

Parashat Vayishlach וישלח

Torah: Genesis 32:3–36:43

Haftarah: Hosea 11:7–12:12

Jacob's Struggle

General Overview

Twenty years had passed since Jacob was in his homeland. The Lord took him away from Canaan and it was the Lord who, in this parasha, is bringing him back. During his twenty years absence, Jacob had matured through the many hard experiences he encountered while living in Paddan-aram. God grew him up! He had to mature because when he returned to Canaan he would encounter many more difficult situations that called for God's wisdom. He would not have had such wisdom if it were not for the tough lessons the Lord taught him while living with Laban.

Exposition

This parasha discusses some of those difficult situations that Jacob encountered upon his return to the Promised Land. In addition, it records one last major moment of breaking which Jacob had to experience in order to face those ordeals that awaited him. In this light, our expository outline is as follows:

- I. The Match
- II. The Mending of a Relationship
- III. The Mess with the Canaanites
- IV. The Mourning of Loved Ones

In this excerpt from Parashat Vayishlach, we will focus on section I, The Match.

I. The Match

Jacob was about to have a life-changing experience with God. He had just spent about twenty years in a frustrating relationship with Laban. When the Lord told him to leave Laban and travel back to Canaan, Jacob must have thought that his worst troubles would be behind him. Not so. This parasha records one of Jacob's most serious personal trials — his confrontation with his brother Esau. How prepared was Jacob to handle this reunion? What had God been doing in his life in order to prepare him for such an encounter?

Naturally, Jacob grew stronger and more mature as a result of his experiences with Laban. There still remained, however, one boulder left in his flesh that needed to be smashed. If God is the God who sanctifies as well as saves, then we will witness a great moment in Jacob's sanctification in this parasha. Let us examine it.

A. A Real Stumper

A lot of preparation was necessary for Jacob to face his dramatic meeting with Esau. He organized, he planned, he plotted, and he hoped for the best, but the

Lord had some preparing of His own to do. The night before Esau and Jacob were finally to meet, the Lord had Jacob sleep alone. We are told in 32:22–24:

But he got up that night and took his two wives, his two handmaids, and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. And when he took them and had them cross over the stream, he sent over all his possessions. Jacob was left alone...

Sometime during the night, a man interrupted Jacob's sleep and engaged in a wrestling match with him. The ensuing passage, with its enigmatic conclusion in 32:22ff is decidedly one of the most difficult of all the Torah passages to understand. The language is not the problem, nor are the facts difficult to ascertain. The problem is one of interpretation. Who is the man with whom Jacob wrestled (verse 24)? If he was only a regular man, then why does he not tell Jacob his name (verse 29)? Why did he start to wrestle with Jacob? How is it that Jacob prevailed during the match (verse 25)? Why did Jacob conclude that he saw the face of God (verse 30)? Why was Jacob's name changed and why was it that the man did it (verse 28)? Finally, why did the man dislocate Jacob's hip socket (verse 25)?

The best that a commentator can do is to present first some of the more common interpretations. It is always helpful, to know how others view a difficult passage. Then secondly, he can only suggest his own view of the matter. This will be our procedure.

1. Just a Dream

The Rambam perhaps best explains the first traditional interpretation of this passage. The Rambam (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon) lived during the 12th century. This giant of Jewish philosophers and Torah commentators sees this story as an account of a prophetic dream that Jacob had. According to him, the man with whom Jacob wrestled in this dream was an angel.

In response to this view we should note that the fact that Jacob sustained a physical injury from this experience might dispel any possibility of this being merely a dream.

2. Esau's Angel

Rashi represents another traditional Jewish interpretation. Rashi, who lived a century before the Rambam and is considered to be the greatest of all Jewish Torah commentators, writes, "And our Rabbis of blessed memory explained that he was the ministering angel of Esau."¹ Continuing further with his interpretation, Rashi explains that Jacob told Esau's angel that he (Jacob) would not let him (the angel) go from the wrestling match unless the angel would willingly bless Jacob: Rashi's words are, "Concede to me with regard to the blessings with which my father blessed me, over which Esau objects." Thus, according to Rashi, Jacob wanted to have the blessings willingly given to him by Esau instead of through the deceit by which he formerly secured them from Isaac. Jacob's name change accordingly came as a result of Esau's angel recognizing that Jacob will now rightfully inherit it from God, and not through the deception, which formerly characterized him.²

3. An Inner Struggle

Other commentators, such as Rabbi Elie Munk, see in this story a symbolic account of

the righteous person's inner struggle against the forces of evil...the patriarch's mysterious encounter thus becomes a symbolic representation of the fights and struggles taking place on the eve of the approaching ordeal.³

Israeli commentator, Nechama Leibowitz takes this interpretation one step further. She agrees that Jacob emerged safely, albeit wounded, from this wrestling match. Then she adds:

But the text promises more than that. Not only will Jacob emerge "whole" from the ordeal, but he will enjoy his adversary's blessing.⁴

4. Both Defeat and Victory

While the above are all interesting, this commentator sees something else here, something not commonly expressed by the sages of old. It seems that this wrestling match was the time set by our Father for Jacob's transformation from being a follower of men into being a servant of God.

Up until now, all the blessings Jacob had acquired were the result of deception and cunning. This was the way of the flesh. This was man's way of living as opposed to God's way. Moreover, at least in regard to his relationship with Esau, following the wishes of his mother Rivkah heavily influenced Jacob's actions. Hence, Jacob had been living after his name "heel" or "a follower."

