

# VaYishlach: God Wrestler

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The Torah is not intended to be read as a full and complete account of history nor as an elaborate retelling of an epic tale. As modern readers, therefore, we feel confused and frustrated. We are given bits and pieces and much is left to the imagination. This week's parsha, Vayishlach, is chock full of interesting vignettes but lacks details. Furthermore, generally, there is very little conveyed regarding the emotions of those who will someday be the forebears of all that we hold sacred. This absence of specifics is vexing! This incompleteness, perhaps, is also what continues to draw us back in and for us to find relevance in every age.

Jacob/Yaakov is, at long last, returning home. He has no choice but to confront his twin brother, Esav and his past. Jacob left as one man, young and fleeing for his life after tricking his father and stealing the blessing that was the right of the eldest heir, even if older only by a few minutes. He is coming back rich both in acquisitions and family. The blessing fulfilled, Yaakov is in the position of strength, not yet a tribe, but head of a clan, with enough wealth to live comfortably and sustain those in his care.

Jacob sends messengers and gifts ahead to his brother. When Yaakov hears that Esav is coming to greet him with 400 men, Jacob panics. In a rare moment of Biblical drama and revealed emotions of our protagonist, the text tells us outright that Jacob is scared of this confrontation. Yaakov divides his people into two camps. If Esav attacks in vengeance, at least some of his people will be spared. Jacob prepares more gifts, tries to sleep, further divides his family, removing them for protection, and finally lays down to perhaps get a few hours of rest. It is in this state of anxiety and exhaustion that we reach one of the defining moments of our national narrative.

## Bereshit (Genesis) Chapter 32

**25** And Yaakov was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.

כה וַיִּנְתֵּר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֵק אִישׁ  
עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר:

**26** When he saw that he could not prevail against him, he touched the socket of his hip, and the socket of Yaakov's hip became dislocated as he wrestled with him.

כו וַיִּרְא כִּי לֹא יָכֵל לוֹ וַיִּגַע בְּכַף־  
יָרְכוֹ וַתִּקַּע כַּף־יָרְךָ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֶאָבֵקוֹ  
עִמּוֹ:

**27** And he (the angel/man) said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking," but he (Yaakov) said, "I will not let you go unless you have blessed me."

כז וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי כִּי עֹלָה הַשָּׁחַר  
וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ כִּי אִם־  
בֵּרַכְתָּנִי:

**28** So he (the angel/man) said to him, "What is your name?" and he said, "Yaakov."

כח וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מִה־שְּׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר  
יַעֲקֹב:

29 And he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but Israel, because you have **שָׁרָה** with **אֱלֹהִים** and with **אֲנָשִׁים**, and you have prevailed."

כַּט וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יִעֲקֹב, יִשְׂרָאֵל, כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל, כִּי-שָׁרָה  
שָׁרָה כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל, כִּי-שָׁרָה  
עַם-אֱלֹהִים וְעַם-אֲנָשִׁים וְתוֹכֵל:

Yaakov emerges from his sleep, newly named, emboldened from his encounter and sets out to meet his brother.

Again, shockingly detailless! So many questions unanswered! Is this a man or an angel? Perhaps it is the spirit of Esav? Maybe it is Yaakov's own subconscious? Why do we care about his hip socket? We are left confused regarding the true identity of the "wrestler" yet we need to know that bit of information?! When the "wrestler" begs to be let go as dawn breaks, Jacob asks for a blessing. Why? And rather than giving Yaakov a blessing, the "wrestler" says, "What's your name?" You came to Jacob in the middle of the night to fight him and you don't even know his name? What kind of question is that?! Finally, the "wrestler" gives Yaakov this new name, Yisrael, one who **שָׁרָה**'s with **אֱלֹהִים** and with **אֲנָשִׁים**. What on earth does that mean?!

Before I go on, it is incumbent upon me to tell you that entire books have been written trying to figure out these questions. This episode is so fundamental to who we are as a people, to our national narrative, that lifetimes have been labored over the abhorrent lack of information in these few lines.

I also need to be honest about something else. While the text itself is terse, there is exquisite wordplay happening within the Hebrew that is lost when reading the text in English. I have plucked out just a small snippet of the larger tale. Within the surrounding text, there are repeated roots that tell a deeper meaning, that leave clues to help unravel the mysteries of this scene. The text is filled with double entendre, reaching as far back as the narrative of creation and ahead to that of Moshe leading B'nai Israel in the *midbar*, the desert. Even the names of the places become part of the story, not serving just as geographical markers, but also as reflections of the experiences of the players.

