

Parashat Vayishlach 5783, 2022:

And Ya'akov Was Alone

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the fascinating themes in Parashat Vayishlach is Ya'akov's wrestling with an anonymous man, as the Torah states: "*Vayivater Ya'akov levado* (and Ya'akov was alone), and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn." (*Sefer Bereishit* 32:25, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations) There are three other times in *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* wherein the word "*levado*" (alone) is employed in reference to major Biblical figures:

And Hashem Elokim said, "It is not good (*lo tov*) that man (Adam) is *levado*; I shall make him a helpmate opposite him." (*Sefer Bereishit* 2:18)

And they set for him (Yosef) *levado* and for them (Yosef's brothers) *levadom*... (Ibid. 43:32)

And Moshe *levado* shall approach Hashem but they shall not approach, and the people shall not ascend with him. (*Sefer Shemot* 24:2)

In the first instance, *Adam HaRishon*'s aloneness was absolute. He was literally the only person in world. Little wonder, then, that the Almighty described his existential condition as, "*lo tov*," the polar opposite of the phrase "*ki tov*" that we find time and again in reference to *Ma'aseh Bereishit* (the Creation of the Universe).

In my estimation, the Torah's description of Yosef's physical distance from his brothers in the banquet hall depicts the state of alienation that existed between them before Yosef revealed himself

as their long-lost brother. They were in the same room, yet they remained miles apart from each other. Moreover, Yosef was second in command of Egypt, the greatest world power of the time, while his brothers were but desperate strangers attempting to acquire grain to stave off starvation. A more unequal power dynamic could hardly be found. Yosef was truly *levado*.

The Torah's statement, "and Moshe *levado* shall approach Hashem," to receive the Torah is congruent with the idea that he was different in kind and degree from any prophet who had ever lived or would ever live. As the Rambam writes:

What is the difference between Moshe's prophecy and that of all the other prophets? [Divine insight is bestowed upon] all the [other] prophets in a dream or vision. Moshe, our teacher, would prophesy while standing awake... [Divine insight is bestowed upon] all the [other] prophets through the medium of an angel. Therefore, they perceive only metaphoric imagery and allegories. Moshe, our teacher, [would prophesy] without the medium of an angel... His appreciation of prophecy would not be through metaphor, but through open revelation, appreciating the matter in its fullness. All the [other] prophets are overawed, terrified, and confounded [by the revelations they experience], but Moshe, our teacher, would not [respond in this manner] ... just as a person will not be awe-struck from hearing his friend's words, so, too, Moshe's mental power was sufficient to comprehend the words of prophecy while he was standing in a composed state. All the [other] prophets cannot prophesy whenever they desire. Moshe, our teacher, was different. Whenever he desired, the holy spirit would envelop him, and prophecy would rest upon him... (*Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah* 7:6, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

As such, in Moshe's case, *levado* is far more than a statement of who was allowed to ascend *Har Sinai*. Instead, it is a description of Moshe's singular spiritual uniqueness, and consequent aloneness.

Just as the term *levado* is closely tied to these biblical figures, so, too, is it connected to the entire Jewish people: "For from their beginning, I see them as mountain peaks, and I behold them as hills; it is a nation that will dwell *levadad* (alone) and will not be reckoned among the nations." (*Sefer Bamidbar* 23:9). Unlike the other nations of the world, our people, alone, have remained

unwavering in devotion to Hashem. As we find in the following selection from the first paragraph of the *Aleinu*:

It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to proclaim the greatness to He who forms all creation. For He did not make us like the nations of other lands and did not make us the same as other families of the Earth. He did not grant us the same portion, and our destiny is not the same as that of all others... Hashem is our G-d, there is none other. Our King is truth, and nothing else exists besides Him. (Translation my own)

Shabbat Shalom

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