

5780 - Genesis 32-36 - Vayishlach (And he sent)

Vayishlach tells the story of the meeting, after an estrangement that lasted twenty—two years, between Jacob and Esau. Hearing that his brother is coming to meet him with a force of four hundred men, Jacob is “greatly afraid and distressed.” He divides his camp into two, sends gifts to Esau, and prays. That night he wrestles with a mysterious stranger, in an episode that ends with his being given a new name, Israel, meaning “one who struggles with God and men and prevails.” The next day the two brothers meet, not in violence but in peace. They embrace and then go their separate ways. The parasha ends with the death of Isaac and a genealogy of the descendants of Esau.

The first of the following studies examines Jacob’s state of mind before the meeting, exploring the difference between (physical) fear and (moral) distress. The second analyzes the wrestling match with the Stranger and what it tells us about Jacob’s inner struggle of identity and self-image. The third relates Jacob’s struggle to our own responses to crisis, and the fourth asks what it means to be a descendant of a man whose name means “one who struggles with God and men,” arguing that Judaism is the countervoice in the conversation of humankind.

*Surviving Crisis*¹

The Torah is not just a book to read; it is a book to live by. In that spirit, I want to reflect in this essay on how the story of Jacob’s wrestling match with the angel can help us survive crisis, when we, like our ancestor, **feel ourselves alone, afraid and in distress**. It can happen in many ways: we can lose our job, our savings, our self respect. We can suffer bereavement and feel ourselves surrounded by a cloud of grief. We can find ourselves in the midst of controversy, subject to the sometimes brutal criticism of others. We can feel ourselves to be a failure. These are terrifying moments when life seems drained of meaning, when we can no longer concentrate or connect with others, when we find it hard to sleep at night or stay awake during the day, when mere existence seems a burden we lack the strength to carry.

At such times, **it can sometimes help to retrace the steps of our ancestors when they faced similar situations**. One of the most beautiful aspects of Genesis, often lost when we read the stories through the lens of midrash, is that **its heroes and heroines are recognizably human**. They too have fears and doubts, none more so than Jacob, the man whose name, Israel, we bear. Often it is argued that we should not read the text

at its surface meaning, precisely because this would make them seem mere mortals like us, and there is much to be said for this point of view. But there is a contrary case. **The Torah portrays the patriarchs and matriarchs in all their human complexity so that we can identify with them and take strength from their stories rather than seeing them as impossibly remote from all we know and are**. What follows is what I have learned from Jacob’s night-time struggle.

1. 1Corinthians 10:1-13

⁶Now these things occurred **as examples** to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry” (Exo 32:6). ⁸We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died (Num 25:1ff). ⁹We should not test Messiah, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes (Num 21:5-6). ¹⁰And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel (1Chron 25:15). ¹¹**These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come ...**

And Jacob was left alone: The wrestling match with the stranger takes place after the most elaborately conceived and executed preparations for any event in Genesis. Jacob had prepared himself for three things: diplomacy, war and prayer. He sent huge gifts of cattle to appease Esau’s anger. He divided his camp in two so that even if one were destroyed the other might survive. He prayed to God. **He covered every eventuality, adopted every strategy, anticipated every outcome—except the one that actually happened**, the appearance of an unnamed adversary who fought with him.

Crises happen, and there is no way we can make ourselves immune to them. That is the human condition and we cannot escape it. **We live toward an unknown, unknowable future**. Even the answer God gives Moses when he asks Him His name—“I will be what I Will be”—tells us this. God is saying, “You will not know what, where or how I will be until the moment comes.” **Faith is not certainty: it is the courage to live with uncertainty. Indeed that is why we need faith, because life is uncertain**. Even in the twenty-first century when we know so much about the universe, cosmology, the human genome and the workings of the human brain, **there is one thing we do not know and never will: what tomorrow will bring**.

2. James 4:13-17

¹⁴**Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.**

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Genesis*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 229-233.

3. Matthew 6:25-34

³⁴Therefore **do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.**

4. Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶"But **about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father** ... ⁴²"Therefore keep watch, **because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.**

And a man wrestled with him: We do not know who this stranger was, a man, an angel or God Himself. What we surely do know is that **the wrestling match was an externalisation of Jacob's inner conflict, the result of his fear and distress.** However we construe the passage, Jacob was wrestling with himself, and that is where the real battle takes place. If we can win the struggle "in here," we can win it "out there," and if we cannot win the struggle with ourselves, we will eventually lose our struggle with the world.

