

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's portion Vayishlach, we read some of the most amazing verses in the entire Torah. The Torah tells us how Yakov fought with a malach - an angel until the break of dawn. On the simplest level, the verses are describing how Yakov had a knock down, drag out fight with an angel. After fighting, the angel gave Yakov a new name, Yisroel. The verse states: "And he [the malach - angel] said, Your name shall be called no more Yakov, but Yisrael; for as a prince you have power with G-d and with men, and have prevailed." (Bereishis 32:29)

We can also understand these verses on a deeper spiritually rewarding level. Namely, all of our struggles in life are tests from Hashem. Hashem gives us challenges so that we can grow from them. This is similar to a teacher who gives assignments to his students so that they can learn. Just as Hashem sent the malach - the angel to fight with Yakov, so too does Hashem send us challenges every day.

A few years ago a young Israeli in his early twenties entered Rabbi Wilhelm's Chabad House and stood before the massive bookcase filled with Torah books with a bewildered look on his face. Rabbi Wilhelm asked him if he needed help and he replied that he was looking for a book on Judaism.

When the Rabbi suggested that perhaps they learn something on the book of Bereshis (Genesis) the fellow asked if that was a Jewish book and when he heard it was, agreed to sit and learn. The young man (we will call him Erez) grew up on an atheistic Israeli Kibbutz where religion (especially the Jewish religion) was branded as no more than a crutch for the crippled. So it was no wonder that he knew virtually nothing about Judaism. Erez told the Rabbi that a few months ago he and his girlfriend, from another Kibbutz, decided to ditch Israel for a few months (at least) and set off for an unforgettable tour of the Far East together like tens of thousands of other Israelis.

They traveled from one exotic country to another, met the people, ate the food, camped out in jungles, climbed mountains ... but were careful to call home regularly to let their family know they were still alive.

Several months into their journey in one of his calls home Erez's parents made an interesting proposition. His sister was coming from Canada to visit Erez's parents in Eretz Yisroel for two weeks. They suggested that they would pay Erez's way, round trip, and they would love to have him for a family reunion.

He talked it over with his girlfriend, she agreed and a day later he was back in Israel with his family. There was a wonderful warm feeling of love and unity that he never felt before. They ate together, spoke, sang, laughed, reminisced and took walks together every day and after two weeks his sister flew back to Canada, he kissed his parents good bye and returned to his girlfriend in Thailand.

When his plane landed he called to tell his parents that he arrived safely but his mother, fighting back the tears gave him some terrible news. Just minutes after his plane took off his father suffered a heart attack and passed away.

The burial was to take place in a few moments. Erez was stunned. Not being religious he didn't even consider a period of mourning but it was a shock to his entire being; especially the wonderful irony of the family reunion. He felt "lucky" to have been able to spend time with his father before his untimely passing and he even began to feel that there was some G-dly force involved with that "luck."

But every time he brought it up to his girlfriend she just fell silent; she wanted to just enjoy the trip and concentrate on happy, non-religious things. And that's what Erez did. The weeks passed, the trip went on and they were enjoying every moment of it together.

But once in a while, sometimes in the middle of the afternoon as they were walking in the street, sometimes before he went to sleep, the mystery of it all suddenly welled up in his heart like a mysterious ocean until he took his mind off it. Then his girlfriend came up with a fantastic idea; she heard of that a very special yoga master in India was beginning an unforgettable ten-day silence and meditation seminar and she wanted that they should go. But for the first time Erez disagreed. How could it be that she didn't want to speak about Jewish things but she did want to go to an ashram? He respected her desire for the seminar, but he wanted something different. So they talked it over and decided that they wouldn't be able to be together in the meditation seminar. They would part ways for ten days and he would go to learn about Judaism.

