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בס"ד

Parashat Vayishlah Part II On Genesis 32-33

1. Contending With the Angel

Despite having sent the fabulous gift Jacob remained apprehensive. He rose in the middle of the night to move his family and effects to a safer spot across the nearby Jabbok ford. Now that he realized he was responsible to make amends to Esau, he also realized that his efforts earlier that night were inadequate. Soul-searching was in order. Sure enough, at a moment when he was alone, an unnamed “man” wrestled with him until dawn.

The Rambam insists that such passages must be understood as indicative of a prophetic vision occurring within the individual’s imaginative faculties (*Guide for the Perplexed* 2:42). Jacob is the recipient of a divine message, through the imagery of wrestling with his assailant, that fortifies him for his upcoming confrontation. Others have viewed the passage as an allegorical depiction of a struggle occurring deep within Jacob.

Along these lines, some sages have interpreted the adversary as being שָׂרֵי עֵשָׂו (*Gen. Rab. 77:3; Tan. Vayishlah* 8), the heavenly minister of Esau. This is an application of the ancient concept, allegorical in Scripture, that each nation has a cosmic representative, a guardian angel, who defends its rights and interests in the heavenly sphere that affects the corresponding earthly sphere in which we live.*

The time had come for Esau’s position to be represented fairly. Jacob must contend with the issue of each brother’s legitimate rights to his portion of the patrimony. Jacob’s deception of his father and causing the redirecting of his blessings had impinged on the normal transmittal of those rights.

It is significant that the encounter takes place at the Jabbok ford, perpendicular to the Jordan River on its

east, the well-established border of the land of Israel (Num. 21:24; Deut. 3:16, Josh. 12:2; Judg. 11:13, 22). While away, contending with Laban, the matter was postponed. Exactly upon reentering the land, Jacob must establish his legitimacy.

Wrestling with Esau’s heavenly angel indicates that the struggle takes place at the deepest level of being, perhaps, we may say, in the world of truth, where cosmic justice and true human deservedness are decisive. When an individual sheds his psychological defensive mechanisms and rises above his ego he has access to this deeper sphere of reality. This encounter would then be a continuation and amplification of the process set in motion by Jacob’s struggle with his conscience earlier that night, a struggle in the inner recesses of his being, engaging in thorough introspection of his moral standing. With honesty and sincerity he would have reviewed his past lapses, the chastisements he received and the lessons he learned (and was now continuing to learn) from them. He would have come to recognize Esau’s legitimate rights. It was a struggle to prove to the satisfaction of the celestial proxy of Esau that he, Jacob, truly renounces his past deviousness and exploitation, that he is no longer “crooked” but is now “straight” (terms we shall soon comment upon), and is now worthy of the blessings of the family heritage.

After struggling until dawn, the angel realizes that he cannot vanquish Jacob. Doing what he can, obviously what is appropriate at the deeper level of reality that this event represents, he strikes a blow to Jacob’s thigh (the word נָגַע actually denotes “touched”), bringing about a wrenching of his hip that causes him to limp. The impairment of Jacob’s mobility perhaps symbolizes the subduing of the materialistic dimension within him, that which Jacob had no right to usurp from Esau, a necessary condition for true reconciliation.

The angel requests to be released since dawn has arrived, but Jacob insists that he first give him a blessing. We may assume that the blessing he has in mind was connected with acknowledgement of his having renounced his past deceitfulness and is now worthy of carrying on the heritage of Abraham and Isaac. Before blessing, the angel asks Jacob, “What is your name?” The blessing obviously has a connection to Jacob’s name. Upon receiving the answer, “Jacob,” he announces that Jacob’s name will be changed to Israel. That indeed soon materializes when not long afterwards G-d appears to Jacob at Bethel (35:10), blesses him and changes his name to Israel. Some see the significance of the angel asking Jacob for his name before blessing him may lie in the fact that when he deceived his father to obtain his blessing, he stated his name was Esau. The act of stating his name in association with the blessing is symbolic of the larger correction occurring at the time. However it appears there is much more involved in stating his name.

