When Fear Follows You Into Shul

What follows us into shul

Bereishis 28:15 and 32:7–10[1]

וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיֵּצֶר לוֹ

Some of us here in Toronto have had home invasions on our minds this week. You hear about a family being attacked in their own home. Later that night you go upstairs, you're just about to get into bed, and you think, "Did I lock the front door?" You know you locked it. You remember doing it. Sometimes you go downstairs and check anyway. Then you get back into bed, and you're still thinking about that family.

And sometimes it's news from the other side of the world. You hear the name of a place in Eretz Yisrael where somebody you love lives. You send a message. Until you see those two words, "We're fine," it's hard to give your full attention to whatever else you were doing. The people we're worried about can be thousands of miles away. The worry is right here.

Then Shabbos comes. You walk into shul. The fellow sitting next to you says, "Good Shabbos." You say, "Good Shabbos." You open your siddur. What do you do with the worry that came in with you?

With that in mind, listen to how the Torah describes Yaakov Avinu. He's on his way home with his wives and his children. The messengers he sent ahead come back with news. Esav is coming to meet him. He has four hundred men with him. *Vayira Yaakov me'od vayeitzer lo.* Yaakov was very afraid, and he was distressed.

Here's question number one. *Why was Yaakov Avinu so afraid?* We understand why a father hearing that news would fear for his children. But this father had heard something from Hashem Himself. *Ush'marticha bechol asher teileich.* "I will guard you wherever you go." In the very tefillah he's about to say, Yaakov recalls that Hashem Himself told him to return home. How do we understand the word *me'od*, **very** afraid, in the life of the man who received that promise?

[Pause.]

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1 Adapted from Rabbi Yehoshua Rubenstein's shiur "The Integration Bitachon & Tefilla and the Worry of שמא יגרום החטא," Aish Kodesh, Woodmere, via YUTorah. The Radak, Rabbi David Ashear's account and the closing sources and prayer are additions.

Listen to the order of Yaakov's words

Bereishis 32:10–14, 23–25 and 33:1–3

כִּי בְמַקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה

Let's listen to the tefillah before we try to answer. Yaakov tells Hashem, *Ki v'makli avarti es haYarden hazeh.* I crossed this Yarden with my staff. *V'atah hayisi lishnei machanos.* And now I've become two camps. Then he says, *Hatzileini na miyad achi, miyad Esav.* Please save me from my brother, from Esav.

Here's question number two. *Why does Yaakov bring up his walking stick just here?* There's a simple reading. When I left home I owned a stick. Look at the family, the flocks, everything You have given me since. We understand why Yaakov is grateful. What we still want to understand is why he takes Hashem back to that river just before he asks to be saved. What does the Yarden have to do with his brother?

Here's question number three. *Why does Yaakov add, "Ki yarei anochi oso — because I'm afraid of him"?* Suppose the pasuk had read, "Please save me from Esav, lest he come and strike me, mother and children alike." We would understand every word. Now put back the phrase the Torah actually gives us. "Please save me from Esav, **because I'm afraid of him**." Hashem knows how many men Esav has brought. He also knows how frightened Yaakov is. What is Yaakov telling Him with that word *ki*, "because"?

Here's question number four. *Where, in the story that follows, do we hear Hashem's answer?* Yaakov finishes davening. He sends the gift ahead. He takes his family across the stream. That night he's left alone, and someone wrestles with him until dawn. In the morning Esav comes into view, still with his four hundred men. This time Yaakov walks out ahead of his family. Read those scenes one after the other. At what point would you put your finger on the pasuk and say, "Here. Here is where his tefillah was answered"?

[Pause.]

The yesod of the Panim Yafos

Panim Yafos on Bereishis 32:12 · Tehillim 118:6 · Ohr HaChaim on Shemos 14:15 · Rashi on Bereishis 32:11

ה' לִי לֹא אִירָא

The Panim Yafos begins with a line we know from Hallel. *Hashem li, lo ira. Mah yaaseh li adam?* Hashem is with me. I will not be afraid. What can a human being do to me? We tend to read it as one thought. David HaMelech trusts Hashem, and that trust gives him the courage to face another person. The Panim Yafos hears something further in the second half.

His words are *bis'char habitachon hu hahatzalah*. ***The bitachon itself can be the zechus through which the rescue comes.*** If a person reaches the point where he can really say *Hashem li, lo ira*, relying on Hashem to that degree counts for something. It is in the merit of that trust that Hashem can give him a yeshuah.

What does that mean in practice? Think of Klal Yisrael at the Yam Suf. The Egyptians are behind them. The water is in front of them. Hashem says to Moshe, *Daber el Bnei Yisrael v'yisa'u*. Tell them to move forward. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that there was a claim of din against them. When they went forward on Hashem's word while the sea was still in front of them, that act of trust was itself a zechus for the sea to open.

