

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



A Sage for Today

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Rabbi Akiva: Sage of the Talmud, Barry Holtz (Yale University Press, 2017)

In my new biography of Rabbi Akiva, I have tried to draw upon the latest scholarship about rabbinic stories to present the outlines of his life anew for our times, in the light of what we know about how to read these stories from our tradition and about the historical context of the ancient Jewish world. My goal was to present the various stories about Akiva's life in an intellectually serious but accessible manner, highlighting their literary character and trying to discern the ways that Akiva's story might speak to people today.

Why should we care about Akiva, this figure from 2000 years ago? I think it is because the story of his life is both archetypal and unique. Who could not be drawn into such a tale? Born in poverty (or at least in a family with no social status), unschooled in his religious tradition, he mocks scholars and disdains them (in one telling of his early life). And then a personal revelation comes to him, and he decides that despite his advanced age he must learn Torah, starting from the very basics of the alphabet. And this man becomes the greatest rabbi of them all. In another version of the story, he courts the daughter of a wealthy man—who opposes the relationship—and wins her heart, and eventually the respect of her father, through his accomplishments.

He is a mystic as well as a practical legal analyst, a theologian and a text interpreter. He disputes with his colleagues in dramatic fashion, yet is admired and beloved by his peers. And in the end, he becomes the exemplar of Jewish martyrs, executed by the Romans with the Shema on his lips. Akiva has captivated the Jewish imagination: a hero in the Jewish mystical and legal traditions, and the exemplar for the innovative interpretation of Torah. His biography expresses the heart of what it means to be a Jew—intellectually engaged, spiritually profound, and deeply human.



Vayishlah 5778

וישלח תשע"ח



Wrestling the Angels and the Demons within Us

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In this week's Torah reading, Parashat Vayishlah, we read of the patriarch Jacob's journey home with his family after freeing himself and his entire clan from his father-in-law, Laban's, control. Along the route, Jacob prepares himself for his eventual reunion with his older twin brother Esau, whom he fears to be vengeful. Right in the middle of the parashah, in between the description of Jacob's preparations and his actual meeting with Esau, Jacob is involved in a transformative experience: a physical struggle with a stranger. He comes out of the encounter newly named "Israel" and, at least temporarily, limping.

As the narrative goes, after accompanying his family and children from one side of the river Jabbok to the other, Jacob was suddenly left alone. The Torah only tells us that, "Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn" (Gen. 32:25). But, if in fact he was left alone, with whom did he wrestle? Was it with a suddenly arrived messenger from God, an angel, as alluded to by the prophet Hosea (12:4)? Or, alternatively, was Jacob's struggle an internal one, the verses giving a physical description of what was truly an emotional inner fight between Jacob and the demons that haunted him? If the latter, then the Torah's description of Jacob being "left alone" is more meaningful. For struggling within ourselves and with ourselves is, at times, the most difficult challenge. We can let the demons within us eat us up alive, extinguish our passions, take away our hope. Or, we can conquer them. The ultimate lesson of the Jacob encounter is that, even if we come out a bit scarred, if we face our fears and win the struggle, we can move forward, changed at the core, and stronger to face the future.

What was, in fact, the fear that Jacob confronted, and, what significance does his transformation—in the form of a name change—really have? For possible

answers to these questions, we need to remind ourselves of some background. Even in their mother's womb the twins, Esau and Jacob, competed for seniority. And as we read in Parashat Toledot two weeks ago, that struggle continued into adulthood, reaching its high point when Jacob eventually took the birthright from Esau. In fact, in two separate narratives, we are told of Jacob's progress toward the goal of seizing the birthright from Esau (Gen. 25:27–34 and 27:1–28:9).

Here a note on the firstborn and his birthright in the ancient Near East and the Bible is in order. The firstborn son, at least according to Deuteronomy, would typically inherit an extra portion of inheritance (see Deut. 21:15–17) and become the head of the clan upon his father's death. Despite the presumed regular practice, it seems that fathers had the ability to ignore the birth order of sons and appoint a "firstborn," in so doing transferring both rank and right to another son. These details are an essential part of the background to the stories about the relationship between Jacob and Esau. Both Rebecca (the boys' mother) and Jacob knew that, although the birthright was lawfully Esau's, Jacob could have it, if only Isaac, their father, would cooperate. In the first instance (Gen. 25), Jacob took advantage of the famished Esau and got him to sell the birthright for a bowl of lentil stew. In the second scene (Gen. 27), with the crafty assistance of his mother, Jacob disguised himself and managed to convince his visually impaired father that he was Esau. Isaac himself bestowed the blessing of the firstborn onto Jacob!

Although it is clear from Genesis 25:23 that God's communication to Rebecca during her pregnancy revealed the divine plan that Jacob would eventually rule over Esau, mention of God's sanction of Jacob's deceitful behavior is never made in Gen 25 or 27. In fact, it may be that 25:23 mentions the prophecy of Jacob's eventual leadership specifically to emphasize that Jacob's future position as forefather will be solely the result of divine appointment; the methods Jacob employs along the way are not endorsed by God. Only in the scene of Jacob wrestling the stranger does God appear again. Ultimately, to fulfill the prophecy, and as a result of Jacob's activities, God puts Jacob through the ordeal of wrestling, eventually transforming the crafty Jacob into the upright Israel, only now a worthy candidate for leadership.

The lifetime feud between brothers weighed Jacob down. It was not just actual fear of Esau's threatened retaliation for past events (see Gen. 27:41)

that haunted Jacob. It was the fear of facing the fact that he had taken something that was not his and had fooled his father into cooperating. As implied by his name, *Ya'akov*, Jacob recognized he had behaved "deceptively." Read in this way, Jacob did not wrestle an angel; he struggled with the demons inside of himself. Winning the fight that night, therefore, represented a new phase in the development of Jacob's character. As pointed out by Nahum Sarna, if Jacob's new name, Israel—in Hebrew *Yisra'el*—is related to the root *y-sh-r*, meaning "upright," then the new name "forms a perfect antonym" of the old name (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 405). Jacob's confrontation, struggle, and triumph leading to his transformation into Israel changed his persona at the core. Jacob, once crafty, cunning, and conniving, will now be Israel, straight, strong, and upright in his ways.

Real internal transformation is a feat only accomplished by the most mature; those who can see into themselves so keenly that they can find their deepest faults—despite perhaps being predisposed to them—and actually change themselves. Certainly the process of facing and conquering his fears better equipped Jacob for his eventual encounter with his brother Esau.

More importantly for the history of the people Israel, Jacob's transformation that night at the ford of the river Jabbok—the geographic limit of the wandering Israelites' victory against the kingdoms east of the Jordan River—qualified him to be a patriarch for the great nation that would become his namesake. For, although *Yisra'el* can be rendered as "one who wrestles with God," based on the above it can also be translated as "he who is upright with God" (*ibid.*). It is here that God gave the final stamp of approval for Jacob to enter physically into the future Land of Israel and spiritually into the role of its patriarch. Jacob's ability to move from being *Ya'akov* to being *Yisra'el* made him worthy, now, of being a leader. The initial prophecy was fulfilled.

In these trying times, leaders should learn from the Torah's teachings that to become great—and, yes, in order to make a nation great—leaders have to allow themselves to be transformed as they heed the call to public service. Authentic leadership requires the search for both truth and justice along a straight path. The cunning, conniving, and colluding must wrestle down their internal demons and metamorphize into upright representatives of a higher truth for the greater good. For, as we learn in this week's Torah reading, leadership is a holy task.

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