

A Tale of Two Jacobs

In this week's parsha Vayishlach, we are told that when Yaacov was informed that Esav was approaching with 400 men, he devised a threefold strategy. The first was to shower Esav with gifts. The second was to pray to HaShem for deliverance, while the third was to divide into two camps separated by distance to insure the survival of at least one of those camps should Esav attack. We are then told that, "Yaacov 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 Yaacov's thigh was strained, as he wrestled with him. And he said: 'Let me go, for the day breaketh.' And he said: 'I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.' And he said unto him: 'What is thy name?' And he said: 'Yaacov'. And he said: 'Thy name shall be called no more Yaacov, but Israel; for thou hast striven with G-d and with men, and hast prevailed.'

Now this episode poses a question? Why is Jaacov the father of our people, the hero of our faith? We are called the "congregation of Jacob", "the children of Israel". Yet it was Avraham Avieniu who began the Jewish journey and Yitzhack who was willing to be sacrificed. So again, I ask you why Jaacov?

Upon a literal reading of the text, the account of Yaacov life appears to fall short of the others mentioned above. He has a less than ideal relationship with his brother Esav, his wives Rachel and Leah, his father-in-law Lavan, and with his three eldest children Reuven, Shimon and Levi with many recorded incidents of tense encounters. There are times when Yaacov seems enveloped by fear and self-doubt, others when he seems to act with less than total honesty. In parsha Vayigash read in 3 weeks hence, we are told that Yaacov says in reply to Pharoah, "The days of my life have been few and hard". This is less than we might expect from a hero of faith.

Judaism is about faith as a journey, a lifelong process. It began with the journey of Avraham and Sarah, who left their, "land, birthplace and father's house" to travel to an unknown destination, "the land that I will show you". Later in parshat Vayiera, Avraham was told to, "Take your son, your only son, the one you love Yitzchak and go to the region of Moriah".

What is so moving about Avraham is that he goes immediately and without question despite that fact that both journeys are gut-wrenching. In the first he has to say goodbye to his past by leaving his father and all that he knows, in the second he risks saying goodbye to his future by being asked to sacrifice his beloved Yitzchak. Avraham is a man of pure faith who loves God absolutely and trusts him resolutely. Few of us are able to achieve that kind of faith. It seems superhuman.

Yitzchak is the opposite. While Yitzchak was complicit in the act of sacrifice, he must have been traumatized by the event. Yitzchak never leaves the Holy Land, even to find a wife, for as you know Avraham sends his servant Eliezer to accomplish this mission. Yitzchak does not lead the nomadic life of his father or son, and internalizes his whole approach to God and his faith.

Since Judaism is about faith as a journey, it follows that to be a Jew means not to be fully at home in the world. We are reminded of this among other times during Sukkot, when we live in temporary dwellings as did our ancestors and told to never forget that we do not own the land as it belongs to HaShem. We are merely there as G-d's gerim ve-toshavim, "strangers and sojourners". (Lev. 25:23). To be a Jew means to live within the tension that exists between heaven and earth, creation and revelation, the world that is and the one we are called on to make. The only time Jews stand still is when we stand before our G-d. The universe, from galaxies to subatomic particles, is in constant motion, and so is the Jewish soul. Life as a journey means striving each day to refine our characters, to be better than we were the day before, both individually and collectively.

Yaakov is different than all of the aforementioned lions of our faith. For Yaakov is unique in that he has the most intense encounters with G-d. Yaakov is someone with whom I can identify. Few can aspire to the loving faith and complete trust of an Avraham, or to the seclusion of a Itzchak. But Yaakov is someone I understand and can relate to. I can feel his fear, understand his pain caused by his family dynamics and sympathize with his longing for a life of quietude and peace. In addition, Yaakov is also the name of both my father and son.

The Rambam is of the opinion that the incident of Yaakov wrestling with the man/angel/G-d was a 'prophetic vision'; and other commentators likewise in all ages regarded the contest as symbolic, the outward manifestation of the struggle

within the Patriarch, as in every mortal, between our baser passions and our nobler ideals. In the words of Rabbi Hertz, former Chief Rabbi of England, "In the dead of night he had sent his wives and sons and all that he had across the river. Jacob was left alone-with G-d. There, in the darkness, given over to anxious fears God's Messenger was wrestling with him who had so often wrestled with men and won by sheer energy, persistency and superior wit. In the words of the Prophet chosen as the Haftorah for this Sedrah, 'He (Jacob) strove with an angel, and prevailed: he (Jacob) wept, and made supplication unto him.' That supplication for mercy, forgiveness and Divine protection is heard. Jacob the Supplanter, becomes Israel, Prince of God."

