

Vayishlach: the Struggle for [a New] Identity

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“In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds meaning”.

-- Victor Frankl

When difficult situations arise, we struggle. Often the struggle is unbearable, and the suffering immense, especially when the suffering is imposed by external forces. Sometimes it is impossible to comprehend that the outcome of a deep personal struggle and suffering, is growth and change.

Perhaps this is why the episode in this week's parsha when Jacob wrestles with an angel has captivated the imagination of many.

One evening Jacob is completely alone. He sends everyone -- his wives, children and servants -- away. He prepares for his encounter with his brother Esav, and in this contemplative state, without the usual distractions, he is able to be truly honest with himself. He is vulnerable, unprotected. At this very moment, an angel enters the scene and Jacob and the angel wrestle the entire night until daybreak.

How odd! Why does the angel enter?

What does the angel represent? What does it mean to wrestle with something? With someone? With our own sense of self? With our own identity.

There have been many representations of this famous biblical moment.

Rembrant paints Jacob as contemplative, powerless, exhausted:

Gauguin paints a real wrestling match where Jacob is clearly the underdog:

Delacroix depicts the angel retreating and Jacob strong and overpowering:

All of these are valid interpretations. It is possible to imagine that in the course of the wrestling that Jacob could have taken on different roles. He is the oppressed and the oppressor, the defeated and the victorious.

Some commentators describe this wrestling as between the light and dark parts of Jacob -- the good son, the bad son; the good brother, the bad brother.

When Erik Erickson coined the phrase "identity". He introduced the idea that we are a "mosaic" of different facets that are then synthesized to form a person. Different parts of our personal identity coexist. These different facets are what make each person complete-- no part any less valuable than the other.

Shmuley Boteach quips:

"I've been told by television producers, radio producers, book publishers 'you've gotta stop this multiple identity thing. What are you?' But I resisted that because I think it leads to a life of monotony and boredom."

This is a very profound point, however. Dichotomies exist in each one of us. But to recognize and to wrestle with the reality of having polarizing parts of ourselves, takes guts, it takes real courage, and through this process we truly grow.

Jacob needs to go through this wrestling, this struggle within himself, to acknowledge all that he is, all that he has done, in order to overcome, to become a greater Jacob, to become Yisrael.

Further, according to a Midrash, the reason that the angel with whom Jacob wrestles does not give a name, is that "our names keep changing based on the mission we are sent to deliver". This is another fascinating insight that clearly implies the existence of diverse identities within each individual. Sometimes we are the boss and sometimes the employee, sometimes the parent and sometimes the child, sometimes the life of the party and sometimes the pensive scholar.

In social psychology, there exist the concept that identity is the same across time and space and identity is also influenced by different contexts. What's more, there is part of the identity formation process that we do not have control over, and then there are other parts, which are entirely within our control.

Jacob cannot take away his identity as Esav's brother, nor his identity as Issac's son. These are a given. He can control the evolution of his identity, however.

Jacob can control the person that he is going to become. But this will not be easy.

*"He [the man] saw that he could not defeat him,
and he struck the socket of his hip"*

When the angel realizes that he cannot defeat the true “essence” of Jacob, he inflicts an especially painful physical blow. Another, Why? Well, it seems to symbolize that to mature, to truly morph into something other, to change our identity -- how we see ourselves and how others see us -- something has to be broken. It can't be a smooth transition.

In the end, Jacob perseveres and is victorious.

When the angel asks Jacob to let him go, Jacob demands that the angel gives him a blessing first. Again, why? Sometimes when you're in the middle of the struggle, in midst of a personal, emotional turmoil, its difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel, it is difficult to see your way up the mountain. Jacob needed the reassurance, as we often do, that this struggle shall be a blessing.

The blessing leads to a name change and thus a change of identity. Jacob is no longer Jacob. He is now called Yisrael . A metamorphosis occurs: Jacob is no longer the one who stole his brother's birthright, but is instead, Yisrael, the one who contended with Godly beings.

For me, this outcome is incredibly inspiring.

Personal growth takes work; it takes courage. It is a struggle and sometimes involves real suffering. Yet, we can bounce back from trauma, loss, set backs and experience incredible growth. We can overcome and even transform to become our greatest selves.

Perhaps Victor Frankel is right... suffering can bring deeper meaning to one's life.



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