

Fear Itself: Jacob, Israel, and the Battle Within

Parashat Vayishlach, Genesis, Chapters 30-33 | November 18, 2021

Few today know the name Louis Howe, but he is responsible for one of the most important lines in American history.

We all associate the phrase, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” with President Franklin Roosevelt—words originally inspired by Thoreau, who had written that, “Nothing is so much to be feared as fear.” But the late presidential speechwriter and columnist William Safire further informs us that:

Forty years ago, compiling my first political dictionary, I asked Raymond Moley, the F.D.R. speechwriter who worked most closely with the president-elect on that speech, where “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” came from. He said that Louis Howe, a gnomelike, politically savvy man who was F.D.R.’s closest confidante, crossed out the early draft’s opening line about “no time for false hopes” as lacking a forceful show of confidence. He had seen, in a recent department-store newspaper ad, the “fear itself” quotation from Henry David Thoreau, and Howe wrote atop the draft: “let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

That worked magnificently.

But what if the original reference to facing up to fear itself can be traced to a nighttime wrestling match on the banks of a biblical river, in one of the the most enigmatic accounts in the entire Bible?

The experiences of the boy named Jacob by his parents, leading to his evolution into the man known as Israel, requires an understanding of the implications of each of these appellations. The root of his original name, “*Yaakov*,” which means “heel,” is linked to the seemingly subordinate nature of this boy’s birth, grasping the foot of this elder brother. Thus “Jacob” can be read literally as “he will follow.” There is, however, another meaning to be discerned, and it is one referenced by Esau after the tricking of Isaac. Playing on the root of Jacob’s name, Esau in Genesis 27:36 proclaims, “*vay’akveini*,” “he has tricked me” or “outwitted me.” And even though I insist that Jacob and Rebecca acted correctly in this episode, nevertheless, Esau does instruct us as to another aspect of Jacob’s life: rather than face-to-face confrontation, Jacob prefers to take cunning routes that avoid actual engagement with his adversaries.

This is by and large the way in which Jacob approaches his relationship with Laban, father of Rachel and Leah. Contending with his swindling father-in-law, he proposes that he be paid for shepherding with every spotted or speckled specimen born to the flock. Using some cunning approach, Jacob ensures the birth of just such specimens of sheep. And then, when Jacob senses the intense ire of his father-in-law building against him, and the Almighty instructs him to return home, Jacob decides not to have it out, but instead to flee.

Only after Laban catches up with him does he actually embrace candor, openly airing his grievances against Laban, and then concludes with an uneasy covenant with his father-in-law in which he and Laban agree not to encroach on the territory of the other. It is not the most heartwarming of family partings, but true conflict has been avoided.

Jacob now sends messengers to his brother Esau, seeking to placate him, but if confrontation was what he sought to avoid, confrontation comes to him:

And the messengers returned to Jacob saying, We came to thy brother Esau, and moreover he cometh to meet thee, and four hundred men with him.

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. And he divided the people that was with him and the flocks and the herds, and the camels, into two camps.

And he said, If Esau come to the one camp, and smite it, then the camp which is left shall escape.
(Genesis 32: 6-8)

Gifts are sent to Esau, and then we encounter the most mysterious encounter of all:

And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his handmaids, and his eleven children, and passed over the river crossing of the Jabbok.

And he took them, and sent them over the stream, and sent over that which he had.

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.

And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained as he wrestled with him.
(Genesis 32:22-25)

Jacob overcomes his opponent, who succeeds in injuring him but not defeating him, by dawn. Who is this man? What is the significance of this injury? We begin our interpretation with the depiction of this episode by Rembrandt von Rijn.

Rembrandt, like the rabbis, takes Jacob's opponent to be no mere man, but an angel, and so he bestows upon this individual an ethereal appearance. But in Rembrandt's painting it is Jacob's face that is truly surprising, almost shocking. For what we see is not so much exertion or pain, but something else entirely: Jacob's eyes are closed; he is, strikingly, seemingly asleep. This highlights, as

many suggest, that this is also internal encounter rather than only a physical one, or as Simon Schama puts it:

Though the Bible says only that Jacob wrestled "until the breaking of the day," Rembrandt has given it the quality of a somnambulist encounter, intensely felt yet physically immaterial.

