

PARSHAT VAYISHLACH

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Jacob's life was filled with struggles. With these words I began, in essence, my rabbinic career. Each rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary was required to deliver a sermon at the Seminary synagogue. In my day that took place in Unterberg Auditorium on a Shabbat morning. We were randomly given our Parsha designation and with the assistance of our senior Homiletics teacher and our classmates were required to prepare and deliver a sermon. In those days sitting in the front row of the Seminary synagogue were Louis Finkelstein, the Chancellor Emeritus of the Seminary, and Saul Lieberman, the great Talmudist. In the second row sat other scholars of the Seminary, including Simon Greenberg, H.L. Ginsburg, David Weiss-Halivini and Seymour Siegel, among others. In addition to these, other Seminary faculty were present as well. It was a frightening experience to come before your teachers, the great Judaic scholars of our age, and preach the sermon.

In my senior sermon I continued: Even before his birth, Jacob was involved in a contest in his mother's womb; he later fought repeatedly with his brother Esau over their birthright. Additionally, when he moved to Haran his life was filled with constant conflict with his cousin Laban and his shepherds. We also know about the rivalry he created among his sons. When he meets Pharaoh and is asked how old he was, his reply was: "The years of my sojourn on earth are 130. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor did they come up to the lifespans of my fathers during their sojourns."

But of all of Jacob's struggles, one was paramount and changed him forever. Overnight, the man who knew uncertainty and peril was changed into a leader. Preparing to meet his brother Esau, he transferred his family over the river and remained behind by himself, alone at night. The Torah states: "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn."

From that sermon forward that passage has been my favorite in all of Biblical literature. I have preached about it, written about it, and taught it. Every so often I return to it to examine what it means to me at that particular moment in my life. The text never changes, but I do, and it has meant different things to me throughout the course of my rabbinate.

Twenty-five years after my ordination in 2000, I delivered a sermon using this text. I have presented Divrei Torah in many places including at a UJA Rabbinic Cabinet meeting on this Torah portion. I wrote a chapter in a book in 2001, in honor of my teacher at Chicago Theological Seminary, Andre LaCocque, on this Biblical episode. I entitled the chapter "Three Biblical Portraits of the Divine-Human Encounter." It appears in a book entitled *The Honeycomb of the Word*. I wrote another article using this text for a book edited by Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin entitled *Texts Messages – A Torah Commentary for Teens*. There is a sermon in my book *Encountering Torah* on this

passage. Over the years I have collected different commentaries on this episode and it formed the framework of my work for my Doctorate.

In 1981, during my studies for my Doctor of Ministry degree, at Chicago Theological Seminary, a Protestant Seminary in Hyde Park, I had to write what they called a “Position Paper” and defend it. This was my theological statement. I used this text as the basis of my thoughts and defended it in front of my professors. Years later, at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, I was asked to present my theological underpinnings for my classmates, and I again used this text which I find so meaningful. In Pirkei Avot, at the end of the fifth chapter, a scholar known as Ben Bag-Bag taught: “Study it and review it – you will find everything in it. Scrutinize it, grow old and gray in it, and do not depart from it. There is no better portion of life than this.”

As I come close to the end of my active pulpit career, I return to this text once more to try to understand what was Jacob’s great struggle with a “man” in the midst of the night. I believe it was a theological, psychological, and physical struggle for Jacob, which changed him forever.

This text is meaningful not only because of the struggle, but what occurs after it. When the “man” is not successful in defeating Jacob, he wrenched Jacob’s hip at its socket. He then spoke to Jacob saying: “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” But Jacob refused to do so unless the “man” blessed him. It is at that point that Jacob’s name is changed to “Israel,” the name that you and I carry, “for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” Thus, this text defines not only Jacob of old, but Israel of today and is instructive in our understanding who we are, what motivates us, and what defines us.

There are many ways to understand Jacob’s struggle. Some suggest that it was a theological struggle. Jacob was fighting with an angel of G-d and was trying to comprehend his theological understanding of the Divine. For me, this has been a constant struggle as I go through life. When I left the Jewish Theological Seminary, I had never been asked to define my belief in G-d. It took my course of studies at the Chicago Theological Seminary, amongst Protestants, to begin to define it more carefully. As I suggested then, and continue to understand it today, it is a constant struggle to try to understand our position in this world, our role in the universe, and G-d’s presence in our lives and in world history. Over the years my faith has been challenged as I sustained personal losses and have been present with members of our community at many difficult moments. Having stood at Auschwitz and Birkenau last April with members of our “March of the Living” trip, although it was not a time for theology, I know my faith was tested once more.

