

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch Vayishlach 20 “What’s Your Name?”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. First, I want to acknowledge that this week’s sermon is sponsored by Karen & Henrique Setton, in memory of Henrique’s great-Aunt, Adina Bat Kalman V’Tcharna z’l, who passed away last Tuesday. May her memory be a blessing.

In this week’s parsha there is a mysterious episode in which Yaakov wrestles with an angel of God. According to our sages, this angel was the spiritual representative of Yaakov’s brother Eisav, and the struggle symbolized the battle that Yaakov was destined to have with his brother from then on, throughout history.

After Yaakov triumphs, the angel admits defeat and asks to be released, so that, as the sages teach us, he could join the other angels in their morning ritual of singing praises to God. Before releasing him, Yaakov first asks for a blessing. The angel responds by asking, *What’s your name?* He then tells Yaakov, *Your name is no longer Yaakov, it’s Israel, ki sarita im Elohim v’im anashim vatuchal, because you fought with angels and people and you’ve emerged victorious.*

For some reason, Yaakov asks the angel the same question, as if to become friendly, which is quite strange. Seemingly mystified, the angel responds, *Lama zeh tishal l'shmi, Why do you ask my name?* And that's basically the end of the story.

Rav Sholom Shvadron the famous *Magid* asks two questions about this episode: Why does Yaakov ask for the angel's name? And why does Yaakov let the angel go even though he fails to answer?

As we said, this was the angel of Eisav, which the sages identify as the yetzer hara, the evil inclination.

Rabbi Shvadron explains that the angel's name was captured in his question - *why do you ask?* - because the nature of the yetzer hara is to squelch inquisitiveness. As Chazal tell us, a name represents the essence of a person, and the same could be said of the angel. By asking the angel his name, Yaakov was helping us discover the essence of the yetzer hara so that we can defeat him. This teaches us that the Jewish proclivity for asking questions, which began with Avraham Avinu, is a good practice because it helps us overcome character defects and everything else the yetzer hara tries to instill in us. It keeps us growing and prevents stagnation.

We're all in the midst of a world that in many ways has stopped in its tracks, so it's harder than ever to be productive. But one activity we **can** focus on is being inquisitive, thinking of ideas, how we want to improve our life after Covid, how we can contribute to the lives of other people, and other productive activities. It's true that life has become increasingly difficult because of the amount of time we're spending out of our normal routine. But we can take inspiration from our parsha and look at this as an opportunity to get our creative juices flowing. That will help us be prepared for when God willing, things become normal again. And when that time comes, we'll be poised to make an impact and thereby create an authentic and lasting name for ourselves. Shabbat shalom.