

VaYishlach – 5783

Last week, some of you will remember, I began my Davar Torah relating some details of my journey to my doctorate and how I began the dissertation itself talking about the hero's journey on a quest to meet a challenge. I was relating that to the journey Jacob began when he fled from his brother Esau who he had betrayed in any number of ways. Jacob, you will remember, dreamt about a ladder ascending to heaven and his interactions with the angels. At the time, last week, I had not thought about a very important dimension of that journey he had begun. As I prepared to today's Davar Torah, I realized that what I had forgotten was the actual challenge which really only occurs in this week's parsha. I admit to having made that mistake because I have only, in these past few years, come to begin, yes only begin, to appreciate how deeply Torah study takes us into the text and its meanings.

So, what exactly is this challenge that Jacob is confronting head on this week? It is the resolution of his issues with his twin brother Esau. Many of the commentaries point out that, up until this point in the story, Jacob has been a trickster and a deceiver. As a way of explanation, let me remind you that last week, the text tells us that Rebecca sensed tremendous turmoil in her womb between these two boys she was carrying. Midrash fills in the gaps in the story by suggesting that Jacob was actually the first fetus to be conceived and only afterwards Esau. Yet, it was Esau that came out first, with Jacob holding on to his heels. From this point onwards, Jacob has been in Esau's shadow and not very happy about it. That is why Jacob believes he is entitled to first steal the birthright from his brother by having Esau forego the birthright so that he could eat a bowl of pottage. That is also why Jacob goes along with his mother's bid to have him receive the blessing of Isaac

as the first born through deception. So, let's remember that Jacob tricked Isaac into giving him the blessing as the eldest, which he believed he was entitled to because he was actually older by minutes. But Esau was born first so Jacob stole what he thought was rightfully his. Then after his trickery is discovered, Jacob runs away and makes his home in his uncle's bosom so to speak. Laban tricks Jacob into marrying first Leah and only then Rachel. Now after 20 years of highly successfully herding and farming, Jacob has decided he must confront Esau and tend to the rift between the brothers.

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that Jacob prepares for his encounter with Esau in three ways. First, he prepares to appease Esau with offerings from the best of his flock. Secondly, he prays to God that he will help him to meet this very important challenge. Thirdly, he prepares for war and takes precautions so that he does not lose everything should war between the brothers occur. Now at this point in the story, the sages and commentaries agree that Jacob wrestles with a being with no name which is generally agreed to be an angel sent by God and Jacob loses to the angel because his hip is wounded in the fight.

But here's where the crux of the significance of this part of the story is made apparent. Even though Jacob ostensibly loses, he is told that his name will be changed from Jacob, which alludes to his having hung on to the heel of Esau as he emerged from the womb to Israel which signifies that he has struggled with man and the divine and come away the better man. This is actually the climax of the struggle of the hero. He has changed as a person as a result of this struggle and hence the name changes to reflect this change.

The rabbis discuss this change and look for its significance because unlike other name changes (Avram to Abraham, Sarai to Sara, even Ben-Oni to Binyamin) this name is not always used after it was given and the rabbis question quite rightly WHY? Why do we refer to the patriarchs as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not Abraham, Isaac, and Israel? Essentially, they argue that the name Israel is only used when it serves to profile the struggle between man and the divine, rather than between man and man. Jacob has overcome tremendous odds and turned his life completely around. He is now the one with the rightfully earned blessing because he has shown tremendous courage and fortitude to confront the demons from his past and attempt to make amends. When the story centres around Jacob the man, he is Jacob. When it is about Jacob versus God, he is Israel.

It is no random coincidence that HaShem commands his extended family to change their clothes and clean themselves because they are going to pray. He wants his family to understand that it is modesty to confront the divine properly prepared. And that modesty carries through to our services and the choreography that we use in prayer, lifting ourselves up when we say Kodesh, Kodesh, Kodesh, standing when we open and close the ark, bowing when we recite the Borchu, and so forth. When we confront the divine, we must be properly predisposed to acknowledge God's sovereignty over us. That is when we become the Children of Israel, aware that life's challenges force us to constantly make choices between right and wrong, between good and evil, and we acknowledge, as Jacob did in today's parsha, the presence of HaShem in the background to our lives. Shabbat shalom.