I happen to believe that this is worthwhile. Life is not black and white, it is various shades of gray. It is important to struggle and challenge oneself. It is for that reason, that I am a Conservative Rabbi and a Conservative Jew. There are gray areas in faith and in Halacha, Jewish law, and its application in life. I don’t want to live in a world where the answers are given, I want to be challenged to find those answers. We are a people of

questions. We are, as I heard President Shimon Peres once say, a people who live with dissatisfaction. We are always questioning, we are always dissatisfied, and we, therefore, have to search for better answers. I continue to believe that Conservative Judaism compels me to ask the proper questions about Jewish life, the Jewish people, our role in the world, and how we act during the days that we are present on earth. We can never be complacent, we can never feel we have all the answers, we always have to struggle and challenge ourselves to be better.

There are some commentaries who believe that it was an angel of Esau who fought with Jacob. In other words, Jacob had to struggle with concerns about the vengeance his brother might take upon him or that Jacob might take upon Esau. Needless to say there are many challenges for us as the children of Jacob, our patriarch. Whether it is the security of the State of Israel and the hundreds of rockets that were launched at civilian populations, anti-Semitic actions in Europe which bring back fears of 80 years ago, or violence against Jews in this country whether physical, verbal, or on social media – we are challenged as never before. How do we react? What should be our posture? I have suggested that we must be concerned with security. But we must also be concerned about setting maintaining high standards for our community. We must engage in civil dialogue and remember that words matter. It is sometimes difficult to live that way, but I do believe that is the role of the Jewish people be “a light to the nations” and G-d’s witnesses on earth.

There were challenges in American society and for the Jewish people when I left the Seminary in 1976. Some of them remain the same and others are new and more dangerous. Concerns with assimilation in this country, the lack of identification with the Jewish people, and the indifference to Jewish life, I believe, are more acute today than in 1976. At the same time, our national and international position has both been ameliorated and become worse. The State of Israel is definitely stronger both as a start-up nation and from a security point of view than in 1976, three years after the Yom Kippur war. Yet, the dangers are real. And there are still Jewish communities living in dangerous predicaments. The struggle with the angel of Esau continues in this day and age.

The third aspect of Jacob’s struggle may be understood as an inner personal struggle that Jacob had to endure. He possessed self-doubts, he was unsure of his abilities, whether he could prevail in his meeting with Esau. He had been a frightened fugitive, now could he be a leader of his people?

When I left JTS in June, 1976, I could understand that Jacob. Entering into synagogue life and serving the Jewish community was something that was both frightening and challenging for me. As a young rabbi I questioned my abilities whether I could serve a community, be a good teacher, good pastor, communal leader, and grow as a Jew and as a human being. While 42 years later I still ask the same questions of myself, I am much more confident in my abilities. School is a great place for training, but on the job experience is really the best training.

I have learned to be with people both in their joys and their sorrows. I have grown in my knowledge of Torah and secular learning. I have been privileged to be engaged in Jewish communal activities and in leadership positions in this community and on the national and international scene. I have learned more about budgets than I ever thought I would want to know and feel comfortable in the area of administration. I have learned sometimes “to follow my gut,” and follow through on things that I may have been unsure of in 1976.

However, I don’t kid myself. There is a lot I don’t know, there is much yet to learn, there are many challenges ahead, there are many struggles that I must endure, both within myself and on behalf of others. Those struggles are worthwhile, as they allow me to grow as a willing, learning, and striving Jew, as outlined in Emet Ve-Emunah, the statement of principles of Conservative Judaism, issued in 1988.

It is interesting to note that at the conclusion of Jacob’s struggle he is wounded and forced to limp, “Jacob was limping on his hip.” I believe in all of these struggles we are a little wounded as well. We wish we had all the answers, but we cannot necessarily find them. We wish we had the solutions to Jewish life and to life’s travails but cannot be so confident they are there. We wish we could overcome all of our weaknesses and parlay our strengths into greater good. Many of us, including myself, never make it. However, the struggle is a good one and it is important that it takes place. It makes us stronger and forever molds our lives.

After his encounter with Esau, the Torah tells us: “Jacob arrived safe in the city of Shechem.” The Hebrew word used is *Shalem*, which really means complete, whole. Our Rabbis suggest that Jacob was now a complete person, even with his physical disability. He was now whole in body, in his Torah, and in his material possessions. He was a more mature and capable person.

I hope and I pray that the same could be said of me and perhaps of all of you. May we survive our struggles. May we grow in the process, and may we appreciate our role in the world as we attempt to make it a better place for all.