angel. The angel struck Yaakov's ability to move, because this was his goal: to prevent Yaakov from progressing forward, from growing spiritually.

It was at this point that the light/sun of salvation burst forward and shined brightly for Yaakov, that the Patriarch sensed that he was limping. That small doubt generated by an overactive humility cast a blemish on his faith – represented by the *gid ha'nashe*. This is why we do not eat that *gid*, nerve. When we are stationary/static, dwelling on past indiscretions and misdeeds, we become prey to the depression, grief and sorrows of the past. They pull us down and prevent us from surging forward. This is the most dangerous time. When a soldier is injured on the battlefield, he must not lay there – or else the enemy will finish him off. He must escape and seek medical aid. We must not look back. We must always go forward, pulling ourselves up on the line/rope of hope. The panacea for depression is hope, which generates joy. The angel attempted to immobilize Yaakov. He erred, because he did not know how deeply rooted was Yaakov's faith and how solid was his hope. That one blemish generated darkness and a feeling of abandonment, over which Yaakov quickly triumphed. Can we say that we are that strong?

Veritably, humility and depression are polar opposites, but one error in humility can lead a person to fall into the abyss of depression. Dejection is the result of an accumulation of failures, disappointments and poor decisions. As a result, many of a person's wants and needs are not realized. One who is truly humble believes that he has never deserved that his goals achieve fruition; thus, he is not depressed. Self-effacement in the presence of Hashem defines a humble person. Such a person wants nothing, because he feels that he is nothing.

Horav Shlomo Freifeld, zl, was a *Rosh Yeshivah* who made students. He taught them who they were. In order to succeed in the manner that he did, it was crucial for his *talmid*, student, to become his passion. It was all about the student. To achieve such a relationship requires immense love for the Torah and for the student whom one is imbuing with Torah. It is impossible to acquire this uncanny ability, however, unless one is himself the paragon of humility. I think this is why Moshe *Rabbeinu*, the quintessential *Rebbe* of *Klal Yisrael*, was accorded the appellation, *anav mi'kol*

adam, humblest of men. The two go together. I cite two vignettes concerning Rav Freifeld (taken from *Reb Shlomo*, by Rabbi Yisroel Besser).

A student in the *Yeshivah* succumbed to a difficult moral challenge, causing great shame to himself, the *yeshivah* and its *Rosh Yeshivah* and mentor. No one – including the student – questioned that this student would be asked to leave.

The student was sitting in the *bais hamedrash* waiting for his verdict, when he was summoned to the *Rosh Yeshivah's* office. Everyone watched, certain of the outcome. The student himself, although expecting the worst, walked stoically to the office. He was prepared for a confrontation.

A few minutes later, he emerged from the office, white and visibly shaken. He was clearly humbled.

He told his *chavrusa*, study partner, that he had entered the room ready for an argument. He knew he had committed a grave error, but still...

Rav Freifeld stood up from his seat, walked across the desk, stood right in front of the student and, in a broken voice, said, "I am sorry that I could not inspire you to be bigger."

No battle, no confrontation, no argument. The student remarked, "I had no defense against his awesome humility. He broke me."

The *Rosh Yeshivah* had no question that the student had acted egregiously, but he took the blame. This way, he had hope that one day the student would come around.

Rav Freifeld taught his *talmidim* that the ability to introspect and see the failures in oneself is a sign of greatness. He recalled, "A fellow used to eat at our home. When he ate his soup, he made unusual, offensive noises. The *Rosh Yeshivah* had no alternative but to inform the young man about his noises. He called him aside and said, "We must have a culinary discussion."

When he concluded the conversation, the young man's immediate response was, "Do you really mean that I offend people when I eat soup? I cannot believe that."

The *Rosh Yeshivah* summed it up, "Excuse me, but I embarrass myself to tell you the story, because, when I heard his reaction, I was shocked. Such an intelligent and talented young man had no clue concerning his offensive behavior. I said to myself, 'How many things are there concerning myself to which I am oblivious?' It was a frightening experience. We all have trouble seeing ourselves properly (objectively)." This, I feel, is the epitome of humility.