

(ז) וישבו המלאכים אל־יעקב לאמר באנו אל־אחידך אל־עשו וגם הלך לקראתך וארבע־מאות איש עמו.
 (ח) ויירא יעקב מאד ויצר לו ויחץ את־העם אשר־אתו ואת־הצאן ואת־הבקר והגמלים לשני מחנות.
 (ט) ויאמר אם־יבוא עשו אל־המחנה האחת והכהו והיה המחנה הנשאר לפליטה.
 (י) ויאמר יעקב אלהי אבי אברהם ואלהי אבי יצחק ה' האמר אלי שוב לארצך ולמולדתך ואיטיבה עמך.
 (יא) קטנתי מכל החסדים ומכל־האמת אשר עשית את־עבדך כי במקלי עברתי את־הירדן הזה ועתה הייתי לשני מחנות.
 (יב) הצילני נא מיד אחי מיד עשו כי־ירא אנכי אתו פן־יבוא והפני אם על־בנים.
 (יג) ואתה אמרת היטב איטיב עמך ושמתני את־זרעך כחול הים אשר לא־יספר מרב.

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

very frightened and that he was distressed? In addition, why does it say he was “very frightened” but not that he was “very distressed”?

2. What did Yaakov achieve by dividing the camp into two?
3. (a) Why does Yaakov say (verse 9), “If Esav **comes to one camp [and strikes it]**”? He should have just said, “If Esav strikes one camp.” (b) Our Sages⁷ teach us that Yaakov prepared for war with Esav. Why, then, would he simply let Esav strike one camp and not fight him?
4. Why was Yaakov so sure that the remaining camp would escape, when we find him expressing doubt even about his own survival?⁸ And if Yaakov was confident he could fight against Esav and defeat him, then couldn't he also save the first camp?
5. Why does Yaakov say, “God of my father Avraham and God of my father Yitzchak”? He should have combined them and said, “God of my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak.”
6. (a) Why does Yaakov need to remind God of His promise to him in verse 10, “Return to your land ... and I will bestow good upon you”? (b) Doesn't the fact that God promised to keep Yaakov safe⁹ make Yaakov guilty of lack of faith in being afraid of Esav?
7. Why does Yaakov say in verse 10, “**Hashem** (ה-ו-ה-י), Who has said to me” instead of “You have said to me” (as he says in verse 13)?¹⁰

7. Tanchuma, Vayishlach 6.

8. As Yaakov prays to God (verse 12), “Please save me from the hand of my brother.”

9. In this verse; and also earlier, when he had first embarked to Lavan's house, where God had told him, “I am with you and I will protect you wherever you go” (28:15).

10. It can likewise be asked why the verse does not simply continue, “Who has said to me,” without “Hashem” or “You.”

8. Why does Yaakov say (verse 12), both “from the hand of my brother” and “from the hand of Esav”? It would have been enough to say one of these.

Initially, Yaakov did not know whether Esav was still out to harm him for having taken his blessings, or if he had forgotten the matter. That is why he sent angels (rather than human beings), for angels would be able to reveal to him what was truly in Esav’s heart.¹¹ They reported back that Esav was intending to harm him and was marching toward him with four hundred men. However, Yaakov was still not sure if Esav would really want to kill him while their father was still alive.¹² Perhaps he would satisfy himself by venting his anger against Yaakov’s possessions, which he felt Yaakov had acquired only as a result of the blessings he stole from him.

Yaakov was also worried that Esav possessed certain merits that he himself lacked.¹³ During all the years that Yaakov had lived in exile in Lavan’s house in Padan Aram (Charan), Esav had the merits of both living in Eretz Yisrael and fulfilling the mitzvah of *kibbud av va’eim*. Maybe these merits would give him an advantage over Yaakov. In addition, Yaakov was worried that perhaps in God’s eyes he had indeed “stolen” Esav’s blessings, and that he therefore owed Esav. Finally, Yaakov was worried that even if in God’s eyes the blessings belonged to him and he had not sinned in taking them, Esav could still kill him, for his brother was a creature of free will (בְּעַל בְּחִירָה), and God does not prevent people from acting based on their free will.¹⁴

11. The Alshich references Rashi to verse 7.

12. See *Bereishis* 27:41, where the Torah tells us that Esav planned to kill Yaakov after their father Yitzchak passed away.

13. This is besides a merit that both of them had, namely the merit of their righteous ancestors, Avraham and Yitzchak (זְכוּת אֲבוֹת). See Alshich below.

