

Stalling the Angel of Death (Vayishlach)

Death smiles at us all, all a man can do is smile back. -Marcus Aurelius

Jacob finds himself wrestling with an angel who has murderous intentions. Yet not only does Jacob persevere, he walks away triumphant, though injured (Genesis 32:26)

How does a mortal man triumph over an attack from the spiritual world?

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno (1475-1549) hints at a related story, described in the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Shabbat, 30a-b):

King David inquired of God to disclose the day of his death. God was only willing to inform David that he would die on a Sabbath. David embarked on a strategy of continuously studying Torah from the onset of every Sabbath, on Friday at sunset, until its conclusion 25 hours later, on nightfall of Saturday. The strategy is successful, and the Talmud recounts the growing frustration the Angel of Death has with King David over the course of multiple Sabbaths.

Finally, one Sabbath, the Angel of Death succeeds in distracting David. The Angel of Death goes into David's garden and causes a tremendous amount of noise to emanate from the trees. David goes out to investigate, still absorbed in words of Torah. As he walks out, one of the steps breaks underneath him. For that one instant David is distracted, and it is at that instant that the Angel of Death manages to finally claim David's indomitable spirit.

Sforno explains that Jacob's battle with the angel was no mere physical wrestling match. It was a battle conducted on multiple planes, including the spiritual one. Jacob was able to succeed because throughout the struggle he was continuously focused on and absorbed in the underlying reality of God's Torah. In an act of desperation, the angel tries to distract Jacob by showing him the future sins of his descendants, the fruit of his loins. The distress of those future sins succeeds in distracting Jacob and giving the angel an opportunity to hurt him in the area of the loins.

Nonetheless, Jacob quickly regains his focus and wins the battle.

May we likewise keep our focus on the important things in life and win the multiple battles, both big and small, that continuously challenge us.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the fall of Bashar al-Assad of Syria. May all our enemies meet swift ends.