In fact, he didn't really have much of a plan but he had been briefly in the Chabad House in Bangkok (his girlfriend stood outside and didn't even want to enter while he looked around) which was the only

In memory of Shusha Malka bas R' Avrohom ה"ו

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religious Jewish place he had been to in his life and figured that maybe they would teach him. Rabbi Wilhelm was more than happy to arrange a full day of teachers for Erez and even take time every day to personally teach him. But when he suggested that he should first of all put on Tefillin for a minute or so, Erez flatly refused; he hated religion, he came only to learn.

But at learning he was fantastic. He took to the books like a fish to water. He asked tens of questions on each detail and enjoyed the answers but at every opportunity he was careful to declare that it would never bring him to change his lifestyle. Then, two days later, he suddenly approached Rabbi Wilhelm and said he wanted to put on Tefillin. Rabbi Wilhelm didn't ask questions. Before Erez could change his mind he took out his Tefillin as quickly as possible and showed Erez how to put them on for the first time in his life.

"You're probably wondering why I suddenly changed my mind and put on Tefillin." Erez asked when he finished. Rabbi Wilhelm nodded 'yes'.

"Well, last night when I called home and told my mother that I decided to learn in the Chabad House she began to cry. She said that she would never have even thought of telling me, but now that I mention Chabad, she has a secret about my father to reveal. She told me that over fifty years ago Chabad helped him to get out of Russia and he got to know them. He didn't like religion, not at all. But the Chabad people made a good impression and, well... he used to put on Tefillin every day. "He didn't want anyone to know. Especially the people in the Kibbutz, so he used to put them in the bathroom where no one would see. But he did it every single morning till the day he died. He was proud to be a Jew. And that is why I decided to put on today."

After her seminar Erez's girlfriend returned to Bangkok to resume their trip but she was in for a surprise; Erez wanted one more week and he wanted her to join him! It wasn't an ultimatum. He made it clear that he would do what she decided. So they talked it over. She agreed to the week but there was no way she would even set foot in the Chabad House. But on the other hand she knew that Erez was no fool. He was a clever young man, and had been as big an atheist as herself, maybe bigger. She didn't want to be closed minded. So they came to an agreement; he could have one more week and she would participate from 'outside'.

Every morning Erez would enter the Chabad House with a list of questions she had prepared the night before and after each class he would go outside, meet her, they would discuss the answers and he would enter with more questions.

The week ended, Erez announced that he was continuing his trip, said goodbye and Rabbi Wilhelm returned to the hundreds of visitors that pass through the Chabad House every day.

A year later Rabbi Wilhelm, was invited to speak at several institutions in Israel the last of which was the Yeshiva in Tzfas where four hundred-plus students learn. As he entered the building and the Rabbis there greeted him and shook his hand, someone from behind him yelled "Hey, Rabbi!!" and as he turned to see who it was one of the bearded young men ran up, hugged him warmly, gave him a kiss on the cheek and stepped back saying "Don't you recognize me?"

Rabbi Wilhelm was baffled. "It's me! It's Erez! Remember? A year ago? Remember? how my father passed away?"

The Rabbi could not believe his eyes. "Wow!" He exclaimed "Of course I remember! It's a miracle! But what about your girlfriend? What happened? How is she?"

"Listen Rabbi" Erez moved closer and spoke in a low voice, "You better watch out! There are a lot of people that I think are after your life! A lot!"

"My life?" he replied "Are you serious? Why? Who? What has that got to do with your girlfriend? Why are you smiling?" "Who?" Erez answered "All the people in my kibbutz... and in my girlfriend's as well!! That's right, she is now learning around the corner in M'chone Alte, the Chabad College for girls. And the people in our Kibbutzim are blazing mad! They're going out of their minds!"

A few months later Rabbi Wilhelm got an invitation to their wedding and just recently he heard they were hired by a Chabad House to do what the Rebbe sent him to do... wake up Jews.

If we fight hard and rise to the challenges as Yakov did, then we will merit to be called Yisroel, meaning, as the verse says: "a prince [who has] power with Hashem and with men." **Good Shabbos Everyone.**