

## **Parsha Vayishlach**

### **Genesis, Chapter 32 v.4 - 36**

The last few parshot are filled with stories of the life of Jacob. Two weeks ago, he stole his twin brother Esau's birthright and fled to the land where his uncle Laban lived. Last week we learned of his trials under Laban in order to wed his beloved Rachel, which was preceded by 7 years of additional toil after his "forced" marriage to Leah. He fathers 6 children to Leah, one to Rachel (Joseph) and two each to their maids Bilhah and Zilpah. We read about Jacob's dream and the Ladder to Heaven. In this week's parsha, Jacob and his family leave Laban under strained circumstances and head back to see Isaac and Esau, who had previously threatened to kill him. No mention is made of Rebekah, so we must assume that she has died.

Before he meets Esau, he has another encounter with an angel of God. Jacob wrestles with this "angel" and prevails, as he done by guile with Esau in taking his birthright. Since the Hebrew word for prevails is "saritah" (Hebrew letters sin and raish), the angel changes his name to Yisrael (again the letters sin and raish + el [God]), meaning "prevailing with God", and blesses him with a nation; hence we have the Children of Israel. The "angel" also touches Jacob's thigh and either dislocates his hip or gives him a permanent case of sciatica. Jacob is so taken with the event that he renames the location P'neiel, where he "saw God face to face" [p'nei + el]. Only at the end of Deuteronomy is there a similar verse, where we read about Moses who knew God face to face. Jacob views this experience as a major life event. He has been given the opportunity to meet God not once, but twice.

Chabad.org, an excellent resource for the parshas and other things Jewish, brings up some interesting points. It says that Jewish tradition states the angel is Samael, Esau's guardian angel and an omen of evil. While Jacob says the being is God or an angel of God, the question is why would God need to fight with Jacob, and then lose, and then physically injure him? The notion of winning and losing an encounter with Esau's angel perhaps better prepares us for Jacob's meeting with Esau. The meeting goes much better than planned. Jacob first sends Esau a gift of hundreds of head of cattle, but he is prepared for a battle, as is Esau. In the end, however, Esau runs to meet and embrace him. While scholars disagree on Esau's sincerity, it is a warm reunion that lasts for a day before the brothers continue on their separate ways.

Then I listened to bimbam.com. They say the encounter was really between Jacob and Esau because the angel is never called an angel. But the key is that the encounter is a life-altering event for Jacob. Prior to the event, Jacob was a master manipulator. But afterwards, after he wrestles with God (or Esau), his name and his personality change. The next day, when he meets Esau face-to-face, he bows 7 times. He knows that the right way to deal with people is face-to-face, and honestly. That is why his meeting with Esau is warm and heartfelt. Jacob is a new person. He is now Israel.

Later in the chapter his beloved wife Rachel dies in childbirth as Benjamin is born. Rachel had a premonition of the birth of a second son when she bore Joseph. Not a word of Jacob's grief is included. And for unknown reasons he buries her there, in Bethlehem, rather than 15 miles away, in the Cave of Machpelah, where Abraham and Sarah (and presumably Rebekah) reside. Rachel's tomb is a shrine today. Then a scant 10 verses later, after his journey takes him back to his father Isaac's house, Isaac dies at age 180, and is buried by Jacob and Esau in Machpelah. Just like Ishmael attended the burial of Sarah even though we

have no idea how he knew about it, the same seems true of Esau, who had gone his own way after his meeting with Jacob.

There are two other significant passages in the parsha that should be mentioned. The first is all of Chapter 34 and is the story of Dinah, Isaac's only daughter (to Leah). Dinah goes out alone into the land and meets Shechem, a Hivite prince. He is struck by her beauty and seduces her. He wants to marry her, but when his father, the king, meets with Jacob, Jacob's sons are outraged. While the king makes a generous offer that we later find to be suspect, Jacob's sons require that all the Hivite males be circumcised. That is agreeable to the king. However, three days after the mass circumcision, while the Hivite men are recovering from their ordeal, Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi enter their camp and kill every man with their swords. Curiously, Jacob is concerned that other nations will view this action poorly and may decide to make war on his family (remember they are not yet a large number of people). Simeon and Levi can only question what Jacob would have considered a proper response to be, for otherwise their sister might have been considered a harlot. The male-centered nature of the Bible never discusses an appropriate punishment for a rapist, and chapter 34 ends here.

The second passage is Chapter 36 which contains the entire genealogy of Esau, the father of the Edomites. Although Esau's wives were not Jewish, God did have a special affection for the Edomites, and when Moses and the Children of Israel passed thru Edom on the way to the Promised Land, he was ordered not to make war upon them.

Jacob certainly has his share of ups and downs. Consider these: stealing Esau's birthright and gaining his father's first blessing, fleeing from his home to escape Esau's wrath, finding Rachel but having to work 7 years only to marry Leah, working another 7 years for Rachel, but then having no children with her until the birth of Joseph, having to watch her die in childbirth, meeting an angel of God face to face twice, confirming his place as the father of a great nation, coming home to see his father Isaac one last time, yet never seeing his mother Rebekah, who loved him so very much. That is a lot for one lifetime, yet the story is not over – he still has to endure the saga of Joseph and his brothers.

Jacob's encounters, whether real or imaginary, point out one unique feature about the Jewish religion, and that is that every Jew has a direct connection with the Almighty. How you make the connection is up to you. The Children of Israel found God at the Tent of Meeting in the desert and later at the Temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple, local Jewish communities built synagogues to maintain group worship. But like Jacob, you can commune with God on an individual basis, such as by saying prayers at night before going to bed or finding quiet times alone for inner spiritual reflection.

The Haftorah is the entire Book of Obadiah. In it, the prophet speaks out strongly against the hateful nature of the Edomites towards the Israelites, which should not occur because they share a common heritage. The Edomites were particularly cruel to the Israelites after the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE, and Obadiah prophesizes that they will eventually feel the wrath of God while Israel is restored to her rightful place because of Israel's faith and trust in God. After the Israelites return from Babylonian exile in 530 BCE, the land they return to, while it still might be considered the Promised Land, is, in fact, made up of much of the Kingdom of the Edomites that had also been conquered by the same Babylonians. The Edomites, the descendants of Esau, make the connection between the Torah and Haftorah.

In conclusion, whatever the setting, make the most of your opportunities to talk to the Supreme Being. Like Jacob, your life will probably change for the better.

