TORAH FROM JTS

JTS

Vayishlah 5786

וישלח תשפ"ו

Jacob's Fear

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The Torah wants us to identify with the ancestors we meet in the book of Genesis; indeed, Abraham and Sarah and their children become our ancestors when we agree not only to read their stories, but to take them forward. Abraham "begat" Isaac in one sense by supplying the seed for his conception. He "begat" him as well by shaping the life that Isaac would live, setting its direction, digging wells that his son would re-dig, making Isaac's story infinitely more meaningful—and terrifying—by placing him in the line of partners with God in covenant. So it is with us. Nowhere is this impact of the ancestors more obvious than in the case of Jacob, who in this week's parashah receives the name by which we heirs to the covenant call ourselves to this day: Israel. The ancestors are us, if we accept the Torah's invitation to make them so. We are them: the latest chapter in the story that they lived and bequeathed to us, and which we have chosen to live and bequeath to others.

Jacob is a particularly compelling ancestor for contemporary Jews because he is so very *human*. Just think of the words that come readily to mind as descriptions of his character: heel, trickster, schemer, cheat. The man exhibits courage from time to time. He can be noble, loving, wise. We have seen his depths. But he is often so much less than he could be. The Rabbis imagined Jacob studying Torah all day while his brother, Esau, was out hunting game (and see him pausing just long enough from the holy books to put the soup on for dinner), but that is not the way we see Jacob. We are not sure whether or not Rebecca ever told Jacob about God's promise that he, her younger son, would eventually supplant and rule his older brother. But we certainly watch Jacob with awe as he moves swiftly to acquire the birthright from Esau and steal the blessing. The Torah lavishes unusual detail on the story of how Jacob outmatches his uncle and father-in-law, Laban, in deception, but also makes us witness to the moment at the beginning of Jacob's journey to the old country (Gen. 28:10) when God affirms that Jacob and his descendants will inherit the promises made to his grandfather Abraham: land, fertility, protection, the ability to bless and be blessed by others, the gift of God's enduring presence. He is a man of many parts and little wholeness.

I don't know about you, but I treasure Jacob's very human response to God's promise, at once an example of the very best of which we mortals are capable and of behavior that is transparently limited and self-serving. You do all this for me, Jacob tells God—you bring me home in one piece, you feed me and protect me—and I (who owe my very life to you!) will give back 10 percent and have you be my God! By normal human standards, the tithe seems generous, as indeed it is. By God's standards and the Torah's, however, given that we owe absolutely everything to God and own absolutely nothing, the offer looks quite different. The description given of Jacob at the start of this week's portion is precious to me for the very same reason. The man who has just bested Laban with God's help; who has escaped from Laban's clutches with both his wives and all his children; who carries with him the promise that God will protect him as he now heads home and prepares to encounter the brother whom he wronged so grievously many years ago—this man Jacob, the Torah tells us (32:8), "was very afraid and distressed."

The Rabbis are both incredulous and understanding: incredulous that God's chosen vessel for the covenant should fear his brother at this moment despite God's promise of protection; understanding of that fear because, as one particularly astute midrash points out (Genesis Rabba 76:1), fear comes naturally to human beings. Moses too is afraid, as he prepares to fight Og, king of Bashan (Num. 21:34), even though he bears a promise of divine protection and has just defeated Sihon, king of the Amorites, as Jacob had just defeated Laban. The ancestors, like us, are mortals. They too

have a lot to lose. Indeed, their encounters with "the living God," far from immunizing them against fear, only make them treasure life all the more and so give them more to fear. Picking up on both words used to mean "fear" in this verse, Rashi (on Genesis 32:8) adds another layer of explanation: Jacob *feared* that he might be killed and was *distressed* that he might kill others (or, I would say, be responsible for their deaths). Jacob has been guilty of great wrongs in the course of his life. He desperately wants to be in the right from now on. He knows from experience that fear and vulnerability sometimes lead us to compromise of virtue. Put another way: Jacob wants to maximize the part of him that is Israel and minimize the part that is Jacob. Fear takes him in the opposite direction. He does not want to go there.

The Torah knows that its readers have much to fear and ample reason to fear it. We walk the streets, going about our daily business, as if we feared nothing, but that is often not the case. There are moments when adrenaline and courage rise to meet an imminent challenge—as when Jacob confronts Esau in this week's parashah—and there are moments of quiet trepidation: a visit to the doctor, for example, or a conference in the principal's office about a troubled child, or an interview that will determine if we get the job, the security that it entails, and the self-respect with which it is bound up.

I asked a JTS rabbinical student who teaches teenagers to ask them what they most fear. "Letting people down," said one. "I feel like I have a lot of stress nowadays and I have a lot of people I NEED to make proud." Such fear of failure is widespread among teens. The college application process is a time of particular anxiety. Love sometimes seems conditional on achievement: fail to be the person your parents and your friends want you to be, and perhaps they won't love you as much or will not love you at all. (God's "chosen people" have had this problem from time to time, aggravated by prophets who warned Israel that God was not pleased with them and by disasters that seemed to be proof of that displeasure.) One 20-something, when asked what that age-group fears, said this: "What are we *not* afraid of is probably a better question. I personally am afraid that I am not on the right path or that I don't know what the right path is. I'm afraid that I'm not enjoying these years that are supposed to be so 'enjoyable' enough. I'm afraid that I'm going to be lonely or unhappy." And then there are the times when those sorts of fears vanish, or seem small, in the face of immediate threats to health or life itself. We all learn to live with fear, if we are lucky. We cross the river, as Jacob does. We throw ourselves into life, which surrounds and contains fear with joy and blessing. We are filled with gratitude for what we most fear to lose.

I could not help but think as I read Jacob's story this year that American Jewry is once more engrossed by the specter of its own diminishment and disappearance. Jacob feared the death of his family—the covenant family—at the hands of a vengeful brother. We fear the death of our community—the covenant community, or a substantial portion of it—at the hands of disinterest in the tradition of the ancestors. We worry that the story might soon find its place in "Bible as Literature" courses, but not be translated into the stuff of life, ethics, law, and policy. I think that Jacob has a lot to teach us about this as well. Watch him as he summons his courage, strategizes the best he could to meet the situation, and then sets out to meet his brother. He survives intact the encounter he had so much feared—and he knows enough about life by this point, and about God's covenant, to know that other challenges await: losses and sufferings mixed with immense joys and blessings, with God's protection there to guide him along the way, but not to save him from fear or what occasions fear. Jacob earns the name of Israel the hard way, the only way: by living it. May this be true of us as well. I, for one, am grateful for his example, and his company, as I too walk the path of Torah.

This commentary originally appeared in 2013.

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