

(4) Yaakov sent angels before him to Esav his brother to the land of Seir, the field of Edom.

(5) He commanded them, saying, “So you shall say to my master, to Esav: ‘So said your servant Yaakov: I have dwelt with Lavan and I have delayed [coming back] until now.’”

(6) ‘I have acquired ox, donkey and sheep, servant and maidservant, and I have sent to tell my master to find favor in your eyes.’”

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### THE HIDDEN MEANING OF YAAKOV'S MESSAGE TO ESAV

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#### Consider the following questions:

1. a) The word *לֵאמֹר* (*saying*) normally serves as an instruction to the listener to repeat what he is being told to another person. However, it seems unnecessary in verse 5, because Yaakov explicitly tells the angels to tell Esav his exact words (“*So you shall say to my master, to Esav*”).  
b) Conversely, since Yaakov does say *לֵאמֹר*, why does he also say, “*So you shall say to my master, to Esav*”?
2. Why did Yaakov want the angels to tell Esav, “*I have dwelt with Lavan*”? How is it germane here?
3. What is the point of telling Esav, “*and I have delayed [coming back] until now*”?
4. How will telling Esav about the possessions he has accumulated (*ox, donkey and sheep, etc.*) accomplish “*finding favor in Esav’s eyes*” (verse 6)? To the contrary, this would arouse Esav’s envy and anger, for he would say that Yaakov acquired these things as a result of Yitzchak’s blessings that he had stolen from him.
5. Why did Yaakov make himself so very subservient to Esav in this message?

(ד) וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מַלְאָכִים לְפָנָיו אֶל־עֵשָׂו אָחִיו אֲרָצָה שְׂעִיר שָׂדֵה אָדָם.

(ה) וַיֵּצֵאוּ אַתְּם לְאָמֹר כֹּה תֹאמְרוּן לְאֲדֹנָי לְעֵשָׂו כֹּה אָמַר עַבְדְּךָ יַעֲקֹב עִם־לְבָן גְּרִתִּי וְאַחַר עַד־עָתָה.

(ו) וַיְהִי־לִי שׂוֹר וְחִמּוֹר צֹאן וְעַבְד וְשִׁפְחָה וְאִשְׁלָחָה לְהַגִּיד לְאֲדֹנָי לְמִצְאֵיחוֹן בְּעֵינָיָהּ.

Yaakov's goal was to appease Esav, who was angry at him for stealing the blessings given by Yitzchak. He therefore sent angels with a carefully worded message. The first issue to be addressed was the fundamental one of which brother was the dominant one in their relationship.

Yaakov knew that when messengers convey verbal messages, they often modify the original wording to make the best impression on the intended recipient. So even if the angels were to refer to Esav as Yaakov's master, and refer to Yaakov as Esav's servant, Esav might think that these were the messengers' words, not Yaakov's. To make it clear that they were Yaakov's own words, the angels did not speak to Esav in third person (as messengers usually speak): "Your servant Yaakov said that he has dwelt with Lavan, and he has delayed, etc." Rather, Yaakov specifically prefaced his instructions to the angels with the word *לֵאמֹר* (*saying*), by which he meant that the angels were to convey his message to Esav exactly as he stated it, i.e., in the first person (*"I have dwelt with Lavan and I have delayed..."*). Esav would then reason as follows: "If these messengers were careful to repeat the message so exactly, using Yaakov's exact words, it must be that Yaakov himself called me his master and referred to himself as my servant. It is not that the messengers changed his wording to make a better impression on me." [This answers Question 1a.]

However, even if Esav believed that this deferential language was Yaakov's, he might still suspect that Yaakov spoke this way

Answer to  
Question 1a

only because Yaakov was sending a message to him. He might think that when Yaakov spoke about him in the privacy of his own home, he did not speak in such a respectful way. To address this concern, the Torah tells us that Yaakov *commanded [the angels] saying*, “So you shall say to my master, to Esav: ‘So said your servant Yaakov...’” Although the words “So you shall say to my master, to Esav” are not part of the actual message the angels needed to transmit to Esav, Yaakov wanted the messengers to repeat even these words to his brother.<sup>1</sup> In this way, Esav would see that even when Yaakov spoke to others about him in the confines of his own home, he still referred to him as “my master.” [This answers Question 1b.]

