

WHO WRESTLED WITH JACOB?

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The story of Jacob's fight with an unidentified attacker (Gen. 32:23-32) poses a multitude of questions which the plain text leaves unanswered.

1. Why did Jacob take his family and possessions across the river, after having received the message that his brother was approaching with a small army? A river is, after all, a natural line of defense and was therefore an advantage which should have been maintained.

2. Why would Jacob have remained alone in the middle of the night?

3. Who was this unnamed opponent? At the outset he is called *a man* (v. 25) but in the course of the story he turns into an angel. This is manifested by Jacob's demand for a blessing from him prior to his release.

4. What was the attacker's objective? We are left wondering whether he wanted to kill, rob, or in some other fashion hurt Jacob.

5. Why did the first appearance of dawn disturb the fighting man/angel so much?

6. If we deal with an angel, how is it possible that a heavenly being would find himself unable to defeat a human opponent? Not only was he apparently unable to pin Jacob down, he was even unable to detach himself from Jacob's grip and to disappear the way he had come.

7. The angelic wrestler then predicts the change of name from Jacob to Israel which takes place later. He does not actually effect this change. For this he would have needed to say *Yikare shimkha* which he does not say. He uses the expression *Ye-amer shimkha* which connotes the prediction of a later event (Compare the use of this expression with Isaiah 62:4 and Hosea 2:1). What is the connection between the night fight and the anticipated change of name?

8. The story ends with the words: *And for him* [Jacob] *the sun shone, as he crossed the river . . .* to rejoin his encampment. The peculiarity of the words *for him* deserves our attention and will help in the clarification of the event.

Various answers have been offered by traditional commentators to some of the questions enumerated above. None seems to answer the full range of

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these questions and therefore fail to create a complete picture of what took place during this eventful night.

This may be the reason that prompted Maimonides in *The Guide For The Perplexed* to declare that the wrestling match between Jacob and his unidentified attacker was not a reality, but rather, what he calls a prophetic vision.¹ It is regrettable that Maimonides did not elaborate and explain what, in his opinion, the message of this vision was. We, the readers, are therefore challenged to explore this point by ourselves.

In her book *Wrestling with Angels*² Naomi Rosenblatt assigned to this unnamed intruder the role of Jacob's father, Isaac, the enmity of his brother, Esau, and several other fears and memories assaulting Jacob. She thereby brilliantly reduced Jacob's adversary to a symbol of emotional regrets and fears and paved the road towards a better understanding of this episode.

However, the Bible was written long before Freud and the ensuing psychological insights. The *peshat* [plain meaning] of the Torah is addressed to an all-inclusive audience of its time, and cannot be expected to build on broad-based psychological meanings. While there can be little doubt that allegoric writing is used in biblical stories, it can only be to a point where the average reader can instinctively absorb it with ease.

It is for this reason that I propose that the two adversaries in this fight are the symbolic representatives of two inner voices in Jacob: One that advocates the entry into the land which had been promised to his forefathers and to which he felt entitled; the other which advocates a prosperous life on the other side of the border, thereby avoiding the dreaded warfare with his brother.

A short review of the life of our protagonist will help us understand these contradictory feelings. Jacob had labored long and hard to reach the prosperity now in evidence. Subsequently, he had left Laban to return to the land which he considered to be his rightful inheritance. In his mind, the message from his brother Esau signaled an open contest for the land of his forebears. He was therefore confronted by two alternatives: To relinquish his claim for the land and live across its border in wealth and tranquility, or to insist on the acquisition of all or part of the promised land which was likely to lead to open and perhaps continual warfare with his brother.

In biblical reporting, the earlier promises to Jacob should have outweighed the doubts which Jacob manifested immediately after having received Esau's

message. Had not God ordered him to return (31:3)? Did such an order not include a promise of safe arrival? Why should doubts and fear arise in a person who had a prophetic assurance from his God?

