

This parashah is about the encounter of Jacob with his estranged brother Esau, as he and his family together with his herds, servants and entire household travel from Padan Aram back to Canaan. The fear which Jacob feels, especially when he hears that Esau is approaching with 400 horsemen, is palpable in the story and creates great literary tension. There is much to discuss here including the drama leading to the peaceful reunion of the estranged brothers, the death of beloved Rachel, the rape of Dinah (another interpolated story you didn't learn about in Hebrew school) and the death of Isaac.

I would like to focus on the brief but powerful episode of Jacob wrestling with the stranger/angel. The episode is related in Chapter 32 verses 23-33 on pages 201-203. Lets read the story together.

READ vv 23-33.

Now let's discuss the following issues:

1. Who is the stranger/man? Altho there is a multiplicity of interpretations such as inner turmoil, fear of tomorrow's encounter with brother Esau who wanted to kill Jacob, etc. the text strongly suggests an angel or divine being. The new name YISROEL means "striving with the divine." When Jacob leaves the place, he names it Peniel i.e. "face of God." He encounters God face to face in this encounter.
2. What is the meaning of the name change? The name Jacob (Yaacov) means "heel" and has a series of negative connotations. He was so named because at birth he was seen grasping as brother Esau's heel. The name implies grasping but also tricking and manipulating. We know that Jacob's past history was that of a grasping trickster. The name Yisroel is a far nobler appellation, conveying a sense of one who struggled with God and prevailed.
3. Let's compare the last time Jacob was asked his name. He was standing before blind Isaac, and he answered the question "what is your name?" falsely, naming himself Esau. Now when he is asked the same question by the mysterious stranger, he answers truthfully, and the angel immediately changes the name. He received his father's blessing under false pretenses, but here, he receives the angel's blessing without any artifice or misrepresentation.
4. Names are very important in the Torah, but also among most peoples of the earth. Children are given names that reflect their essences at birth or what parents would wish of them as they mature. Recall the movie "Dances with wolves" with Kevin Costner. The Torah is telling us that at this point in his life, Jacob has matured to the level that he is ready to give up being a tricky and manipulative youth. Instead he is now a seasoned and wise man of the world who has fought the battle of life and has prevailed.

5. What about other biblical figures whose names were changed? There are 4 times in the Torah where a biblical figure undergoes a name change. We have already read about Abraham and Sarah (Abram & Sari). Later, we will read about Joshua going from Hoshea to Yehoshua. But in this parashah, first the wrestling angel and then Hashem Himself declare that Yaacov (Jacob) will now be addressed as Yisrael. Curiously, Jacob's transformation is markedly different from the other 3. Once Abram becomes Abraham, he was never again addressed as Abram. The same is true of Sarah and Joshua. Jacob, on the other hand, retained his old name. Subsequent to the struggle w/ the angel, both names (Yaacov & Yisrael) are used interchangeably throughout the rest of the Torah. Why? Perhaps some of his old persona, his old mission and destiny, were not quite abandoned.
6. So to sum up, one's name reveals important character traits. Abraham, Sarah and Joshua were transformed into "new people" with their name change. Jacob had a partial transformation. But the notion of a man who wrestles with God is a splendid and noble image of a man. We are all B'nei Yisroel, the children of that grasping man who evolved into that questioning and struggling human who bequeathed to the world an altogether new sort of God-seeking. We do not have a monopoly on theological truths, but for our long 4000 year history, we have been a God seeking and God questioning people, wrestling and grappling with the uncertainties and random events of life, and trying to make sense of them.
7. Last paragraph. Our theology is not simply to appease the gods (God) with presents, i.e. sacrifices, so that our crops will grow well, although there is some of that, especially in the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of the Shema. No, we have made God-seeking a very complicated issue with no easy answers. And I suspect that the seeking (and not the finding) is the BIG THING. Ultimately, we all try to find answers to the BIG questions, and that's a process that has been going on since Avraham Avinu. Perhaps, this has been the most valuable and outstanding contribution which our people has made to the progress of world civilization. Shabbat shalom.