



Parashat Vayishlach  
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Parashat Vayishlach begins with the reports Yaakov receives about his brother, Esav, who was approaching with found hundred men. Yaakov reacts to the news with dread: "Yaakov was very afraid and distressed..." (32:7).

Maimonides cites this verse in his *Shemona Perakim* (chapter 7), amidst his discussion of the requisite credentials for prophecy. He asserts that although beholding prophecy requires that the prophet has refined and developed his intellect and character, he does not necessarily have to achieve perfection in all areas. Maimonides points to a number of examples of prophets who received prophecy despite exhibiting certain flaws. Among the examples he mentions is Yaakov, who was worthy of prophecy despite the fear he experienced in advance of his encounter with Esav.

It clearly emerges from this passage that Maimonides viewed Yaakov's fear as unwarranted and inappropriate – an assumption that several later writers questioned. The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (4a) asks why Yaakov feared this confrontation with Esav, after having received God's explicit promise of protection (see 28:15). The answer, the Gemara explains, is "*shema yigrom ha-cheit*" – meaning, Yaakov doubted his own worthiness. Yaakov did not entertain doubts as to whether God was able or willing to keep His promises; he was concerned, however, lest he had forfeited his right to this promise by virtue of some wrongdoing that he had committed in the interim. Maimonides makes reference to this Talmudic passage in his introduction to his commentary to the Mishna. He adds that although prophecies of blessing and success cannot generally be retracted or reversed, this does not apply to prophecies directed to the prophet himself. When God conveys a favorable prophecy concerning all *Am Yisrael*, its realization is guaranteed, but a promise made to the prophet himself can be revoked if the prophet is later deemed unworthy. Yaakov thus had reason to fear the outcome of his reunion with his brother, despite God's promise of protection.

Why, then, does Maimonides consider Yaakov's fear an indication of some deficiency in his character? If the Gemara (which Maimonides himself cited) justified Yaakov's fear, why does Maimonides see it as reflecting negatively – if only slightly – upon Yaakov?

Apparently, as noted by Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman (1875-1941), Maimonides understood that the Gemara sought to explain Yaakov's conduct, but not necessarily to justify it. The Gemara found it difficult that Yaakov would react with such dread after having received an explicit promise of protection, and it therefore explained that the possibility of wrongdoing in the interim undermined the effect of the promise. However, Rav Elchanan commented, in Maimonides' view, Yaakov should have still felt confident in God's protection, no less than had he never received any explicit promise. Even if Yaakov could not rely on God's promise given his concerns that he may have sinned, he should nevertheless have trusted in God's kindness, irrespective of any promise.

Of course, this discussion relates to the broader issue of "*bitachon*," the question of when and to what extent one must confidently trust that he will be safely delivered

from situations of crisis. The undisputable fact that all people – including the most righteous – suffer misfortune makes it difficult to imagine that Yaakov would be criticized for entertaining the possibility that he might be killed by Esav. Once we accept the validity of the concern of “*shema yigrom ha-cheit*,” we cannot truly blame Yaakov for fearing the outcome of this confrontation.

One possible explanation is to distinguish between rational concern and the emotional experience of fear. True, Yaakov cannot be blamed for considering the possibility that God may allow his brother to kill him and his family. This rational concern, however, might not entirely justify the experience of fear. Maimonides, who so vigorously emphasized the importance of empowering the intellect over one’s emotions, perhaps felt that Yaakov’s emotional response – to the point where he was not only afraid, but was also “distressed” – may have reflected incomplete control over his emotions. That Yaakov allowed himself to be gripped by fear perhaps indicated that his intellect had not yet succeeded in exerting absolute control. Even though Yaakov had reason to suspect that he may not survive his encounter with Esav, his emotional reaction may, in Maimonides’ view, have signaled a somewhat deficient level of self-discipline.

In any event, more generally, Maimonides’ remarks remind us that as much as a person achieves, there is still more for him to accomplish. Even a person who has reached the level of prophecy has not necessarily reached the point of perfection, and must still continue working to improve and enhance his character. One can never be fully satisfied with what he has achieved; he must instead persist in the lifelong process of self-improvement, constantly inching ever closer to perfection.