14. God gave man the freedom to choose good or evil (for otherwise the whole

Based on all this, let us now proceed to answer the questions we asked above.

The Torah tells us that when the angels told Yaakov that Esav was marching towards him, *he was very frightened*. The very fact that he felt so frightened worried him. In order to explain this, let us look at the following Gemara:¹⁵

A certain student was walking behind R' Yishmael bar R' Yose in the marketplace of *Tzion*. He saw that [the student] was afraid. He said to him, "Have you committed a sin? Is it not written (*Yeshayahu* 33:14), *The sinners in Tzion were afraid...?*" The student answered, "But does it not say (*Mishlei* 28:14), *Fortunate is the man who is always afraid?*" R' Yishmael replied, "That verse is referring to Torah learning [i.e., that he should always worry lest he forget something he has learned.]¹⁶"

Based on this, we can explain that Yaakov grew concerned when he felt great fear well up inside him. He thought to himself, "If I am feeling such fear, it must be that I have sinned in some way; otherwise I would not be feeling like this." That is why the Torah states (verse 8), *Yaakov was very frightened and he was distressed*: the very fact that he was so frightened was causing him distress; it was not that he was both extremely distressed as well as frightened over what was happening with Esav. Perhaps in God's eyes it was nevertheless still considered as if he had stolen the blessings from Esav. [This answers Question 1.]

Therefore, verse 8 continues, *he divided the people who were with him and the sheep, cattle, and camels into two camps*. In one camp, he put his wives and children (*the people who were with him*)

concept of reward and punishment would not make sense), which includes freedom to hurt others.

15. *Berachos* 60a.

16. Rashi there. Rashi adds that in this way he will take the time to review what he has learned.

Answer to
Question 1

and in the other he put all his possessions (*the sheep, cattle, and camels*). He positioned the camp that held his possessions in front, so that Esav would meet this camp first. Then he placed himself in front of both camps. He reasoned, “Perhaps Esav will let out all his anger against the first camp, in the belief that my possessions really belong to him; but he will not want to hurt me personally as long as our father Yitzchak is still alive. Or perhaps he will be so overcome by anger that he will indeed attack me even though our father is alive. So this is how I will find out his true intentions: *If Esav comes to one camp and strikes it* (verse 9), i.e., if Esav passes me by (despite the fact that he will reach me first), and comes to the first camp (the one containing my possessions), I will know that he does not intend to attack me personally. And I will stand aside and let him *strike [my camp]*; I am not concerned about my possessions, and perhaps this will even help to atone for any sins I might have committed against him. [This answers Question 3.]

“Once Esav destroys the first camp, I have no doubt that *the remaining camp will escape*. Firstly, he will not attack the second camp containing my family because he will not be so furious anymore, and he really does not want to risk killing me in our father’s lifetime. And even if he does attack the second camp, I will fight him, and Hashem will surely not let him defeat me after he has destroyed the one camp on which he may have a somewhat legitimate claim (because I took his blessing).” [This answers Questions 2 and 4.]

What if Esav ignored the camp containing the possessions and attacked Yaakov himself? [If this were to happen, it would come down to a question of who has greater merits.] Yaakov’s next words addressed this issue, one merit at a time:

On the surface, it would seem that Esav and Yaakov equally shared the merit of being the children of Avraham and Yitzchak. Yaakov addressed this by saying: “*God of my father Avraham and God of my father Yitzchak...*”

This corresponds to a teaching of our Sages. When Sarah

Answer to
Question 3

Answer to
Questions
2 and 4

wanted to send Yishmael out of the house, God said to Avraham, “Do not be upset about the youth (Yishmael) and about your maid-servant (Hagar); whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her because through Yitzchak (יִצְחָק) you will be considered to have offspring¹⁷ — i.e., Yitzchak is your true son, not Yishmael. The Sages¹⁸ then expounded the word “יִצְחָק” (lit., *in* Yitzchak) further, to mean: only some of Yitzchak’s children will be considered your (Avraham’s) offspring, but not all — i.e., Yaakov, but not Esav.

By repeating the phrase “my father,” Yaakov was hinting at the fact that only he, not Esav, possessed the merit of being called the offspring of Avraham and Yitzchak. “Not only is Avraham my father and not Esav’s (as the Sages explained); but Yitzchak, too, is my father and not Esav’s.” [This answers Question 5.]

