

**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 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. 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 G-d and with men."*

The following inspirational story illustrates one Jew's successful overcoming of struggles in life. In the 1960's Ben Richards (not his real name) grew up hating city life in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn. Ben was a voracious reader of nature books and he dreamed of living on a farm.

Ben's parents were Orthodox Jews, but Judaism had little meaning for Ben. He was a free spirit, with no desire to be encumbered by rules and regulations that controlled every aspect of his life. Still though, he sought the meaning of life.

So, at age 17 he left home and traveled 2,000 miles westward to live on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in the northwestern mountains of America in the area bordering Glacier National Park. While on the reservation, he enrolled in the local university and majored in wildlife biology.

However, Ben's primary studies were on the reservation. His primary teacher on the reservation was an old Indian man named Whitecalf. Ben stayed for a little while on that reservation, before leaving to join a different reservation in South Dakota. Ben spent several years on the reservation in South Dakota learning the ways of the Indians. Eventually, Ben was fluent in their language and customs. He even dressed in the traditional Indian garb.

Ben always strived to understand the deeper meaning of life. He looked for answers among the Indians. One day, Ben heard about a woman who was said to possess higher spiritual powers. The woman was the matriarch of the Sioux Indian Society. Ben was convinced that this woman knew the meaning of life.

Eventually, after traveling several days over hills and across prairies, Ben reached the camp where the famous woman lived. Elva Onefeather, as she was known, lived in wretched conditions.

Ben approached her and began to ask about her Indian Heritage. She refused to answer him. *"You are not one of us,"* she said. *"You can never be like us, you don't belong here."* *"But I have lived on reservations for years. I know your culture, I know your language, I practice your customs and I feel part of..."* She interrupted him, *"If you were a X-tian, I could understand. But you are a student of the Holy White Rock Man."* Ben assumed she was referring to Moshe Rabbeinu (Years later he thought that the 'holy rock' was perhaps a reference to Shemos 32:22 - *"When My glory passes by, I shall place you in the cleft of the rock."*)

*"You are not one of us,"* she admonished him. *"Go back to your roots. That is where you belong."* Ben was shocked. He was being rejected. After all the time and effort he had invested in this lifestyle. A revered member of the Indian community had labeled him an outsider. Was he now to go back to city life? To Jewish life?

The rejection made him rethink his whole life. Within days, Ben packed his Chevy pick-up truck and together with his dog, began the long journey eastward.

He made his way to Brooklyn and began asking old acquaintances for names of people or organizations who might give him guidance. He was given a list of names and he consulted each of the them. Ben was disappointed once a again. He went through name after name on the list, and he still did not feel that he could relate to anyone. He had one more name left on his list. If it did not work, he could go back west. The name was Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld (1926-1990), Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva "Shor Yoshuv" in Far Rockaway, New York.

Ben with his long ponytail and his dog, drove out to Far Rockaway in his old pick-up truck. He parked his truck on Central Avenue in front of the Yeshiva and headed inside where he soon met Rabbi Freifeld. Ben was immediately touched by the Rosh Yeshiva's kindness.

Rabbi Freifeld warmly welcomed Ben into his office. Ben told Rabbi Freifeld about his experiences on the Indian reservation. Ben was then taken aback by Rabbi Freifeld's queries. The Rabbi wanted to know how to hunt deer, how to determine the freshness of elk tracks. These were the last topics Ben ever thought he would be discussing with a Rabbi.

Their first conversation lasted for about 20 minutes, and it covered a wide range of subjects. As Ben left, Rabbi Freifeld noticed Ben's ponytail and said, *"Why are you hiding your hair in your shirt? Your hair is so beautiful!"* Ben left the office mesmerized. He wanted to come back. He needed to get to know this man.

Ben returned the next morning where he found the members of the yeshiva busy with a bris. Rabbi Freifeld managed to pick Ben out of the large crowd and motioned for him to come to the front. Ben was once again touched by the Rabbi's warmth.

Over the following few weeks, Ben and Rabbi Freifeld spoke for hours on end. They would usually speak in his office, which was bejeweled with thousands of sefarim (Jewish books) on all aspects of Torah. Each of the bookshelves was filled to capacity. It was said that Rabbi Freifeld had 15,000 sefarim.

One afternoon as they spoke in the office, someone came in and told Rabbi Freifeld that he was need in the Beis Medrash (the study hall). Rabbi Freifeld excused himself and told Ben that he would be back in a few moments.

Being alone in the office, Ben got up from his chair and began walking around gazing at the overflowing bookcases of seforim that Rabbi Freifeld had. He walked near where Rabbi Freifeld had been sitting and noticed something unusual in the knee-hole of the desk. There were a number of books lying on the floor! It did not make sense. These were all holy books - how could they possibly be on the floor? He bent down and picked them up.

It was then, when he picked up those books, did Ben's life change forever. Because, the books on the floor were about American Indian culture and life on reservations!

*"It was then,"* says Ben, *"that I realized how much [Rabbi Freifeld] really loved me."* Rabbi Freifeld was studying those books so that he could understand where Ben was coming from. By taking time to understand and not merely to be understood, Rabbi Freifeld validated Ben's concerns and quest for meaning in life.

Ben went on to study at the Yeshiva Shor Yoshuv for several years, where he developed into a remarkable *talmid chacham* (Torah scholar), a incredible mentsch, and (in his mind) Rabbi Freifeld's most beloved talmid. (From "Reflections of the Maggid" Rabbi Paysach J. Krohn, p.215) Just as Hashem sent the *malach* - the angel to fight with Yakov, so too does Hashem send us challenges, every day. If we prevail as Yakov did, then we will merit to be called Yisroel, meaning, as the verse says: *"a prince [who has] power with G-d and with men."*

**Good Shabbos Everyone.**