

# JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

## Vayishlach

Among the more important character traits to acquire during one's lifespan is resilience. Considering that life is replete with challenges and obstacles, resilience-the ability to bounce back from a fall-helps us overcome crisis, and can lead us to success where we might otherwise suffer failure.

The book of Genesis in particular tells us of the many challenges and tests that the forebears of Judaism faced. An important distinguishing mark that separated Abraham, Isaac and Jacob from other people was their success in overcoming their life's challenges. This week's portion illustrates many examples of resilience, including: Jacob's encounter with Esau (30:4), Jacob's clash with the angel (32:15), Simon and Levi's treacherous deal with the Shechemites (34:1), and Rachel's death (35:18).

Resilience, as the key to surviving crisis and difficulty, is a theme that rings true on both a personal and national level.

Consider the resilience of the Jewish people. We have spent thousands of years in exile experiencing oppression and failure in many eras, deprivation and discrimination in many countries, trials and tribulations around every corner. Nevertheless, we have always been able to rise successfully, phoenix-like, from the ashes of history, to meet greater and bigger challenges than ever before.

What is the secret of the longevity and continuity of the Jewish people? What has enabled us to prevail and not just survive, but even thrive throughout the generations?

The answer lies in this week's portion. For eons the Jewish people have been called "*Am Yisroel*," the nation of Israel. But why has this name persisted rather than one of the many others ascribed to us over the years? Why not *Ivrim* (Hebrews), *Yehudim* (Judahs?), etc?

This week's parsha teaches us the source of the name *Yisroel*. God tells Jacob, "Your name is Jacob. Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." And He named him Israel" (35:9). The reason for this is stated earlier in the portion:

And Jacob was left alone, and *a man* wrestled with him until the break of dawn... And he (the angel) said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking," but he (Jacob) said, "I will not let you go unless you have blessed me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" and he said, "Jacob." And he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you have commanding power with [an angel of] God and with men, and you have prevailed" (32: 15-29).

The Zohar explains that this man was actually the Esau's *sar*, the heavenly angel that acted on behalf of Esau and his family. Thus what appears at first to be a simple contest between Jacob and a man was actually a spiritual fight between the powers of good (Jacob) and the influence of evil (Esau's *sar*).

Jacob, knowing he was wrestling with a Higher Power, could have been intimidated, easily given up and been vanquished. Instead, he chose to fight. He chose to overcome.



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“Because you have fought and prevailed, you are to be named *Yisroel*. Because you showed yourself to be resilient, you will be called *Yisroel*.”

The Jewish nation has been called *Yisroel* because the name *Yisroel* is rooted in the fight with “the man.” The result of that fight was the acquiescence of evil to good: “Because you have commanding power with [an angel of] God and with men, and you have prevailed.” Thus are the descendants of Jacob given the name *Yisroel*.

What has given the Jewish people hope through the ages is the promise that one day things will get better. Latent in our very name is the promise that despite difficult times, there is hope that the promise of change will be fulfilled. It has been stated that “Judaism is not about the spirit of survival, it is about the survival of the spirit.”

And just as resilience is the key to survival of Jews as a people, it is also critical to our success as individuals.

The Torah and its commentaries have a number of suggestions that can help people learn to be more resilient. One suggestion is to believe in yourself. Do not give up hope. Maintain perspective by carefully considering the context of your troubles. This will help you avoid alarm and paralysis, allowing you to recognize your feelings of anxiety and fear for what they truly are: a call to action. Resilience is the ability to act without getting swept away by waves of panic and despair, without getting too caught up in the moment.

Rabbeinu Yonah of Grodne (dec. 1263), in his famous ethical work, *The Gates of Repentance*, writes:

From the darkness itself comes the light. As the verse states, “Rejoice not against me, my enemy; *although* I have fallen, I will rise; *although* I will sit in darkness, the Lord is a light to me” (Micha, 7:8). The Sages have taught, “*Without* falling I would not arise; *without* sitting in darkness there would be no light for me.”

It seems that the experience of falling and darkness, coupled with the ability to rise, i.e., resilience, are requisite for being in the light.

A similar concept makes its appearance in Proverbs, “For the Tzadik will fall seven times and rise, while the wicked will stumble within evil” (24:16). The simple understanding of the verse is that *despite* falling, a person has the ability to overcome. It is never too late. Even after a fall, it is still possible to succeed and become a righteous person. However, one commentator, Rav Yitzchak Hutner (1906–1980), takes the verse one step deeper explaining, “The tzaddik *must fall* in order to become righteous; you have to experience darkness before you can sit in the light.” Thus darkness, or crisis, is not necessarily cause for despair. It is rather a call to action. It is a call to be strong. It is a call to prevail. It is a call to be resilient.

Every individual Jew is part of the nation of Israel. Our name Yisroel calls out to us both as individuals and as a nation: “Do not despair. Stay strong. Be resilient. Overcome challenge.” You can and will ultimately prevail.

***Shabbat Shalom!***

