Chazak Ve'ematz – Empowerment & Growth

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A Whispered Promise – and a Name Born of Struggle

The *tallit* comes down over my head, muting the noise around me to the bare minimum. All I can see is the *machzor* and a corner of the cloth it rests on. I say the words from it one by one, slowly, like a man counting coins.

The *Shemoneh Esrei* of Rosh Hashanah. I'm a newlywed, married only a few months. The ring still gleams too brightly. And my shoulders are still learning the weight.

"*Malchuyot*." I crown Hashem King over me. "*Zichronot*." My fingers press into the *machzor* until they turn white. "*Shofarot*." Someone behind me coughs, the synagogue door creaks, and I try—truly try—to stay here.

My eyes, which had been open, now squeeze shut, and I ask. For an apartment. For a livelihood in abundance, the kind that doesn't mean doing sums at night over a sheet of paper and a pencil with a broken tip. And for a child.

I finish the list, and a great deal of air is left behind it. And into that air I say, almost without a sound: I want a child.

"Abba, every day hundreds of thousands of babies are born into the world. Chinese, Russians, Germans, Indians, Brazilians. They all have their different and unusual names—Li, Ivan, Hans, Raj, João." My voice cracks in the middle. "I'm asking 'for Your sake'—that Your great Name be magnified and sanctified."

It's still not enough. I feel it inside. I'm still standing at the gate. And then I remember the essence of the day, in the line I said a moment ago: "And You, Hashem our G-d, shall reign over all Your works." And suddenly I understand that this whole day is built on that one word. Not on my requests. On kingship. If that is the essence of the day, that is the point where I need to stand and ask.

I squeeze my eyes shut even harder. "Abba. The first son You give me, if it's this month—this very month, so I'll know this was my prayer—I will call him by the most Jewish name there is. Israel. 'That you may crown Me over you.'"

I don't move. I stand there like a little child who grabbed his father's sleeve in the middle of the street and refuses to let go, even as the whole world rushes past.

The next day, in the Ten Days of Repentance, I'm sitting in the living room while my wife folds a pile of laundry. I tell her about the commitment I made under the *tallit*, without looking at her, trying to get the moment over with quickly. She stops in the middle of folding a pair of pants. Looks at me one second too long. Then she goes on folding, and says, as if in passing, though it was not in passing at all: "Okay."

That's all. "Okay."

She folds the pants again, though they were already folded. And I breathe for the first time since Rosh Hashanah.

That very month, our prayers were answered with a son. At the *bris*, between the cup of wine and the noise of the relatives, my father-in-law, honored with the blessing, raises his voice: "And let his name be called in Israel." And I hear myself say: "Yisrael Eliyahu."

Years later, I open Parashat Vayishlach, and there he stands. Jacob. Past midnight. Everyone has already crossed the stream. The children's voices still carry from a distance, and then they don't. Only he remains, and the darkness. "And Jacob was left alone." And the one who came to him in the dark did not come to talk. "And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn."

A struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. From below, it looks like two men grappling in the dark. But the Heavenly Court stops and watches: who will win?

Jacob does not emerge from the struggle unscathed. The man sees that he cannot overcome him, touches the socket of his hip, and the hip is injured. From that moment on, he will limp. And still, Jacob does not let go. "Let me go, for dawn has broken," the man pleads. "I will not let you go unless you bless me," Jacob answers.

"What is your name?" the man asks. "Jacob," he replies. "No longer shall your name be said to be Jacob, but Israel—for you have striven with the Divine and with men, and you have prevailed."

He was not told, "Because you won." He was told first: "Because you struggled." Because you fought. Because you did not walk away in the middle of the night. Israel is not the title of one who came through a struggle easily. It is the name of one who stayed in the night until the dawn broke, and fought with all his strength—even when it hurt, even when he was limping.

And that is the name our people was given. Not "the people of Abraham," not "the people of Isaac." A people who wrestle.

And that is why, to this day, the Torah commands us not to eat the *gid hanasheh*, the sciatic nerve: "because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip." He was healed—as our Sages taught of the words "And Jacob came whole"—and yet the wound remains with us, so that we will know there are nights from which one emerges limping. And still whole. And still prevailing. The limp is not the end of the story. It is part of it.

Many a night I put him to bed and stand beside the little bed. My son pulls the blanket up to his chin and murmurs after me, word by word: "Hear, O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One."

Tonight he opened one eye. "Abba." "Yes." "Am I called Israel? Or is the Jewish people called Israel?" I pause for a moment, searching for how one explains such a thing to a child. "Both," I finally tell him. "The Jewish people is called Israel, and that's why I called you Israel too."

I look at him to see if he understood, and want to add something. But he is already asleep, his face still pondering the question.

My finger stops on the switch of the night-light. And I realize that "Israel" is not only the name of a son, and not only the name of an entire people. It is a mission, and it is given to all of us. Nearly every day, a struggle like this awaits us: the morning that is hard to get out of bed for, the moment we want to skip praying with a *minyan*, the feeling of "I've had enough." And there, precisely there, we must not let go.

Because within us hides a small Israel, and facing him stands the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination. Sometimes the *yetzer hara* manages to wound us, and that is the blow to the hip: a fall, a failure, some corner of our service of Hashem that has been captured. But as long as we don't let go, the story doesn't end there. "And Jacob came whole." We get up, keep moving forward, and in the end, we win.

I turn off the light. And I see that, as with Jacob, our struggle is not taking place down here alone. From below, one sees a single Jew getting up in the morning, or walking a long way to pray with a *minyan*, and fighting himself. But above, the entire Heavenly Court stops and watches: who will win, good or evil?

And the answer is already written in our name: "For you have striven… and you have prevailed."

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