Now, upon his return to Canaan, Jacob found himself to be in a situation that was totally beyond his control. He could not face Esau as a deceiver any longer. He could not follow the ways of men in conducting his relationships. It was at this point that the Lord Himself stepped in to change Jacob. He did so by engaging in a symbolic wrestling match,

which brought to a head the battling and groping of a lifetime. Moreover, it was against Him, not Esau or Laban, he had been pitting his strength.⁵

As a result of this match, the Lord gave Jacob both a victory and a defeat. It was a defeat for his flesh. Deception and following after men's ways would have to be demolished. The Angel sufficiently did that for Jacob. The Lord also gave Jacob a permanent reminder of this clash — his hip injury — in order to remind him that this was a real experience and not a dream. Furthermore, "after the maiming, combativeness had been turned to a dogged dependence, upon God instead of his own flesh, to secure blessings for himself."⁶

The match was also a victory for Jacob. The Lord dealt with his flesh and caused a new man to emerge. This change is reflected in his name change. The name "Jacob" (heel, deceiver, follower of men) was changed to "Israel."

This name, Israel, is derived from the root *s-r-h* (ס-ר-שׁ). (The *שׁ* is a sin, and not a shin). According to BDB it carries the idea of persisting, or perseverance.⁷ For what was Jacob persisting? It seems that all his life he wanted the family inheritance and the family blessing. Being the younger one, he had to relinquish it to Esau, until the time that Esau gave it up to him through deception. Now,

Jacob was about to face the one whom he had deceived in order to receive the coveted inheritance.

It seems, however, that desire for the family inheritance may have meant something else to Jacob besides riches. His family also had established a heritage of knowing God in a covenantal way. Perhaps Jacob associated receiving the family inheritance with being part of that covenantal relationship with God as well. If that is true, then we see Jacob strongly persisting to know God and to be properly related to Him, like his father Abraham had been.

It is apparent that Esau did not value either the inheritance or this relationship as much as Jacob. We can tell that by his willingness to exchange the inheritance for a mere cup of stew.

Now Jacob was ready to face the consequences of his flesh, that is, he must face Esau. God was preparing Jacob for this encounter by encouraging him. The wrestling match, among other things, may have been God's way of saying to him,

“You were once a deceiver. In doing so, not only did you struggle with your brother, but you also struggled with me. But in your heart, I have known what you have strived for — not only the inheritance, but a relationship with Me. You are now a broken man, but you are also one who will see the fulfilment of your heart. You will receive not only the inheritance, but also have an opportunity to make things right with your brother. Most of all, you will have the valuable covenantal relationship you have desired to have with Me. Hence, you shall no longer be Jacob, the deceiver, the “heel” — the one who follows after Esau. Now you shall be Israel, the one who persisted with flesh, with kin, and with God. You shall be victorious.”

B. The Wrestler: Who Was He?

The identity of the man who wrestled with Jacob only emerges gradually. At first he is called a man. However, as the light of dawn approached it soon became evident that this man was something more. For one thing, he did not want to be seen. In addition, he hesitated to respond when Jacob asked for his name while at the same time he divulged a divine revelation to Jacob (that his name would be changed from Jacob to Israel). Finally, we are told in 32:30, that Jacob named the place they were in, “Peniel — for I have seen the divine face to face, yet my life was spared.”

Regardless of what others have posited about this man being Esau's guardian angel, or a special messenger of God, it seems clear from the text that not only was this a special angel of God, but He was “The Angel of the Lord.” Indeed, He was most likely none other than the Messiah Himself who wrestled with Jacob! If it was not, then how could Jacob declare that he saw the face of God?

C. For the Kosher Butchers

There is one last item we need to address before moving on. During the wrestling match, the story relates that the Angel damaged Jacob's hip. Because of this, the text indicates in 32:32, “Therefore the children of Israel are not to eat the displaced sinew of the hip socket to this day, because he struck Jacob's hip socket on the displaced sinew.” Rashi explains that this injury was a dislocation at the upper end of the thighbone that is stuck into the hip socket.⁸

Was this a commandment from God, or was it simply a tradition among the Jewish people that became somewhat of an unwritten commandment? The answer is difficult to determine. This commandment is not repeated among the instructions that Moshe taught to Israel. But it is found in the Talmud (Pesachim 22a and 83b), centuries later. Nevertheless, even to the present day,

Jewish law insists on perpetuating the memory of Jacob's struggle by forbidding the consumption of the muscle injured in that struggle.⁹

From this story there emerges three ways by which this event is to be remembered: Jacob's name change, the place name of Peniel, and the abstention from eating the hindquarters of animals by observant Jewish people. Indeed, this was a major event that God wanted both Jacob and his descendants to remember for a long time.

Jacob was running no longer! He was learning a new way to walk. Before, it seems like he was always running away. He was running from Esau. He was running from Laban. Now, he will walk differently, carrying about his body a constant reminder of his struggle.

Furthermore, it seems like Jacob always had a struggle accepting his own name! When approaching his father Isaac about receiving the first-born birthright, Jacob said he was Esau and not Jacob. This incident at Machanayim would change that, too. After asking for a blessing, Jacob's opponent immediately brought the issue of Jacob's identity to the forefront when Jacob was asked what his name was. Then dramatically God changed Jacob's name from Jacob to Israel — one who has struggled with God and man and is able. Indeed, this wrestling match at Machanayim was, in many ways, the moment of Jacob's personal transformation, his moment of re-birth.

¹ Rashi, *Bereshit*, ArtScroll edition, 370.

² *Ibid.*, 371.

³ Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bereshit*, 443.

⁴ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit*, 370.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Genesis (TOTC)*, 169.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁷ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* ("BDB"), 975.

⁸ Rashi, *op. cit.*, 370.

⁹ Munk, *op. cit.*, 447.