Others note as well that Rembrandt here seems to be giving us a struggle that is taking place inside Jacob's psyche. Now Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, actually argues that this entire episode was in fact a vision of Jacob, experienced while in a state of slumber, though Maimonides' perspective has provoked scorn from other commentators. Let us for now abstain from seeking to resolve this dispute and rather highlight the fact that there are rabbis who read Jacob's struggle as both a literal and an internal experience. Here it is relevant to cite the one work of literature with which all of society seems to be familiar: the *Harry Potter* series. Harry, in a post death conversation with Albus Dumbledore, inquires:

"Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?"

Dumbledore replied, "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"

Even if we assume, as do most commentators, that the wrestling match between Jacob and the angel was a literal occurrence, we can also suggest that the physical wrestling is parallel to an internal emotional struggle: a battle within Jacob's soul, within his mind, within his heart. The fact that this occurs in his psyche does not mean that it is not also real.

What was this inner struggle inside Jacob? The answer, it would seem, is wrestling with fear. Though God did earlier inform Jacob, "*behold I will be with you, and protect you in all the ways you walk,*" Jacob is without question terrified at Esau's approach. It is Jacob's fear that provides the context for an interpretation by Rabbi Shmuel Ben Meir, known as Rashbam, a medieval Jewish

commentator always attentive to the plain meaning of the text.

Why, Rashbam asks, does the encounter with the angel take place only after Jacob was attempting to cross the river *Yabbok* with his family? Rashbam further takes note of other texts in the Bible, where a river is used strategically to place a barrier between one's enemy and oneself, and argues that in crossing the river, Jacob had decided to escape any encounter with his brother. This is exactly what God did not want to happen, and that is why the angel was sent to stop him. When the angel was unable to prevail, he injured Jacob in his thigh, establishing a permanent limp, to ensure that he could not run, so that he must face his foe, and attempt a rapprochement. Jacob had to overcome an angel, but he also had to overcome fear itself.

For this reading, what follows, when the patriarch's name is changed, can now be understood most profoundly. *Yaakov*, Jacob, literally means "he will follow after;" and that is the name he has had up to this point in exile. But in order to return to the Holy Land and emerge as a leader, Jacob had not only externally to confront his brother, but also internally to overcome his fear. Thus the name that is suddenly bestowed by the angel upon Jacob reflects the change within himself:

And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob but Israel: for thou hast striven with spiritual beings and with man, and you have prevailed. (Genesis 32:28)

Yisrael, Israel, is linked to "*sarita*," "thou hast struggled," thou hast wrestled.

The struggle with the spiritual being is obviously the angel, but who is the man with whom he struggled? Perhaps this is a reference to his scheming father-in-law Laban, or to his original encounter with his brother, but those, as we have seen, were not struggles, but acts of avoidance. Perhaps, the man with whom he struggled is himself, with his own emotions, his fears, and in overcoming them he emerges as Israel. You have struggled with an angel and with man, all in one encounter; the struggle without was also a struggle within, with fear itself. What immediately follows is

Jacob's, or Israel's, first deliberate, face-to-face encounter with an adversary. He meets Esau, and both weep and are reconciled. Esau goes to his newfound territory to create the nation later known as Edom, and Jacob journeys on to Canaan, now unassailably his. Fear itself has been defeated, and Jacob, as Israel, can now cultivate what will one day be known as the Land of Israel. The wrestling match did not only occur in his head, but what occurred in his head was all too real.

Is that perhaps what Rembrandt is asking us to see? We cannot know, but Jews have always interpreted this nocturnal fight as portending a struggle within the Jewish soul yet to come. Thus, an explanation given for why the angel would injure Jacob inside his thigh, close to the limb of perpetuation. Building on the Talmud, Nahmanides argues that this represents the threats that Israel's enemies will pose to Jewish continuity all the way into the future. For Nahmanides, who himself suffered and fled the persecution of Spain, the physical struggle of Jacob with the angel portends all the torture and psychological persecutions to follow: the attempt to make the Jews bend the knee, and to cease to be Jews. But in the end, what occurred with Jacob will, we believe, be repeated in every generation in its own way: *And they wrestled till dawn; and then his adversary saw that he could not overcome him.* Jewish continuity, in other words, endures.

