

VAYISHLACH

December 5, 2009

For the past weeks (with the help of Dan Jacoby and Rabbi Tilsen) we have been following the story of Jacob, struggling to understand him, and wrestling with our feelings about his too often unattractive behavior.

In today's parashah Jacob has a transformative, watershed experience, one that signifies a turning point in his life. I want to focus on Jacob's transformational experience.

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The Jacob we have come to know, as we begin today's parashah, is not a very attractive fellow. His deceitful behavior in conning his brother Esau out of his birthright, and tricking his father Isaac into bestowing upon him the blessing that belonged to Esau, has portrayed him as a liar, a cheat, a trickster, a crafty, dishonest manipulator.

Jacob's brother threatens to kill him, so Jacob flees from his home in Canaan to his uncle Laban in Padan-aram. There Jacob meets his match in Laban, a man even more unscrupulous than he is. Jacob labors for Laban for 20 years, during which Laban repeatedly tricks, deceives, and cheats him. Finally, Jacob can tolerate this mistreatment no longer and gathers up his family, servants and flocks and stealthily sneaks away from Laban to return to his family in Canaan.

An incensed Laban pursues Jacob, and in a final, hostile encounter the two negotiate a cool parting of the ways.

Now Jacob faces an even more frightening encounter, with his brother Esau, who has vowed to kill him.

Jacob's past has finally caught up with him. He fears for his life. His worldly success has not prepared him to meet Esau. But he cannot turn back. Laban is behind him. He has no choice but to continue on his way toward the waiting Esau.

Jacob must prepare himself for this frightening reunion. He must struggle with his own inner self, his guilty conscience, his inclination to manipulate. Trickery and deceit will no longer work for him.

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The action of today's parashah is divided into two parts:

- (1) Jacob's preparations for his meeting with Esau.
- (2) The account of the actual meeting of the two brothers.

Between these two episodes is the strange story of the night-long struggle between Jacob and a mysterious adversary, which, as Nehama Leibowitz has observed, "is one of the most puzzling chapters in the Torah."

Jacob remains awake, restless, unable to sleep, consumed with fear and anxiety over his imminent meeting with Esau. He gets up in the night and decides to move his family, flocks, and baggage to the other side of the Jabbok River. He then crosses back over the river and remains alone.

Suddenly he is attacked by a mysterious assailant, with whom he wrestles until dawn. As daylight approaches, the assailant struggles to break loose from Jacob's

grip, even wrenching Jacob's hip, but Jacob refuses to let go unless the assailant blesses him.

The stranger asks, "What is your name?" Jacob replies, "Jacob." The stranger then proclaims, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." The stranger refuses to reveal his own name. As the sun sheds its first light, the stranger vanishes, and Jacob limps off toward his confrontation with Esau.

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What are we to make of this extraordinary episode? Who is the "man" (ish) with whom Jacob wrestles? What is the purpose of the assault, the meaning of the struggle, the significance of the name change? How are we meant to understand this apparent interruption in the Jacob narrative?

There is midrash that describes Jacob's assailant as Esau's guardian angel, Samael. Rashi adopts this view. Before Jacob encountered Esau in the flesh, his spirit struggled with the spirit of Esau.

Maimonides sees Jacob's struggle as having taken place in a dream. Nachmanides argues that Jacob struggled with no one but himself, with his own guilty conscience. These interpretations are appealing, but seem unsupported by the biblical text. Jacob suffers an actual physical injury in his struggle.

Nehama Leibowitz describes the story as "essentially non-rational." Whether the wrestling took place in the world of the senses, or was "an inner prophetic experience in Jacob's soul, projected through the medium of a dream," or portrays

Jacob struggling with himself, we are still left with the challenge of trying to understand what the Torah seeks to teach us through this story.

I suggest that we read the story (as Rabbi Tilsen would have us do) as a literary narrative, and to view Jacob as a character in that literary narrative.

Understanding the story requires that we interpret and respond to “the spirit, tone and intention of the narrative.”

It really doesn't matter whether the story tells of an actual physical encounter, or of something that happened to Jacob in a dream or in a struggle within his own conscience. Whatever way we read this story, it is about Jacob wrestling with who he was, with his past, with his guilt, and struggling to secure legitimacy by moving forward into a more honest and authentic future.

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It may help if we first situate this story in its cultural and literary context, even as we take note of the distinctly biblical characteristics of the narrative.

The story, as Nahum Sarna observes in his commentary on the Book of Genesis, shows the influence of two literary motifs common to a broad range of cultures—crossing a river, and being attacked by a demon.

Since ancient times, and across many cultures, crossing a river has symbolized overcoming danger and going forward to a new adventure or phase of one's life. There are many tales of river demons or spirits that attack humans who seek to cross their watery domains.

The motif of a demonic being whose power exists only at night, and who is unable to survive the light of day, is common to these tales. A brave traveler could

derive a benefit by propitiating and holding onto the demon, and refusing to let go until the demon allowed him to pass.

These motifs, as they appear in other cultural narratives, are incompatible with biblical monotheism. And so the Torah transforms these motifs into a distinctly Israelite story. The mysterious assailant is not portrayed as a demon, blocking Jacob from crossing the Jabbok, but rather a man (ish). True, the struggle occurs near the banks of the Jabbok River, but Jacob has already crossed the river to transfer his family and camp to the other side without interference. It is Jacob alone who is the object of the assailant's sudden and unexpected attack.

There is no physical description of the "man" (ish) who attacks Jacob. And rather than the attacker being wounded by the human, as is common to such a story, it is Jacob who is injured by the assailant.

The fact that Jacob asks for and receives a blessing from his attacker is further evidence that the assailant could not be a demon. In Jewish tradition blessings are bestowed by God or man.

The geographical location of Jacob's struggle with his assailant, the River Jabbok, is described elsewhere in the Torah as a frontier of the Land of Israel. This suggests that the purpose of the attack upon Jacob is to hinder his return to his homeland, the future national territory of the Children of Israel, unless and until Jacob is prepared to assume the mantle of rightful leadership. To achieve this Jacob must earn the paternal blessing, that he obtained by trickery, through a reconciliation with his brother Esau.

Jacob's flight from Esau, and his 20 years under the thumb of Laban, have not provided him fulfillment of Isaac's blessing. In order for Jacob to become a person of real power and legitimate authority, a true leader, he must have the ability to confront his brother Esau directly and to embrace Esau steadfastly, even though in doing so he will expose himself to serious injury.

Jacob's crossing of the Jabbok River after his night-long struggle, and his receipt of a blessing and a new name, represents a watershed in Jacob's life. He can only face up to his own unsavory past honestly, and truly reconcile with Esau, if he becomes a new man—not the old Jacob, but the new Israel. Or, as Aviva Zorenberg puts it, the mysterious assailant has come “to save [Jacob] from the condition of being Jacob.”

Zorenberg interprets the wrestling match as an occasion for Jacob to discover and clarify the parameters of his personal strengths and weaknesses. The injury Jacob suffers actually empowers him to experience a broader sense of authenticity, as he comes to show his courage and realize his vulnerability. In this sense, Jacob's injury is not disabling, but enabling.

If we read the story of Jacob's struggle with his mysterious assailant in this light, we may come to understand it, not as a curious interruption of the Jacob narrative, but rather as an integral part of the story. The struggle prepares Jacob for his reconciliation with Esau, and at long last earns him the right to re-enter Canaan, the future land of Israel, as the rightful progenitor of the Jewish People.