

Parshat Vayetzei- 2018/5779 The Power to Wrestle With Oneself

A catholic priest, a Protestant minister and a rabbi would meet often to compare notes about how they preached to their respective flocks. One day, the comment was made that preaching to people may not be that hard; preaching to bear- that would be hard. So they agreed to go out into the woods, find a bear, preach to it, and then come back and share their experiences. They met back after a week. Father Flannery went first. He was a bit beat up: his arm was in a cast and he had sets of stitches across his cheek. "Well", he said, "I found a bear and began to read to him from the Catechism. That bear wanted nothing to do with me and began to slap me around but good. So I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him and, Holy Mary Mother, he became as gentle as a lamb. The bishop is coming next week to give him first communion and confirmation." Pastor Bob went next. He was even in worse shape: crutches, bandages all over his legs and arms, a neck brace. "Well", he said, "When I finally found a bear, I began to read from God's HOLY WORD! But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So I took HOLD of him and we began to wrestle. We wrestled down one hill, UP another and DOWN another until we came to a creek. So I quickly DUNKED him and BAPTIZED his hairy soul. And in an instant, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praising Jesus. The two clergymen then turned to rabbi. He was in the worst shape of them all: he was in a full body cast, with IV lines into his arms, black-and-blue patches all over his face. The rabbi looked up and said, "looking back on it, circumcision was probably not the best way to start!"

Today, I want to talk with you about the story of Jacob and the story of his wrestling, more specifically who he wrestled with and why.

In order to understand Jacob's wrestling with himself, with his past, with his future, with nothing less than the future of the Jewish people, we need to understand what brought Jacob to this moment. The backdrop for the Torah reading this and next week is that in previous chapters, Jacob had stolen the birthright from his older brother Esau by fooling his now-blind father, Yitzchak, into believing that he, Jacob, was Esau. He did this by coating his hands with fur, simulating Esau's burly nature and physique. Although at first Yitzchak did not completely fall for this, saying, the feel is that of Esau but the voice is that of Jacob, he nonetheless gave Jacob the

blessing of the first born. And in that society, that blessing was the key to most, if not all the inheritance.

Many years ago, I wrote a whole year's worth of sermons based on what I called "personal dualities" of most of the major characters in Genesis. Abram becomes Abraham; Sarai becomes Sarah. The reasons for the name-change was that character had either passed some test put before them by G-d or that they had enveloped G-d into their lives and souls. One could argue that Jacob's faking Esau's character was such a duality, but as I'll describe in a second, Jacob will not become his new self, with a new name, until he wrestles with his internal angels.

Back to the story, Esau, furious with his conniving brother, vowed to kill him if he ever saw him again.

Jacob, being- let's face it, the wimp, fled. He fled to the land of Laban, eventually toiling in servitude to Laban for 14 years in order to eventually marry his love, Laban's daughter Rachel, but not before getting tricked into marrying Leah.

Jacob has become rich over the years with flocks of goats and cattle, and when he hears that Esau is coming, and more than that, with a posse of 400 men- an army!, he tries to placate Esau with gifts of these flocks. Here, take my riches, and let's say bygones will be bygones. But the Torah lets us know that this "bribe" would not cut it with Esau.

This is more than the neurotic, anxious Jacob can take. He sends his wives, concubines, children and flocks over the Jabbok River, and then the Torah describes a very curious episode:

וַיִּנְתֵּר יַעֲקֹב, לְבַדּוֹ; וַיֵּאבֶּק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ, עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר.

And Jacob was left alone; and he wrestled a man with him until the break of day.

וַיֵּרָא, כִּי לֹא יָכַל לוֹ, וַיִּגַע, בְּכַף-יָרְכוֹ; וַתִּקַּע כַּף-יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב, בְּהֶאָבְקוֹ עִמּוֹ.

And when he saw that he could not prevail against him ("could not to him"), he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained, as he wrestled with him.

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחְנִי, כִּי עֹלָה הַשָּׁחַר; וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָּ, כִּי אִם-בִּרְכָתְנִי.

And he said: 'Let go of me, because the day is breaking.' And he said: 'I will not let you go unless you give me a blessing.'

