One Last Deal Before Shabbos?

Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz • Parshas Vayishlach • 29 minutes

Transcript of the recording, lightly edited for reading.

00:00 The three questions

A good Erev Shabbos to our friends and members of the Westmount Shul. It's time for our weekly Erev Shabbos drash. As we get ready for Shabbos, I'd like to ask three questions about the night that Yaakov Avinu became Yisroel.

Here's question number one. The malach tells Yaakov that he'll be called Yisroel. Good. Later, in Beis El, Hashem Himself gives him that name. Well, let's think about what happened with his grandfather. Once Hashem changed Avram's name to Avraham, we were to call him Avraham, and it's an aveirah for us to call him Avram. But look at the pasuk when Yaakov is on his way down to Mitzrayim. The Torah says that Hashem spoke to Yisroel. And what does Hashem call him? "Yaakov, Yaakov." The Gemara in Berachos learns from that very pasuk that we can still call him Yaakov. Why? Because Hashem Himself called him that. So we have our Torah source for both names. Why did Hashem want him to keep the name Yaakov even after He gave him the name Yisroel?

Here's question number two. Yaakov has wrestled with Eisav's malach until daybreak. The malach sees that he can't overcome him. He asks to be let go, and Yaakov answers, "No, I'm not going to let you go until you bless me." What bracha could Yaakov possibly want from the malach who spent the whole night fighting him? And what is there still to win if the malach's already conceded that he can't beat him?

And finally, question number three. On Shabbos, in the zemer Yom Zeh l'Yisroel, "Yom zeh l'Yisroel, orah v'simchah, Shabbos menuchah." For Yisroel, this day is light and joy, a Shabbos of rest. On Motzaei Shabbos, at the Melaveh Malka, we sing a different zemer, Al Tira Avdi Yaakov. Its refrain, "Al tira avdi Yaakov," is said over twenty times. Have no fear, My servant Yaakov. So why is the name in the first zemer Yisroel and in the second it's Yaakov? And why does Yaakov need to hear that reassurance just as Shabbos goes out?

02:27 Whose clothes was he wearing?

To understand all this, let's think back to the day that Yaakov received the brachos. Rivkah gave him Eisav's clothes to wear. When Eisav came in afterwards and realized whom Yitzchak had blessed, he complained, "Vayaakveini zeh fa'amayim." Twice now he has outwitted me. Eisav was speaking about the bechorah and the bracha. Listen to the name he hears in that word, vayaakveini. As far as Eisav is concerned, the very name Yaakov tells you how his brother came by the brachos.

Now let's look at what Yitzchak actually gave Yaakov. The dew from heaven, the richness of the earth, an abundance of grain and wine. Yaakov wanted those brachos. Why would Yaakov Avinu go to such lengths for grain and wine? What does a Jewish neshamah come down here for in the

first place? To make this physical world a dirah betachtonim, a dwelling for Hashem. In Yitzchak's bracha that means taking the things the earth produces and using them for kedushah. So Yaakov needs the grain. The question is what he means to do with it.

There's a strong word for Yaakov's way of dealing with the world. The word is mirmah, cunning. What makes such a thing work? Someone watching thinks he knows what you're after because he sees what you're doing. But your purpose may only become clear when the person sees what you do with what you've gained. Now who's the one being outwitted here? Let's say the Jew is dealing honestly with the people around him. It's the pull of gashmiyus itself that he has to outwit.

Take an ordinary weekday lunch. What does anybody see? A man sits down because he needs to eat. What does he want the strength for? So when he opens the Gemara he can learn, when he stands up to daven he can concentrate, and when there's a mitzvah to do, he has the koach to do it.

Or take a man in business. He wants the business to turn a profit. So does the man across the street. But what does the first fellow have in mind while he's earning the money? He wants to give tzedakah from those profits. He wants his children to learn Torah, and their tuition has to come from somewhere. You can watch him at work all day and never see what you'd see if you followed that money home. That's a new interpretation of "follow the money"!

That's the essence of Yaakov putting on Eisav's clothes to receive the bracha. Whose clothes was he wearing when he stood before Yitzchak? Eisav's. But who was inside of them? Yaakov. Aha. A Jew does much the same when he goes out to earn his parnassah. He has to know his trade. He has to look after his customers and collect what he's owed. Those are Eisav's clothes. Inside, he's still Yaakov.