Now come back to one man, one stick, and a different body of water. On the words *ki v'makli*, Rashi brings a Midrash. Yaakov put his staff into the Yarden, and the river split for him. The Panim Yafos asks us to consider what Yaakov brought to that crossing. He had his stick. What else did he have? ***He had the bitachon with which he put that stick in the water.*** In the zechus of that bitachon, the Yarden opened for him.

Keep that picture of Yaakov in your mind. Now let him hear the news about Esav.

The river and the fear

Panim Yafos on Bereishis 32:12 · Ahavas Yisrael, Vayishlach · Berachos 26b · Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 1:1–2

הַצִּילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו כִּי יָרֵא אָנֹכִי אֹתוֹ

That answers question number one. ***Why was Yaakov afraid? Because, facing Esav, he didn't have the same bitachon he'd had at the Yarden.*** The very fact that he felt this fear told him something about himself. He knew what it was to stand before danger with complete trust in Hashem. He remembered what that had felt like. That gives us a way to understand *vayeitzer lo*. It distressed Yaakov to discover that he was afraid.

That answers question number two. ***Why mention the staff? Yaakov is remembering a moment when his bitachon itself was a zechus for a yeshuah.*** Listen to the little word *v'atah*, "and now." The Ahavas Yisrael makes a beautiful observation here. ***Then, the river divided for Yaakov. Now, Yaakov is dividing the camps.*** At the river he knew the strength of his trust. Here he is looking from one camp to the other, worried about what might happen to the people in them. Both moments belong in the same tefillah.

And listen now to what follows. *Hatzileini na … ki yarei anochi oso.* It's as though Yaakov is saying, "Ribbono Shel Olam, I remember how I crossed the river. Today I feel afraid. How can I count on the zechus of a madreigah that I can feel I don't have right now? So I'm asking You, please save me and my family."

That answers question number three. ***Why say "because I'm afraid"? The fear explains why Yaakov turns to this particular tefillah for rescue.*** He can tell Hashem exactly where he's holding.

Of course Yaakov davened even on days when his bitachon was strong. Yaakov himself gave us Maariv. ***Bitachon is a madreigah. Tefillah is a chiyuv.*** The degree of trust I feel can change from one day to the next. The obligation to daven is there every day. When Shacharis comes after a sleepless night, I can open my siddur just as I am. And if what's troubling me most is how little bitachon I feel this morning, what can I do about that?

What the Baal Shem Tov says we can ask for

Berachos 4a · Bereishis Rabbah 68:2 · Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah, Vayeitzei §1

שמא יגרום החטא

The Gemara in Berachos puts the promise and the fear side by side. Hashem promised to guard Yaakov. Why should Yaakov be afraid? *Shema yigrom hacheit.* Perhaps he had sinned in the intervening years, and that might affect the protection he had been promised. Chazal also tell us what Yaakov had once said on the road to Charan, empty-handed. *Ezri mei'im Hashem, oseh shamayim va'aretz.* My help comes from Hashem, the Maker of heaven and earth. Yaakov knew how deep his trust had once been.

Now listen to what the Toldos Yaakov Yosef records from his rebbe, the Baal Shem Tov. *Shamati mimori* — I heard from my teacher. When a person is deserving of punishment, the madreigah of bitachon can be taken from him. Remember the Panim Yafos. Bitachon can itself be a zechus of protection. Losing that madreigah can therefore be part of the judgment.

In that light, listen again to *shema yigrom hacheit*. What did Yaakov know, and what did he wonder? He knew he was afraid. That made him wonder whether something he had done had cost him the bitachon he remembered. *Shema* means **perhaps**. This was Yaakov's own cheshbon about his own avodah. For the Jew sitting here this Shabbos worrying about somebody at home, listen to the Baal Shem Tov's next words.

Al kein ra'ui lehispallel. Therefore a person ought to daven. For what? ***For the bitachon itself.*** If trust is a gift Hashem can give me, I can ask Him for it. I can say, "Hashem, You know who I'm worried about. Please look after them. And please give me the bitachon I wish I had right now."

Think back to the worry we brought into shul. If Yaakov Avinu could tell Hashem that he was afraid for his family, **surely we can tell Him that we're afraid for ours.** We still have one question on the table. What happened after Yaakov said those words?

Yaakov davened for help. Hashem sent a wrestler.

Radak on Bereishis 32:14 and 32:25 · Rashi on Bereishis 33:3

לחזק לבו שלא יירא מעשו

Go back to the scene we left before dawn. Yaakov has davened. He has sent his gift ahead to Esav. Now he is alone, and someone comes to wrestle with him. If you were telling this story to someone for the first time, you could well imagine him interrupting. "One minute. The man is already scared of his brother. He's asked Hashem for help. Now he has to wrestle all night, too?"

