



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Vayishlach

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Vayishlach

6 Strategies to Win Any Battle



Meaningful Sermons "Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"

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ABSTRACT

How many best selling books have been written on how to confront adversity? How many seminars have been delivered teaching us methods to face our challenges?

One of the oldest and most influential books on military strategy, *The Art of War*, was written over 2500 years ago, attributed to Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese military general and strategist.

But would you believe that even before that, over 3600 years ago, we have the first ever documented strategy on how to face any enemy and win?

This strategy is described in our weekly Torah portion: The momentous/archetypal confrontation between Esau and Jacob offers us monumental lessons on dealing with our own challenges. Most importantly, how we can reconcile all the warring factions within us and without, including the ultimate battle between matter and spirit – between selfishness and dedication to a higher calling.

This sermon presents six lessons of how to fight the good fight and win, keeping in mind that the ultimate objective is not to destroy but to transform the enemy ... not to annihilate adversity but to channel it.

6 STRATEGIES TO WIN ANY BATTLE

1. The Art of War

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But would you believe that even before that, over 3600 years ago, we have the first ever documented strategy on how to face any enemy and win?

This strategy is described in our weekly Torah portion, which relates the momentous/archetypal confrontation between Esau and Jacob. This episode offers us monumental lessons on dealing with our own challenges. Most importantly, how we can reconcile all the warring factions within us and without, including the ultimate battle between matter and spirit – between selfishness and dedication to a higher calling.

Let us review the story and discover six fundamental strategies on how to fight the good fight and win, keeping in mind that the ultimate objective is not to destroy but to transform the enemy ... not to annihilate the material world but to shape it into a channel for the spiritual.

2. Torah Message

The message of this week's Torah reading may initially seem difficult to decipher.

Jacob is returning to Israel after twenty years of exile. Twenty years previously he fled from his brother Esau who, furious at the fact that Jacob "stole" his birthright and blessings from him, wanted to kill him.

During his years in exile, Jacob built a strong home and large family. He matured extensively under the oppression of his complex and cunning uncle and father-in-law, Laban.

Now, the big day has come. What will happen when Jacob meets Esau after all these years? Has Esau's anger waned? Has he forgiven what Jacob did to him?

At first it seems that Esau has not. Jacob's scouts bring back a report that Esau is approaching with an army of 400 men.

Jacob is very afraid. He prays fervently to God for protection. He sends lavish gifts to Esau to appease him. And he takes measures to safeguard his wives and children in the event of war.

Then, the very night before the confrontation, Jacob has a strange experience, as the Torah tells us: "Jacob remained alone. A man struggled with him until dawn."¹ Who this mysterious man might be is unclear, though biblical commentators agree that this encounter has deep archetypal ramifications.

Jacob wins the struggle, though he is injured in the process, and is given the name of Israel, because, as the stranger explains to him, "you have striven with the Divine and with man and have overcome."²

In the morning, Jacob meets Esau at last, but it seems that Esau's murderous rage is spent. He says to Jacob: "Let's get going and move on. I will travel alongside you."

But Jacob demurs. "My lord you know that the children are weak and I have responsibility for the nursing sheep and cattle. If they are driven hard for even one day, they will die ... Please go ahead of me ... I will lead my group slowly, following the pace of the work ahead of me, and the pace of the children. I will eventually come to you, my lord, in Seir."³

But he does not intend to get there anytime soon. As Rashi, the 11th century Torah commentator, reveals:

¹ Genesis 32:25.

² Genesis 32:29.

³ Genesis 33:12-13.

And when will he [Jacob] go [to Seir]? In the days of Moshiach, as it says (in the Book of Ovadiah 1:21) “Redeemers will ascend Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau, and the kingdom will be God’s.”⁴

This is what we know. Now, how do we make sense of it for our age and time?

3. Alter-Egos

The Torah tells us that Jacob and Esau, beginning in their mother’s womb, represent “two nations” in a perpetual struggle: Rebecca’s pregnancy was a difficult one. “The children clashed inside her.” Confused she asks of God: “Why is this happening to me?” God’s reply: “Two nations are in your womb. Two governments will separate from inside you. The upper hand will go from one nation to the other.”⁵

And indeed, as Esau and Jacob grow into adults they embody two personalities that are odds – at war – with each other: Esau was the “cunning hunter, a man of the field;” Jacob, the “wholesome man, who dwells in the tents.”⁶

Esau and Jacob represent two struggling forces in each of our lives and in the world as a whole. They symbolize every battle we fight – internally or externally. In general terms the confrontation of Jacob and Esau is the confrontation each of us have with any challenge or difficulty we face.