Part of the money he gets is going to pay a rebbi to teach his child Torah. The customer who paid the bill may never know that. That's the cunning of Yaakov. His purpose is concealed, and he puts the very things that keep him busy all week to work for avodas Hashem. That is Yaakov.

06:04 Where do you see the Yisroel in that same man?

Now, where would you go to see the Yisroel in that same man? Come to shul on Shabbos and listen to him daven. What kind of kavanah! He davens slowly. He's singing. He's in a state of rapture. Watch him after davening. He pulls up a chair for his son, opens a Gemara, and gives the boy time to work through the question for himself. On the way home, he notices somebody who could use a place for lunch and brings him along.

You saw him all week at work. Would you have known how much he loves to learn with that boy, or how much it means to him to have another Yid at his table? On Shabbos you can see it. The ruchniyus that was inside him all week is right there in how he davens, how he learns and how he does a mitzvah. That's Yisroel.

Now follow him home. Who's making Kiddush? Who's passing the challah to the guests he brought from shul? The very same Yisroel. Once you see who the man is, even the eating gets

schlepped along with him. The food his weekday earnings paid for is part of his avodah in the open. By eating the seudah he's fulfilling oneg Shabbos. And that's what I mean by a Yisroel eating.

So that answers question number one. Why does the Torah keep both names? During the week it takes a Yaakov to earn that parnassah and hold on to what he's earning it for. He has to be cunning. We can't know what he's doing. On Shabbos, when he can give himself openly to Torah, tefillah and chesed, we get to see the Yisroel who was inside those clothes all along.

07:44 Why ask this malach for a bracha?

Let's go back to question number two, to the malach asking to be let go. Rashi explains what Yaakov meant when he said, "Barcheni, bless me." Hasn't Yitzchak already given him the brachos? But Eisav still disputes his brother's right to them. Yaakov wants the one who represents Eisav to acknowledge that those brachos belong to him. That's why it matters who gives this bracha. A friend could have wished him every good thing in the world, but Eisav's claim would still be standing against him.

Listen to the words that the malach gives him when he says his name. "Ki sarisa im Elokim v'im anashim vatuchal." You have contended with angels and with men, and you have prevailed. Which malach? The one who's standing in front of him, the sar of Eisav. Which men? Lavan and Eisav. And in our own avodah, what are these two things a Jew has to overcome?

Hashem gives the world its life through malachim. We can name the people who ploughed and sowed and baked the bread on our table. But what our eyes can't show us is Who gave the grain the power to grow. That's one way the world can hide its Creator. The other is much more personal. Someone sees a Jew keeping a mitzvah and laughs at him. "You're an old-fashioned Jew." The Jew knows what Hashem wants, and he still has to overcome that embarrassment. Sometimes we're embarrassed in the airport to put on a tallis and tefillin. People might be laughing at us. But on the madreigah of Yisroel, he can see Who gave him the bread. And the man who laughs has no say in how he uses this.

Here I'd like to suggest a way of understanding the ma'avak, the struggle itself. What would have counted as a victory for Eisav's malach, considering that Yitzchak already gave Yaakov the blessing? Imagine that Yaakov had come home after twenty years with Lavan, knowing every trick Lavan ever tried on him, with flocks to show for all his work. But what if somewhere along the way he had forgotten what he wanted the money for? Whose victory would that have been?

Ah, that's the danger. A man can get so good at earning a living that he has very little time left for the very things he went to work for. And that answers question number two. What did Yaakov still want from the malach? He wanted an admission about those very brachos of grain and wine. Rashi calls it bisrarah uvegilui panim. Yaakov can receive them openly, with his right to them acknowledged. The victory is complete when the very malach who came to oppose him has given him a bracha. Now even the one who stood in the way is helping him, because now you are Yisroel. On the road to Yaakov, you didn't get detoured and fail to make it to Yisroel. No, you made it to Yisroel.

11:03 What does it mean that Hashem sees no struggle?

That brings us to question number three. The Sfas Emes, on this week's parsha, looks back at how much of Yaakov Avinu's life was taken up by Lavan and Eisav. Those struggles, he says, belonged to the name Yaakov. Through them he merited the name Yisroel. And then says the Sfas Emes, "Vehu meyuchad leyom haShabbos." That name belongs especially to Shabbos. A Jew comes to the wholeness of Shabbos through the avodah of the six days. Think of the father who works all week to pay his son's rebbi. On Shabbos he can pull up a chair and learn with his son himself. The boy gets to see what his father wanted for him all along.