The late Viktor Frankl, a psychotherapist, was a prisoner in Auschwitz, and it was there that he discovered his vocation. He saw how difficult it was to sustain the will to live, and those who lost it, died. He took it as his mission to give people back the will to live. He would talk to them to discover whether they had an unfulfilled dream or a task to complete. Once he found it he was able to give them a reason to survive. Something was calling to them from the future, and this was sometimes enough to give them the inner strength to keep going. After the war he founded a new school of psychotherapy—he called it Logotherapy—based on what he called "Man's search for meaning," the power of which he had seen in the camp.⁽¹⁾

Crisis can challenge us at the deepest level of the self, threatening our self-confidence and self-respect. That is where we need to concentrate our effort and focus our energies. **We are here because someone, the One, wanted us to be.** He loves us, understands us, forgives us when we acknowledge our mistakes, and believes in us more than we believe in ourselves. That is where true self-confidence is born: the faith that lights the way in the heart of darkness. "The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Psalms 118:6). "The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?" (27:1).

5. Hebrews 13:1-6

⁶So we say with confidence, **"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"** (Psa 118:6).

6. Isaiah 8:11-13

¹²"**Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.**

7. Romans 8:26-39

²⁸And we know that **in all things God works for the good of those who love him**, who have been called according to his purpose ...

³¹**If God is for us, who can be against us?** ... ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Messiah? **Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?** ... ³⁸For I am convinced that **neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God** that is in Messiah Yeshua our Lord.

Rashi's grandson Rashbam gives an extraordinary interpretation of Jacob's wrestling match.⁽²⁾ Fearing the confrontation with Esau, Jacob wanted to run away, and God sent an angel to wrestle with him to stop him doing so. On this reading, **God was teaching Jacob how to wrestle with his fears and defeat them.** "Who is strong?" asked Ben Zoma. Not one who can defeat his enemies but one who "who masters his impulses."⁽³⁾ Ben Zoma's proof text was a verse from Proverbs: "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules over his spirit than he who conquers a city" (16:22).

What actually happened the next day, when Jacob finally came face to face with Esau? Instead of attacking him, Esau ran to meet him and embraced him (32:1). There was no anger, no violence, no lingering trace of resentment. **Everything Jacob feared, failed to happen.** Was this mere coincidence, happenstance? **Were Jacob's fears simply misplaced?** I believe the Torah is teaching a deeper truth, that once Jacob had resolved the deeper conflict within himself he had removed the source of tension between himself and Esau. Even animals sense fear. Predators chase those who run away. The way of safety is to stay calm and still.

An inner sense of self-confidence and trust does not mean that one will never have to fight battles. Economics and politics are intrinsically conflictual. **Much of life is a zero-sum² competition for scarce goods in which some win, some lose.** But spiritual goods—love, trust, friendship, the pursuit of knowledge—are not zero-sum. **The more we share, the more we have. That I win does not mean that you lose, and vice versa.** So my self-respect never needs to be purchased at the yours. I can respect you without denigrating myself I can make space for you without denying

² In game theory and economic theory, a zero-sum game is a mathematical representation of a situation in which each participant's gain or loss of utility is exactly balanced by the losses or gains of the utility of the other participants.

myself. So our deepest psychological and spiritual goods need never be bought at the cost of others. That knowledge alone—that Jacob and Esau can each have their own blessings without envying one another—is enough to remove many, even most, of the conflicts by which people cause one another pain.

8. Matthew 13:10-13

¹²**Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance.**

9. Luke 8:16-18 (cf. Mark 4:21-25)

Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them."

10. Avot 1:13

(Hillel) used to say; He who seeks renown loses his reputation; he who does not increase [his Torah learning] decreases it; he who refuses to teach [Torah] deserves death; and he who exploits the crown [of Torah] shall fade away.

