

## Parashat Vayishlach

This week's portion contains one of the strangest narratives in the whole of Torah. As we read, Yaakov "got up that night, took his two wives, his two slave-girls, and his eleven children, and forded the Yabok. He took them and sent them across the stream, then sent his possessions across; and Ya'akov was left alone. Then some man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he did not defeat Ya'akov, he struck Ya'akov's hip socket, so that his hip was dislocated while wrestling with him. The man said, 'Let me go, because it's daybreak.' But Ya'akov replied, 'I won't let you go unless you bless me.' The man asked, 'What is your name?' and he answered, 'Ya'akov.' Then the man said, 'From now on, you will no longer be called Ya'akov, but Isra'el; because you have shown your strength to both God and men and have prevailed.'" (B'resheet 32:22-28). So there we have it! Right there in the middle of Torah there is, of all things, a wrestling match! How bizarre! Indeed the outstanding nature of this narrative is attested to by the fact that, in contrast to practically every other form of physical combat in the Torah, no blood was shed. In spite of the bout going on for hours throughout darkness of the night neither combatant felt it necessary to resort to beating each other with fists, gouging each others eyes out, or reaching for a sword. In other words these two combatants seem to have been grappling with each other according to some acknowledged rules. That is until day began to break and Yaakov's unnamed opponent did a very ungentlemanly thing and struck the patriarch's hip socket. Yaakov's response to this act is equally as bizarre as the bout itself. Instead of seeking to get even he held on to his opponent and refused to let him go until he received a blessing. Strange don't you think? I mean what kind of wrestler does that? 'Give me a blessing?' And in which wrestling bout ever has the victor dared to pronounce a change of name over his opponent? So what's this strange wrestling match all about?

Scholars, both ancient and modern, have wrestled (do you notice what I did there?) with the meaning of this narrative. Indeed, both have found hints in the Hebrew to the effect that there is more to this wrestling match than meets the eye. For a start it is noted that Yaakov's wrestling (ye'abeq) with the 'man' connects with the name of the place, the Yabboq ford. When we read this in the Hebrew we raise an eyebrow. Something is being communicated to us that goes beyond the literal meaning of the text. In fact both ancient and modern scholars see this wrestling narrative as being highly etiological. In other words the events of the wrestling match are causative. This isn't just to be seen in the parallel between name of the place and the act of wrestling, but also in the wound to Yaakov's hip, which is highly etiological. As the text itself explains, "That is why the children of Israel to this day do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, since Yaakov's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh." So too Yaakov's change of name is connected to the struggle. As Professor James Kugel explains, "Instead of explaining his new name, Israel (yisra'el), as 'God rules,' the narrative suggests that it comes from a harmonious root meaning *struggle*: 'You have struggled (sarita) with God and with men and have prevailed.' Finally, the place itself was called Peniel to commemorate this face-to-face (panim) combat with God ('el) that took place." "Indeed," Kugel continues, "for modern scholars there is something very suggestive

## Parashat Vayishlach

about how these disparate elements have been combined into a single narrative line. Start off with the three basic proper names involved - yabboq, yisra'el, and peni'el - and throw them together; what do you get? Once yabboq has suggested ye'abeq, 'he struggles,' then some sort of combat is involved. Yisrael may then be seen to reinforce the idea of struggle and refine it: his struggling (yisra) must have involved God ('el). Still more precisely, the struggle must have involved seeing God's face (peni'el). In a manner strangely reminiscent of Freud's explanation of how the unconscious creates dreams, all these elements might be seen to have cooperated in the creation of the biblical combat narrative, to which a final etiological note - connecting Jacob's injury with Israel's later avoidance of the thigh muscle - has then been added."

The reference to Freud and to dreams is well made in relation to this story of the patriarch's wrestling match because the whole thing actually reads like a weird dream. Little wonder that this episode is said to have taken place when Yaakov was all alone. After all, is it not when we are all alone that, especially at night, our conscious control over our minds relaxes, and whatever is in our subconscious arises? In our dreams in particular we wrestle with all kinds of incredible things and in all kinds of strange scenarios, with the stuff of our regular lives taking on weird and wonderful symbolic forms. Some therapists believe when we 'wrestle' in our dreams our brains are trying to find possible solutions to the regular problems that we find in life such that when we awake we have somehow achieved clarity. In Yaakov's case his biggest present real-life problem was with his brother - an ogre of a man whose murderous anger the patriarch had been seeking to evade for several decades. But now, as we have read at the head of our portion, Yaakov could no longer escape this anger. Yaakov sent messengers to his brother and the messengers came back with the report that "We went to your brother Esav, and he is coming to meet you; with him are four hundred men." Indeed, we are then told that "Yaakov became greatly afraid and distressed" and it was because of this that he divided his camp thinking that, "If Esav comes to the one camp and attacks it, at least the camp that is left will escape." The patriarch's state of emotional distress is made plain in his subsequent prayer to God, "God of my father Avraham and God of my father Yitzchak, Adonai, who told me, 'Return to your country and your kinsmen, and I will do you good': I'm not worthy of all the love and faithfulness you have shown your servant, since I crossed the Yarden with only my staff. But now I have become two camps. Please! rescue me from my brother Esav! I'm afraid of him, afraid he'll come and attack me, without regard to mothers or children. You said, 'I will certainly do you good and make your descendants as numerous as the grains of sand by the sea, which are so many they can't be counted.'" It was in this state of tremendous emotional distress, when he was all alone, afraid of his brother and impending disaster, that the wrestling match took place. Whether the patriarch was conscious or asleep there is nevertheless little question among scholars, both ancient and modern, that the match is meant to be read as metaphor as if Yaakov were working out his most deep-seated fears. Indeed, Yaakov begins wrestling with a 'man', but lo and behold, by the end of the experience Yaakov believes that he has actually wrestled with God. As Kugel adds, "To say this is hardly to say all. As we saw earlier, there is something quire eerie, and most evocative,

## Parashat Vayishlach

about this combat - the 'man' who is suddenly not a man at all but God Himself; the fight that turns out to have been something else entirely, carried on in the 'fog' in which Jacob was plunged; perhaps most of all, a narrative that seems to bespeak a most real encounter that took place long, long ago. No wonder this brief episode begins with the mention of Jacob's sending everyone and everything to the other side of the stream; only thus could this fight ever take place, when the noise of voices in the tents had died down and night had fallen and Jacob found that he 'was left alone.'"

The idea that Yaakov was wrestling within his own mind is perhaps indicated by the fantastic morphing of the man into a divine being. Thus the portion begins with a statement of how Yaakov feared his brother and he ended up wrestling with God, or was it? Because, in an apparent contradiction to the text of our portion, Hoshea 12 suggests that Yaakov didn't wrestle with God but with an angel. As we read, "Adonai also has a grievance against Y'hudah; he will punish Ya'akov according to his ways and pay him back for his misdeeds. In the womb he took his brother by the heel; in the strength of his manhood he fought with God. Yes, he fought with an angel and won; he wept and pleaded with him." The Hebrew here is malakh, meaning angel or messenger - a word which has already been used in our portion as Yaakov sent messengers (Heb malachim) to his brother Esav. Since the word is enigmatic and might refer to a human or an angelic messenger it is well suited to the wrestling sequence where the boundary between the physical and spiritual is porous - a state which we all experience as we drop off to sleep and we exist momentarily in that strange liminal space between consciousness and subconsciousness. Hoshea's identification of the man as an angel rather than God allows some of our sages to suggest that this angel was in fact an evil one - Esav's guardian angel no less. This is Rashi's approach, who suggests the wrestling match as a struggle for supremacy between the two brothers. If this is admitted as a possibility then, so Rashi suggests, the two wrestling parties stand metaphorically for the Jewish people and HaSatan. "The 'man' who struggled with Jacob," Rabbi Nosson Sherman declares, "was not a human being, nor was he an ordinary angel. As Rashi comments, the 'man' was Samael, the guardian angel of Esau. The Sages teach that Samael represents evil as does no other angel. If that is Samael, then we can understand why he tried to destroy Jacob. He was fighting not merely Esau's twin brother, not merely the brother who had gained the blessings sought by Esau, not merely the heir to the inheritance Esau coveted - he was fighting the man who climaxed the Patriarchal tradition. Jacob was [hachut hamshulash lo vimherah yinatek], the tripled-thread [which] will not be broken easily (Kohelet 4:12). Because Jacob combined within himself the unyielding, unbreakable pillar of all three Patriarchs, he was the unyielding, unbreakable pillar upon which the Jewish future could be built." Given that this was so, that in the opinion of these rabbis Yaakov fought against the very epitome of evil, and on the basis that 'the deeds of the fathers are portents for the children', it is thereby suggested that Yaakov's struggle with the angel had immense prophetic significance. "The struggle between Jacob and the angel had truly cosmic implications" says Rabbi Nosson Sherman. "The bout between Jacob and the angel had repercussions that went infinitely beyond the sands of Jabbok. The angel succeeded in

## Parashat Vayishlach

setting in motion a chain of events that would affect Jacob's offspring thousands of years into the future, and its implications would affect world history until God would take his place on the thrones of judgement revealed to Daniel... Throughout time the cause-and-effect processes set in motion by their struggle would reverberate, colouring, moulding, determining history until God's final day of judgement. In terms of the struggle's intensity, it extended throughout every spiritual level, from the lowest all the way up to God Himself." Thus it is said that our Jewish people's struggle to survive throughout the millennia in the face of the hostility of gentile nations was prefigured by Yaakov's wrestling and that the narrative of the wrestling should therefore be properly read as prophetic vision.

