

Jacob Wrestling

The story of Jacob's wrestling match with an unnamed adversary, alone at night, is surely one of the most enigmatic in the entire Torah. With whom was Jacob wrestling? The text itself calls him "a man". According to the prophet Hosea, it was an angel. For the Sages, it was the guardian angel of Esau. Jacob himself had no doubt. It was God. He called the place of the encounter Peniel, "because I have seen God face-to-face, and yet my life has been spared" (Gen. 32:30) The adversary himself implies as much when he gives Jacob the name Israel, "for you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28).

The passage resists easy interpretation, yet it holds the key to understanding Jewish identity. It is not we, the readers, who give it this significance but the Torah itself. For it was then, as dawn was about to break, that Jacob acquired the name that his descendants would bear throughout eternity. The people of the covenant are not the children of Abraham or Isaac but "the children of Israel." It was only with the division of the kingdom and the Assyrian conquest of the north, that those who remained were called generically Yehudah (the southern kingdom), and thus *Yehudim* or, in English, Jews.

Names in the Torah – especially a new name given by God – are not mere labels but signals of character or calling. The moment at which Jacob became Israel contains the clue to who we are. To be sure, our ancestors were later called on to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" but we never lost that earlier appellation. We are the people who struggled with God and with man and yet survived. What does this mean?

One way into the text (to be sure, only one of many) is to ask: what happened next? By reasoning backward, from effect to cause, we may gain an insight into what transpired that night.

The events of the next day are a little short of astonishing. We have been prepared for a tense encounter. Hearing that Esau was coming to meet him with a force of four hundred men, Jacob was "acutely afraid and distressed" (Gen. 32:7). He made elaborate preparations. As the Sages said, he adopted three tactics: diplomacy (he sent lavish gifts

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of herds and flocks), prayer ("Rescue me, I pray, from my brother's hand, from the hand of Esav. I am afraid…") and readiness for war (dividing his household into two camps so that one at least would survive).

Yet when Esau finally appears, all the fears turn out to be unfounded. He "ran" to meet Jacob, threw his arms around his neck, kissed him and wept. There is no anger, animosity or threat of revenge in Esau's behaviour (to be sure, there are midrashic traditions that suggest otherwise, but we are concerned here with the plain sense of the narrative). That is not to say that Jacob's fears were irrational. They were not. After all, Esau had vowed revenge twenty-two years before.[1] Esau, however, is an impulsive man who lives in the mood of the moment. He has none of Cassius' "lean and hungry look" or Iago's cold calculation. He is quick to anger, quick to forget. The anticlimax when the brothers meet reminds us of Roosevelt's famous words that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Second, and far more consequential, is Jacob's behaviour when the brothers meet. It is little short of extraordinary. First, he bows down to the ground seven times, prostrating himself before Esau. Each of his family members does likewise: "Then the maidservants and their children came forward and bowed down. Leah and her children came forward and bowed down. And last, Joseph and Rachel approached and bowed down" (Gen. 33:6-7). The threefold repetition is significant.

No less striking is Jacob's use of language. Five times he calls Esau *adoni*, "my lord"

1. "The days of mourning for my father are approaching," he said to himself, "and then I will kill my brother Jacob" (Gen. 27:41).



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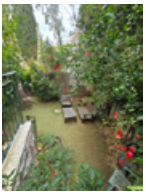



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(in the previous chapter, he tells his servants three times to use the same word to Esau). Twice he calls himself Esau's *eved*, "servant," (and four times in the previous chapter tells his servants to do likewise). As with his physical gesture of sevenfold prostration, so with his sevenfold use of the words *adon* and *eved*, this is the choreography of self-abasement.

How are we to connect this with the wrestling match of the previous night? Surely Jacob had won a victory over his adversary. At the very least he had refused to let him go until he blessed him. The new name implied that henceforth Jacob should have no doubts about his ability to survive any conflict. A man who has "wrestled with God and with men and has overcome" is not one who needs to bow down to anyone or call him "my lord." We would have expected Jacob to show a new-found confidence rather than a wholly surprising servility.