Answer to  
Question 1b

In general, Yaakov’s message was meant to show Esav that there was no reason for him to be angry over the fact that Yaakov received the blessings that had been meant for him — for they had not been fulfilled. There were three main parts to those blessings: (1) Abundant blessing from the heavens — *May God give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fatness of the earth, and abundant grain and wine.* (2) Power over the nations of the world — *Nations shall serve you and peoples will bow down to you.* (3) Dominion over your brothers — *“May you be master over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you.”*<sup>2</sup> In telling the angels what to say to Esav, Yaakov addressed these three blessings (in reverse order): With regard to the third part, Yaakov said, “So you shall say to my master, to Esav. ‘So said your servant Yaakov...’” As explained above, the message here was: “I am not your master, my brother; to the contrary, you are mine. I am your servant, who is supposed to do the bowing.” Regarding the second part, Yaakov said, “*I have dwelt with Lavan,*” meaning:

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1. Additionally, the Alshich offers the explanation that Yaakov was worried that the angels would be concerned for his honor and not want to say to Esav, “your servant Yaakov.” Yaakov therefore expressed himself with those words in the part that was addressed to the angels, to reinforce the message that the angels should say, “your servant Yaakov.”

2. *Bereishis 27:28–29.*

“Lavan is from the nations of the world, yet he did not serve me; rather, I was his servant, dwelling in his house [under his authority].” And vis-à-vis the first part of the blessing, Yaakov said, “*I have delayed [coming back] until now.* That is, I have had to work many years for Lavan, day and night. It was only through this demanding work that I have amassed this wealth, not as a result of Yitzchak’s blessing that I should receive *of the fatness of the earth*, etc. (for certainly that blessing did not mean that I would have to work like a slave.)” In sum: You have no need to be jealous of me that I took our father’s blessings, for you can see that they have not come true. [This answers Questions 2 and 3.]

Answer to  
Questions  
2 and 3

Now, the halachah states that whatever a servant owns belongs to his master (מִה שֶׁקָּנָה עֶבֶד קָנָה רַבּוֹ). After declaring himself to be Esav’s servant, Yaakov told Esav about all the possessions he had accumulated (*ox, sheep and donkey, etc.*). This would certainly “find favor in Esav’s eyes,” Yaakov was saying, for these possessions were now Esav’s to take if he so chose. [This answers Question 4.]<sup>3</sup>

Answer to  
Question 4

It remains to be addressed why Yaakov spoke in such a subservient way to Esav (Question 5). We find that our Sages<sup>4</sup> indeed state that God held it against Yaakov for doing so. After all, He had already promised Yaakov that He would bring him back safely (*Bereishis* 31:3) and had even sent angels to accompany him, so he had no reason to fear Esav! The Sages compare Yaakov to a person who awakens a sleeping robber chieftain:

The Holy One, blessed is He, said to Yaakov, “Esav was going on his way in the direction of Seir and had no intention of

3. The Alshich adds that we find elsewhere that Yaakov was prepared to give all his belongings to Esav. *Midrash Tanchuma* (Buber), *Vayishlach* 11 states that Yaakov sold everything he had acquired outside the Land of Israel as payment for his share in the Cave of the Patriarchs (מְעַרַת הַמְּכַפְּלָה). [The Alshich explains that this was because properties acquired outside the Land “have no *berachah*” in Eretz Yisrael.] See also Alshich to verses 8–13 below.

4. *Bereishis Rabbah* 75:2–3.

(7) The angels returned to Yaakov, saying, “We came to your brother to Esav and he is also making his way towards you and four hundred men are with him.”

(8) Yaakov was very frightened and he was distressed. He divided the people who were with him and the sheep, cattle and camels into two camps.

