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“Incompletely Complete”: Yaakov’s Struggle and the Torah’s Eternal Embrace of Pain

There is something unexpected about Yaakov’s request at the end of his mysterious nighttime battle. He turns to the very being who has been wrestling him for hours—this shadowy figure representing the forces determined to break him—and asks for a blessing. It is an astonishing move. A person bruised, exhausted, injured, would normally wish only for escape. But Yaakov wants transformation. He wants meaning. He wants wholeness.

The struggle unfolds “עד עלות השחר”—until the rising of dawn. This is not incidental. Night, in Torah symbolism, is the realm of uncertainty, fear, doubt. When you cannot see, you can only feel. It is the darkness of confusion, of not knowing what comes next. It is the space where one must rely on faith alone—אמונתך בלילות. In daylight, right and wrong become more obvious; clarity returns. But at night, we confront ourselves, our demons, our vulnerabilities, with no external bearings to steady us.

This battle—between Yaakov and the mysterious “man,” understood by Chazal as the Satan or the guardian of Eisav—represents the internal struggle between good and evil, between the desire to perfect oneself and the forces determined to pull a person down

spiritually, emotionally, or physically. And it is precisely there, in that darkness, that Yaakov earns the blessing of a new name: Yisrael.

Yet the Torah does something curious. Although Yaakov prevails, he is left limping. And we, his descendants, are forever commanded not to eat from the גיד הנשה, the sinew connected to his injury. Why? If Yaakov ultimately triumphed, why is the sign of his struggle preserved eternally?

After Yaakov parts from Eisav, the Torah narrates a series of journeys: to Succot, to Padan Aram, and then to Shechem, where he purchases a parcel of land from the children of Chamor. And then comes the striking statement: “ויעקב בא שלם”—“And Yaakov arrived intact.”

Rashi comments: שלם בגופו, שלם בממונו, שלם בתורתו—he arrived whole in body, whole in wealth, whole in Torah. Was he miraculously healed? Did he no longer limp? Was his pain gone?

Perhaps externally he looked complete. Perhaps others saw him and thought he had fully recovered. His gait was steady again; his strength restored. From the outside, he was whole.

But the Torah refuses to erase what

happened in the night. The command of גיד הנשה ensures that the injury is remembered forever. The Jewish people will never sit down to a meal without—consciously or not—carrying the imprint of Yaakov's limp.

Why preserve the scar of a wound that healed?

Because this is the Torah's profound psychological truth: triumph does not erase pain. Victory does not undo the suffering that preceded it. Healing does not mean forgetting. Being "complete" does not require being unbroken.

I call this being "incompletely complete."

Yaakov went on. He built, he traveled, he raised his family, he became Yisrael—the father of a nation destined to endure. He arrived shalem, intact. But the Torah holds space for the fact that he once limped.

So, too, for the Jewish people. Our national identity is forged not only through our triumphs but also through our wounds. We suffer losses, we encounter profound pain, yet we emerge with the greatest of victories: faith, continuity, identity, hope. But we do not pretend the injuries never existed. Our completeness contains its fractures. Our wholeness carries the shadows of what broke us.

And so it is with families who endure loss. From the outside, new photos may show smiling faces, expanded circles, renewed life— which are very real and honest. People may comment that a family appears strong, restored, intact. Shalem. Our family will never be whole again in this lifetime. The Torah, in its eternal wisdom, acknowledges that wholeness after tragedy is not the same as wholeness before it. There is a before and an after. There is the part that heals—and the part that remains broken forever.

The mitzvah of גיד הנשה says: I, God, remember your pain. I hold your wound within My law. I will not force you to move on as if nothing happened. Your struggle is etched into the eternal story of My people.

Yaakov becomes Yisrael precisely because he struggled — כי שרית עם אלוקים ועם אנשים — because he fought with the Divine and with man and prevailed. Yisrael is the name of geulah, the name of נצחיות, a name that carries the promise of ultimate wholeness. But it is a wholeness that does not discard the limp.

The Jewish people are forever Yisrael—not because we are untouched, but because we rise, again and again, higher and higher, stronger and stronger, from within the very places we were wounded.

We are, like Yaakov, part of a nation that's incompletely complete—and divinely embraced in that state forever. ■

The **Airleys** have built **Beit Binyamin**, a retreat center in Tzfat for those directly affected by the war. Soldiers, Zaka members, security forces, bereaved families and widows can come for respite, relaxation and rejuvenation. For more information and to donate, visit Beitbinyamin.org

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