

[I'd like to start by acknowledging what an honor it is for me to be here, as a proud son of Temple Emanuel, having gone from being a nine year old running away from Nunya in the basement of the old building to being almost thirty-five, and standing before you here in the sanctuary, charged with the challenge of teaching Torah. I'd like to thank Rabbis Gardenswartz and Robinson for extending this gracious invitation, and the Temple Community in general for all of the support, both spiritual and quite tangible, that I've received over the course of my five years of study at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, which will come to its culmination, b'sha'a tova, with my ordination this June. I also need to acknowledge Rabbi Chiel, who I realize more and more, with every step I take into this vocation, is my first teacher of Torah and my foundational role model. And I'd also like to take this moment to warn anyone sitting near my mother to stand back in case her head explodes. ]

Every year around this time in the cycle of Torah reading, I find myself wrestling with Jacob again. On the one hand, we honor him as the father of our people. He is the first person to bear the name Yisrael—Israel—the wrestler with God. But at the same time he is someone who lives his life in ways that we do not necessarily find so admirable. The name Jacob itself means heel, a reference to the way the patriarch emerged into the world—grabbing at the heel of his brother Esau, even at the first moment attempting to better his position at the expense of somebody close to him. This is a consistent pattern of behavior throughout his life—again and again he succeeds through deceit and trickery, whether it be gaining the blessing and birthright that were his brother's due, amassing his fortune of livestock out of the holdings of his father-in-law, or even, occasionally, seeming to pretend that God has spoken to him, when no such speech

has taken place. I am left wondering: who is this man? Is he Jacob the deplorable liar? Is he Israel the sublime Godwrestler? Can he be both at the same time?

These questions become particularly acute as we read today's Torah portion, parashat vayishlakh—because it is a text in which Jacob himself is forced to wrestle with the same questions. After years of living in the land of Haran, his mother's country, where he fled to avoid the wrath of the brother he dispossessed, Jacob has heard God's voice clearly and unambiguously telling him: *shuv el erets avotekha ulimoladetekha vi'ehyeh imakh*—Return to the land of your fathers and to the land of your birth, and I will be with you. But the peril of this command becomes clear soon enough, as Jacob learns that Esau is aware of his return, and is approaching, his intentions unclear but presumed to be hostile, with a band of four hundred men. On the evening before this uncertain reunion, Jacob offers a prayer to God—a plea for a protection that he modestly declares himself unworthy to receive. There follows one of the most intense spiritual experiences narrated in the entire Torah, introduced in the most understated of terms: *vayivater ya'akov livado, va'ye'avek ish imo ad olot ha'shachar*—and Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until dawn. Then, in the morning, having demanded and received the blessing of his new name—Yisrael—he goes forward, not as a trickster or a sneak, but with the limp of a wounded man, to look into the eyes of his brother.

Jacob's experience on this night is at once poignant and obscure—so evocative and mysterious, in fact, that it has been the focus of generation after generation of commentators. One of my favorite midrashim on the subject comes from tractate Berakhot of the Babylonian Talmud. Here, Rabbi Yosi ben Hanina attempts to link each of the three prayer services of the

Jewish day to one of the three patriarchs. Abraham, who rose up early in the morning to do God's will on the mountain in Moriah, is the father of shacharit. Isaac, who was meditating in the fields in the afternoon when he first beheld his bride, is the progenitor of mincha. And Jacob, who experiences God in dream visions of angels and ladders, in pleas for protection against the dark unknown, in nocturnal descents into the darkness of his own soul, is the master of ma'ariv, the patron saint, as it were, of the evening prayer.

This midrash, beyond being a rabbinic game of connect the dots, is a profound statement on the spiritual character of Jacob, on the darkness and confusion that characterize his communication with God. We perceive this obscurity in the way that Jacob receives God's promise of blessing, the formulaic language that is familiar to us from the stories of the other patriarchs, the words with which God announces God's intention to God's chosen servants, which usually run something like this: I will bless you and make of you a great nation. Both Abraham and Isaac receive this promise in the waking consciousness of daylight, though in Isaac's case we might say it is a daylight tending toward evening. Jacob hears them only in a dream—the dream of the ladders and the angels that comes to him on the night of the day that he has fled from home. The God of Jacob's dream speaks them—not the God of waking life, not the clear voice that spoke to Abraham and Isaac—but the God that is planted deep within Jacob's sleeping mind. On some level, we might even wonder if Jacob speaks them to himself. And their effect is to startle him awake into the dead of night, shrouded in a strange new sense of his own potential, confused by a world that is at once larger and more resonant than he took it to be, a brave new world that he attempts to name through recourse to a theology of his own making:

“There must be Adonai in this place,” he says. “How strange, how wondrous is this place. It must be the House of God.”

Jacob encounters God in the same obscure way in today’s parsha. In the darkness of night, the Torah tells us, he wrestles with a “man”, and in the morning, we are told, he comes away with the same need to name the experience for himself in theological terms—to tells us how exactly this strange, ambiguous, transformative event was an experience of God: “And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel—the face of God, because,” he tells us, “I saw God face to face and my life was saved.”

But, wait a minute, if Jacob’s experiences of God are so darkly subjective, if they issue out of his own depths and if he himself tells us what they mean, then how can we be sure that Jacob is really experiencing God? The Torah tells us only that he wrestled with an “ish”, a “man”. It is Jacob who tells us he has seen the face of God. Is he Jacob the liar, and is claiming the blessing of the God of his fathers his ultimate hustle? Or is he truly deserving of the name that is given him, Yisrael, a wrestler with God in an arena that is deeper and darker than anything his ancestors experienced or could understand?