2. The Name Change

The change in name from Jacob to Israel reflects the transformation that had taken place in Jacob. Jacob’s name in Hebrew – יַעֲקֹב (*Ya‘aqob*) – is associated with the word עֶקֶב (*heel*), as “his hand was grasping the heel of Esau” (Gen. 25:26). There is a positive connotation to the name, for it is the basis of the idea of “faithfully following [in the footsteps of (cf. Song 1:8)]” and by extension, as attested in ancient Near Eastern writings, “being protected.” However, the root ע-ק-ב (*‘eqeb*) is also the basis of words that translate as *crooked*, *wily* and *deceitful*: וְהָיָה הָעֶקֶב לְיֵשׁוּר (“and the crooked shall be made straight” [Isa. 40:4]); עֶקֶב הֵלֵב מִכָּל (“The heart is wily above all else” [Jer. 17:9]); כִּי כָל אָח עֲקוּב יַעֲקֹב (“for every brother deals deceitfully” [Jer. 9:3]). Upon discovering Jacob’s deceit Esau declared: הֲכִי קָרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי זֶה פַעַמִּים (“He was rightly called *Ya‘aqob* for he has now dealt crookedly with me twice” [Gen. 27:36]). Esau’s heavenly representative blessing Jacob by declaring he is to receive a new name signifies that Jacob will henceforth no longer be described as Esau had labeled him, crooked or deceitful.

His new name, Israel, teems with possible interpretations. The heavenly minister described it thus: “For you have contended with mighty ones and

with men and have prevailed.” This alludes to Jacob’s having proved his worthiness in his battle against the contentions of Esau’s representative. But יִשְׂרָאֵל also contains within it the root יִשַׁר (*straight*), and its final two letters could be taken to mean G-d, thus signifying that Jacob is now straight with G-d.

In contrast to the case of G-d changing Abram’s name to Abraham, which was a permanent change, Jacob retained both names. The name “Jacob” need not be interpreted as “crooked,” as we pointed out earlier, but since it may be so expounded, the duality serves as a permanent reminder of vulnerability.

Jacob’s mighty struggle to correct himself of his past regrettable behavior and be acknowledged by Esau’s representative, and then by G-d, as worthy of carrying on the family heritage was a matter of historic importance in Israel’s national history. As a remembrance of this milestone, Torah law prohibits Israelites from eating the גִּיד הַנֶּשֶׁה, the sciatic nerve within the thigh muscle on the hip socket, the spot where the angel struck Jacob (32:32).

3. Going Forward

Jacob now recognizes his past misdeeds as regards Esau as well as Esau’s legitimate rights. Esau’s guardian angel is compelled to acknowledge that Jacob was found worthy to be the heir of the Abraham-Isaac heritage and recipient of the spiritual aspects of the blessing. All differences between the brothers were resolved and they would now be able to establish a friendly relationship.

At the meeting, Jacob is obsequious to Esau. He bows to him seven times (a protocol well-known from extra-Biblical sources as a sign of homage to a suzerain) and repeatedly addresses him as “my lord.” After first terming his gift *minhati* (33:10), which translates as “my tribute” (as opposed to a plain gift, which would be termed *matanah*, a word he avoids), Jacob upgrades his description of the gift to *birkhati* (v. 11). The latter word essentially means “my blessing”; by asking Esau, “Please take my *berakha*,” he symbolically returns the blessings he usurped. Indeed, his locution אָת בְּרַכְתִּי נָא קַח corresponds perfectly to Esau’s complaint to his father upon discovering Jacob’s ruse, וְהִנֵּה עָתָה לָקַח בְּרַכְתִּי (“and behold, now he has taken my *berakha*” [27:36]). Of

course Jacob did not know that Esau had made that statement, but it is a providential comment confirming that the score is settled.

Esau is receptive to Jacob's brotherly submission. He is profusely warm, gracious and magnanimous. Although Jacob's gift was of enormous value, Esau refused it at first. Only upon Jacob's insistence did Esau finally accept it. Esau is interested in continuing the friendly, brotherly relationship and offers to accompany Jacob on his journey. When Jacob responds that he will be traveling slowly, Esau offers to leave some of his men with him. But Jacob respectfully declines the offer, perhaps fearing a future change of heart.

The turnabout in Esau's disposition was truly remarkable. Many have questioned whether a magnificent gift, together with profuse gestures of submission and a favorable disposition could have accomplished such a major transformation overnight in an individual such as Esau. After all, he had harbored a murderous grudge for more than twenty years and was intent on acting on it. Gifts and external gestures may be ploys; how does he know what Jacob's true feelings are? Accordingly, they have questioned Esau's sincerity.