Yaakov's triumph symbolized the ultimate ascendancy of good over evil. The point is not just that Yaakov is the most human of the patriarchs but rather that *at the depths of his despair he is lifted* to the greatest heights of spirituality. He is the man who encounters angels. He is the person surprised by G-d. He is the one who, at the very moment of his greatest isolation, discovers that he is not alone, that HaShem is with him. Indeed, his transformation is so complete he is left not only limping (a physical manifestation), but permanently enlightened spiritually as well. In fact, Yaakov is the only person in the Torah to receive an entirely new name from G-d; Israel which as stated before means, "one who has striven with G-d and men".

That being said, the Torah continues to refer to Yaakov as both Jacob and Israel. This is also why the Jewish people as descendants of Jacob are also referred to by both names. The name Israel was not intended to displace the name Jacob. Rather, it was meant to be an additional name, one that expresses a loftier dimension of Jacob.

Each of us has experienced times in our lives when we are locked in a struggle with our conscience, wrestling to decide which path to pursue, which decision is the correct one. I know that I have and I wish to relate just such an instance to you now.

I was thirty years old, single and living in Atlanta, GA. I worked as a salesman for a Jewish family owned business of retail shoe stores with three locations. The owner (I'll call him Ed) had a 6th grade formal education, was therefore educated primarily on the streets, learning how to hustle at an early age. Ed began selling

used shoes out of the trunk of his car in his teens and made his living off other street hustlers, winos, pimps, numbers runners and the like. As the years passed, he made enough money to rent a storefront and expand his business. Since Georgia Tech was nearby and Ed was always fascinated by athletes, he began to call on these student athletes to ply his wares. As you can imagine, many of these young men had large feet, so Ed began to specialize in hard to find sizes and widths. Word traveled fast among the athletes' circles conveying the message that if you want fashionable shoes in hard to find sizes, Ed's was the place to go. Because of this, Ed was able to rent a storefront in the same blighted area of downtown where he began selling shoes out of his trunk. The store expanded both in size and inventory, eventually covering 4 stories filled with men's shoes of all shapes, sizes and price. True to his heritage, the used shoes remained on the main floor. Several years later, a ladies store opened down the street.

The crowning achievement of the men's store was the "Skin Room". It contained boots and shoes made of ostrich, lizard, buffalo, alligator and crocodile. Needless to say, the prices were such that only professional athletes, successful businessmen, politicians and those engaged in less honorable enterprises could afford. It was not uncommon on a typical day to see pro baseball, football or basketball players beside aldermen, city councilmen and drug dealers. Al Bundy's employer Gary's Shoe Store had nothing on this place!

One day a shady character came in and I was "up" which in sales vernacular means that I was the next salesman in line to wait on the next customer. Up to the Skin Room we went. After working with him and stacking his shoes to take downstairs to our cashier, I overheard him tell her that the card was "hot" and per Ed, it was okay. I began to feel my chest tightening while a lump grew in my throat. I was troubled by the experience and asked Ed later why he knowingly accepted a stolen credit card? He basically said that his conscience was clear, he made a sale and that the person whose card was stolen would not have to pay for it. I was shocked by his reply and left speechless (if you can believe that). Throughout that week I related my experience to some of my fellow salesmen. They not only had no issue with it, they knew several other customers that used hot cards and had no problem waiting on them! I was now at a crossroads. Would I succumb to peer pressure and, "go along to get along" while suppressing my belief system in order to keep my job, and if so, would I be able to live with

myself? Would I take the course of Jacob the Supplanter, or Israel, the Prince of G-d?

I wrestled with this for what seemed like eternity, but in reality was only but a few days. Needless to say, I was anxious about which course to take and endured several sleepless nights, tossing and turning in my bed followed by thoughts of little else during the day. Finally, the day of reckoning had come. The same customer that I had waited on previously walked through the door, acknowledged me and expected me to assist him. I asked him to wait a few minutes and asked Ed if I could speak with him privately. We walked into Ed's office whereupon I explained to him that I was not comfortable waiting on any customers that used stolen credit cards. I told him that not only was this illegal, but unethical and that my belief system would not allow me to engage in this activity any further and if that meant that I had to look for employment elsewhere, so be it. He looked at me and smiled as he said, "Snow, while I don't always understand your flowery language, I value you as an employee and respect the fact that you came to me. That took guts. No worries, from now on you will not have to wait on any of these people". I had striven with a man/angel/G-d and prevailed.

Yaakov's message defines Jewish existence. It is our destiny to travel as we are the Restless People. We are not called wandering Jews for nothing! Rare and brief have been our interludes of peace. But what comfort it is to know that during some of my darkest nights, like Jacob, I found myself lifted by a force of faith I did not know I had, surrounded by angels I did not know were there.

May we walk in the way of Israel so that we too may find ourselves surprised by G-d, elevating our souls and refining our character in the process.

Kain YeHi Ratzon. May it be G-d's will.

Shabbat Shalom. Stuart Snow- December 10th, 2011-Kislev 14, 5772