For a thorough linguistic analysis and an excellent argument for one way to view this piece of text, please see Shmuel Klitner's book, [Wrestling Jacob](#).

Rather than tackling all of the questions and nuances of the text, I will focus on one piece of the puzzle, the new name that is given to Yaakov, Yisrael. In *passuk* 29 says:

לֹא יִעֲקֹב יִשְׂרָאֵל, כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל,  
כִּי-שָׁרָה עַם-אֱלֹהִים וְעַם-אֲנָשִׁים וְתוֹכֵל:

"Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but Israel,  
**שָׁרָה** with **אֱלֹהִים** and with **אֲנָשִׁים**, and you have prevailed."

These short phrases, fifteen words in all, can be translated and understood in many different ways. Three words in particular are the key and simultaneously the most difficult to understand.

**שָׁרָה** - because you have struggled, fought, confronted, conquered  
With whom?  
**אֱלֹהִים** - God, an angel of God

and  
אֲנָשִׁים - others, people, Esav, your brother, yourself

In looking at this line, you would have been correct in asking yourself, as so many before you have, “Which is it? Which interpretation is correct?” The short answer is, “All of them.” It is each and every one of these possible configurations. It is Yakov as he struggles with Esav, his past deeds and his inner self. It is Jacob as he wrestles with God, trying to understand how a God who promised him a lasting legacy could place him in mortal danger. The battle that began in the womb between these two is seen as a microcosm, a representative of the struggle between good and evil, order and chaos, both on a global scale and within each of us.

The lack of details, the subtlety of narrative, and the ability for this story to be reinterpreted in so many ways is the very thing that makes this story eternal, the reason it is so integral to who we are as people. These few words sum up every battle fought through the course of the history of humanity. That is a lot of burden placed on a scant fifteen words.

I, like many Jews around the world, see this week’s parsha, and every parsha since October 7th through the lens of the war in Israel. The struggle that existed between Jacob and Esav, two brothers who lived thousands of years ago continues to reverberate today.

We are Israel. We wear our “God Wrestler” title with pride, a badge of honor. We are people who ask tough questions and grapple with grand theological conversations such as the meaning of existence. Yet we are sometimes weary. To paraphrase Tevia, “Couldn’t God pick another people with whom to wrestle?” Part of being the privilege of an American Jew is the ability to blend, to be “just like everyone else.” And yet, now, we feel so acutely our differences, our conspicuousness glaring and raw. Anti-Semitism, more accurately named Jew Hatred, seems to be lurking around every corner. Our veneer of sameness has vanished, for many, overnight.

While we are at war with our brothers, two people who if you stood them side by side you would have difficulty distinguishing them apart, we are simultaneously battling the greatest battle of all time, that of hate, fear and loathing. We are charged with being a light unto the nations, fated to always be a minority, waving a small flame of holiness, *kodesh*, illuminating a path to *shalem*, to peace and completeness. In so many ways, this feud that has been waged for millennia feels futile. Will it ever end? Will we ever awake from our battles, as Yaakov did, and feel there is a path forward?

A few weeks ago, as I was spinning out and not sleeping because of the pain that my people were feeling, I reached out to Avi Meyerstein. I knew Avi casually, knew peripherally of the work that he was doing in Israel with Israelis and Palestinians through the Alliance for Middle East Peace, and understood that Avi was deeply involved in a conversation that I had, for good reasons, not been engaged in for some time, that of peacebuilding. In order to ground myself, I needed Avi’s perspective, one of hope. Avi generously agreed to have coffee with me. Sometimes rabbis need others to be their rabbis.

Avi reminded me of a key tenant to my faith. Each of us is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. To break the cycle that is fear and hate we must be able to see the other, to look beyond what blinds us and recognize that the person we are speaking to and about is, in fact, a person. They are not different from us. They are us.

This war we are fighting is the epic battle described in our text today, in all of its variants. It is the battle between us and our brothers, good and evil, between chaos and order, and even our outer portrayal of self and our inner truth. Yes, we will fight Hamas and all that it represents hate and fear, and we will use Yaakov as our model, confronting our antagonist face-on.

However, to truly emerge victorious from this battle, we will need to forge a global path to understanding. This is no small task, but as heirs of the name Yisrael, those who wrestle with the greatest of human challenges, this is our charge, our legacy. This is the fight that we have been fighting for millennia. We must find a way to show others that it is okay to struggle and grapple with forces that feel greater than ourselves, and awake in the morning, as Yaakov did, with clarity and understanding, that we can move forward along the path to peace and enlightenment.

I pray that we all have the courage and fortitude as we continue with the mission that is the work of our people.