By interpreting this night's fight as an allegoric story, we learn more about the nature of prophecy. The Torah states clearly that none of the biblical prophets, with the exception of Moses, received messages in a clearly enunciated, unambiguous language, as it is stated: *If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord do make Myself known unto him in a vision, I do speak with him in a dream. Not so is My servant Moses; in My entire house he is the trusted one* (Num. 12:6-7). All communications between God and men, as is expressed in this statement, are subject to some doubt. The sages of the Talmud asserted this fact with the words "Perhaps sin interfered."³ Why should it then be so surprising that an inner voice of Jacob would cast doubt on his position versus Esau and consider his possible defeat by him?

If we add to our interpretation of this story an allegoric meaning for "day" and "night," its true meaning emerges with even greater clarity. Darkness and sunrise represent the periods of doubt, fear, and uncertainty on one hand and determination, optimism, and self-reliance on the other. No wonder the night fighter had to disappear when dawn appeared.

So *for him* the sun shone when he crossed the river. The waterway, the symbol of the boundary of the land of his destination, was negotiated when the sun, the symbol of self-assurance and trust in his prophetic mission shone for him.

He had successfully silenced the voice of doubt and fear. He crossed the country's boundary under the rising sun. His inner fight became a memory; but, as such, it lingered. He limped as an aftermath of the "fight," even though the sun shone for him. A trace of the night and the fight had become part of him, as indeed had the blessing which he had extracted from his nocturnal opponent. Doubts will arise, so the experience of the night had taught him, but you can and must assert the strength for defeating them. He had been blessed with the foreknowledge that he was to receive the new and impressive name Israel because once settled on the other side of the river, it is hoped that the intruding voice of defeat will have been silenced.

When the time had come to leave the domicile of Laban, and when he had received the prophetic command to return to the land of his father, Jacob was

not alone in the dark. His wives had joined him to complete this plan. At the time when he suspected that his brother was about to challenge his return, he was alone at night, a loneliness describing not necessarily the absence of people but the inner loneliness of a man struggling with contradicting emotions. He had not physically returned to the abandoned camp – he had taken the struggle of the night with him. His relationship to Esau was his, and his only. It preceded his marriages, as did the famous dream of the heavenly ladder which he had experienced when he left his parental home and which had included a promise for a safe return.

The solitary struggle of the night, the quarrel of his inner voices, present to Jacob a glimpse of his future life. The "angelic" wrestler who fails to subdue his confidence for success inspires Jacob to expect the new name Israel. The victorious voice then asks its opponent: *'What is **your** name?'* (Gen. 32:30). No answer is recorded. There is just the sentence *'Lamah zeh tish'al le-shemi?'* This is usually translated as *'Why are you asking for my name?'* If the word "zeh" had not been unnecessarily included this would be the correct translation. However, the expression "lamah zeh" has a slightly different meaning. In its repeated use throughout the Bible it always denotes a reproach or a statement not requiring or receiving a reply.⁴ It expresses the idea that the person addressed ought to know the answer to the dilemma or the impropriety of his action. So here – the Israel side of Jacob should know what the other side is called. Its name is not about to be changed. It will remain Jacob.

Once he had crossed the river and taken root on its other side, his name became Israel, the one who had successfully fought off the doubts of the night. However, the text continues to use the old name and the new name interchangeably. His limp which had resulted from this inner fight remained with him, and historically with his descendants. It was this symbolic limp, the residue of his wrestle of the night, which characterized Jacob, the leader of the earliest root of Israel as a nation, and also the one who led his descendants into their first exile in Egypt. Abraham had sought refuge in Egypt to survive a famine and had returned. Isaac had endured a famine and had survived in the Promised Land. Jacob moved when the famine threatened him. He, however, never returned. Perhaps it was the limp of that fateful night which induced him to remain in Egypt when the famine had ended.

NOTES

1. Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Part II, Chapter XLII.
2. Naomi H. Rosenblatt, Joshua Horwitz, *Wrestling with Angels: What Genesis Teaches Us About Our Spiritual Identity, Sexuality and Personal Relationships* (New York: Delta, 1995) pp. 298-300.
3. See BT Berakhot 4a
4. Genesis 18:13, 25:32; Exodus 17:3; Jeremiah 6:20.