

A Muse: Vayishlach

This week's Torah portion details the reconciliation of Jacob and his brother Esau as well as the mysterious encounter between Jacob and the angel at a place he subsequently named Peniel, on the banks of the Jabok River. The portion also relates the rape of Dina as well as the brutal revenge of Shimon and Levi.

The complex and delicate nature of the Sedra raises many questions. I'd like to share just a few of them with you:

- The series of events are not sequentially logical. If after having wrestled with the angel of God, Jacob comes out a spiritually stronger man as evidenced by his name change than why did he fear confrontation with Esau? If he wrestled with an angel and was able to overcome why was he afraid to face his brother?
- Who did Jacob really fight, man or angel, or was it perhaps a dream in which he found himself in a struggle with phantom demons. This happens to be one of the classic controversies between the Rambam **and the** Ramban - as to whether the wrestling constituted an external event or an inner prophetic experience through the medium of a dream.
- What was the significance of the encounter being a nocturnal one and why near the river Jabok?
- Why was it important for the text to note Jacob's physical handicap resulting from the struggle?
- Why is the story of Dinah mentioned, considering that it is unrelated to the rest of the narrative? She never reappears in the Biblical text, nor do we ever learn what happened to her, so why is this isolated incident recorded?

- Jacob's response to the news of Shimon and Levi's bloodbath is limited to the possible repercussions (utilitarian concerns) from the neighboring tribes rather than addressing the moral issues - and this after his encounter with the angel!

It is possible that these events have a common denominator, which point to the character development of Jacob. In this Parsha Jacob should be understood as a work in progress, as a man who is still caught up in the quagmire of self-discovery.

Jacob, on his way to meet his brother whom he hadn't seen for years is, according to the text, in fear for his personal safety. And rightfully so, according to Yehoshua Leibovitz. After all, according to Leibowitz, he was fully aware that he had sinned twenty years ago, and therefore didn't have the courage to confront his brother - let alone fight him. He was even willing to humiliate himself in order to atone. Ironically, it is precisely that night, the night prior to his meeting with his brother that he has the real or imagined encounter with the angel. Is it possible that in anticipation of his confrontational meeting with Esau, Jacob suffered from anxiety? Going to sleep with a heavy conscience may have precipitated Jacob's need to confront this and other issues. If so, with whom was he in fact struggling?

Was Jacob indeed literally struggling with an angel, or was he still struggling with his father Isaac regarding the Bracha? Possibly he was struggling with Esau, or his alter ego as the Medrash Rabbah suggests, whom he incidentally wrestled once before - in the womb. Or perhaps it was his shadow self whom he was struggling with.

Possibly, Jacob is wrestling with all these phantoms on this night prior to his meeting with Esau. He subdues all of these phantoms and in the process transforms himself while given a new name. In assuming his new identity, he leaves behind his insecurities and assumes the adult mantle of the patriarch. It is no wonder that his struggle is staged

at the River Jabok, for it symbolizes a spiritual divide - a new destiny and a break from the past. The word Yabok shares the same Hebrew root for Maavak - struggle.

Jacob's struggle as narrated in the text illustrates that we never stop growing. Each step forward brings new challenges and sometimes setbacks. Even after Jacob's spiritual catharsis he resumes his journey with a limp - with imperfections. Jacob's set back was that he inappropriately rebuked his sons after the revenge of Hamor and the tribe of Shechem. This, especially in light of the fact that Chazal point out that Hamor's solution was in step with the biblical law: payment to the rape victim's father and marriage to the victim. It was only years later that Jacob, on his deathbed did redeem himself of this matter by appropriately addressing Shimon and Levi with a moral rebuke and a scathing curse.