

Jacob's Mysterious Assailant

Introduction

In this week's portion, *Vayishlach*, Jacob is on his way back to the Holy Land to reconnect with his brother Esau. He had been fleeing from him for twenty years because he was afraid Esau would kill him for stealing their father Isaac's blessing from him.

Suddenly, a mysterious entity attacks him and he wrestles with it for an entire night:

וַיִּנָּתֶר יַעֲקֹב לְבָדּוֹ וַיִּאָּבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלֹת הַשָּׁחַר:

Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When [the man] saw that he had not prevailed against [Jacob], he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him.

Then [the man] said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking."

But [Jacob] answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

The [man] said, "What is your name?"

[Jacob] replied, "Jacob."

The [man] said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings both divine and human (כִּי־שָׁרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים), and have prevailed."

Jacob asked, "Please tell me your name."

But the [man] said, "You must not ask my name!"

וַיִּבְרֶךְ אֹתוֹ שָׁם: -- And he blessed him there.

So Jacob named the place Peniel (פְּנִיֶּאֱל -- "face of God"), because, he thought, "I have seen a divine being (אֱלֹהִים) face to face, yet my life has been preserved."

The sun shone for him as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip.

That is why the children of Israel to this day do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, since Jacob's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh muscle. [Genesis 32:25-33]

Indeed, Jews may not eat the sciatic nerve attached to the hip socket.

[Chullin 7, Yoreh De'ah 65:5-14] This mitzvah is called *Gid Hanasheh* (גִּיד הַנָּשֶׁה), or displaced tendon.

Questions

- Who was that entity? A man? An angel? God?
- He describes himself as “beings both divine and human”. Why the plural since he was only one entity?
- The entity asks Jacob: “What is your name?” Did he not know all along whom he was fighting?
- What was his mission?
- When the entity sees that he cannot defeat Jacob, he wrenches Jacob’s hip. How is that cause and effect?
- Why does the entity have to leave at dawn?
- Why does Jacob want to be blessed by it after fighting it and getting injured?
- In response to Jacob's request for a blessing, the entity changes Jacob’s name. Is that a blessing and why?
- Why did Jacob ask for the entity’s name and why would he not reveal it?
- How does Jacob know it was a “divine being”?
- Why is Jacob’s wound so important that it led to a dietary restriction for Jews?

Let us explore some possible answers.

Who was the entity?

1-It was a vision

Maimonides (12th-century Egypt) believed that the incident was “a prophetic vision”. [Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed 2:42:2]

Abravanel (15th-century Spain) strongly disagrees: Why would Jacob limp after a dream?

2-He was no one: Jacob was alone

-The Torah says: “Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him”. If he was “alone”, who was he wrestling with? It must be with himself.

He was engaged in an inner struggle, in profound introspection, repenting for past misdeeds.

In the mystical view, the fight represents the struggle between the good inclination and the evil inclination. The latter, the dark side, is most powerful at night. [Zohar 1:170b]

3-He was an angel

The prophet Hosea describes Jacob's opponent as a *malakh* – an angel. [Hosea 12:4] Midrash: He was Esau's guardian angel, Samael. [Genesis Rabbah 77:3, Yalkut Shimoni 1:110, Zohar Bereshit 170a]

Note: Everyone, good or evil, has a guardian angel sent by God to look after his interests. [Everyone is entitled to a lawyer.]

What is the significance of the wound Jacob received?

Zohar: The entity struck Jacob's thigh, the place where sexual desire originates, and only there was he able to wound him. [Zohar 1:170b]

Lesson: We do not eat the sciatic nerve to remind us that sexual desire is one place where the urge is so strong that even the greatest are powerless against it.

-However, Chizkuni sees the prohibition as punishment to “the children of Israel” for not being with their father in his time of peril:

[Jacob was left alone.] It is right and proper to punish the Israelites [by not allowing them] to eat that particular sinew as they should not have allowed their founding father to be exposed to hostile forces at night. Jacob's sons were physically strong, and they should have been at hand to assist their father if the need arose to do so. Seeing that they failed to do this, the blame for the injury sustained by their father was theirs. From now on they would have learned their lesson and would practice the commandment to accompany their father, or for that matter, any older and wiser person, especially at night.

Why did Jacob ask for his blessing?

Rashi (11th-century France) believed Jacob wanted the angel to bless him to confirm that the blessing Isaac gave him was valid. Rabbenu Bahya (14th-century Spain) writes:

[Why did Jacob say] “I will not let you go unless you first bless me.”? He wanted Esau's angel to acknowledge that the blessing he had received

from Isaac was acknowledged by Esau as being rightfully his... [By saying] "Your name will no longer be Jacob but Israel" the angel meant that from now on people will no longer say that you obtained the blessings by subterfuge, but they will admit that you are their rightful recipient... This was confirmed when the prophet Micah said:

תתן אמת ליַעֲקֹב -- You have given truth to Jacob. [Micah 7:20]

Why did he ask Jacob his name?

Tur HaAroch (13th-century Spain):

The angel wanted to know Jacob's exact name because the healer must know the person's exact name if his efforts are to be crowned with success.

