

Gabriel Zucker

D'var Torah

VAYISLACH

“Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau came, and with four hundred men... And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him; and they wept.”

This is the climactic finale of a twenty year period during which Jacob and Esau are estranged. After years of exile, Jacob is finally coming back to face his haunted past – his homeland and Esau. And this entire rocky history meets the hopeful future in six short verses about a wrestling match.

The text simply says that Jacob wrestles with an eesh, literally a man, leaving us to wrestle with the text. Various midrashim have identified the “man” as an angel of G-d, Esau’s guardian angel, or G-d G-dself. Since G-d is by definition indefinable, there may be some truth to Jacob’s statement that he had confronted the Divine. But in the long run, I believe that Jacob was essentially wrestling with himself. He was coming to accept who he was, who he was meant to be, and what he truly believed.

This is not Jacob’s first wrestling match. Some forty years earlier, Jacob and Esau wrestled in the womb. Jacob lost this unconscious, physical struggle, defining his life from that point on. In my portion, Jacob is at another pivotal moment in his life. He has recently left the shelter of his uncle Laban and is about to take on the leadership that he fought for so many years ago. But it is not that simple. Jacob first must prepare himself for the role. He must decide whether this is what G-d has in mind, and whether he truly deserves the blessing.

Unlike the first time, this struggle is not about strength of limb but strength of spirit. This time, Jacob struggles with something undefined and unknowable. This time he is ready, and emerges victorious. And it is precisely because he wins the spiritual struggle that Jacob, not Esau, proves himself worthy of leading a people that from that moment forward would be known as Israel, which literally means one who wrestles with G-d.

But Jacob does not escape unscathed. There are certain things that he must accept before he can truly live up to the birthright and become a leader. First of all, he has to relinquish the hope of fixing his broken relationship with Esau. After many years Jacob finally realizes that the injustice he has done to Esau cannot be mended unless he were to abandon his leadership, leaving no future for the Jewish people. That is why, when they meet, Jacob declines Esau’s offer to travel together and they split again after five minutes.

Next he must accept his own imperfection. He obtained the birthright through deceit, and he can never feel completely comfortable about it. He showed favoritism to Joseph and to Rachel. He made many mistakes on the bumpy road here. And the “stranger” makes sure Jacob will never forget them by dislocating his hip in the course of wrestling. Whenever Jacob walks he will have a physical reminder of all his flaws.

In fact, leadership is often quite painful for Jacob, as we can see later in this portion. Many events follow the meeting with Esau; by far the most troubling is the episode of Dinah. She is raped by a Canaanite prince, who will then do anything to marry her. Two of Jacob’s sons respond with trickery and deceit and then ruthlessly slaughter and plunder the Canaanites, all behind their father’s back. While this is an incredibly ugly passage, it makes us understand a leader’s challenges. Even though Simeon and Levi were the ones that did wrong, Jacob fears that he will be blamed and that the Jewish people may even be destroyed as a result.

The Torah goes on to show that such problems won’t end with Jacob. This portion ends with an entire chapter recounting the descendants of Esau, telling us that there will always be Esaus in our way. That is why we are Am Yisrael, the nation of Israel, and not Am Avraham, the nation of Abraham. We will always have obstacles in our path. Abraham and Isaac were great guys, but they’re not realistic

figures. Jacob, on the other hand, is clearly human. He has weaknesses and problems that he must deal with and overcome, like the rest of us. That's why it makes sense to name the Jewish people after this guy. To name a country after this guy. To pattern our lives after this guy.

Jacob helps show us how to balance the spiritual and the practical in our modern day lives. Abraham and Isaac seemed to trust that G-d would deal with conflicts as they arose. But before Jacob meets Esau, he attends to both the spiritual and practical needs of the moment. He prays to G-d. He engages in this self-transforming wrestling match. And he deals with the down-to-earth, splitting his camp, sending gifts ahead to Esau, and moving his family across the river to safety.

I had to follow Jacob's model in the preparation for my Bar Mitzvah. Obviously, I had to learn my portions, write this D'var Torah, and buy this suit for practical reasons. Yet the more difficult part was attempting to look for G-d. Every night for the last year I said the Sh'ma and V'ahavta before I went to bed. It was meant to be a religious meditation time for me, and I had to work hard so that it didn't turn into a meaningless daily routine like brushing my teeth. I'm not saying that I ever actually heard G-d and had some amazing revelation, but the power of this ritual brought me a tiny bit closer to understanding what G-d might or could be. It was enough to make me want to continue even after today.

I'm sure for many of us the practical end is often easier to deal with, while we may find ourselves more challenged with the spiritual part of the bargain. Jacob has something to say about this too.

