

ALSHICH

INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר בראשית

פרשת וישלח

SERIES 1: ISSUE 8

THE HIDDEN MEANING OF YAAKOV'S MESSAGE TO ESAV

Chapter 32

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

ד) וישלח יעקב מלאכים לפניו אל עשו אחיו ארצה שעיר שדה אדום.

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.

ה) ויצו אתם לאמר כה תאמרון לאדני לעשו כה אמר עבדך יעקב עם לבן גרתי ואחר עד עתה.

6) I have acquired ox, donkey and sheep, servant and maidservant, and I have sent to tell my master to find favour in your eyes."

ו) ויהי לי שור וחמור צאן ועבד ושפחה ואשלחה להגיד לאדני למצא חן בעיניך.

Consider the following questions:

1. Why did Yaakov want the angels to tell Esav, "I have dwelt with Lavan"? How is it relevant here?
2. What is the point of telling Esav, "and I have delayed [coming back] until now"?
3. Why did Yaakov make himself so very subservient to Esav in this message?

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.

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."*

In telling the angels what to say to Esav, Yaakov addressed these three blessings (in reverse order): Regarding the third part, Yaakov said, "So you shall say to my master, to Esav. 'So said your servant Yaakov...'" 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: "Lavan is from the nations of the world, yet he did not serve me; rather, I was his servant, dwelling in his house (i.e., under his authority)." And vis-à-vis the first part, 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 1 and 2.]**

Still, why did Yaakov speak in such a subservient way to Esav? Indeed, our Sages (*Bereishis Rabbah* 75:2–3) state that God held this against Yaakov, for He had 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. They compare Yaakov (*ibid.*, 75:5) to a person who awakens a sleeping robber chieftain, with Hashem telling Yaakov that Esav was going on his way in the direction of Seir and had had no intention of attacking him, but then Yaakov sent the messengers who talked so subserviently (waking him up, as it were).

However, the Sages then relate an episode that occurred when the Jews were under the dominion of the Roman empire (the descendants of Esav). R' Yehuda HaNasi (Rebbe) told R' Apas to address an official letter to the emperor. R' Apas wrote: "From Yehuda 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 Yehuda to our master, King Antoninus." When asked why he was degrading his own honor, he replied, "Am I better than my forefather Yaakov who said, 'So said your servant Yaakov?'"

Their message is that Yaakov behaved in this way toward Esav 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 3.]**

THE ALSCHICH AND HIS COMMENTARY

The Alshich (1508–1600), was one of only five famous rabbis in Jewish history universally known by the title "HaKadosh" (the holy one). He served on the same Beis Din as Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the *Shulchan Aruch*. The Alshich is most noted for his monumental Tanach commentary.

The Alshich uses his creative insight and encyclopaedic knowledge of Tanach, Talmud, and Midrash to weave together his profound interpretations. He simultaneously focuses on the text as well as the context of a series of verses by listing a range of questions and then answering them all with one or two concepts.

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