

JACOB'S PARADOXICAL ENCOUNTERS

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Genesis 32:1-32:17 describes Jacob's reunion with his brother, Esau, assuredly the most traumatic of the many trials that he was subjected to during his life. Esau, who had vowed to kill him twenty years earlier, was now coming to meet Jacob on his return to his home in Canaan, after having been a fugitive in Mesopotamia, sojourning with, and working for, his deceitful uncle, Laban. During the night before the brothers are to meet, Jacob suddenly was confronted by an unexpected encounter with a shadowy, heavenly adversary who wrestles violently with him throughout the night, and who, as dawn broke, ended the struggle, but not before wounding Jacob's thigh and laming him.

The next morning Jacob prepared for the anticipated violent confrontation with his brother. No doubt he must have felt dejected, weak and fearful, especially after the desperate exertions of the entire previous night's encounter which had left him crippled. Perhaps he felt that the odds were stacked against his being able to resist Esau's expected onslaught? Yet God was with him, and his worst fears are soon put to rest when the brothers finally meet. It was a warm and loving reunion as they instinctively embraced each other and wept.

As we reflect on the two confrontations we discover something quite paradoxical. Jacob's encounter with the brother who had envied and hated him was transformed into a warm and loving reunion, whereas his meeting with an angel – presumably a kindred spirit, an associate in God's service – began as a violent struggle and ended with Jacob maimed and lame.

A classical Midrash speculates that the heavenly being with whom he struggled was one of those angels whom he had seen in his earlier dream of the ladder with angels ascending and descending (Gen. 28:12-16), and who, according to the Midrash, were designated to protect him during his forthcoming travels and travails, including his journey home. One wonders whether this night time encounter was also a dream and if so, how we are to

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understand the wounding of the thigh. How, also, may we resolve the attendant paradox that one of those whose mission it was to protect Jacob was transformed into an opponent, while his erstwhile enemy, Esau, was revealed as an affectionate brother and friend!

Other Midrashim try to avoid the problem by suggesting that the angel who struggled with Jacob did not, in fact, hail from those who were created to protect him, but, quite the contrary, the angel who fought with Jacob was one of Esau's protectors. It was he who wounded Jacob as a punishment for having taken advantage of Esau's physical exhaustion, years earlier, when Jacob extracted the birthright from his brother in exchange for a dish of lentil pottage. Thus the Midrash seems to say that Esau, through his guardian angel, gets back at Jacob, inflicting pain, disability and physical exhaustion on the brother who had treated him so poorly and unfairly. However, it would seem that Esau somehow came to understand that Jacob had suffered so greatly during his years of exile that the score had been fully settled between them. This might account for Esau's apparent change of heart and his readiness to embrace his brother and lament their long estrangement.

This speculative perspective employs imagination and the many levels and possibilities of Midrashic interpretation. But there is another way of viewing these two encounters, namely to see them as symbolically representing two levels of human strife and disquiet, one domestic and the other religious. The first, represented by the struggle between the brothers, stands for the breakdown of domestic relationships, in this instance the not uncommon sibling rivalry that divides families, and which is, frequently, a grappling over birthrights, wills, inheritance and money. The resolution of such misunderstandings is never simple, and at times impossible. Yet there are also times when reconciliation emerges and broken relationships are restored. Such a blessed event appears to have happened between Jacob and Esau. The paucity of explanation in the text is no doubt responsible for the many Midrashic attempts to account for the turn of events.

The second encounter, which found God and man ranged against each other – for this is how Jacob himself describes his night time adversary – *For I encountered God face to face, and yet I survived* (Gen.32:31) – is a far more difficult and complex problem to resolve. That enigmatic confrontation is suggestive of the restless mind and tormented soul struggling for insight into

truth and higher reality. It seems to hint at a wrestling with doubt regarding Divine justice and concern for the world. It symbolizes, perhaps, the hard struggle to maintain one's faith in the reality of God in the face of a world filled with violence, both natural and man made, and the subsequent feeling that there is "neither judge nor justice." This confrontation is about the intellectual and emotional tug-of-war to capture and retain faith, all the while struggling against the forces and philosophies that aim to render notions of God and spirit outmoded and irrelevant.

Viewed in this way the paradoxes seem to be resolved, if only in part. Jacob can make peace with Esau more readily than he can with himself or with his faith. External conflicts are often more easily resolved than are inner ones.

And yet, the resolution of the internal paradox is alluded to, at least in metaphorical terms if not fully realized, in the text itself. When the night-long engagement ended, we are told that *the sun rose upon him...and he limped upon his thigh* (Gen. 32:32). The sun and its light often are understood as symbols of the Divine presence. Thus the text seems suggestive of the freshening of Jacob's faith in God, but on a more mature level. His crippled thigh led him to the understanding that faith in God does not heal all pain, nor does it resolve all doubts.

Armed with that truism concerning religious faith, we may be able better to understand another ironic paradox expressed in one of the final verses of the episode. After the two encounters with the angel and with Esau, we are told, *And Jacob emerged shaleim...* (Gen. 32:32). Here a bit of the Midrashic style of imaginative interpretation will be helpful.

The word *shaleim* has two meanings, "wholeness" and "peace." (That which is whole and complete is probably at peace.) So we are told that, after all the turmoil and aggravation, *Jacob emerged whole...* But, in fact, he was far from whole, for he was physically impaired! Nevertheless, a physically handicapped person, who has a healthy perspective, is still a whole person. Perhaps because of, not in spite of, what he had to endure, Jacob was able to go forth and make his peace with Esau, and empathize with his suffering. At the same time, he was able to make his peace with God, understanding that God, the Father of all humankind, also must suffer when His children are estranged, as Jacob's parents must have suffered at his own long exile and

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alienation from his brother. Above all, his own internal struggles were healing, and Jacob was, at long last, *shaleim*, whole and at peace with himself.