Nor is this all. When Esau at first refuses the gifts (with the words, "I have plenty [*yesh li rav*]; let what is yours remain yours"), Jacob replies in the following extraordinary words:

"No, please, if I have found favour in your eyes, accept this gift [*minchah*] from me, for seeing your face is like seeing the face of God, as you have shown me such favour. Please accept my present [*birkhati*, literally "my blessing"] that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me, and I have everything [*yesh li khol*]." (Gen. 33:10-11)

Why has the "gift" become a "blessing"? In what conceivable way is seeing the face of Esau like "seeing the face of God"? And what exactly does Jacob mean by altering Esau's words, "I have plenty," into his own "I have everything"?

There are other resonances in the passage. The most significant has to do with the word *panim*, "face." Jacob's words to Esau, "to see your face is like seeing the face of God," clearly echo his remark after the wrestling match, "He named the place Peniel, saying, 'for I have seen God face-to-face and yet my life has been spared.'" Altogether, chapters 32 and 33 (the preparations for the meeting, the night-time struggle, and the meeting itself) echo time and again with variants on the word *panim*. This is missed in translation, because *panim* has many forms in Hebrew not evident in English. To take one example, verse 32:20 is often translated as follows:

[Jacob said to his servants], "You shall say… 'Your servant Jacob is coming behind us,' for he thought, 'I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.'" (Gen. 32:20)

There is nothing here to suggest that, in fact, the word *panim* appears four times in this verse alone. Literally, the second half of the verse should be translated: "for he thought, 'I will wipe [the anger from] his face with the gift that goes ahead of my face; afterward, when I see his face, perhaps he will lift up my face.'" There is a drama here and it has to do with faces: the face of Esau, of Jacob, and of God himself. What is going on?

The clue lies in Jacob's use of the word "blessing". This takes us back twenty-two years to another fateful moment (Bereishit chapter 27) in which Jacob, dressed in Esau's clothes, takes his brother's blessing (whether by accident or design, the term *b-r-ch*, "bless" or "blessing" occurs exactly twenty-two times in that chapter). Let us

remind ourselves of what the blessing was:

May God endow you with the dew of heaven, the cream of the land, much grain and wine. May nations serve you; may nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. A curse on those who curse you; on those who bless you, blessing. (Gen. 27:28-30)

The plain sense of these words is clear. They mean wealth and power. This is the blessing Jacob took, dressed in Esau's clothes, taking Esau's place. That is the first fact.

The second, whose importance cannot be overstated, is that there was a later blessing. Esau had married two Hittite women. This was a source of grief to both Isaac and Rebecca. Rebecca takes this as an opportunity to send Jacob away to her brother Laban, where he will be safe from Esau's desire for revenge. Before Jacob leaves, Isaac blesses him in these words:

May God Almighty bless you, make you fertile, and multiply you so that you become a community of peoples. May He grant Abraham's blessing to you and your descendants, that you may possess the land where you live as a stranger, the land which God gave to Abraham. (Gen. 28:3-4)

This is a completely different blessing: for children and a land, the two key things God had repeatedly promised Abraham. These are the "covenantal blessings". They dominate the book of Bereishit, and have nothing to do with wealth or power. God promised Abraham that he would have children who would continue the covenant, and a land in which to do so. God never promises Abraham "the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth," nor does He

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use the language of power, "Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you." Before sending him away from home, Isaac gives Jacob the Abrahamic blessings, saying to him in so many words: it will be you who will continue the covenant into the future.

