Where Was Yaakov's Army?

Why Yaakov prepared to flee and the Chashmonaim chose to fight

Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz · Congregation's source sheet

Source 1 What did Yaakov actually prepare to do?

Bereishis 32:7–9 · The report, the division of the camp and Yaakov's own words.

ז וַיָּשֻׁבוּ הַמַּלְאָכִים אֶל יַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר בָּאנוּ אֶל אָחִיךָ אֶל עֵשָׂו וְגַם הֹלֵךְ לִקְרָאתְךָ וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ עִמּוֹ׃
ח וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיֵּצֶר לוֹ וַיַּחַץ אֶת הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ וְאֶת הַצֹּאן וְאֶת הַבָּקָר וְהַגְּמַלִּים לִשְׁנֵי מַחֲנוֹת׃
ט וַיֹּאמֶר אִם יָבוֹא עֵשָׂו אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה הָאַחַת וְהִכָּהוּ וְהָיָה הַמַּחֲנֶה הַנִּשְׁאָר לִפְלֵיטָה׃

The messengers returned to Yaakov and said, "We came to your brother, to Esav. He too is coming to meet you, with four hundred men." Yaakov was very afraid and distressed. He divided the people with him, the flocks, the cattle and the camels into two camps. He said, "If Esav comes against one camp and strikes it, the remaining camp will escape."

Source 2 Where does Rashi see three preparations?

Rashi on Bereishis 32:9 in full · The first comment explains the grammar of "camp."

המחנה האחת והכהו. מחנה משמש לשון זכר ולשון נקבה. "אם תחנה עלי מחנה" (תהלים כז, ג), הרי לשון נקבה. "המחנה הזה" (בראשית לג, ח), לשון זכר. וכן יש שאר דברים משמשים לשון זכר ולשון נקבה. "השמש יצא על הארץ" (בראשית יט, כג), "מקצה השמים מוצאו" (תהלים יט, ז), הרי לשון זכר. "השמש זרחה על המים" (מלכים ב ג, כב), הרי לשון נקבה. וכן רוח, "והנה רוח גדולה באה" (איוב א, יט), הרי לשון נקבה. "ויגע בארבע פנות הבית" (שם), הרי לשון זכר. "ורוח גדולה וחזק מפרק הרים" (מלכים א יט, יא), הרי לשון זכר ולשון נקבה. וכן אש, "ואש יצאה מאת ה'" (במדבר טז, לה), לשון נקבה. "אש לוהט" (תהלים קד, ד), לשון זכר.

והיה המחנה הנשאר לפליטה. על כרחו, כי אלחם עמו. התקין עצמו לשלשה דברים, לדורון, לתפלה ולמלחמה. לדורון, "ותעבור המנחה על פניו". לתפלה, "אלהי אבי אברהם". למלחמה, "והיה המחנה הנשאר לפליטה".

"Even against his will, for I will fight him." **Gift** — "The gift passed on ahead of him" (32:22). **Prayer** — "G-d of my father Avraham" (32:10). **War** — "The remaining camp will escape" (32:9). Why does Rashi cite a pasuk about escape as his evidence for milchamah?

הצילני נא מיד אחי מיד עשו כי ירא אנכי אתו פן יבוא והכני אם על בנים׃

In his tefillah (32:12), Yaakov asks, "Please save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav. I fear him, lest he come and strike me, mother and children together."

Source 3 Rav Simcha Zissel Broyde reads Rashi beside the Ramban

Sam Derech on Vayishlach · Ramban on Bereishis 32:4, 9 · Kesubos 111a

וראוי לנו לאחז בדרכו של צדיק ... ולהצלה בדרך מלחמה לברוח ולהנצל

Even if Yaakov would have fought, what can later generations learn from him? Yaakov divided the camp to let his family escape. If Esav cut off that route, Yaakov was ready to stand in front of his children. Rav Simcha Zissel explains why the Ramban tells us "to flee and be saved." In Yaakov's day there was as yet no oath against rebellion. A Jewish community in galus is bound by that oath (Kesubos 111a). What carries forward is the duty to prepare for rescue: daven, seek to appease the ruler, and give the threatened families a way out.

Source 4 Why was the family still there when Esav arrived?