When I told a friend from school which portion I had, he said to me, "Oh, yeah. Some of us wrestle with angels metaphorically. The rest of us do it metaphorically." Although it may lose some of its Yogi Berra-esqueness, I would change it to: some of us actively wrestle with our spirituality. The rest of us are not ready. We are like Jacob's family, who were sent across the river before God could enter the camp; they simply weren't spiritually prepared to deal with such an indefinable power. I think of this as the River of Faith that all of us must cross before we can experience anything of such great magnitude. We are all born with a spiritual side, but we must nurture it to keep it alive. This is a process that never finds you. Like wrestling, it must be aggressive.

There is another reason that Jacob sends everyone away before his defining moment: he needs to go through this struggle alone. People can help you, but sometimes you just have to face your own demons.

G-d gave us free will, and that means that a leader is only a leader up to a point. When it comes to matters of the soul, not only can we be our own leaders, but we must. Whether we have Jacob, rabbis, parents, teachers, or friends out there to help us, no one can teach us to be spiritual. In order to cross the River of Faith, we must build our own boat and row it across ourselves. And no one is prevented from building that boat and embarking on his or her own journey.

In Judaism this is not an abstract idea; the opportunities for exploration are all around us. We can wrestle with our sacred scroll, the Torah, in order to extract lessons for our daily lives. Even more importantly, we can wrestle with G-d, as the name Israel implies. This is an extremely important point of Judaism – that we are all different, and we must create our own paths.

Becoming a bar mitzvah means that I'm supposed to start this process. The year of preparation has shown me what this journey might entail, and it has given me some tools to work with. I haven't yet made any complete decisions about my beliefs; like Jacob I don't even know what I'm wrestling with. For now, I know that I will pursue a Jewish life down the road, and that what I have tried to do this year will not stop now. And, as with Jacob, I hope day will eventually dawn, and I'll see what was there all along.

But just because I'm becoming my own leader doesn't mean that I no longer need anyone to guide me. In fact, it means I need more help. Even if you're setting out alone on uncharted waters, you need someone to help you push the boat into the water.

I'm really lucky to have many people that are helping me to launch my boat. I have great friends who have always been there for me, and you all know who you are. Then there's my family; my grandmas who are great companions despite our age difference; my grandpas who are not here in body but I know they are here in spirit; my aunts, uncles, and cousins; and Linda, Ron and Liana who feel as much like family as anybody else I know. I'd like to thank Maria, my piano teacher, for not only teaching me all I know about piano and music, but for being a guide and a friend to me. I'd like to thank everybody here at the New Shul, and especially Niles and Ellen, for making me feel like a full-fledged member of the community even before my bar mitzvah. And Melanie, you are an amazing inspiring teacher – you didn't just teach me the trope but you also gave me some of the best acting lessons I've ever had, and so much more. Finally, mom and dad, I could talk about you for another ten minutes. Being there for me when nobody else was, being with me at some of my happiest moments, giving me so many joyful memories that I will never lose, loving me every minute of my life, and everything else. I'd like to thank each and every one of you for coming to share this day with me. Shabbat Shalom.

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"StorahTelling"
VAYISLACH

Jacob: Messenger! I need you to go to my brother Esau and give him this message: "To my lord Esau. Your humble servant Jacob says: I have been staying with Laban and have delayed my return until now. I have acquired cattle, donkeys, sheep, slaves, and slave-girls, and am now sending word to tell my lord, to gain favor in your eyes." Oh, please let everything go well with Esau. We never have been a good pair though. From when we were young all the way to when I stole the blessing, our anger never went away. And now I fear his feelings have not subsided – I've even had to resort to plain bribery as an attempt to put an end to the fighting between us. I don't get it! My father and my grandfather were perfect. They were righteous before God and they never sinned. I am from their heritage. Yet I sin. I know I do. Is it natural? Adam and Eve sinned. The generation of Noah sinned. But they didn't have the covenant. What if I ruin our heritage? I never should have stolen the blessing from Esau. If he had kept it we still would have been happy with a good future in front of us...No, I'm lying to myself! I deserved it, and Esau would not have sustained the heritage! This was the only way...Ah, the messenger has returned. What does he say? Coming towards me!? An army—...400 men! What shall I do? I cannot fend off Esau, but I must keep my family safe...well...at least I can split my camp. If Esau comes and attacks one camp, at least the other camp will survive.