The third significant fact is that, at the time of the blessings, Isaac was blind. Jacob's impersonation of Esau was possible only because Isaac could not see. Bereishit 27 is almost an essay on the senses. Deprived of one (sight), Isaac uses the other four. He *tastes* the food, *touches* Jacob's hands (which Rebecca has covered with goatskins to make them feel rough) and *smells* his clothes ("Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field the Lord has blessed"). He also *hears* his voice ("The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau"). Eventually, after considerable doubt, Isaac trusts the evidence of taste, touch and smell over that of sound, and gives Jacob Esau's blessing. He does so only because he cannot see Jacob's face. These three facts are enough to allow us to decipher the mystery of the meeting between Jacob and Esau twenty-two years later.

The patriarchs were more than just founders of a new faith. They were also role-models. Their lives are significant not only for what they tell us about the past but also for what they tell us about the present – for their challenges are ours.

Abraham was the man who had the strength of conviction to stand apart from the culture of his time – to be different, to refuse to worship the idols of the age, to listen instead to the inner voice of the one God, even when it meant setting out on a long and risk-laden journey. What carried him through was love (*chessed*) – love of God and, yes, the love of humanity that shines through all his deeds and words.

Isaac was the man who knew the reality of sacrifice. He lived, he survived, but not without seeing the knife lifted against him. He knew to the core of his being that to be a child of the covenant is neither easy nor safe. What carried him through was courage (*gevurah*) – and for whatever reason, the historical record is clear: to remain Jewish takes courage.

In connection with Jacob, though, the prophet Micah speaks of truth ("You will give truth to Jacob"). He does not mean truth in a cognitive sense ('What are the facts? What is ultimately real?'). He means it in an existential sense ('Who am I? To which story do I belong and what part am I called on to play?'). The search for cognitive truth – scientific, metaphysical, artistic – is not specific to the Abrahamic covenant. It is the heritage of all humankind. There is no such thing as Jewish science or economics or psychology. What is, is; and it is given to homo sapiens as such to discover it (Rashi translates the phrase "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" to mean "with the capacity to understand and discern"). The truth with which Jacob spent much of his life wrestling was quite different. It was a truth about identity. Central to it are the words face (in which mirror do I look to see who I am?), name (by which term do I know myself?) and blessing (to what destiny am I called?).

One thing stands out about the first phase in Jacob's life. He longs to be Esau – more specifically, he desires to occupy Esau's place. He struggles with him in the womb. He is born holding on to Esau's heel (this is

what gives him the name Jacob, "heel-grasper"). He buys Esau's birthright. He dresses in Esau's clothes. He takes Esau's blessing. When Isaac cannot see and asks him who he is, he replies, "I am Esau, your firstborn."

Why? The answer seems clear. Esau is everything Jacob is not. He is the firstborn. He emerges from the womb covered in red hair (Esau means "fully made"). He is strong, full of energy, a skilled hunter, "a man of the fields." More importantly, he has his father's love. Esau is *homo naturalis*, a man of nature. He knows that *homo homini lupus est*, "man is wolf to man." He has the strength and skill to fight and win in the Darwinian struggle to survive and the Hobbesian war of "all against all." These are his natural battlegrounds and he relishes the contest.

Esau is the archetypal hero of a hundred myths and legends of the ancient world (and of action movies today). He is not without dignity, nor does he lack human feelings. His love for his father Isaac is genuine and touching. The Midrash, for sound educational reasons, turned Esau into a bad man. The Torah itself is altogether more subtle and profound. Esau is not a bad man; he is a natural man, celebrating the Homeric virtues and the Nietzschean will to power.

It is not surprising that Jacob's first desire was to be like him. That is the face he first saw in the mirror of his imagination, the face he presented to the blind Isaac when he came to take the blessing. But the face was not the face of Jacob, any more than were the hands.

Nor was the blessing he took the one that was destined for him. The true blessing was the one he received later when Isaac knew he was blessing Jacob, not thinking him to be Esau.