Let's listen to the two halves of Bilaam's bracha. "Lo hibit aven b'Yaakov." Hashem sees no wrongdoing in Yaakov. What does that mean? A Yid closes his business in time for Mincha. All through davening, the deal he left unfinished keeps coming back to him. Each time he brings his mind back to the words. Hashem sees a Yid who did what he was supposed to do. But what did it take to get there? That fight with his own yetzer hara is what the Alter Rebbe calls amal. "Lo hibit aven b'Yaakov." Hashem sees no wrongdoing in Yaakov because he has to fight against the yetzer hara. That's Yaakov, and that's struggling, because you're in Eisav's suit. There's a lot of struggle, but at the end of the day he doesn't sin.

But then the next half. "V'lo ra'ah amal b'Yisroel." Hashem sees no such struggle in Yisroel. Remember what it says in the bracha that the angel gave him. "Vatuchal," you have prevailed. On the madreigah of Yisroel, what used to pull him away has lost its hold. The Alter Rebbe's example is Shabbos davening, when a Yid lingers over the words because he takes pleasure in Hashem's greatness and wants to understand another word of praise. He can put his whole koach into davening. What has fallen away is the amal, the fight to get himself to want it. That's the menuchah of Yisroel. "V'lo ra'ah amal b'Yisroel." When there's Yisroel, there's no amal.

13:26 The soldier sings on the way in

What happens on Motzaei Shabbos? A Jew knows where he's going back to on Sunday morning. He knows how easily earning a living can take over his thoughts. His question is, "Will I succeed in the work I have to do?" What gives him the confidence to go back into it?

Listen to what Hashem calls him. Avdi, My servant. Whose work is he going back to do? And Who gave him the strength to do it? Yeshayahu calls a Jew — what are we? We're the shoot that Hashem planted, the work of His hands. The Tanya calls this neshamah a chelek Eloka mima'al mamash. So what's going on? "Al tira avdi Yaakov." Hashem is with him when he goes to work on Sunday just as surely as He was with him at the Shabbos table. Remembering where his neshamah comes from gives him bitachon, and he can go back to his work with simchah.

The Frierdiker Rebbe gave a mashal of a soldier marching toward a place he knows is dangerous. When does he sing his niggun? On the way in. What has he got to sing about? He still has the battle ahead of him. That's precisely when the niggun does something for him. The simchah with which he goes into battle helps him prevail.

And that answers question number three. Why do we change names, and why do we sing Al Tira? The Alter Rebbe explains that on Shabbos a Jew stands on the madreigah of Yisroel. At Melaveh Malka he's going back to the avodah of Yaakov. And just then Hashem calls him avdi. The words "Al tira avdi Yaakov" give him the courage to go back and do the work with simchah. That's the soldier's niggun on Motzaei Shabbos.

Listen for the other half at our Shabbos tables. When we say Kah Echsof, Rav Aharon of Karlin asks Hashem to crown Yisroel. Here are the words we sing.

לעטר את ישראל בתפארת המפארים אותך על ידי שבת קדשך

Crown Yisroel with the splendour of those who glorify You through Your holy Shabbos. We're called Yisroel.

כל ששה ימים להנחילם נחלת יעקב בחירך

Through all six days, grant them the inheritance of Yaakov, Your chosen one. Listen to the change. When we sing about Shabbos, whom do we ask Hashem to crown? Yisroel. And whose inheritance do we ask for through the six days? Yaakov's. Now we can hear it in the zemer we know so well. "Yom zeh l'Yisroel, orah v'simchah, Shabbos menuchah." On Shabbos, the name is Yisroel. This is his day of light and joy.

16:26 The Rebbe who carried both names

There was a Rebbe who carried both names we've just heard in Kah Echsof. His name was Yaakov Yisroel Twersky of Cherkas. One of his chassidim was Reb Zalman Maliner, a wealthy lumber merchant with vast holdings. And we're going to see an amazing story. Every Erev Shabbos, when Reb Zalman came out of the mikvah, he took off something the Rebbe had given him to wear all week.

The Rebbe's grandfather was Reb Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, a talmid of the Baal Shem Tov. His father was Reb Mordechai, the Chernobler Maggid. He called his eight sons the eight candles of the Menorah, and Yaakov Yisroel was one of those eight. We don't have to go through the history over here. He led chassidim for decades in Hornosteipel during a period that included the reign of Czar Nicholas I. Jewish communities had to fill the Czar's military quotas. Boys were seized for the Cantonist system. Jewish books were censored, and there were restrictions on where a Jew could travel or trade. In 1861 the Rebbe moved to Cherkas, in what is now Ukraine.

