

Idea for וישלח

The scene of Jacob wrestling with a strange assailant has always been a source of wonder and mystery. The Sages saw in this stranger the עשו של עשו and that, in turn, gave further cause for speculation.

My interpretation is psychological-moral, and attempts to explain not only certain details in the verses describing the encounter, but also the position of this tale in the rest of the Torah's narrative.

Jacob, on that fateful night before meeting his brother Esau, was wrestling with his conscience--better, his bad conscience. And indeed, this may well have been what הוא"ל had in mind when they identified him as עשו של עשו.

Consider Jacob's native, indigenous character. He is described as ויעקב איש תם יושב אהלים--straight, totally honest, almost naive. Yet--or maybe therefore--he was וילך אנוחז בעקב עשו, holding on to Esau for sheer survival. This, however, is precisely what gets him into trouble, the main trouble being that he is false to his own nature, his intrinsic character.

When his mother suspects that Isaac is ready, wrongly, to award the Abrahamitic blessing to Esau, he willingly participates in the deception of Isaac, "stealing" the blessing from his brother. Later, when he works for Laban and feels he is being wronged, he devises a scheme to enrich himself and enlarge his flocks.

There is something morally offensive about these two incidents and they seem to have dogged his footsteps throughout history. Were they really immoral acts?

That is precisely what worried Jacob. On the eve of his potentially disastrous meeting with Esau, Jacob must finally confront his nagging conscience. He "wrestles" with this conscience--the "angel of Esau"--until dawn (according to the Midrash: the dust stirred up by their struggle rose to the Divine Throne, i.e., this was a serious moral encounter which was not merely a case of "Jewish guilt" or an "overextended superego" but a genuine, objective case of right and wrong. Jacob must settle accounts with himself, before his Maker, before he goes off to meet Esau.

With the break of day, the struggle is over. Jacob emerges triumphant and is therefore awarded the name ישראל, for he has fought with both "man and angel"--what a beautiful description of conscience, that amalgam of the human and the divine, that angelic dimension of the human personality! But nonetheless he does not leave unscarred: והוא צולע על ירכו, he leaves limping.

What does this mean? It means, I believe, that Jacob is cleared of the charge of moral infraction. Neither legally nor ethically is he to be faulted. In the case of Esau, as Prof. Casuto has pointed out, it was Isaac's intention all along to reserve the core of the Abrahamic blessing (ברכת אברהם--that of זרע and ארץ ישראל) for Jacob; it was the blessing he gave to Jacob qua Jacob, and which he did not offer to Esau either when Jacob posed as Esau or when Esau came to Isaac in his own right. And there was really no other way to salvage what he had worked for and rightfully owned from his scheming uncle Laban; had he not resorted to his own brand of trickery, he would have forfeited what was his by right.

This explains why he triumphed in the wrestling match with שר של עשו. And yet, there is an odor of moral ambiguity that hovers over the two incidents. Why so? Not because Jacob is guilty on objective grounds, but *because, whether or not he had a choice, his actions went contrary to his own innate character, they made him act contrary to his own moral nature!* One feels this element of dissonance all through this narrative on the early career of Father Jacob: there is something disturbing, unnatural, inappropriate, jarring. The תמימות איש תם is not acting with him. Hence, he bears the wound with him--struck in the גיל הנשה, he leaves with a dislocated hip. Indeed so: an element in his personality, as so far revealed, is dislocated, no less than, in the physical realm, a dislocated hip. (Only later, according to the Sages, will this be healed: יבא יעקב שלם עיר שכם--שלם בגופו. בממונו ובתורתו; שלם בגופו--שנתרפא מצלעתו.)

When we meet Jacob in the beginning of ויצא, the sun is setting. Abarbanel interprets that dream as the torment of a guilty conscience because of the self-same stealing of the blessings. The revelation of God at that time was meant to assuage Jacob. But apparently, his guilty conscience did not go away until this full-fledged encounter with it in וישלח. Only after this encounter has he cleared himself *in his own eyes*, and therefore, instead of a setting sun, ויזרח לו השמש, the sun rises on him, his record is cleared, the torture and torment caused him by שר של עשו is now a thing of the past, and the darkness lifts from his burdened soul: כי ראיתי אלקים פנים אל פנים ותנצל נפשי. Jacob's character is now whole--שלם, תם--once again. The circle is complete: his remarkable "straightness," his sterling directness, is back in focus, and not even a whisper of moral ambiguity follows him; even his slight limp is eventually cured.

We may now understand why the Torah relates the story of Shechem and the rape of Dinah immediately after this tale of the double encounter--with the "angel of Esau" and with Esau himself. Here, in the Shechem story, Jacob had a perfect opportunity to wreak vengeance against Shechem and his people who fully deserved it for the foul crime that had been committed. But the "new" Jacob--indeed the "old," original Jacob--could not and would not play that game. His sons, Levi and Simeon did indeed do that, and Jacob was incensed by their actions. How does the Torah describe



their plan?--במרמה אביר ויענו בני יעקב את שכם ואת חמור אביר במרמה, they relied on a deception--one, indeed, which was morally defensible but a deception nevertheless--and reminiscent of the Jacob who had deviated from his own nature, the Jacob who obtained his brother's blessing with deception: ויאמר בא אחיך במרמה ויקח ברכתך. Jacob, in reproaching the two brothers, could well have advanced the moral argument, but he did not, and instead offered a purely practical reason--that they were few in number and the indigenous population would rise up and, since they outnumbered the Jacob clan, destroy them. The reason: Jacob, who had twice himself resorted to a kind of מרמה, felt unable to take the high moral road to his own children who knew well their father's life story. Instead he gave them a military explanation, as mentioned, which really held no water for, as we read right after this incident, ויהי חתת אלקים על הערים אשר סביבותיהם...

At this point, ותמת דבורה מלנקת רבקה, Deborah, the last one to be intimately associated with his mother Rebecca, dies--and with her vanishes the last taint of un-Jacobian character that had colored his life at the behest of his adoring and loving mother.

Finally, there is the divine charge to change his name from Jacob to Israel. There is something strange about this that has halakhic ramifications: Abram's name was changed to Abraham, and that is the way it remains in Scripture, and the Halakhah considers it a transgression to refer to him as Abram. Yet after Jacob's name is changed to Israel, the Torah itself often refers to him as Jacob, and the Halakhah declares that he continues to bear *both* names. Why the difference? Because Abraham has undergone a complete and irreversible change of status--from private individual to historic, public figure--whereas Jacob has simply *reverted* to his original nature, and it is therefore inappropriate to ban mention of the name Jacob!