We might have a clearer answer to this question if we could figure out who this “ish” really is.

There are three schools of thought on this subject, two of them represented by classical commentaries and the third a little more modern, though no less rooted in the text. Rashi tells us that the “ish” was in fact an emissary of Esau that had come to assassinate Jacob on the eve of

their reunion. Sforno, the renowned Renaissance-era Italian commentator assures us that we should read this text as we are accustomed to reading it: Jacob wrestled with an angel. But there is a significant phrase found in today's parsha that holds out another possibility. In offering his prayer for protection, Jacob tells God: "Behold, with my staff I have crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps." Of course, on the practical level he is speaking about his family and possessions, which he has split into two groups in order to mitigate the damage that an attack by Esau might cause. But, on a deeper level, he may very well be speaking about himself. Feeling the pressure of the upcoming reunion with the brother he has wronged, the man who holds a very real and justifiable grievance against him, Jacob himself has split into two camps, and now, before he goes forward, he must wrestle with himself.

There is an uncanny parallel between this event—this indefinite struggle with an entity that may at one time be God, his brother, and himself—and another moment in Jacob's life. Not just any moment, but the first moment, an incident that the Torah tells us occurred even before he was born, when he and his twin brother were together in their mother's womb, and God somehow hovered in their midst, close enough to be able to tell their mother, Rebecca, what was going on when she complained about the pains she felt inside of her. "There are two nations struggling within you," God said, "and the elder shall serve the younger." Just as we are never certain whether Jacob is speaking to God or to himself, so here we are not certain if God is commenting on Jacob's character or determining it—telling Rebecca, "Your son will be like this," or "I have made your son like this." Either way, it is a fate that Jacob fulfills, coming into the world with the determination that he will live by struggle—he will succeed by pushing and pulling—pushing away those who could be close to him if this gnawing lifeforce suggests that he

should pull towards himself what it is that they have—and always living with the hovering assumption that his turmoil is a part of God’s plan.

But we have seen that the only thing that God says to Jacob in language as clear as daylight is: Return, Jacob. Return to where you were born, and I will be with you. Somehow, beneath it all, the only unambiguously divine voice he can hear is a voice telling him to return to where it all began, to face what he has not been able to face, or, as Jacob might put it himself: to see the face of God.

This phrase of his, “seeing the face of God” has such power in Jacob’s mind that he uses it more than once in today’s parsha. It is the theological meaning he gives to his experience of wrestling with the “ish”, and it is also something he says to his brother, after their reunion has proven to be one of tears and embracing, rather than violence. *ki al ken raiti fanekha kirot pnei elhohim*, he says—“for therefore I have seen your face as if seeing the face of God.” In saying this, he draws an explicit connection between his experience of the night before and this moment now of looking into his brother’s eyes. He is telling us that he has discovered that they both share something of the same divine quality. But what is that quality?

Jacob’s dark night had begun with a prayer. *Katonti*, he said: I am humbled, I am not worthy of all that I have received. This may have been false modesty, or it may have been a guilt he had always felt now coming closer and closer to the surface. My brother is coming and I am afraid, he said, I am split into two. Protect me, help me to pass through this. And his prayer was answered, not with a miraculous deliverance, but with solitude, with a mysterious descent into

his own depths, with the appearance of another whose face was sometimes his own, sometimes his brother's, and sometimes glowing with a divine light, with a life and death struggle that he could neither win nor lose, with a pain in his heart that became a wound on his body, and finally, with a glimmer of daylight.

What happened to Jacob at this moment of daylight, when he saw in his grandfather's morning light what he had only guessed at in his own darkness--when he found himself holding the presence of this other in a furious embrace? "I will not let you go until you bless me," he said. I will not let you go until you bless *me*. I have stolen blessings before, dressed so I would be taken for somebody else—but now I want to be seen for who I am. "Who are you?" he is asked. I am Jacob, he says, Jacob the heel, Jacob the trickster, Jacob the liar. You are Jacob, he is told, and part of you always will be—it is your nature or it is what your life has made you. But there is also a part of you that has always been struggling for this moment, this clarity, waiting for the call to return, to wrestle with yourself, with your brother, with God, with all of the pieces of your fragmented life, for this moment of true vision, of seeing the divine face to face, of holiness. That part of you deserves a name as well, and that name is Yisrael, the divine wrestler. And just as you came out of your mother's womb with your first name, go forward now with this one, go forward and see, if only for a moment, the image of God in the eyes of your brother.

We do not really know in the end who gives Jacob this new name—an angel of God, the forgiveness of his brother, the yearning of his own heart--and in a way it doesn't really matter. He is the father of ma'ariv, the prayer of the nighttime, searching for God in the darkness.

Whereas his fathers may have been more certain of what they heard, he must take upon himself

the task of naming the holiness of his own experience. He must contend with the moral failings and the loss of vision that arise out of his will to succeed, and the damage they cause to his relationships, to his vision of God, and to the health of his own soul. He must strive to be blessed by the glimmers of divine daylight that only arise at rare moments in his life, fortuitous moments at which he finds the courage to discover in his wounded self and in his brother the image of God—moments at which he realizes the potential of his other name, the name he leaves as a legacy to us, the children of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom