

Torah Table Talk – Sacred Words

Yisrael: Wrestling with Beings, Divine and Human

Parshat Vayishlach, Genesis 32:4 – 36:43

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z”l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Jacob’s story reaches its climax when our forefather is given a new name. Having defeated the mysterious night-time visitor, Jacob demands a blessing. It is not a blessing but a new name that changes the course of Jacob’s life. In fact, when Jacob later meets with his brother, he says, “Please accept my blessing/present (*birchati*) which has been brought to you, for God has favored me...” (Genesis 22:11) Jacob refers to the gifts that he gives his brother as ‘my blessing.’ Having stolen his brother’s blessing he now seeks to return it. With this act he earns the name Yisrael, Israel. The author of the *Etz Hayim* writes that, “Names in the Bible are intertwined with character and destiny.” With this change of name, our forefather leaves behind the negative and pejorative connotations of his past. His new name marks the beginning of a new life and a nation. It is interesting to note, however, that Israel never completely ceases to be Jacob in the biblical narrative. He is referred to by his old name even after God gives him a new name, a second time. Jacob is not only a name and a description of his character. It implies that we can never leave our past completely behind.

Genesis 32:28-29 The other said: “What is your name?” He replied: “Jacob.” He said: “Your name shall no longer be Jacob but Yisrael for you have struggled with beings, divine and human, and have prevailed.

Genesis 35:9 God appeared again to Jacob on his arrival from Paddan-aram and blessed him. God said to him, “You whose name is Jacob, you shall be called Jacob no more. But Israel shall be your name.”

Sources

Rashi Genesis, 32:29

Your name shall no longer be Jacob: It shall no more be said that the blessing came to you through falsehood and deceit but lordliness (*serarah* – like the word *Yisrael*) and openness. Later on, the Holy One will appear to you at Beth El and change your name and there He will bless you, and I will be there and confirm them for you. Hence it is written: “And Jacob had power over an angel and prevailed, he wept and made supplications to him.” (Hosea 12) That is, the angel wept and made supplications to Jacob. At Beth El God will meet us and there He will speak to us...”

Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Bereshit (page 268)

Why was the angelic emissary required to ask him his name? Did he not know it? Some explain that the angel’s purpose was to make Jacob admit that he had supplanted his brother and that not for nothing had he been dubbed the supplanter (Jacob). After he had made the admission and uttered his name, the messenger announced the removal of the stain on his character in the adoption of a new name, Israel...the angel did not change his name but merely announced the act of the Almighty who sent him. Why did not the angel change his name there and then... before the name of his act of supplanting his brother could be dropped, he had to appease his brother...after his brother had accepted the blessing could the Almighty reveal Himself to him and announce the fulfillment made by the angel.

Robert Alter The Five Books of Moses, Translation and Commentary

Not Jacob...but Israel: Abraham’s change of name was a mere rhetorical flourish compared to this one, for of all the patriarchs Jacob is the one whose life is entangled in moral ambiguities. Rashi beautifully captures the resonance of the name change....It is nevertheless noteworthy – and to my knowledge has not been noted – that the pronouncement about the new name is not completely fulfilled. Whereas Abraham is invariably called “Abraham” once the name is changed from “Abram,” the narrative continues to refer to this patriarch in most instances as “Jacob.” Thus “Israel” does not really replace his name but becomes a synonym for it – a practice reflected in the parallelism of biblical poetry, where “Jacob” is always used in the first half of the line and “Israel” the poetic variation, in the second half.

Elie Wiesel Messengers of God Page 128-133

Here’s the episode’s dimension shift: We witness a confrontation between Jacob and Jacob....Jacob won his share of eternity but he emerged a shattered man. Jacob or Israel? Both. True, God ordered him not to call

himself Jacob any more, yet one moment later the Bible calls him just that. As though Israel did not succeed in severing the link to Jacob. We were explicitly forbidden to call Abraham by his former name, Avram, but such was not the case for Jacob. For him we are dealing with the very destiny of Israel – the imminent, real, historical people Israel. Could Israel have erased Jacob? No, he should not have – even if heaven had ordered him to do so. Israel would not have been Israel had he not first been Jacob, had he not carried inside himself Jacobs’s strange and exalted dream. Tormented, torn, staggering under the weight of his memories, Jacob belonged to Israel just as Israel was part of Jacob. More than his father and grandfather, Jacob was conscious of the pluralism that was to mark his descendents...

Author I. Waskow, Godwrestling

I wrestled again with my brother last week,
First time since I was twelve and Grandma stopped us:
“She won’t even let us fight!” we yelled, embracing,
But she said talking was nicer.
Wrestling feels a lot like making love.
Why did Jacob wrestle with God, why did the others talk?
God surely enjoyed that all-night fling with Jacob:
Told him he won
Renamed him and us Godwrestler,
Even left him a limp to be sure he’d remember it all.
But ever since, we’ve talked.
Did something peculiar happen that night?
Did somebody say next day we shouldn’t wrestle? Who?
But Esau struggled to his feet from his own Wrestle,
And gasped across the river to his brother:
It also Feels A lot Like Making War.

Commentary

The story of Jacob leaves us with more questions than answers. His nocturnal wrestling match is not only a defining moment in the life of our forefather; it is also meant to define who we are. We are, after all, *Yisrael*, the ones who wrestle with beings, divine and human. Wrestling can be a sign of aggression or it can be an expression of love. How can one tell the difference between one and the other? Wrestling can be a physical act or it can be an expression of one’s inner state of being. With whom did Jacob wrestle: with God, an angel, with his brother, or possibly with himself? As Jews what we seek is not peace of mind and spirit but openness to wrestle with God and the world. When we sing, then, *Am Yisrael chai*, “The nation of Israel lives” maybe we are speaking of our ancestors as well as our selves! But we are also Beit Yaakov, “The house of Jacob.”

Questions to Ponder

1. The Torah refers to the mysterious night time visitor, simply as an *eesh*, a man. With whom do you think Jacob wrestles?
2. The Torah tells us twice that Jacob was given a new name. How does Rashi reconcile the two versions of the story? What does he add to our understanding of this name?
3. What does it mean to wrestle with God? Have you ever wrestled with God? If so when? What does the name *Yisrael*, one who wrestles with God, say about our role in the world?
4. When is wrestling like “making love?” When we wrestle with God are we making love or war?

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