

This week is the third installment, so to speak in the saga of Yaakov – who was born and rivaled with Esav in Parashat Toldot, two weeks ago. He fled to Haran, met his wives and was oppressed by his father-in-law, Lavan, in last week's parasha, and now, in this week's parasha, Vayishlach, he prepares to meet Esav for the first time in 21 years.

And we will see how he transforms, and the limits of one transformative night.

The night before Yaakov and Esav meet, Yaakov is terrified to hear that Esav is marching towards him with 400 men. As Rashi notes, he prepares himself in three different ways – by sending presents to Esav, by praying, and by setting up his entourage for battle, dividing up his family in preparation for them to fight.

His preparations concluded, Chapter 32: 25-29 describe:

Jacob was left alone. A man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him.

Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob."

Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, *v'tuchal*" - which usually is translated, "and you have prevailed," but could also be translated as "and you will be able."

Now, I owe a great debt to the Torah study participants who asked the questions that produced the insights I am about to share.

First of all, in the same verse, it says definitively both that Yaakov is alone, and also that someone is wrestling with him. Tom Broecker challenged the notion that Yaakov could be alone, given the divine promise he received last week that Hashem would be with him always.

We wonder if perhaps this wrestling divine messenger is sent to Yaakov in response to his own self-perception that he is alone – an abrupt and physically discomfiting reminder if you will, of the promise that God is with him. We see a similar moment in Exodus 17, when the people whine at the waters of Massah and Meribah, asking “is God here or not?!” The next verse says that Amalek came to attack the Israelites. Rashi says that those verses are related because Amalek’s attack was God’s answer, “You think I’m not here?! I’ll show you what you’d be facing alone if I weren’t here!” so to speak.

The other great oddity we noticed in this text – is that in the moment when a stranger has just sprained Yaakov’s hip and begged to be released, Yaakov’s response is not “say uncle first!” but instead, “First bless me!”

We realized that Yaakov has never wrestled for a blessing. He has disguised himself to get them, bargained for them from Hashem. But this facing of a stranger and wrestling a blessing from him may be a kind of *tikkun*, a kind of healing for him in how he relates to the world.

Rabbi Shefa Gold takes the Chassidic commentary tradition of reading the struggle as internal. She writes: “All night long Jacob wrestles with a mystery. All his cunning and defenses are wrested from him that night. He is held in the grip of truth as layers of false self fall away, revealing, at the break of dawn, the soul’s hidden radiance.”

Whether you read the wrestling as internal or external, Yaakov seems to undergo profound transformation. He appears to let go of the self that is Yaakov, meaning “heel,” the self that sneaks underfoot to grab at the heels of others, and to take on a new identity. But it is not clear how permanent that transformation is. The habits of Yaakov are hard to shake.

This becomes clear at two points in this parashah. After Yaakov and Esav have a warm reunion, in Chapter 33, verses 12-17, Esav urges Yaakov to travel with him back to his home in Seir.

Yaakov tells Esav to go ahead, and that he and his camp will come along at a slower pace. But he then takes his family to Sukkot, and does not visit Esav in Seir at all. The text does not say whether he was frightened of going with Esav but frightened of defying him, or whether he meant to visit him, but got sidetracked. But whether intentional or not, Yaakov again deceives his brother.

After going to Sukkot, a few verses later, Yaakov travels to Shechem. And here, at the beginning of Chapter 34, in a devastating and infamous episode in Torah, while Yaakov is sojourning near Shechem, his daughter Dina goes exploring and the prince of Shechem takes her and rapes her.

With much respect to fans of *The Red Tent*, everything about the plain meaning of the text, and almost everything in the commentary tradition suggests that this was a non-consensual, violent act. Yaakov hears of this and is strangely passive and silent, letting his sons negotiate on his behalf what restitution Shechem and his father Hamor must make.

It is only after his sons sneak out in the night and slaughter all the male inhabitants of the village in vengeance for Dina that Yaakov voices anything. In verse 30: “Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, “You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my men are few in number, so that if they unite against me and attack me, I and my house will be destroyed.”

My friends in Torah study were quite disgusted with Yaakov’s behavior here – both with his passivity in defense of Dina, and that his reaction to his sons’ act of vengeance was only in terms of his own comfort. He doesn’t scold them saying, “how does this help Dina?” And he doesn’t scold them saying, “A whole village

doesn't deserve to die for the crime of one man!" He scolds them for putting himself at risk.

As easy as it is to be angry with Yaakov, I do feel some compassion for him. This events of this parasha suggest to me the great difficulty of affecting personal transformation. Evolution is *not* a one-time, momentous event that marks a clear demarcation between what one was and what is becoming. Yaakov does not just become Yisrael and walk in the world differently forever more.

As we all know, to really make a change from the way we were conditioned when we were young is not the work of a flash of insight, though they help. It is constant spiritual discipline, occasional regression, and orientation to the path whenever we stray. Of course, Yaakov regressed in times of great stress.

And this is where we come back to the word *v'tuchal*, at the end of the blessing.

Rabbi Avital Hochstein writes: Maybe both the name Yisrael and the verb "va-tukhal" need to be read in the future tense, "You will wrestle and you will be able to wrestle". The ability to withstand conflict that the angel promises to Ya'akov is also a blessing for his progeny and namesake people.

. . . he is not blessed to become a victor and someone who never has to fight again. He is instead blessed to have the fight move inward, to be a person who wrestles with himself, with his God, face-to-face. A move from a battle in which there are winners and losers, blessed and unblessed, to above all being someone who is able. A person who survives and thrives despite his life's tensions. He is aware of them and is constantly trying to conquer them, not out of a fear of losing, but out of a recognition of their value and his own ability—va-tukhal."

May it be so.