Jacob's blessing had nothing to do with wealth or power. It had to do with children and a land – children he would instruct in the ways of the covenant and a land in which his descendants would strive to construct a covenantal society based on justice and compassion, law and love. To receive that blessing Jacob did not have to dress in Esau's clothes. Instead, he had to be himself, not a man of nature but a person whose ears were attuned to a voice beyond nature, the call of the Author of all to be true to that which cannot be bought by wealth or controlled by power, namely, the human spirit as the breath of God and human dignity as the image of God.

It should now be clear exactly what Jacob was doing when he met Esau twenty-two years later. He was giving back the blessing he had taken all those years before. The herds and flocks he sent to Esau represented wealth ("the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth"). The sevenfold bowing and calling himself "your servant" and Esau "my lord" represented power ("Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you.") Jacob no longer wanted or needed these things ("I have everything" – meaning, "I no longer need either wealth or power to be complete"). He is explicit. He says, "Please take [not just] my "gift" [but also my] "blessing". He now knows the blessing he took from Esau was never meant for him, and he is returning it.

It is equally clear what was transacted in the wrestling match the previous night. It was Jacob's inner battle with existential truth. Who was he? The man who longed to be Esau? Or the man called to a different destiny, "the road less travelled," the

Abrahamic covenant? "I will not let you go until you bless me," he says to his adversary. The unnamed stranger responds in a way that defies expectation. He does not give Jacob a conventional blessing (e.g. you will be rich, or strong, or safe). Nor does he promise Jacob a life free of conflict. The name Jacob signified struggle; the name Israel also signified struggle. But the terms of the conflict have been reversed.

It is as if the man said to him, "In the past, you struggled to be Esau. In the future you will struggle not to be Esau but to be yourself. In the past you held on to Esau's heel. In the future you will hold on to God. You will not let go of Him; He will not let go of You. Now let go of Esau so that you can be free to hold on to God."

The next day, Jacob did so. He let go of Esau by giving him back his blessing. And though Jacob had now renounced both wealth and power, and though he still limped from the encounter the night before, the passage ends with the words, *Vayavo Yaakov shalem*, "And Jacob emerged complete." That is the stunning truth at which Jacob finally arrived, and to which the name Israel is testimony. To be complete we do not need Esau's blessings of wealth and power. Ours is another face, an alternative destiny, a different blessing. The face we bear is the image we see reflected in the face of God when we wrestle with Him and refuse to let go.

Not by accident was this episode the birth of our identity (our "name") as Israel. At almost every significant juncture in our history we have wrestled with civilisations who worshipped the gods of nature: wealth ("the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth") or power ("may nations serve you and peoples bow down to you"). Israel never knew the wealth of ancient Greece or Rome, Renaissance Italy or aristocratic France. It never knew the power of great empires, their invincible armies and weapons of destruction. When it longed for these things (as in the days of Solomon) it lost its way.

Israel's strength never lay in itself but in that which was other and greater than itself: the power that transcends all earthly powers, and the wealth that is not physical but spiritual, a matter of mind and heart. Jews have often wished to be someone else, the 'Esaus' of the age. Too often, they knew what it was, in Shakespeare's words, to…

…look upon myself, and curse my fate/ Wishing me like to one more rich in hope/ Featured like him, like him with friends possessed/Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope/With what I most enjoy contented least. (Sonnet 29)

That is a feeling we must ultimately reject. The Torah does not ask us to think badly of Esau. To the contrary, it commands us: "Do not hate an Edomite [i.e., a descendant of Esau], for he is your brother." It did, however, ask us to wrestle, as did Jacob, alone, at night, in the depths of our soul, and discover the face, the name and the blessing that is ours. Before Jacob could be at peace with Esau, he had to learn that he was not Esau but Israel – he who wrestles with God and never lets go. ■

Rabbi Sacks zt"l was the Former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. These weekly teachings are part of his 'Covenant & Conversation' series on the weekly Torah teaching. With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel. Visit www.RabbiSacks.org for more.