Listen to the Radak on the pasuk after the tefillah. Yaakov waited for an answer. The Radak calls the malach ***"hamalach shehayah teshuvas tefillaso" — the malach who was the answer to his tefillah.*** A little further on, when the Torah describes the struggle, the Radak tells us why Hashem sent him. *Lechazek libo shelo yira me'Esav.* To strengthen Yaakov's heart so that he would no longer fear Esav.

All night the malach wrestles with Yaakov and cannot overcome him. Through that encounter Hashem lets Yaakov experience something for himself. If the malach couldn't overcome him, Esav wouldn't overcome him either. Now look again at where Yaakov stands the next morning. *Vehu avar lifneihem.* He walks ahead of his family. Rashi tells us what was on his mind. If Esav comes to fight, let him meet me first.

That answers question number four. *Where was the answer to "Please save me"? It had already begun that night, while Yaakov still had to face Esav in the morning.* What did Hashem give him in those hours? The courage to go out and meet his brother.

The call on the way to Mincha

Rabbi David Ashear, Living Emunah, “Capitalize on the Opportunities,” May 30, 2024

What might that kind of chizuk look like in the middle of an ordinary week? Rabbi David Ashear tells of a businessman who came to him with this story. On Shabbos he’d heard a rav speak about what happens when a person asks Hashem for help. Sometimes Hashem gives him an opportunity to do a mitzvah. On Tuesday an important customer canceled an order. The goods were already made, the delivery was late, and the man stood to lose hundreds of thousands of dollars.

On his way to Mincha he said, *Eloka d’Meir aneini*, three times. He meant to give tzedakah when he reached shul. A minute later his phone rang. A man he didn’t remember was in financial trouble. The businessman said he couldn’t help and ended the call.

Now stop there for a moment. A Yid with money worries has just asked Hashem for help, and his phone rings. ***Who would he most like to hear from?*** The customer. ***Who’s actually on the phone?*** Somebody who needs money from *him*.

Walking into shul, he remembered the Shabbos drash. After Mincha he called the man back, apologized, and asked what he needed. His rent was due the next day. What he lacked was the very amount the businessman had in mind to give. He sent it. He told the caller, **“Nothing is random. Hashem sent you.”** ***Rabbi Ashear says he already felt better that evening.*** The customer agreed to take the goods the following morning.

What could he do that evening that he couldn’t do when he first picked up the phone? ***He could make room for that other Yid.*** Think what it took to call back and say, in effect, “Tell me what you need.” His own merchandise was still sitting there. He could already act with bitachon while he was waiting for his yeshuah.

Think of Yaakov going out to meet Esav. Think of that businessman making the second call. If a nisayon comes our way this week, we can have a tefillah ready. ***“Hashem, I’m afraid. Please help me through this, and give me the bitachon to take the next step.”***

What we can daven this Shabbos

Zera Kodesh, Vayigash · Shemos 34:6–7 · Ashrei, Tehillim 145:8–9 · Likutei Tefillos I, 60

טוֹב ה׳ לַכֹּל וְרַחֲמָיו עַל כָּל מַעֲשָׂיו

If I wonder what zechus I have to ask, the Ropshitzer Rebbe points us to Hashem's Yud-Gimmel Middos HaRachamim. Where do you hear those Middos in davening? Think of Selichos, or of Yom Kippur. We say *Keil Melech yosheiv al kisei rachamim*, and then we call out together, *Hashem, Hashem, Keil rachum vechanun*. Merciful and gracious. That's Who I'm turning to. Even when I wonder, "What zechus do I have?" I can still ask Him for rachamim.

Where do we hear that rachamim in shul on an ordinary Shabbos? Open to *Ashrei*. Two pesukim, one after the other. *Chanun verachum Hashem, erech apayim ugdol chesed.* Hashem is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and great in kindness. Then, *Tov Hashem lakol, verachamav al kol maasav.* Hashem is good to all, and His mercy extends to all His creatures. If I'm sitting here worried about somebody I love, ***we're both included in that kol.***

Reb Noson of Breslov asks in his own tefillah, *U'sezakeinu levitachon gadol dikdushah.* ***Grant us the zechus of deep, holy trust in You.*** Yaakov could say to Hashem, *ki yarei anochi*, "I'm afraid." What might those words sound like from us, here in Toronto?

> *Ribbono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, You see everything happening right here in our city—families shaken in their own homes, people losing jobs and livelihoods overnight, and the sudden reminder that alarms, walls, paychecks, and plans cannot guarantee a single second of safety.*
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> *Hashem, when I hear these news stories, it is natural for fear and vulnerability to creep into my heart. Please don't let this fear pull me away from You—use it instead to awaken the emunah I have been asking You for.*
>
> *Please watch over my family and the families in our city.* ***Give me the bitachon to trust You while I'm still waiting.*** *When You send me something that can strengthen me, help me recognize it. And when someone I love is afraid, give me the calm to sit beside them and say,* ***"Let's daven together."*** *Amen.*

Good Shabbos.

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