- a. One either ascends or descends in Torah learning; **if one does not continuously increase in knowledge, he will inevitably forget that which he previously learned.** Included in this directive is the duty to master new areas of Torah (*Meirif*) ... Life is made for growth. One who feels no need to learn more is spiritually dead; the gift of life is wasted on him (*R' Yonah*).⁵

The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip (32:31): **Jacob limped after the fight. Crisis is real; the suffering to which it gives rise can cut deep; even when you survive, you limp; long afterwards, perhaps for a lifetime, you bear the scars.** But they are honourable scars. They tell that you fought and won, and greater is one who fought and won that one who, fearing confrontation, takes the path of least resistance and submits.

I will not let you go until you bless me: These words of Jacob to the angel lie at the very core of surviving crisis. Each of us knows from personal experience that **events that seemed disappointing, painful, even humiliating at the time, can be the most important in our lives.** Through them we learned how to try harder next time; or they taught us a truth about ourselves; or they shifted our life into a new and more fruitful direction. **We learn, not from our successes but from our failures.** We ma-

ture and grow strong and become more understanding and forgiving through the mistakes we make. A protected life is a fragile and superficial life. Strength comes from knowing the worst and refusing to give in. Jacob/Israel has bequeathed us many gifts, but few more valuable than the obstinacy and resilience that can face hard times and say of them: "I will not let you go until you bless me." I will not give up or move on until I have extracted something positive from this pain and turned it into blessing.

That is how the story of Jacob's struggle has helped me, and it serves to emphasize how important it is not to lose sight of the biblical text by burying it under layers of midrashic reinterpretation. **What Genesis tells us is that the heroes of our faith did not live charmed lives.** They suffered exiles, knew danger, had their hopes disappointed and their expectations delayed. They fought, they struggled, but they neither gave in nor gave up. They were not serene. Sometimes they laughed in disbelief; there were times when they feared, trembled, wept and even gave way to anger. For **they were human beings, not angels; they were people with whom we can identify, not saints to be worshipped.** Jacob taught us that we cannot pre-empt crisis, nor should we minimise it, but we can survive it, thus becoming worthy of bearing the name of one who struggled with God and with men and prevailed.

- (1) See Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Simon and Shuster); *The Doctor and the Soul* (Vintage Books); *The Will to Meaning* (New American Library).
(2) Rashbam, Commentary to *Bereshit* 32. Rashbam compares Jacob to Jonah, who also tried to flee.
(3) Avot 4:1)

^{32:24}So Jacob was left alone, and **a man wrestled with him till daybreak.**

²⁵**When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.** ²⁶Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, **"I will not let you go unless you bless me."** ²⁷The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. ²⁸Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." ²⁹Jacob said, **"Please tell me your name."** But he replied, **"Why do you ask my name?"** Then he blessed him there. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because **I saw God face to face**, and yet my life was spared."

1. ²⁴... and **a man wrestled with him ...**

- a. Obviously NOT a "man"—²⁵**When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched ...**

3 Menachem ben Solomon Meiri (1249–1306) was a famous Catalan rabbi, Talmudist and Maimonidean.

4 Rabbi Yonah was an Amora (*Expounder*) of the 4th-generation (320–350 CE) active in Eretz Yisrael.

5 Rabbi Moshe Lieber, Ed., *The Pirkei Avos Treasury*, (Mesorah Publications, Ltd.), pp. 40–41.

2. ²⁸"Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, **because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.**"

a. Genesis 35:9-15

⁹After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him. ¹⁰**God said to him, "Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.**

"So he named him Israel. ¹¹And God said to him, "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body. ¹²The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you." ¹³Then God went up from him at the place where he had talked with him.

¹⁴Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. ¹⁵Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel.

1) Like with Abraham and Sarah, a genuine encounter with God is life-changing—it is a sort of wrestling match—Jacob has a new name, a new nature, a new destiny.

2) The apostles teach us that, in Messiah, we have a new identity—Paul speaks of our old identity as the "old self."

a) Romans 6:6; b) 2Corinthians 5:17; c) Ephesians 4:22-25

3. ³⁰*I saw God face to face ...*

a. Exodus 33:11 (cf., Num 12:8; 14:14; Deu 5:4; 34:10)

¹¹**The LORD would speak to Moses face to face**, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.

1) Exodus 33:20

But," he said, "**you cannot see my face, for NO ONE MAY SEE ME AND LIVE.**"

b. Judges 6:22

c. Judges 13:21-22

d. 1Corinthians 13:12

e. John 1:14-18