In one of my introductions to Bible 365, I quoted the exquisite admiring words of Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, who dedicated one of his Sunday homilies to his impressions of visiting Yeshiva University, and the study hall where hundreds of students engage in daily learning of the Torah:

I saw in the lives of those Jewish students the incredible durability of God's promises and God's Word. Despite centuries of persecution, exile, dispersion, and even apostasy, the Jewish people continue to exist because their covenant with God is alive and permanent. God's Word is the organizing principle of their identity. It's the foundation and glue of their relationship with one another, with

their past, and with their future. And the more faithful they are to God's Word, the more certain they can be of their survival.

Interpreted this way, to stare at Rembrandt's image of Jacob's seeming somnambulist struggle is to see a struggle throughout Jewish history. The struggles have differed from one another over time. We have struggled with internal fear, as Rashbam reads the story; we have struggled with the physical persecution of our enemies, as Nahmanides reads the tale; and we have also wrestled with the internal allure of assimilation. And for contemporary Jewry, we can look at Rembrandt's rendering of Jacob's closed eyes and see the struggle as one that is also within ourselves: the struggle to proudly hold on to our identity and to identify covenantally as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, wherever we may go.

FDR might have claimed the credit for his "fear itself" line and consigned his speechwriter to anonymity, but there were examples of other presidents who did the opposite: taking their speechwriters' products and polishing them into some of the most famous lines in American oratory. As Abraham Lincoln prepared for his first inaugural address, he originally intended to end his speech in a bellicose manner, threatening war. Lincoln showed the draft to William Seward, whom he had asked to serve as his Secretary of State. Seward counseled that Lincoln instead end in a conciliatory manner, and wrote his own draft, for Lincoln's use, of the inaugural's ending. Seward composed as follows:

The mystic chords which, proceeding from so many battlefields and so many patriot graves, pass through all the hearts and all hearths in this broad continent of ours, will yet again harmonize in their ancient music when breathed upon by the guardian angel of the nation.

Lincoln adopted Seward's conciliatory approach, but edited Seward's words, showing his own genius for the English language as well as his great psychological insight—gifting us one of the most famous

sentences in American speechwriting history. Lincoln ultimately said:

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Seward referred in his draft to a guardian angel of the nation, a messenger of God. Lincoln in turn spoke not of external angels but of the better angels of our nature, by which he means our spiritual capacity, the human ability to bring love to bear over anger. Seward wrote of guardian angels, and Lincoln spoke of our souls.

Are angels external or part of ourselves? Are they providential beings or sacred aspects within us? Both Seward and Lincoln are correct. We read in Scripture often of ethereal messengers of the Divine that help advance the providential plan. But there are also angels within us, aspects of ourselves,; and while Jacob's nighttime struggle may well have been with an angel, it also occurred within his soul, reflecting the triumph of courage over fear—the better angels of his nature emerging victorious. Not all of us will encounter our guardian angels, but we can all make manifest the better angels of our nature inside ourselves. Thus, though few of us will wrestle a mysterious man on the banks of the Jabbok River, all of us called to bear the covenant of the man named Israel will—in some way, at some point in our lives—have to wrestle to find the courage within, to overcome fear itself, and to make Jacob's triumphant struggle our own.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Jacob's name is changed to "Israel," which indicates struggle, rather than to a name that indicates how he *overcame* his struggles? Is there a value in struggle itself, irrespective of its ultimate result?
 2. When Jacob finally meets Esau, they have an apparently peaceful reunion. Yet, Jacob subsequently turns down his brother's offer to journey together, and the two parts ways. What can we learn from the peaceful meeting of these once estranged siblings? And what should we take away from Jacob's desire ultimately to part ways with Esau?
-