Think of what a working week would ask of Reb Zalman, his student. On the roads of Kiev province, where could he put on tefillin or take his kosher food in peace? A tax collector could hold him up. An official could make trouble. How much of his day could a man spend looking over his shoulder just to earn an honest ruble? And what did Reb Zalman do with those rubles? He maintained a beis medrash where ten of his sons and sons-in-law could sit and learn. Wow.

One day the Rebbe summoned Reb Zalman. He says, "Here, take this." Hands him a kameya, an amulet small enough to wear on his body. The Rebbe told him to keep it on every weekday,

every day. And he wagged his finger like this. “Remember, all week long, no exceptions.” The Rebbe himself told him when to take it off. After the mikvah on Erev Shabbos he was to lay it aside, leave it off all Shabbos and put it back on only after Havdalah.

Reb Zalman did just that. He wore the kameya all six days. Then came Erev Shabbos. He went to the mikvah, came out, took it off and laid it aside. It stayed there all Shabbos. After Havdalah on Motzaei Shabbos he put it back on.

Why did he have to take it off on Shabbos? The Slonimer account tells us where Reb Zalman wore the kameya. It went with him to every business meeting and on every round of his forests. When he put his weekday affairs aside and went to the mikvah for Shabbos, he laid the kameya aside with them, because his work in the forest was finished for the week. Now what was his avodah? He didn’t need the kameya anymore. Look at the Rebbe with whom he was spending Shabbos.

19:46 Friday night through Reb Zalman’s eyes

Picture that Friday night through Reb Zalman’s eyes. During the week, when the Rebbe had to deal with the non-Jewish authorities on behalf of his chassidim, a Yid’s livelihood might depend on how the Rebbe made his case. The Rebbe had to know when to speak and when to keep quiet. Who else was listening? What might a moser, an informer, carry back to the authorities?

Now come into the beis medrash with Reb Zalman. It’s Shabbos. The doors are wide open. There’s the Rebbe in the white silk. Listen to his voice at Kabbalas Shabbos. Later, at his tish, the chassidim take up a Chernobler niggun until the rafters shake. His father used to say that the malachim learned their niggunim from what was sung at a Rebbe’s tish. And his old chavrusa, the Tzemach Tzedek, said that Eliyahu HaNavi took delight in his company even before he made Kiddush.

That was the Rebbe’s own avodah of Yaakov during the week. He had to sit across from an official and find the words that would help another Yid. Now it’s Shabbos. Whom is the Rebbe standing before when he davens? Who’s he singing to at his table? Hashem. He can say the words he means and sing them with his whole heart. Reb Zalman can see the Yisroel in his Rebbe and can now lift his own voice and sing with him.

Rabosai, I think we can understand that change from something we do ourselves. On a weekday morning, before a Yid goes out to work, he puts tefillin on his arm and on his head. The arm is going to work for his living. The head will be busy with a hundred decisions. He begins his day by giving them both to Hashem. That’s the avodah of Yaakov.

But what happens on Shabbos morning? Why do these tefillin stay in their bag? Rabbi Akiva says that tefillin are an os, a sign of the bond between Hashem and the Jewish people. We don’t need to wear the tefillin because now we become Yisroel. Shabbos itself is that sign. That, I think, is the avodah of Yisroel. A Yid makes Kiddush, learns with his children, davens and sings. The bond he put on his arm during the week is there for his family to see in the Shabbos he keeps.

Think of Reb Zalman at the Rebbe's table. He had left the kameya behind after the mikvah. He could now sit and sing with the Rebbe. But is it always so easy for a Yid to leave the whole working week behind?

22:17 Until the light comes

I'd like to go back to the words "Vayei'avek ish imo." A man wrestled with Yaakov. For how long? "Ad alos hashachar." Until the first light of dawn. What do you think Eisav's malach wanted from Yaakov all those hours? Here's how I understand it. For twenty years Yaakov had to keep his wits about him to make a living with Lavan. Suppose he got so caught up in buying and selling that all he wanted tomorrow was a better deal than he'd made today. What would become of the Yisroel in him? He'd worn Eisav's clothes to get the brachos. Was he going to spend the rest of his life wanting what Eisav wanted?