And yet, as is the nature of psychedelic dreams, it is possible to read the narrative of the wrestling match alternately. What if the man with whom Yaakov wrestled was a good angel, a symbol of God? And what if the great struggle within him was not such much with Esav but with the will of God? After all, had Yaakov not struggled with and against God's apparent will from the moment of his birth? The struggle against God's apparent will began in the womb as the two brothers wrestled to come out of the womb first, with Yaakov clinging to his brother's heel. According to the understanding of the ancient Middle East certain rights accrued to the first born male. Primogeniture was the right of the first born male to inherit his parent's main or entire estate. According to the mores of the time Yaakov ought to have accepted his status as second born son but he refused to do so and schemed, some might say underhandedly, against this pre-destined fate. Through trickery and cunning he managed to acquire his brother's rights as the first born and then again he managed to deceive his father into giving him the pre-eminent blessing that was due to Esav. Thus Yaakov struggled against God's will. He refused to accept the hand that had been dealt with and be means fair or foul he triumphed! Perhaps this is what Hoshea means when he said, "In the womb he took his brother by the heel; in the strength of his manhood he fought with God." Because in fighting Esav Yaakov was really fighting, at least from his own perspective, with God's apparent will for his life and against a patriarchal system that claimed authority from God. Yaakov simply refused to accept the cards that God had apparently dealt him. And now, after having acquired the birthright, blessing, wives, children, great wealth and male and female servants, and having returned to the Land after a word from God Yaakov found himself struggling with God's apparent will once again. According to this view as Yaakov prayed in desperation that night he wasn't so much wrestling with Esav, but with God. Perhaps this was a set up? A sick divine joke with a mortal punchline? How did Yaakov know that this wasn't a trap and the God with whom he had wrestled all his life wasn't delivering him into the jaws of a trap? Is that why the patriarch reminded God of his promises? "You said. 'I will certainly do you good and make your descendants as numerous as the grains of sand by the sea, which are so many they can't be counted.'" Perhaps Yaakov still had doubts about God's goodness toward him since he had effectively stolen the birthright and blessings? Would God revert to favouring Esav in the battle between the brothers? Was he now to meet his doom?

## Parashat Vayishlach

So many questions and so few answers! But such is the nature of our Scriptures. We look to Scripture for answers but instead we find more questions! One the one hand this and on the hand that! The multivariate nature of our Scriptures is no more evident than in a passage which, as we see, somewhat parallels our present text. In Shemot 33 a similarly distressed Moshe, tired from his testing existence as Israel's leader in the wilderness, pleads with God to show him his favour. "Moshe said to Adonai, "Look, you say to me, 'Make these people move on!' But you haven't let me know whom you will be sending with me. Nevertheless you have said, 'I know you by name,' and also, 'You have found favor in my sight.' Now, please, if it is really the case that I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways; so that I will understand you and continue finding favor in your sight. Moreover, keep on seeing this nation as your people." He answered, "Set your mind at rest — my presence will go with you, after all." Moshe replied, "If your presence doesn't go with us, don't make us go on from here. For how else is it to be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, other than by your going with us? That is what distinguishes us, me and your people, from all the other peoples on earth." That God was with Moshe and favoured him ought perhaps have been obvious to him given what we are also told in this particular passage. For as we read, "Whenever Moshe entered the tent, the column of cloud would descend and station itself at the entrance to the tent; and Adonai would speak with Moshe. When all the people saw the column of cloud stationed at the entrance to the tent, they would get up and prostrate themselves, each man at his tent door. Adonai would speak to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. Then he would return to the camp." Here then we are told that Moshe would speak with God 'panim el panim' face to face - in a statement that consciously echoes the events of our Torah portion. "Yaakov called the place P'ni El [face of God], 'Because I have seen God face to face, yet my life is spared." And yet, straight after telling us that Moshe spoke with God panim el panim we read that God said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass before you, and in your presence I will pronounce the name of Adonai. Moreover, I show favor to whomever I will, and I display mercy to whomever I will. But my face," he continued, "you cannot see, because a human being cannot look at me and remain alive. Here," he said, "is a place near me; stand on the rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you inside a crevice in the rock and cover you with my hand, until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand, and you will see my back, but my face is not to be seen."

So which is it? Can a human being see God's 'face' and live? Did Moshe speak with God face to face? Indeed what is God's face? Did Yaakov wrestle with God or an evil angel? I would suggest that the texts are deliberately ambiguous. The brilliance of the redactor(s) is such that these multiple possibilities were consciously planted deep within our texts in order to challenge *us* to wrestle. That is why Yaakov's act of wrestling so speaks to us as Jews. For the most part there are no easy answers in Scripture and deliberately so. So if you are struggling to understand God, life and the universe then welcome to the club! It is as if, like Yaakov's wrestling match, all our present day theological wrestling is being performed in a fog. As Rav Shaul said, "For now we see obscurely in a mirror, but then it will be face to face." Becoming

## Parashat Vayishlach



attuned to the cognitive dissonance that is involved with living in this fog is part and parcel of the Jewish condition.