However, given the extraordinary prominence accorded the "wrestling" encounter, and the fact that the angel agrees to bless Jacob, the Torah indicates that Jacob's new perspective toward Esau was acknowledged and accepted. Somehow, truly sincere changes in disposition toward another individual, finalized in what we may term the "psychic" sphere, get across to the relevant party. Accordingly, when the brothers meet they carry out decisions that were already made in the internal world of both.

In summary, a beautiful and complete reconciliation took place. Jacob ceded to Esau the rights to his blessing, status and dignity and he was cleared from his guilt for his past wrongdoings toward his brother, allowing him to focus on his becoming Israel.

When Isaac passes away, the dreaded day which Esau had many years before set as the time he would avenge himself from his brother, "Esau and Jacob his sons buried him" (35:29), indicating that the reconciliation continued. But G-d's chastisement to

Jacob is not ended; there remains the matter of his deception of his father. Wrenching events, particularly concerning his beloved son Joseph, will be forthcoming.

4. Symbolism of the Numbers Eight and Thirteen Attached to the Name Change

We have previously pointed out a number of examples of the symbolic use in the Torah of the numbers eight and thirteen and their multiples, especially decimal multiples. Eight signifies an aspect of the G-d-Israel covenant while thirteen (perhaps associated with it being the *gematria* of *eḥad*, "one"), appears to be symbolic of recognition of the one G-d. The two are often deployed in tandem. (For a fuller discussion of this topic with many examples see our study, *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon.*)

Building on Rabbi Sassoon's work, Ronald Benun has demonstrated that there is a striking example of such number symbolism in both contexts of the name change of Jacob to Israel. In the case of the angel informing Jacob of the change to come (Gen. 32:27-28), the last "Jacob" attested before the angel asserts that his name will be changed to "Israel" – the **יִשְׂרָאֵל** said in response to the angel asking him his name – is the 80th "Jacob" in the Torah when it appears in the pure form, that means to say without a prefix attached to it. In the context of G-d proclaiming the name change (35:10-11), the last "Jacob" before the actual name change – **יַעֲקֹב** – is the 130th "Jacob" in the Torah, including those with prefixes.

Although when eight and thirteen work in tandem the thirteen invariably appears prior to the eight (such as the case with Adam, who lived 130 years and then 800 years), it is not practical in a normal-reading text that spans the thirty-five chapters from Genesis 1 to have the 130th attestation of "Jacob" before the 80th, even if the first set of attestations would include prefixes and the second exclude them. However, besides this very practical issue, the differing contexts of the two statements of the name-change are more congruent with the symbolism as expressed, the 80 before the 130.

The angel name-changing episode is in association with Jacob's struggle with Esau, which ultimately was

for the right to carry on the covenant that G-d had established with Abraham and Isaac. When Jacob is vindicated by Esau's celestial minister and called Israel it connotes his rightful place as the bearer of the covenant, signified by the number 80. The passage within which G-d changes Jacob's name is one in which Jacob had first requested that all members of his family and entourage remove all idols and idolatrous items from their midst. They were to cleanse themselves from any connection to idolatry in preparation for the upcoming experience of visiting Bethel. Hence, it was a case of abandoning polytheism and assuming dedication to the one G-d, symbolized by 130.

Thus, Benun has shown that the eight and thirteen symbolism associated with the name change of Jacob is a remarkable parallel to the eight and thirteen symbolism associated with the name changes of Abraham and Sarah (see our study *On Genesis 17*.) In that case, the combined total attestations of the names

of Abram and Sarai from the beginning of the Torah through the last verse of Genesis 16 (just prior to the expanded covenant statements of Genesis 17 that highlight the number eight) is 70. At the point that G-d changes Sarai's name to Sarah (17:15), completing both the Abraham and Sarah name changes, the combined total of both names in both forms is 80. From the next occurrence of Abraham's name (17:17) until the end of the Book of Genesis, Abraham's name appears 130 times. The total number of attestations of Abraham's name in the Five Books (both as Abram and Abraham) is 210 (130 + 80). We have no doubt that number symbolism is present but we must await further research as to its fuller meaning.

Endnote

* See our comments on Deuteronomy 32:8

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