Answer to
Question 5

Yaakov next addressed the issue of all those extra years that Esav had fulfilled the mitzvos of living in Eretz Yisrael and of honoring his parents. He said to Hashem, “It is not possible that I am viewed as having sinned with regard to these two mitzvos during the years I spent away from home. After all, You Yourself said to me (verse 10), ‘Return to your land (i.e., the Land of Israel) and to your birthplace (i.e., the place of your parents) and I will bestow good upon you.’ If I had sinned in connection with Eretz Yisrael and honoring parents, how could You have linked Your promise to bestow good upon me to my returning home?!” It emerges, then, that verse 10 is not a reminder to God of His promise to Yaakov; rather, it is a proof that Yaakov is adducing to back up his claim of having merits equal to (if not greater than) Esav’s. [This answers Question 6a.]

Answer to
Question 6a

In addition, in saying, “Hashem (י-ו-ה) Who has said to me, ‘Return to your land...’” Yaakov was countering the possible charge that his fear of Esav showed a lack of trust in God, Who

17. Bereishis 21:12.

18. Nedarim 31a.

had promised to protect him (Question 6b). Yaakov was saying: Hashem (יהוה) promised to protect me — יהוה being God’s Name that represents His Attribute of Mercy (*Middas HaRachamim*). However, I am afraid of God’s Attribute of Strict Justice (*Middas HaDin*). For if I acted wrongly in taking Esav’s blessings, God will judge me for that and I will not merit His protection.¹⁹ [This answers Questions 6b and 7.]

Answer to Questions 6b and 7

Yaakov also addresses the question of his possible lack of merit (guilt) for having taken Esav’s blessings. He did not know if God considered this a sin or if God had wanted him to do it. He therefore said: “If I acted wrongly, then *please save me from the hand of my brother* (verse 12), whom I wronged and who has a right to be upset.²⁰ But if I acted rightly, then save me *from the hand of Esav*, i.e., the wicked Esav who is a murderer.²¹ Either way, please save me from him.” [This answers Question 8.]

Answer to Question 8

Then Yaakov continues: “Even though Esav is a creature of free will (בַּעַל בְּחִירָה), and You do not normally intervene to stop people from acting as they choose, please do so here, *lest he come and strike me down, mother and children* (אִם עַל בְּנִים).” With these words Yaakov was hinting as follows: “If You let him kill my family, You will be treating me worse than the mother bird regarding which You commanded (*Devarim 22:6*), לֹא תִקַּח אִם עַל הַבְּנִים, *Do not take the mother with the children.*” He then concluded: “*And You had said, ‘I will surely do good (הֵיטֵב אֵיטִיב) with you and I will make your offspring like the sand of the sea.’ Do not just save me.* Your double expression *הֵיטֵב אֵיטִיב* certainly includes my wives as well. And You promised I would have

19. The Alshich notes that this exactly parallels his explanation of the doubt Yaakov expressed in *Bereishis 28:20*, “If God (Elohim) will be with me and protect me...” See Alshich above, *Parashas Vayetzai 28:20–22*, Question 2.

20. The Alshich adds that this is how Yitzchak viewed matters, for he said to Esav (*Bereishis 27:35*), “**Your brother** came with cunning and took your blessing.”

21. See Rashi, *Bereishis 25:29*.

(14) He spent that night there and he took from what was in his hand, a gift to his brother Esav.

(15) Two hundred she-goats and twenty he-goats, two hundred female sheep and twenty rams.

(16) Thirty nursing camels and their offspring, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.

(17) He handed over each group of animals to his servants separately, and said to his servants, “Go on ahead of me and leave a gap between each group of animals.”

(18) He commanded the first one saying, “When Esav my brother meets you and he asks you saying, ‘To whom do you belong, where are you going and whose are these [animals that are] before you?’

(19) “You shall say, ‘[We belong] to your servant Yaakov, [the animals] are a gift sent to my master, to Esav, and he (Yaakov) is also following behind us.’”

(20) He commanded the second as well, and also the third and also all the ones following the groups of animals, saying, “You should speak like this to Esav when you find him.

(21) “You shall all say, ‘Your servant Yaakov is behind us.’” For he said, “I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.”

numerous offspring — how, then, can You leave them to perish by the hand of Esav? It would be a desecration of Your Name were Your promises to go unfulfilled.”

YAAKOV SENDS GIFTS TO TRY TO APPEASE ESAV

Consider the following questions:

1. Why does the Torah need to tell us (verse 14) that Yaakov *spent that night there*? It seems both unnecessary and unrelated to what happens before or after it.