

To Stand our Ground

From Jacob to Israel

The Sages of the Talmud, with rare exception, were great believers in earning one's keep.¹ Taking as an axiom that life is replete with innumerable challenges, honest struggle is preferable, from the rabbinic viewpoint, than any form of naive escapism, on the one hand, or feeding from the silver spoon, on the other. If this is the case regarding personal struggle, the same is true concerning national challenges. As the Talmud taught, the Land of Israel itself is acquired by the Jewish people, not with ease, but through difficulty and struggle².

The life of Jacob presents itself as a case study in support of this thesis. The common denominator of Jacob's response to the challenges presented by Esav, and Lavan, is to look for the exits. In this week's sedra, Jacob, all alone, stands and confronts the mysterious man-angel, wrestling him through the night. Only *through* this struggle, and not despite it, does Jacob receive the blessing of a new identity, Israel, one which reflects the willingness to struggle, and thereby, to develop, in one's relationship both with God and man.

It seems quite poetic that Jacob is, on account of this struggle with the man-angel, sustains an injury, and loses, at least temporarily³, his capacity to run. Whereas *Jacob* might have opted for that path, of decidedly lesser resistance, *Israel* had no need to do so. He was perfectly capable of standing his ground, and meeting life's challenges with his signature blend of faith and resilience. Jacob was born grabbing the leg of the brother who was to leave the womb first; Israel, whom the angel cannot defeat, has his own leg grabbed, and, even as he is wounded, he is redeemed from all past failures. It was not he who struck beneath the belt.

It hardly needs to be said that on that fateful night, Israel blazed a path for his descendents, who consecrate that night of struggle with an eternal ban on consumption of the *gid ha-nasheh*, where Israel was wounded by the man-angel. As the Prophet stated⁴, the Children of Israel are, like their illustrious ancestor, 'survivors of the sword', who have struggled many a painful day, and many a long night. Battle-tested, clear-eyed, we see our present challenges in Israel as another round in a generational bout. As Bnei Yisrael, quite literally, the sons of Israel,, we are unshaken.

¹ See for example, Brachot 8a, Brachot 35a, Menachot 99b, Avot Chapter 2, for a small sampling of sources concerning procuring sustenance at the personal level. Maimonides Hilchot Talmud Torah Chapter 3 for a particularly strident formulation of the well-worn rabbinic sentiment. Naturally, the willingness to engage in grueling struggle is a cardinal spiritual value, across the board, and in particular, with respect to Torah study. Reish Lakish said, the words of Torah are preserved in he who kills himself, in a figure of speech, over them (Brachot 63b).

² Brachot 5a.

³ According to the rabbinic tradition, he was healed shortly thereafter, concomitant with his arrival in Shechem. See Shabbat 33a.

⁴ Jeremiah 2:1.