



5782 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Vayishlach / פרשת וַיִּשְׁלַח

The Goodness of Yerushalayim

When Yaakov hears that Esav is approaching him with a small army of four hundred soldiers, Yaakov understandably is fearful: “Yaakov became very frightened and was distressed.”¹ Soon, his fears are realized when he is alone at night and is attacked by an angelic representation of Esav. Desperately, Yaakov is forced to fight for his life until the morning, a single mistake away from death.

Yet, Yaakov emerges victorious from his travails. He defeats the angel and receives a new name – Yisrael – to signify his newfound ability to rule over people and angels. Esav takes the path of reconciliation instead of fighting and vacates their ancestral homeland for a life in the far-off Edom. Yaakov/Yisrael reaches heights that he would not have reached if he had not encountered these crises.

The Baal Shem Tov² explains that human beings do not always know what will ultimately be good for them. In fact, a human’s conception of “goodness” might be so rigid that he will even flee from a good thing that God has in store for him since he thinks of it as bad. According to the Baal Shem Tov, this is the meaning of Dovid’s prayer in Tehilim: “May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life.”³ Sometimes human beings run from God’s goodness, mistaking it for the opposite. Therefore, Dovid prays that in such situations the divine kindness should actively pursue him, eventually catching up with him and bringing him God’s blessings. Such was the situation with Yaakov in our parsha.

With this in mind, it is fascinating to analyze the second half of the above verse from Tehillim: “and I will dwell in the house of God my entire life.” Presumably, on one level, this verse refers to the Beit HaMikdash or, the times of Dovid, the home of the Aron in Yerushalayim.

¹ Bereishit 32:8. Translation adapted from Chabad.org.

² Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah, parshat Vayishlach.

³ Tehillim 23:6.



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Understood simply, this concluding prayer is the culmination of the “goodness and kindness” that God should show Dovid.

However, based on the Baal Shem Tov, perhaps we can add a different dimension to the verse. Throughout the long exile, many Jews have become accustomed to living in foreign ground. Intergenerational Jewish communities exist around the world and people often feel a sense of home in their adopted cities. Accordingly, even when afforded the opportunity to return to Yerushalayim, many Jews historically have opted to stay in their home communities (often for very legitimate reasons). Though very far from viewing returning to Yerushalayim as something negative, this return is nonetheless not considered the ultimate good.

God, however, knows what is the ultimate good for human beings and for the Jewish people. Even if they do not perceive returning to Yerushalayim as the ultimate goodness in their lives, God’s blessing will pursue them. One way or another, all Jews will return to “the house of God” in Yerushalayim and thank God for His guidance back to Yerushalayim.