Malbim on 32:8–9 · Abarbanel on 32:8–12 and 33:1 · Chofetz Chaim al HaTorah, Devarim 2:3–5

The Malbim explains how separating herds and family bought time for flight or resistance. Abarbanel adds that Esav approached on the family's side of the river. Their escape route had closed. The Chofetz Chaim points later generations back to Yaakov. The Ramban gives an example: a ruler in one country threatens the Jews, and another receives the refugees. Which camp have those families become?

Source 5 Whose acknowledgment did Yaakov need?

Bereishis 32:25–30 and 33:9 with Rashi · Derashos HaRan 2 · Malbim on 33:1

לא אשלחך כי אם ברכתני • יהי לך אשר לך

To the malach: "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Esav later says: "Let what is yours remain yours." Rashi hears acknowledgment of Yitzchak's brachos in both encounters. The Ran explains the victory over Esav's sar. The Malbim connects what Yaakov saw with his spiritual eyes that night to the meeting he would see with his physical eyes in the morning.

Source 6 The maidservants went first. Where was Yaakov?

Bereishis 33:2–3 with Rashi · Koheles Rabbah 9:18

וישם את השפחות ואת ילדיהן ראשנה ואת לאה וילדיה אחרנים ואת רחל ואת יוסף אחרנים:
והוא עבר לפניהם וישתחו ארצה שבע פעמים עד גשתו עד אחיו:

The maidservants and their children, then Leah and hers, then Rachel and Yosef. Yaakov himself went ahead of them all and bowed seven times. Rashi on 33:3 gives us Yaakov's words:

והוא עבר לפניהם. אמר, אם יבא אותו רשע להלחם, ילחם בי תחלה.

"If that wicked man comes to fight, let him fight me first." The Midrash adds, "Better that he strike me than my children."

Source 7 What does the order of the families foreshadow?

Gra, Even Sheleimah, ch. 11 · Rav Yisroel Elya Weintraub, Hatekufah B'saaras Eliyahu · Rashi, Devarim 7:10

The Gra reads the order of the families as a remez to the end of galus. The Erev Rav hold public power, ordinary Jews follow, and talmidei chachamim stand last in public esteem. Bilhah and Zilpah themselves are mothers of shevatim. **Do Israeli soldiers' victories prove the national ideal is right?** Rav Weintraub explains that the good within a movement may earn reward in this world. Success may even use up the merit that sustained it. Consider Ashur and Bavel. Each once conquered other nations. Both empires fell. What could either victory, by itself, establish about whose values to follow? (Yeshayahu 10:13–15.)

Source 8 Who invokes the Maccabees?

Earlier voices. Herzl: "The Maccabees will rise again" (The Jewish State, 1896). Jabotinsky honours Jewish defenders as "the children of those whose ancestor was Judah, lion of the Maccabees" (introduction to Skazanie o Pogrome). Aharon Ze'ev's song Anu Nos'im Lapidim declares, "No miracle befell us."

Source 9 What did the Chashmonaim fight to preserve?

I Maccabees 2:27 and 3:18–22 · Rambam, Hilchos Megillah v'Chanukah 3:1–3 · Shabbos 21b

Mattisyahu calls for those faithful to Torah and the covenant. The Rambam records the Greek bans on Torah and mitzvos, the victory and the return of Jewish rule. Then he describes entering the Heichal and finding one day's oil. Which event explains eight days of lighting?

Source 10 What do we thank Hashem for in Al HaNissim?

להשכיחם תורתך ולהעבירם מחוקי רצונך
מסרת גבורים ביד חלשים ורבים ביד מעטים ... וזדים ביד עוסקי תורתך
ואחר כן באו בניך לדביר ביתך

"To make them forget Your Torah and turn them away from the laws of Your will." "You delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few … and the arrogant into the hands of those who study Your Torah." "And afterwards Your children entered the inner chamber of Your House."

Source 11 Rav Shimon Schwab on "and afterwards"

Why does Al HaNissim insert ואחר כן before the return to the Mikdash? Rav Schwab explains that the decrees compelling Jews to abandon Torah and mitzvos were what warranted risking their lives. Even reclaiming the Beis HaMikdash would not by itself explain going to war. Purifying it and relighting the menorah came afterwards, once Hashem had granted victory. (Chanukah derashah, recorded in The Empty Wagon, p. 1293.)