

"[HILLEL] WOULD SAY ... IN A PLACE WHERE THERE ARE NO MEN, STRIVE TO BE A MAN." (PIRKEI AVOS 2:5)

**The battle between
Yaakov and the angel was
a cataclysmic showdown**

THIS WEEK'S CHAPTER of Pirkei Avos includes Hillel's famous advice. The Rambam explains that the effort Hillel discussed was to strive to reach higher levels of spirituality. If you find yourself in a situation without wise men to teach you, the Rambam continues to explain, you must teach yourself. The Hebrew word that Hillel used for "strive" is *hishtadel*. The Rambam tells us that the Targum used *hishtadel* as a translation of the word "wrestle" when the angel of Esav wrestled with Yaakov. In other words, the angel "strove" or "put in effort" to try to overpower Yaakov. The Rambam is making a comparison between the case of a man exerting himself to grow spiritually, and the situation of Esav's angel grappling with Yaakov. Spiritual growth would seem to be a matter of a slight increase in energy, a small turning of the dial to a higher setting. The battle between Yaakov and the angel, on the other hand, was a cataclysmic showdown between the forces of good and evil – a fight to the death. How can the Rambam compare the effort needed to reach for a higher spiritual level to the effort required to protect and defend your very existence?

**"Not me," we say to
ourselves**

We often see people on the "fast track" in life, devoting incredible amounts of focus and energy to their jobs and careers, constantly striving to reach the next plateau, a more prestigious position, a better salary package and more recognition in the company. For these people, their career is their life, and they will push themselves to their physical limits, and beyond, in their quest to reach the top. Such individuals obviously have little time for spiritual pursuits. Some of our friends can get caught up in a similar mindset, thinking 24/7 about their occupation, and even if they don't ignore Torah and *mitzvos*, they can leave them in a stagnant mode, without growth or improvement. "Not me," we say to ourselves, "Even though I am very focused on material matters, I also always pay some attention to my spiritual progress; I go to shul, I learn every day, etc. In this way I can be sure I will achieve some growth." We feel satisfied that there will be positive movement since we are not neglecting our spirituality.

We see from the Rambam that the struggle to truly grow spiritually requires more than just "some attention." It requires the same super-human effort that the angel and Yaakov expended to defend themselves. What we call making a "living" should not be confused with life itself and the real purpose of our existence: to strive for spiritual perfection. That is where we should be trying to "make it to the top." That is life itself, and the effort we exert to achieve spiritual growth literally spells a life or death difference to our future.

It is a fight for life or death

Proper guidance is critical to allow us to reach the higher levels demonstrated by our teachers. However, Hillel is teaching us that even if we find ourselves without proper mentors, we must summon our deepest reserves of effort to fight alone against the *yetzer hara*, for this is not merely an attempt to make a slight improvement. It is a fight for life or death, and we have to use whatever means possible to save ourselves from the enemy who is out to destroy us. If we muster the latent forces within us, and throw every ounce of our being into the fray, we can be confident that we will merit Hashem's help and be successful, even without human assistance, in climbing ever higher up the mountain of life's challenges.