Isaac: Why can't my sons get along? In a normal family, brothers would be overjoyed to be re-united. And underneath it all, I fear it's my fault. I wasn't a good father. I wanted God to raise them in same way that Dad and I had God as family. Yet while Esau never grew to love God, Jacob saw himself as a giant in his faith. In my mind it is clear that Jacob will make the superior leader for our people, but it was not his decision to make. Tricking me for the blessing was where his sinning started, where he first got the idea of bribery. And although I know Jacob is praying to my God as he waits for Esau, his faith has yet to be tested. I remember when they both left here, with only a staff in their hands, but now they have each acquired not a camp, but an army – it is too much to bear. My God, I know I will soon die, that my final ailing years mean less than my sons' future ever could. But please allow me to live long enough and see my sons meet again. You owe it through the covenant that you promised to my father, to me, and to both of my sons.

Sheep: BAAAAAAAAAAAA! I want to know why it's always Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that receive all the credit. Why they are considered so righteous and grand, and the doers of anything God wants. I can tell you what it's like. I am a bribe. I am part of a loveless deal to win back family. If you ever thought about it, you too would be disgusted with how low and dirty even righteous people will go to get something they want. Jacob will go so far as to give away me, 439 of my herd mates, and 110 other camels, donkeys, and cows so that everything can go well between the two brothers. It's not quite sacrifice – Isaac had instilled in Jacob fear of that – but being separated from all my family and friends is not exactly fun. The other 3000 of them get to stay together, and Jacob still plucks me from my dear little lambs.

In creation, God put humans on the earth to be caretakers for all the animals, plants, rivers, and oceans. That includes us sheep, cows, camels, and donkeys. So tell me, why would a person like Jacob, who chats with Adonai all the time, give nearly 600 of us to other owners whom he cannot trust? That really doesn't seem like something a good caretaker would do. But he didn't even think twice...We could all see that Jacob actually cared about making up with his brother – he always cares about his family – but nothing warranted this. BAAAAAAAAAAAA!

Joseph: Oh, my father Jacob was scared. He was terrified. He was trying to save every last one of us; he didn't want anyone to be with him when he was attacked. It was the middle of the night when I was aroused along with my brothers, sisters, mother, and step-mothers. We thought we were under siege, that we would open our eyes and there would be Esau staring down at us. Instead, there's Dad, sending us away. My first thought was that maybe Esau was not far off and he wanted us to be his bodyguards, or maybe he was still coming to attack and he wanted to spare us. But he wasn't attacked by Esau that night. He fought with something although to this day I don't know what it was...Dad told

me that his grandfather Abraham received his prophetic vision right before the most spiritually-intense moment of his life, before he was to sacrifice my grandfather Isaac. And maybe Jacob knew what would happen later that night. Maybe that's why he sent us away. Maybe he knew.

Jacob: Whew! What was that!? Was that an evil angel, or maybe God's messenger, or maybe Adonai himself! Could it be? If so, then I have seen the Divine face to face and my soul has withstood it. That may have been what I needed to pass the test of Esau himself. But here he is! I now have faith that I will withstand Esau. Well, no matter what happens now, I know that I was blessed in God's eyes. Thank you Lord!

Well, I could have guessed that would happen. There wasn't a way for us to truly go on side by side. But I don't need to fear him anymore. I have one less weight on my back. Besides, I still have a brother on my side if I ever need an ally. Just imagine the difference! I left home 20 years ago completely alone, and now I have not only cattle, sheep, and servants, but two wives, 11 sons, my brother and my father. My Lord, you once said "I will make things go well with you, and make your descendants like the sand grains of the sea, which are too numerous to count." And I see that you are doing so. Praise the Almighty!

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I now have one less weight on my back and I can continue living my family life. I now have a brother as an ally if I ever need him for battle, and a brother as a brother, if I ever need family. Just imagine the difference! I left home 20 years ago alone, without family on my side, and now I have not only cattle, sheep, and servants, but two wives, 11 sons, my brother and my father. My Lord, you once said "I will make things go well with you, and make your descendants like the sand grains of the sea, which are too numerous to count." And I see that you are doing so. Praise the Almighty!

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Song
VAYISLACH

Whose wish am I granting?
Who's the one who wanted it most?
Jacob waits to be attacked
In the distance, Esau sees a frail ghost

Isaac worries about the fate of his sons
Whose camps lie asleep in the moonlight
And all is still as night is dead
The minds are working up a plan of flight

And I say how do you fix the mess?
And I say
I cannot lose it yet

These are the ones who were blessed
The ones with the covenant they're in this mess

There must be something I do now
The problem is not what but how

I'm the stranger that meets Jacob
We wrestle 'til the break of dawn
Esau wonders what's become of him
In his mind Isaac looks on

Jacob fights an unknown being
Can't tell that I am a friend
But he gets the better of me
And is blessed in the end

His name is thrown right out the door
His name
The old one is no more

His name will be Israel
His name will be Israel
His name will be Israel
His name will be Israel

God

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