(9) He said, “If Esav comes to one camp and strikes it, the remaining camp will escape.”

(10) Yaakov said, “God of my father Avraham and God of my father Yitzchak, Hashem (ה-י-ה-ו-ה) Who has said to me, ‘Return to your land and to your birthplace and I will bestow good upon you.’

(11) “I am unworthy of all the mercies, and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for with my staff I passed over this Yarden and now I have become two camps.

(12) “Please save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav, for I fear him, lest he come and strike me down, mother and children.

(13) “And You said, ‘I will surely do good with you and I will make your offspring like the sand of the sea which is too numerous to count.’”

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attacking you, but you sent messengers to him and said, ‘...to my master, to Esav. So said your servant Yaakov’!<sup>5</sup>

However, the Midrash itself<sup>6</sup> helps to explain Yaakov’s actions. The Sages relate an episode that occurred when the Jews were under the dominion of the Roman empire (the descendants of Esav). R’ Yehudah HaNasi (Rebbe) told R’ Apas to address an official letter to the emperor. R’ Apas wrote: “From Yehudah HaNasi (the Prince) to our master, King Antoninus.” When Rebbe saw this, he tore up the letter and gave instructions to readdress it as: “From your servant Yehudah to our master, King Antoninus.” When asked why

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5. The Midrash compares Yaakov’s actions to *Yirmeyahu* 13:21, which states, *What will you say when He punishes you? You yourself have trained them as rulers over you.*

6. *Ibid.* 75:5.

(ז) וישבו המלֹאכִים אֶל־יַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר בָּאנוּ אֶל־אָחִיךָ אֶל־עֵשׂוֹ וְגַם הִלֵּךְ לִקְרֹאתָךְ וְאַרְבַּע־מֵאוֹת אִישׁ עִמּוֹ.  
 (ח) וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיִּצַּר לוֹ וַיַּחֲזֵץ אֶת־הָעַם אֲשֶׁר־אִתּוֹ וְאֶת־הַצֹּאֵן וְאֶת־הַבְּקָר וְהַגְּמִלִים לְשָׁנֵי מַחְנֹת.  
 (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־יָבוֹא עֵשׂוֹ אֶל־הַמַּחְנֶה הָאֵחָת וְהִפְהֹו וְהָיָה הַמַּחְנֶה הַנֶּשְׂאָר לְפִלִיטָה.  
 (י) וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי אָבִי יִצְחָק ה' הָאֹמֵר אֵלַי שׁוּב לְאַרְצְךָ וּלְמוֹלְדֹתְךָ וְאִיטִיבָה עִמָּךְ.  
 (יא) קִטְנִיתִי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל־הָאֱמֻת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי בְמַקְלִי עִבְרָתִי אֶת־הִירְדֵן הִזָּה וְעַתָּה הִיִּיתִי לְשָׁנֵי מַחְנֹת.  
 (יב) הַצִּילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשׂוֹ כִּי־יִרָא אֲנֹכִי אֹתוֹ פֶּן־יָבוֹא וְהִכְנִי אִם עַל־בָּנַיִם.  
 (יג) וְאֵתָה אֲמַרְתָּ הֵיטֵב אִיטִיב עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַתִּי אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ כְּחוֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִסָּפֵר מֵרֶב.

he was degrading his own honor, he replied, “Am I better than my forefather Yaakov who said, “*So said your servant Yaakov*”?

Our Sages are telling us here that Yaakov behaved in this way toward Esav in order to serve as an example for his descendants, who would find themselves in the darkness of *galus* without the Divine promises of protection that Yaakov had. At such a time, the correct way to behave towards Esav’s descendants would be with deference and subservience. [This answers Question 5.]

Answer to  
Question 5

## YAAKOV PREPARES TO DEFEND HIMSELF FROM ESAV

Consider the following questions:

1. Why does the Torah use two expressions to describe Yaakov’s emotions (verse 8), saying both that he was