Why did he Jacob ask for his name?

Sforno (16th-century Italy) says:

[Jacob asking for the angel's name means: Your name] would describe your essence, your function, and how you would go about performing same. This would enable me to understand why you attacked me in the first place. I would then be able to do penitence for my sin, something I cannot do as long as I do not know what precisely my sin consists of.

Why did he not give his own name?

-Midrash: The angel would not give his name because it can change:
We have no fixed names. Our names change, depending on what we are commanded to carry out. [Genesis Rabbah 78:4]

-But Ramban interprets "You must not ask my name!" as meaning:
"There is no benefit in you knowing my name because only God can answer your prayers."

-Rabbenu Bahya sees it as a sign of modesty:

He does not want a human being to go around saying: "This and this angel has performed such and such a miracle." He is a servant, a mere extension of his Master in Heaven.

Or a wish to avoid embarrassment at having "lost" the fight:

The loser does not want his name known so as to suffer the minimum of embarrassment.

What was his mission?

-He came to prevent Jacob from escaping from Esau

The Rashbam (12th-century France) believes Jacob is attempting to flee from Esau. But God wants the brothers to meet, so He sends an angel to make sure Jacob does not escape. The angel dislocates his hip joint, thereby laming him and preventing any possibility of escape. The lesson: You may not run away from your troubles.

-He came to find fault with Jacob

Rabbenu Bahya believes the angel came to find fault with Jacob:

The angel came to find a sin Jacob was guilty of to use it as a weapon to overpower him. He did not succeed. The only sin he could find was that Jacob had married two sisters during their lifetime, something the Torah later forbade. The writing: "he inflicted an injury on Jacob's hip joint" is a euphemism for his sexual organs and the seat of sexual desire. The punishment was administered near that organ so that Jacob limped for a while.

-He came to strengthen Jacob

Radak (13th-century France) believes God sent the angel to strengthen Jacob:

God sent this angel to Jacob to strengthen his courage, not to fear Esau. If Jacob could prevail over an angel, surely he had no reason to be afraid of an encounter with someone like Esau! The fact that the struggle lasted until daybreak was an allusion to Jacob that after a period of night, meaning problems and adversity, there would come a period of light, peace and prosperity coupled with security.

-He came to issue a warning against antisemites

The Ramban (13th-century Catalonia) writes that the fight represents the never-ending battle between Jews and antisemites:

The whole matter represents an allusion to our future history, that there would come a time when the descendants of Esau would overcome Jacob almost to the point of total destruction. This happened during the days of the Sages of the Mishnah... There were other generations who did... worse things to us. But we endured all and it passed us by. [Also in Lekach Tov]

They may wound us (Jacob's hip) but they will not destroy us. After that incident, the Torah says:

וַיָּבֹא יַעֲקֹב שָׁלֵם עִיר שְׁכֶם

Jacob arrived whole in the city of Shechem. [Gen. 33:18]

The battle will end at the time of the Redemption (“the break of dawn”).

The Ramban generally taught that “the deeds of the patriarchs are a sign to their descendants.”

The battle is with “beings both divine and human”. The humans are the antisemites. The Divine is God, from Whom we seek answers He withholds from us: Why the evil? Why the suffering? (God likes thinkers, questioners, iconoclasts: Yisrael.)

Our change of name implies that our mission is to struggle with people and with God until we prevail.

Tur HaAroch concurs:

This injury too was intended to serve as a warning to the Jewish people in the future that there would arise a descendant of Esau, the Roman Empire, who would threaten to totally annihilate the people.

Rashi interprets the text literally: “You have striven [past tense, not future] with beings both divine and human and have prevailed” means that the divine is God and the human beings are Esau and Laban.

-He came to provoke a turning point in Jacob’s life

“What is your name?” means “Are you still Jacob, the habitual deceiver, the “one who steals by grabbing onto other people's heels”, or have you matured enough to become Israel, the righteous man “who struggles with God” for lofty spiritual purposes?”

God later confirms what the angel said:

God said to him, “You, whose name is Jacob, You shall be no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” Thus He named him Israel. [Gen. 35:10]

Rashi, commenting on this verse, says:

[The verse means you shall no longer be Jacob,] a man who comes as a lurker and a trickster, but you shall be Israel (ישראל), which means Prince and Chief [one who wields authority].

Note: The Jews are called “the children of Israel” *right* after the incident with the angel.

The Midrash adds that this also teaches us that the righteous are superior to the angels: Jacob seized the mighty angel and vanquished him. [Midrash Tanhuma]

He was not the only mysterious assailant at night

The Torah has another instance involving Moses who did not circumcize his son on time:

At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered [Moses] and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, “You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!” And when [God] let [Moses] alone, she added, “A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.” [Ex. 4:24-26]

Conclusion

The incident can be interpreted many ways, but the facts in the narrative imply that this was the moment when Jacob, who has a history as a deceiver, becomes transformed into Jacob the righteous patriarch and builder of Israel, of the Jewish people.

Shabbat shalom.