



Wrestling With Our Fear (Parshat Vayishlach)

Rabbi Rachel Silverman - 2018

Commentary on Parshat Vayishlach (Genesis 32:4 – 36:43)

Alone. Anxious. Curled in the fetal position, recalling and recoiling from the memories of a similar night years before. Scared of what tomorrow might bring.

Sure, this sounds like how many of us spent election night. But it is also how we imagine Jacob's fitful night before seeing his brother Esau for the first time in years: dreading dawn and the new reality that it would surely bring.

Fear is a powerful motivator. It pushes us to fall in line when we might otherwise fight. It forces us to take extreme measures in an effort to protect our families. And it nudges us toward decisions we might not normally make as we struggle to decide the correct path forward.

This was Jacob's state of mind as he and his family left Laban's house and journeyed home, knowing he would likely meet his brother, whom he had wronged years before. Deeply afraid of Esau's desire for revenge, we find Jacob in full-on panic mode. He divides his family into two camps, thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape." He pleads with God. He sends Esau gifts, one after another, each timed perfectly so that Esau experiences a never-ending train of bounty. And still, this is not enough to calm his nerves. By the time he goes to bed alone, on a separate side of the river from where he hid his family, Jacob's anxiety has only increased.

The Torah text tells us that overnight, ויאבק איש עמו עד עלות השחר, a man wrestled with Jacob until the break of dawn. Our tradition has always been curious about this unnamed man. Who was he? How did he get there? Why was he there? And who won?! *Midrash Avkir* teaches that this איש, this man, was actually the angel Michael. When Jacob wouldn't let him go, Michael allowed his band of angels to join the fight — and finally, God got involved to break things up. Taking a little creative license, an alternative view is that there was no man at all, rather that Jacob “wrestled” with his own conscience for robbing Esau of his birthright. Lastly, Chizkuni, the 13th-century French commentator, argues that this man was an angel representative of Esau, sent to ensure Jacob didn't flee.

But what if the איש was Esau himself and the two men worked out their differences physically, in the dark, before they had to face each other in the light? Perhaps only then could they approach each other with a sense of forgiveness. This view is supported by what Jacob says when he meets Esau in the daytime: “Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.”

No one view is right. Scholars have argued over this mystery for millennia. The key is to accept that there is no right answer — but there is a right outcome. This piece of Torah illuminates one simple fact: Jacob did not know his brother very well and allowed his fear to drive his behavior. If he had known Esau, he might well have realized that flattery and gifts were not the way to patch things up, nor was terror an emotion that Esau sought to instill in his brother. In reality, Jacob needed to make peace with his own guilt in order to own his mistakes and meet Esau as a peer.

More importantly, though, Jacob's fear drove him to do the right thing — to struggle with his behavior and ultimately own it. It is irrelevant whether Jacob wrestled with an angel, an unknown man, Esau, or even his own subconscious. It is the act of wrestling — whether physical or imagined — that allowed Jacob to fully confront his emotions and prepare to do the right thing.

Like Jacob, we must face our fears — confront our emotions — in order to move forward. We have seen many things in the past two years that have shocked and appalled us and caused us to question our fellow citizens, our country's sordid past, and perhaps our own sanity. This time has entailed so much “wrestling” and we're surely not done yet.

But we must keep up the struggle. Maybe dawn is beginning to break; perhaps the election showed us the first crimson threads on the horizon. But this is one case where we must not allow our fear paralyze us. Rather, we ought to channel our anxiety into action, to help us prepare to fight whatever comes. In many ways we do not know with whom we are wrestling, nor do we truly understand what will happen next — but just the same, we have to reconcile with ourselves so that we may fully prepare for whatever tomorrow may bring.

Rabbi Rachel Silverman is the associate rabbi and director of community engagement at Temple Israel of Sharon, MA.