

Devar Torah for Parashat Vayishlach (Dec. 2, 2023)

Shabbat Shalom everyone. First, I want to thank Rabbi Rich for asking me to give a Devar Torah this Shabbat, and for sending sources to help me put it together.

Our Parasha, **Vayishlach**, is rich in important events. I count at least 9 subplots.

1. Jacob's preparations to meet Esau, and his doubts.
2. The great wrestling match with the angel, and the change of Jacob's name to Yisrael.
3. Jacob's meeting and reconciliation with Esau, their embrace and weeping.
4. The defiling of Dinah and the deceptive vengeance of Simeon, Levi, & the other brothers.
5. G-d's revelation & renewal of His covenant with Jacob, renamed Yisrael again, at Beth El.
6. Rachel's death in childbirth of Benjamin.
7. Reuben's rebellious act of lying with Jacob's concubine, his stepmother, Bilhah.
8. The death of Issac at age 180 in Hebron and his burial by both Jacob and Esau.
9. The description of Esau's offspring, forming the nation of Edom in the land of Seir, including a grandson of Esau named Amalek. (BTW, Seir is the region of Petra in Jordan.)

By far the central event is Jacob's wrestling with a mysterious stranger, who the text says is a man, but Jacob believes is a divine being. The account in the text is brief and moving.

Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he [the opponent] said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he [Jacob] answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Yisrael, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there. So, Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping on his hip.

What are we to make of this struggle? Is it real? Is it a dream, or a vision that Jacob perceives? Does it express some emotional crisis of anxiety, indecision and self-doubt, or even a deeper psychological conflict within Jacob? Is it, somehow, all of the above?

Many of the commentators look to the prior verse 8 for an explanation. When Jacob learns that Esau (who had pledged to kill him for stealing his blessing & birthright) was coming with 400 men, the text says, “וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיִּצְרָ לוֹ”, “Jacob was greatly frightened and distressed.” The commentators ask, why does the Torah say explicitly that Jacob is both frightened and distressed? What is the reason for the redundancy? After all, if someone is frightened, they are also distressed.

Rashi says: Jacob is frightened that he might be killed, and distressed that he might have to kill someone. Along with the Talmud Sages, Rashi believes that the mysterious stranger is divine, Esau's guardian angel, and Jacob's struggle is a presage of his meeting with Esau. Jacob is distressed and afraid that he will be forced into a situation where he will kill or be killed. The source of such distress is the moral & human quality of empathy. Rashi's interpretation strikes home today. One can only imagine how the young IDF soldiers fighting in Gaza are torn by the same conflicting emotions, as they confront an evil enemy devoid of similar empathy.

Walter Herzberg (Asst Prof Emeritus of Bible at JTS) points to another interpretation. The Bekhor Shor (a 12th century French commentator) suggests that Jacob feared and was distressed because he did not know what to do. But G-d had promised to protect him during his earlier dream of the ladder to heaven. So, Jacob's faith should have given him the courage to act. The Malbim (a 19th century Russian commentator) agrees. Jacob's fear and distress, despite G-d's promise to him, indicates that his faith in G-d was deficient. He is afraid of being killed, and distressed that his faith does not allow him to overcome this fear.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs takes a more psychological view. Jacob's fear and distress, despite G-d's promised protection, reflect his self-struggle to find his identity. The source of Jacob's inner struggle is sibling rivalry for Issac's favor, and even envy of Esau. (Let's recall: The Hebrew root of **יַעֲקֹב** is **עָקַב** = "heel grasper".) Jacob wrestles all night until his love of G-d, and his faith in G-d's covenantal promise, prevails. He finds his true identity as G-d's agent to father a great and righteous nation. So, Jacob is given a new name, **יִשְׂרָאֵל**, meaning, "One who has wrestled with G-d and man and has prevailed." (Note here: The Hebrew roots of **יִשְׂרָאֵל** are **שָׂר** = prince, & **יָשַׁר** = upright.)

Today we struggle with the hate directed against us from Gaza and elsewhere. A different take on the outcome of Jacob's struggle can be helpful. Rabbi Avital Hochstein, President of the Hadar Institute in Israel, suggests that the meaning of **יִשְׂרָאֵל** should be read in the future tense as, "One who will strive with G-d and man and will prevail". Guided by our faith in G-d's covenant, may this ever be true for us individually, and for our people, **עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל**.