

Parashat Vayishlach



Rectified Jewish 'Fight-Flight-Freeze' Response

Ya'acov Didn't Put all His Eggs in One Basket

"Don't put all your eggs in one basket" (Don Quixote) motivates my approach to life. It is important not to concentrate all efforts and resources in one area. For example, success in matters of health, childrearing and relationships, require that many elements work together as a synergy. This approach to life originates from the Torah. We first learn about it from Ya'acov, our Father. I recall the special picture my children colored when they were in nursery school, for *Parashat Vayishlach*. It had three parts: A person with a long beard and *peyot* (side-locks) swaying in prayer, a person extending his hand with a gift to another and a group of warriors with spears. This coloring page illustrated Ya'acov's preparation for meeting his brother Esav who had been pursuing him to kill him for years.

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וַיֹּאמֶר אִם יָבֹא עֵשָׂו אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה הָאֶחָד וְהָפָהוּ וְהָיָה הַמַּחֲנֶה הַנִּשְׁאָר לְפָלִיטָה:

"He said, 'If Esav comes to one camp and strikes it down, the remaining camp will escape'" (*Bereishit* 32:9).

THE REMAINING CAMP WILL ESCAPE: Against his will, for I will wage war with him. He (Ya'acov) prepared himself for three things: for a gift, for war, and for prayer. For a gift, [as Scripture says] (verse 22): "So the gift passed on before him." For prayer, [as Scripture says] (verse 10): "G-d of my father Avraham..." For war, [as Scripture says]: "the remaining camp will escape." [*Tanchuma, Vayishlach* 6] (Rashi *ibid.*).

The Benefits and Detriments of the 'Fight-Flight-Freeze' Response

With this approach Ya'acov succeeded in appeasing his hateful brother as it states, "Esav ran toward him and embraced him, and he fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (*Bereishit* 33:4). Perhaps Ya'acov's triple approach to facing imminent danger parallels the human innate 'fight-flight-freeze' response. This natural survival-oriented reaction protects us by assessing if we have the power to defeat the immediately threatening force. If so, the body goes into a fight mode and releases hormones – such as adrenaline – necessary for triumph in battle. Conversely, when we realize that the adversary is too powerful to overcome, then our flight response engages, instantaneously gathering our emergency biochemical supplies to enable us to hopefully escape the intimidating force. The innate freeze response is the reaction to a situation, when neither fight nor flight is viable. Under such circumstances, 'freezing up' or 'numbing out' – dissociating from the here and now – is the best thing we can do. Being physically, mentally, and emotionally immobilized prevents us from feeling the horror of the danger, which might otherwise threaten our sanity. The chemicals secreted in response to our dread, such as endorphins, function as an analgesic, desensitizing us to the pain of any injury. However, the 'fight-flight-freeze' response can also backfire. When certain current situations remind us of a trauma suffered years ago, which we have still not fully resolved, then the original fear or panic linked to that memory may compel us to react to the current-day trigger as if our past trauma is happening all over again. It is even possible that dissociating in the midst of a traumatic experience may cause PTSD symptoms later on (see, e.g., [van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989](#)).

Prayer, Present and Preparation for War

Ya'acov was overcome by dread at the prospect of facing his murderous brother, rapidly approaching him with four hundred men (*Bereishit* 32:7-8). This is when his natural Jewish response to danger mobilized him to deal with the horrifying situation by preparing: "a gift, for war, and for prayer" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 32:9). "Preparing for war" clearly parallels the 'fight response,' except that rather than unconsciously going into an aggressive mode that could be unnecessary at best and elicit more animosity at worst; "preparing for war" is a conscious, thought out plan, only to be activated if absolutely necessary. The 'gift' is likewise a conscious rectified response that allows us to avoid combat through assuaging the danger. Rather than evading the adversity by running away in 'flight', appeasing the enemy or the threatening situation with a gift or a peaceful, compromising solution is the preferred mature way of soothing any threat. Lastly, "prayer" is certainly the rectified 'freeze' response when we are in dire straits – feeling utterly helpless. When realistically, there's no way we can defend ourselves having neither the strength to respond aggressively nor the speed to run away from it, "prayer" is all that is left. Even while immobilized and physically 'freezing,' our mind and heart does not have to unconsciously dissociate. A higher level, rectified response is to be mindful of the imminent pain, yet hand it over to Hashem in heartfelt prayer, as King David teaches, "Cast your burden upon Hashem, and He will sustain you" (*Tehillim* 55:23). This sensible response will also surely prevent PTSD symptoms later on.

Transforming Unconscious reactions to Conscious Torah Responses

Our holy patriarchs and matriarchs lived fully conscious, mindful lives. Through their superior G-d-fearing awareness, they were in control of every one of their physical reactions all the way down to the release of hormones. For example, it states about Avraham, our Father, that he never ever lifted a finger without it being for the sake of heaven. Ya'acov, our Father, was able to channel his natural 'fight-flight-freeze' response into conscious elevated ways of turning to Hashem while dealing with imminent danger. In this way, he handed over the rectified Jewish 'fight-flight-freeze' response to every Jew. It is our challenge to accept Ya'acov's mantle of mindfulness by working on transforming our unconscious reactions to become mature, mindful, fully conscious responses to hardships and threats. This way we can prevent a hurtful remark, a condescending glance or an aggressive tone of voice etc. from becoming a trigger to relive past trauma. Moreover, by transforming unconscious reactions to become conscious Torah responses we can rectify all of our relationships and grow closer to Hashem.