

## Vayishlach

**Daniel Preter, 10 December 2022**

Vayishlach is another one of those many parashot where a multitude of stories happen. We have the story of Dinah, Rachel's death whilst giving birth to Benjamin, the death of Yitzchak and the list of Jacob's and Esau's descendants. A big part of the parasha is of course telling the story of the re-encounter of Jacob and Esau and Jacob wrestling with 'a man', and his name change to Israel. I find this part particularly interesting, and very peculiar.

Jacob and Esau hadn't met for 20 years or so, when Jacob left his home. Since then, he had settled elsewhere and started a family. But he is returning home to face his brother once more, and make finally peace with him. To say the least, he is panicking about it. Jacob tricked Esau out of his birth right, and tricked his father to bless him, instead of Esau as the firstborn. Esau has always been described as the butch one of the two, possibly a bit simple and not really interested in the finer things in life. So, Jacob is very worried about the encounter, and sleeps the night before on his own.

He certainly doesn't get much sleep that night, but goes through what seems a transformative encounter! A 'man' comes to him during the night, and we are told he wrestles with him. They wrestle so intensely, that Jacob's back of his leg is injured. As it says in the Hertz chumash: 'and when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained'. However, there are other translations, such as: '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'. Rashi says 'It was violently torn from its joint', so, a dislocation? Rav Hirsch, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi and Torah commentator from Frankfurt says: 'der Muskel wurde von seinen Bändern losgerissen', the muscle was torn from its ligaments.

Being medically minded I am intrigued what happened, but whatever it was, it sounds very painful indeed, and Jacob would hardly have been able to walk the next day!

There are many different explanations for this encounter, and who this mysterious man might have been: Was it an assassin (maybe on Esau's orders), an angel, Jacob's own conscience (even though it would be very hard to self-inflict a serious injury like that!), or was it Esau himself already getting his own back? Rashi says it was the "prince" of Esau (the angel who embodies the spirit of Esau).

Jacob also asks for the stranger's name, but in good Jewish tradition only gets a question back: Why are you asking me for my name? Jacob really wants to know the man's name; I presume because he is trying to make sense of, and somehow control this bizarre situation!

In good Jacob fashion and so in order to get something out of it for himself, he still wants something in return, so asks to be blessed by the stranger. He duly complies, blesses him, and gives him a new name: Israel, the one who wrestles with God. So, was it God who came to see him and fought with him? Well, Jacob certainly seems to think so, as he gives the place a new name: Peniel: face of God, and in Jacob's view 'I have seen God face to face'.

This way, and for his own sanity, it seems that Jacob closes the door to other interpretations who the stranger might have been!

When it comes to the encounter between Jacob and Esau, Esau brings a whole army with him, probably because he knows his brother too well! Jacob, the younger, was certain that his older brother would come to the reunion with anger and revenge on his mind and in his heart. However, when Jacob comes to meet him, he goes on his own, without his family, or army, and bows before Esau seven times. He makes himself very vulnerable this way! Whether he does it out of feeling guilt, or genuine remorse, something extraordinary happens: the two brothers embrace, and they kiss and weep. Esau seems to have forgiven Jacob for his behaviour years before. Jacob says: 'for to see your face is like seeing the face of God'. He now maybe understands, that one way to see God on earth, is by facing the people we have wronged.

But Esau seems to have transformed too in those 20 or so years! It seems that Esau has grown from his own pain, and he manages to forgive his brother for what he had done. He certainly doesn't appear as the 'butch one' anymore!

Kindness, and hope seems to prevail. It seems the relationship has gone through a healing process, and he found his inner quiet.

I suspect all of us have had encounters we were very worried about beforehand. I certainly have. Whether it's a brother, another family member, friend or someone we never have met before.

I don't know about you, but I have had many imagined arguments and discussions with someone before meeting them. Sometimes that was helpful, but a lot of times a complete waste of time and energy.

People say family is the most important thing in life. Whilst I very much agree with that, I'm also conscious family can be very difficult as well, and you can't really choose someone to be part of your family, or not! My own brother and I are very different, in all kinds of ways. Sadly, we've never got along very well. So, every time I see him, which is only really once a year on average, I anticipate our meeting with trepidation and worry, just like Jacob. But most times, but unfortunately not all, and like in the Jacob and Esau story, this fear proved to be unfounded and we had a decent interaction.

So, think about all those encounters that many of us have dreaded in our lives and that have turned out actually much better than we had anticipated. Think of those people that we thought were only going to be filled with antagonism — but as it turns out, when we open up ourselves and display genuine feelings, we can encounter goodness in them too.

Is there an encounter coming up for you, someone you worry about meeting again.... well, think about Jacob and Esau, and what they managed to do. Maybe we all have the ability to transform and try to be more forgiving.

Shabbat Shalom