דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Words of Peace?

Avi Garelick Principal, Rebecca and Israel Ivry Prozdor High School, JTS

Words of peace,
But no treaty,
Are a sign
Of a plot.

—Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*

And [Esau] said, "Let us start on our journey, and I will proceed at your pace."

—Gen. 33:12

Many wonder why Jacob concludes his peaceful summit with his brother Esau by lying and slipping away from Esau's friendly grasp (Gen. 33:13-14). Does he never change? Does he never transcend deception? As Sun-Tzu wrote in the 6th century BCE, "The Way of War is / A Way of Deception." And make no mistake, Jacob and Esau are at war.

In order to understand Jacob's evasiveness from his place of weakness, we should also wonder about Esau's restraint from his place of strength. Why does Esau not deliver on his long-promised slaughter, even while possessing the absolute advantage? Both Jacob and Esau have their own destinies in mind, and Esau knows this is a struggle for dominance, not destruction (Gen. 27:29). "Better take / an army … Intact / Than destroy them. / Ultimate excellence lies / Not in winning / Every battle / But in defeating the enemy / Without ever fighting" (Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*).

Do fundamental antagonisms exist in our world? I don't know for sure. With the future of our country so uncertain, it is tempting to believe that deep conflicts have a quick solution. But it could be fatal to perceive our enemies as potential friends, or to take peaceful gestures as a dependable treaty.

TORAH FROM JTS

JTS

Vayishlah 5780 וישלח תש"ף

Wrestling for Blessing

Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS

On the eve of his dreaded reunion with Esau, Jacob remained alone in the dark, and "a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn." The mysterious assailant injured Jacob, dislocating his thigh, but Jacob refused to let go, so the man pleaded with him, saying: "Let me go, for dawn is breaking!" Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The assailant asked for Jacob's name, and conferred a new one, Israel, "for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:25-29).

This puzzling passage cries out for interpretation. Who was this man, and why did he attack Jacob? Why was he in such a hurry to depart before dawn? How did Jacob manage to hold on, despite his injury? If this was an unprovoked and injurious attack, then why did Jacob try to prolong it, even asking his attacker for a blessing? Who does that? How is the new name Israel a blessing, and if it really is, then why does the Torah continue to refer to him as Jacob? Why do we?

Into this blizzard of questions step the Rabbis, and they offer many answers. According to the Talmud (BT *Hullin* 91b), during their match Jacob questions the man—are you a thief of some sort that you are afraid of daylight? "No," he replies, "I am an angel, and today is my first turn to sing the morning praise." In a parallel midrashic version (Gen. Rabbah 78), Jacob pragmatically offers, "then let one of your friends sing the praise today, and you can sing tomorrow." The angel replies, "If I miss today, then they will say, since you didn't praise yesterday, you can't praise today."

These rabbinic texts address two of our questions—the attacker was not a man, but an angel, and he was eager to commence his next (and presumably more pleasant) task, singing the morning song of praise to God. If the attacker was an angel, then this could also explain our other questions. Jacob held on

because he is accustomed to angels—they appeared in his dream at Beth El on his flight from home, and according to the Rabbis, the "messengers" sent by Jacob to Esau at the start of the portion were also angels. If so, then Jacob had grounds for confidence to hold on to the spectral being.

But why did he request a blessing from the angel? There are two lines of rabbinic interpretation, both playing on the competitive nature of Jacob. According to one line, Jacob recalled that when angels appeared at the tent of Abraham and Sarah, they blessed the aged couple with miraculous fertility. Why should Jacob get anything less? The second interpretation is that Jacob worried about his position in the family. First there was the porridge incident, when he took advantage of his brother's hunger to secure the birthright; and then the fur sleeve story, when he took advantage of his father's blindness to steal Esau's blessing. Jacob had reason to wonder whether those blessings really belonged to him, and how he would face his family, even after all these years.

Since the Rabbis believe that this angel is not a random character, but rather Esau's heavenly patron, they understand Jacob to be seeking confirmation of his blessings, so that when he meets Esau tomorrow, the two brothers can put this nasty business behind them. Recall that Esau had a problem with Jacob's name—it implies crookedness, in that the younger brother has wrested both the birthright and the blessing of the older (Gen. 27:36). Equipped with his new name Israel, Jacob will stand upright before God (*Yashar-El*) and thus also before Esau.

The angel's blessing is apparently effective; things go surprisingly well with Esau in the morning. In chapter 35, God appears to Jacob, confirms the new name Israel, and blesses him. "You whose name is Jacob, you shall be called Jacob no more, but Israel shall be your name" (35:10). Following this, God bestows the covenantal blessings of Abraham and Isaac: numerous descendants, including kings and an "assembly of nations," and possession of the Land. We learn from this that Israel is not only a new name but a new identity, a marker and mechanism of expanded blessing.

It is stunning, therefore, that just four verses later the Torah reverts to calling Israel by his original name, Jacob. After Abram and Sarai were renamed Abraham and Sarah, they never went back, and the Rabbis say that whoever calls them by their original names violates a positive, and perhaps also a negative, command. Yet Jacob remains Jacob—even his renaming verse states, "Your name is Jacob" before adding that it will now

be Israel. The Rabbis reconcile this ambiguity by saying that Jacob remains his primary name, and Israel will be the secondary name (Gen. Rabbah 78:28).

This strange story and its rabbinic exegesis reverberate in Jewish liturgical practice. Like the angel, we too hurry in the morning to sing God's praise, ideally starting with the Shema at dawn, and reaching the Amidah prayer exactly at sunrise (BT *Berakhot* 9b; Tur and Shulhan Arukh, *Orah Hayyim* 89). Like Jacob, we too can delay the morning song of the angels, at least according to Midrash *Sifre Devarim*, which says that the angels in heaven must wait for the people of Israel to pray before they can sing their own supernal song (Ha'azinu 306, interpreting Job 38:7).

And like God, we continue to call the patriarch Israel by his original name, Jacob, opening each Amidah with the phrase, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Why? We don't say the "God of Abram," so why should we say, "the God of Jacob"? A creative answer is found in the halakhic magnum opus of Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein (1829-1908): If you count the letters of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Hebrew, the total is 13. Likewise, if you count the letters of the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, the total is 13. If you add them together, then you get 26, which is the *gematria*, or number value of the divine name.

By this account the mothers and fathers together witness the reality of God. This effect would be lost if we prayed to "the God of Israel" which would add an extra letter (*Arukh Hashulhan*, OH 113). Rabbi Epstein surely did not intend this, but he has provided us with support not only for the traditional text of the Amidah, which opens with the three patriarchs, but also for the updated text as many of us say it, including both the patriarchs and the matriarchs together.

Like Jacob, we wrestle with beings human and divine. We struggle to understand how to live with integrity in a time of conflict and confusion. We worry how others will view us, and we wish to be a blessing for those yet to come. Like Jacob we bear complex identities, and like the angel, we are eager to sing our unique song. We examine the examples of our ancestors, matriarchs and patriarchs together, and link their lives to ours. Reading their stories, we come to understand our own, learning to wrestle with matters mundane and divine, so that we may deserve to be known as upright before God.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (*z"l*) and Harold Hassenfeld (*z"l*).