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, מַה-שְּׁמֶךָ; וַיֹּאמֶר, יַעֲקֹב.

And he said to him: 'What is your name?' And he said: 'Jacob.'

וַיֹּאמֶר, לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאמָר עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ--כִּי, אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל: כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אָנָּשִׁים, וַתֻּכַּל.

And he said: 'No longer will your name be Jacob, but rather, Israel; for you have struggled (wrestled) with God and with men, and have prevailed.'

וַיִּשְׁאַל יַעֲקֹב, וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידָה-נָא שְׁמֶךָ, וַיֹּאמֶר, לָמָּה זֶה תִּשְׁאַל לְשְׁמִי; וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ, שָׁם.

And Jacob asked him, and said: 'Please tell me your name.' And he said: 'Why are you asking about my name?' And he blessed him there.

וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם, פְּנִיֵאל: כִּי-רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים, וַתִּנְצַל נַפְשִׁי.

And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: 'for I have seen God face to face, and my soul is saved.'

Let's unpack some of this story: an obvious way of interpreting who Jacob wrestled with is the traditional interpretation that he wrestled an angel of G-d. But another obvious interpretation is that Jacob wrestled with himself, all night, in a dream. In allegorical form, he wrestled his inner good and bad angels, or as would be described hundreds of years later by the Kabbalists, his Yetzer Hatov, his good inclinations wrestled with his Yetzer Harah, his evil inclinations. Another major point is that Jacob, just like many of the characters in Genesis, has gone through his personal duality; his name literally changes to what becomes the name of all of us as Jews, our nation of Israel.

Several parts of this story are very telling in regards to this metamorphosis: when giving the reason for why Jacob's name changes to Israel, the wrestler uses the word שָׁרִיתָ which translates to struggle or to wrestle. But it should be lost that the root of this word is Sarah, Jacob's grandmother's name...more personal dualities. If you think that the issue of "names" is not that important here, two sentences are devoted to the "wrestler" asking for

Jacob's name, and Jacob then asking for the wrestler's name. If Jacob is really wrestling with forces within himself, then it is likely that he is really asking, "who am I?" or "who have I become?"

The last sentence says that Jacob names that place פְּנֵי־אֵל , literally, the face of G-d, as he has seen G-d face-to-face. Although this was the hint that led many rabbis to believe that the wrestler was an actual angel of G-d, it also allows for the concept that Jacob metamorphosis required him to accept G-d INTO himself, into his soul, and until that happened, his soul could not be saved.

You see, Jacob's distress upon hearing that Esau was approach was his assumption that Esau was there to kill him. He prayed to G-d that he save him from this fate, although it was all his own doing, by stealing the firstborn's blessing. When he saw that offering his brother his riches of flocks would be to no avail, when all seemed lost, even when he split his camp into two parts to make it harder to wipe out his family, Jacob realized that the only way to heal the relationship with his brother was to change, was to wrestle with those parts of his soul that pushed him to get the firstborn blessing by deceit. In short, Jacob needed to purify his soul. How do we know that he succeeded in this regard? It is because we are told that the wrestler "touched" the dimple of his thigh, leaving him with a permanent limp. Again, if we try to apply this not just to physical descriptions but to spiritual ones, we can say that from that time on, Jacob's soul was permanently "disjointed", yet if was stuck, it was stuck in a good way.

How do we know that this change was a spiritual metamorphosis? Because in several more sentences, when Jacob and Esau met:

וַיֵּרָץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרַאתוֹ וַיַּחַבְקֵהוּ, וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְאָרוֹ וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ; וַיִּבְכּוּ.

And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept.

Esau saw a new Jacob, one that was now trustworthy, a brother he could depend on. Esau could see G-d in Jacob's soul, and with this realization, he was moved to embrace and kiss his brother, not to kill him.

And therein lies the moral of this story: we are not just a set of attributes we are born with. We only grow into our better angels if we wrestle within ourselves and let G-d and lovingkindness into our souls. The Torah teaches us that this process is so important AND profound that it could turn a sniveling, neurotic stealer of his brother's blessing into the father of our nation, from Jacob to Israel. And more importantly, it turned an enemy into a brother.

Shabbat shalom