More specifically, Esau, the “skilled hunter, a man of the field,” symbolizes the body, the material world, whose untamed elements need to be conquered. Jacob, the “wholesome man, who dwells in the tents,” embodies the soul, the spiritual world. Initially these two worlds do not co-exist. Matter and spirit are at war with each other. “When one rises the other falls.”

⁴ Rashi on the verse.

⁵ Genesis 25:22-23.

⁶ Genesis 25:27.

The story of Jacob and Esau reflects the struggle of life itself resulting from the tension between matter and spirit, between body and soul, between the holy and the mundane, between religion and science, between faith and modernity. And, in personal terms – the battle between selfishness and dedication to a higher calling.

The momentous/archetypal confrontation between Esau and Jacob has a lot to teach us about dealing with our own challenges. Most importantly, how we can reconcile all these warring factions within and without.

Here are six strategies we can derive from it:

4. Strategy One: Assess the Situation

Before confronting Esau, Jacob first sends messengers to scout out what lies ahead.

The first step in facing an adversary is to understand its intentions and assess its strengths and weaknesses. Only then can we know what options we have and how we might respond.

Perhaps this is the basis of ancient Chinese military general Sun Tzu's words in his book *The Art of War* about military strategy:

"So it is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss.

"If you only know yourself, but not your opponent, you may win or may lose.

"If you know neither yourself nor your enemy, you will always endanger yourself."

A bit of a macabre take on this are the words made famous by that legendary mafia chieftain: "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer."

“Awareness of the problem,” our sages say, is “half the cure.” Some of our greatest problems are not the problems themselves, but the confusion they create; the denial and distortions, which compound the problem many times over. Once you “send out messengers” to identify and diagnose the challenge you can begin to resolve it.

5. Strategy Two: Spiritual Preparation

We must be well prepared. Jacob’s message to Esau was: “I have lived with Laban, and have delayed my return until now.” In effect he said, “Even while living with the corrupt Laban, I maintained my relationship with God.”

Jacob’s words teach us that, before facing the harsh realities of life, we must build a secure home base, firmly standing on the pillars and foundations of faith, spirit and a strong value system and ideals.

Groucho Marx once said: “Those are my principles, and if you don’t like them... well, I have others.”

Like a tree without roots (or weak ones), without solid, unwavering principles we remain extremely vulnerable and can be swept away by the next storm.

This unshakable foundation also imbues us with the confidence that we can and will prevail and overcome any challenge.

Sun Tzu: “Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win”

Some armies had a custom that when they marched to war, even before engaging in any battle, they would sing a victory march, indicating their total confidence and resolve in winning, without a shred of doubt.

6. Strategy Three: Influence People

The best way to overcome an adversary is not to fight him, but to influence and transform him into your ally. When you fight, even if you win the battle, you may still lose the war, because the enemy has remained an enemy and poses a constant threat to you.

Here again Sun Tzu echoed Jacob's approach: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." And: "Ultimate excellence lies not in winning every battle, but in defeating the enemy without ever fighting."

Jacob ultimately prevailed over Esau not through war but through appeasement (see strategy four). Jacob disarmed Esau by reaching into his heart, moving him to change his attitude.

Additionally, Jacob sent "messengers," demonstrating the need in times of challenge to inspire others to become "messengers" who carry the power. It is not enough to do the work alone; the barometer of our own success is our ability to affect and influence others in the same spirit.

We are social creatures; our lives affect and are affected by other people. Indeed, in life we have only two choices: Either we influence others or they influence us.

7. Strategy Four: Cover All the Bases

Jacob prepares to face Esau by covering all his bases: He prays to God; he sends gifts to appease him; and he prepares for battle.

Prayer: We must speak to God and implore Him to help us. Faith and prayer connect us to our higher purpose. This connection to Above gives us the fortitude and persistence to face any challenge, and the confidence to face any adversary (as discussed in strategy two).

Appeasement: When confronting any challenge in the material world around us, it is critical to study and analyze the "enemy" and learn what speaks to it, what can reach it and perhaps change its mind.

War: As a last resort, we must prepare to fight.

The ultimate objective is not to destroy but to transform the enemy ... not to annihilate the material world but to shape it into a channel for the spiritual. To do so effectively, we need to begin with prayer, to access God's strength and thus succeed in facing our challenges.

Next, we need to assess the challenge and find a way to win it over, to speak to and persuade it on its own terms to reconcile with us.