Now listen to what the malach does when he sees he can't overcome Yaakov. "Vayiga b'chaf yereicho." He struck him in the hip joint. Even then, the malach could still hurt him. What does Yaakov do with his hip out of joint and the two of them still wrestling? He holds on. He's holding on. And when dawn breaks, it's the malach who asks him to let him go. Yaakov insists on a bracha, and from that very malach he hears the name Yisroel. When the sun rises, Yaakov's still limping. That's what it cost him to hold on until the light. But then the limp got better.

Rabosai, I think that's our ma'avak every Erev Shabbos. For Yaakov the light came at dawn. For us, spiritually, it's the light of the Shabbos candles. A Yid has worked all week to put that seudah on the table. The table is set, the licht are ready, and suddenly there's one more piece of business that seems to need him. Even now the malach can get in one last blow. Can he leave the deal where it is and come to the table as Yisroel? That struggle could go on right up to candle lighting.

24:11 One more trip to the lumberyard

To appreciate this, listen to what happened to our Reb Zalman one Friday afternoon. On Erev Shabbos, after Zalman had returned from the mikvah and removed the kameya, a gentile lumber merchant arrived with a lucrative business deal. At first Reb Zalman refused. The merchant insisted on closing the deal on the spot. Finally, Reb Zalman said, "Okay." He says like this, "The hour is late and my day of rest is about to begin. I agree to the deal on condition that you go to the forest adjacent to the lumberyard and take care of the goods yourself."

The merchant agreed, but he came back. You know why? Because the gate was locked. Reb Zalman saw no other way and hurried off with him. In his haste he forgot to put the kameya back on. No sooner had Reb Zalman opened the gate than a large tree fell and killed him on the spot. Those who knew him understood then how the Rebbe's amulet had protected his life all the years he had worn it.

Reb Zalman's levayah was on Motzaei Shabbos. His family asked to have the kameya opened. The Slonimer tradition describes two copper coins joined together. When they opened them,

they could read what the Rebbe had written. Reb Avrohom of Slonim heard it from a venerated chassid who had seen the writing with his own eyes. This is what the Rebbe writes.

“I adjure you, all tree and forest spirits of peril, that you not harm or injure Reb Zalman. Signed, Yaakov Yisroel of Cherkas.”

Only now do we hear the two names the Rebbe signed. And now we know what the kameya was for. The Rebbe asked that Reb Zalman be protected among the trees where he earned his living. Think back to the moment before Reb Zalman went to the gate. He’d already said he was finished for the week. He’d even arranged for the buyer to collect the timber himself. Then the man came back. All he needed was somebody to open a gate. How well we know that knock on a Friday afternoon.

26:40 Who is sitting at the Shabbos table?

Sometimes we don’t quite make the change. A man can close up on time, come home from shul and sit down to Kiddush, and in his head he’s still talking to the last customer. His son has started telling him something about the parsha. Halfway through, the father realizes, or the kid even realizes, he hasn’t heard the question. The shop is closed. The conversation with the customer is still going on. That’s a ma’avak a person can recognize in himself.

And sometimes, with Hashem’s help, he wins it. The customer can wait until after Shabbos. And maybe that very same father turns to his son and says, “Tell me again. What was bothering you in the pasuk?” And this time he hears him. The boy whose rebbi he worked all week to pay has his father there with him. That’s a taste of “V’lo ra’ah amal b’Yisroel.” A moment ago he was wrestling with the deal. Now what he wants to understand is his son’s question. And when that father takes the challah in his hands, it’s Yisroel sitting at that table.

So now listen to the bracha. The Gemara says that two malachim accompany a Jew home from shul on Friday night. The lamp is burning, the table is set, the bed is made. The good malach asks that next Shabbos should be like this one, and the other malach has to answer “Amen.” The Lubavitcher Rebbe himself points us to that Gemara when he explains why Yaakov insisted on a bracha from the malach who wrestled with him.

That’s the bracha I think we’re asking for on Friday night. Yaakov held on until the very one who fought him acknowledged who he was. When we’ve struggled on Erev Shabbos and come to the table as Yisroel, may the good malach look at our table and say, “May next Shabbos be like this one.” And may the malach we’ve been wrestling with all week have to answer, “Amen.”

Have a good Erev Shabbos. Please, if you enjoyed this talk, just click the like button. If you haven’t been a subscriber, please subscribe. Share this with other people. I think it’s a beautiful message. We should all be able to have the malach of Eisav say “Amen.”