Finally, if all else fails, we must be ready to go to war and confront our enemy.

8. Strategy Five: Nothing is Too Small

In preparation for encountering Esau the following day, Jacob ferries his family across the Yabbok stream, but he remains behind "alone" for the night. Why? Rashi says he needed to retrieve some "small jars" of his that were left behind. And that is when the struggle with the mysterious stranger ensues.⁷

The "small jars" represent the smallest details. Often, we get distracted by the big picture and the overall objective. When in fact battles are often won and lost due to small details. One move. One soldier. One missed strategic link. One lost opportunity. One ignored piece of information that may have seemed trivial.

Jacob teaches us that when facing adversity nothing is too small. Don't be reckless. Be meticulous and careful over every "small jar," because you never know which one will tip the scale from loss to victory.

In spiritual terms, the "small jars" are the last containers that we need to elevate and refine in fulfilling our divine mission in spiritualizing the material world.

⁷ Rashi citing *Chullin* 91a.

Each person is allocated an allotment of “sparks” of divine energy which is embedded in our material possessions and property. Everything that comes our way in life contains these “sparks” – our home, relationships, furniture, work, car, food, entertainment, activities, travel destinations. We are charged with the responsibility to discover and reveal these sparks by directing all our activities to a higher, spiritual purpose.

Jacob teaches us that our work must not only consist of the “big things” in life, the glamorous and dramatic; it must include all aspects, even the “small jars.” Nothing should remain neglected. Every part of our lives can and needs to be redeemed.

9. Redeeming All (Optional Story)

A wealthy man and his son loved to collect rare works of art. They had everything in their collection, from Picasso to Raphael. They would often sit together and admire the great works of art.

When the Vietnam conflict broke out, the son went to war. He was very courageous and died in battle while rescuing another soldier. The father was notified and grieved deeply for his only son.

About a month later, just before Chanukah, there was a knock at the door. A young man stood at the door with a large package in his hands.

He said, “Sir, you don’t know me, but I am the soldier for whom your son gave his life. He saved many lives that day, and he was carrying me to safety when a bullet struck him in the heart and he died instantly... He often talked about you, and your love for art.” The young man held out this package. “I know this isn’t much. I’m not really a great artist, but I think your son would have wanted you to have this.”

The father opened the package. It was a portrait of his son, painted by the young man. He stared in awe at the way the soldier had captured the personality of his son in the painting. The father was so drawn to the eyes that his own eyes welled up with tears. He thanked the young man and offered to pay him for the picture. “Oh, no sir, I could never repay what your son did for me. It’s a gift.”

The father hung the portrait over his mantle. Every time visitors came to his home he took them to see the portrait of his son before he showed them any of the other great works he had collected.

The man died a few months later. There was to be a great auction of his paintings. Many influential people gathered, excited over seeing the great paintings and having an opportunity to purchase one for their collection.

On the platform sat the painting of the son. The auctioneer pounded his gavel. "We will start the bidding with this picture of the son. Who will bid for this picture?"

There was silence...

Then a voice in the back of the room shouted, "We want to see the famous paintings. Skip this one."

But the auctioneer persisted. "Will somebody bid for this painting? Who will start the bidding? \$200? \$100?"

Another bidder shouted angrily. "We didn't come to see this painting. We came to see the Van Goghs, the Rembrandts. Get on with the Real bids!"

But still the auctioneer continued. "The son! The son! Who'll take the son?"

Finally, a voice came from the very back of the room. It was the longtime gardener of the man and his son. "I'll give \$10 for the painting..." Being a poor man, it was all he could afford.

"We have \$10, who will bid \$20?"

"Give it to him for \$10. Let's see the Masters!"

The auctioneer pounded the gavel.. "Going once, twice, SOLD for \$10!"

"Now let's get on with the collection!"

The auctioneer laid down his gavel. "I'm sorry, the auction is over."

"What?! What about the paintings?!"

"I am sorry. When I was called to conduct this auction, I was told of a secret stipulation in the will... I was not allowed to reveal that stipulation until this time. Only the painting of the son would be auctioned. Whoever bought that painting would inherit the entire estate, including the paintings. The man who took the son gets everything!"

10. Strategy Six: It's a Lonely Journey, But You are Not Alone

Our life journey is often a lonely one. Especially in hard times when faced with difficulty, we may at times feel that we are all alone, demoralizing us in the process.

The same feeling of loneliness can overcome us regarding our spiritual work of redeeming the "small jars." People around us may be involved in all types of glamorous pursuits, and we feel isolated in our spiritual search. Our search may pale in comparison to what's happening out there. Even then, we must remain steadfast in our mission. Our integrity is at stake even when our quest is unpopular.

Our lonely journey includes many challenges and battles.

Standing alone, we encounter forces with which we must wrestle. And this wrestling will occur during the night, when it is dark and desolate, as Jacob wrestled with the stranger.

This "wrestling" represents the struggle with all our negative feelings - with our fears and insecurities. On a spiritual level it reflects the cosmic struggle between matter and spirit. Jacob's victory over the "angel" empowers us to prevail over any adversary we face - internal or external.

In truth, we are never really alone. It only appears that way especially in the cover of night. When we wrestle with an adversary and don't run away, we realize that we have power. Sometimes that power is just enough to make it through the night, to see it through difficult times. And then when dawn breaks, we see that you have prevailed.

11. Reconciliation

Indeed, the next day when Jacob finally meets Esau, Esau's heart opens to his brother. As we read: "Esau ran to meet him. He hugged [Jacob] and throwing himself on his shoulders, kissed him. They [both] wept."

After all Jacob's work and preparation for this encounter with Esau – his 20 years with Laban, building his home and family, his prayer and gifts, his struggle with the stranger – he is able to face his brother and reconcile. The two opposing powers – the two nations and worlds, the two cosmic forces – that are Esau and Jacob have both matured to the point where they can begin to coexist with each other.

The sages argue whether or not this was a complete and sincere reconciliation.⁸ The argument reflects the difficulty of integrating the two. Either way the process of resolution between matter and spirit has begun.

12. The Work Ahead

Witnessing their reunion, Esau suggests to Jacob that they come together and join forces. However, Jacob wisely recognizes that their reunion was only a good beginning. He says:

"My lord you know that the children are weak and I have responsibility for the nursing sheep and cattle. If they are driven hard for even one day, they will die ... Please go ahead of me ... I will lead my group slowly, following the pace of the work ahead of me, and the pace of the children. I will eventually come to you, my lord, in Seir."

Jacob is telling Esau and all of us that there is much work to be done in resolving the inherent tension between the material and the spiritual. And this work must be done with complete focus. Jacob rejects even Esau's offer to help by putting "some of my people at your disposal," even that poses too great of a risk. "Just let me remain on friendly terms with you," Jacob tells Esau.

⁸ Rashi Genesis 33:4. From Sifri Numbers 9:10.

Today, after some 3,500 years of work since then, the world has become refined and the reconciliation can be completed. Jacob can finally fulfill his promise to Esau, “I will eventually come to you,” and the world can be united under one God, with each nation serving in its own unique way.

13. Peace At Last

On a personal level this means that Jacob empowers us with the tools to make and maintain peace with any enemy. And he does so with six critical lessons.

So there we have it: Six strategies to deal with darkness. And – the strength and power to achieve victory.

Today we have the power to reconcile with and transform all our adversaries and adversities. Whether it is a personal quarrel or a family one, whether it is a battle with our inner demons or a community split, whether at home or at work – Jacob teaches us six powerful strategies to face and prevail over any enemy, perceived or real.

After years of war, today we have the power to make peace at last. To find inner peace and to carry that over to peace with all those around us.

14. The Final Frontier

Each of us must ask ourselves the question: Is my “Jacob” ready to meet and make peace with my “Esau”? Is my material life aligned with my spiritual one? Have I integrated what I do with who I am?

The final frontier is upon us.

The Midrash teaches: "During the night of exile, the nations of the world and the kingdom of Edom [that is Esau or the Western World] will wrestle with Jacob, until the dawn of redemption."⁹

As Esau (the Western World), Jacob (the Jewish people) and Ishmael (the Arab/Muslim people) confront each other, they are challenged to embrace the God of their father Abraham – a God who wants to be at peace with the universe. This peace can only be achieved when we do our part in revealing the Godliness in everything we do.

And so this week's Torah portion closes the chapter of Esau.

Just as the portion of *Chayei Sarah* concludes with the chronicles of Ishmael, and the portion of *Toldot* concludes with Esau's marriage to Ishmael's daughter, this week's portion concludes with the chronicles of Esau. It details Esau's family line and the leaders and nations that would descend from him, concluding with Magdiel, founder of Rome (Western World).

Thus, the seeds have been planted for the confrontations to come. The question today is: Do we understand the message?

I bless us all to rise to the challenge, so that the Final Redemption will come speedily in our days, Amen.

⁹ Midrash Lekach Tov on the verse.