

Vayishlach – Shabbat 28 November 2015

One of the most enigmatic episodes in the Torah. Jacob is about to meet with his brother Esau after being absent for over twenty years.

He doesn't know, will Esau still want to kill him? Does he pose a threat, a danger to his now large family?

He crosses them over the Tributary of the Yabbok. He goes back alone. According to Reb Eliezar in the Talmud he has returned for small jugs, unimportant items.

“Jacob is now alone. A man wrestles with him until dawn.”

Who was this mysterious man?

The Torah itself doesn't say.

But our commentators say that this was an angel who wrestled with Jacob and indeed further intuition suggests that it was the guardian angel of Esau, who was there to stop him, to prevent him from meeting Esau in the morning.

And then the angel says to Jacob:

“Your name will no longer be Jacob but Israel- ki **sarita** im Elokim ve-im anashim vatuchal- for you have **fought** with the Divine and with man and you have prevailed.”

This name change is ratified by G-d who appears later to Jacob and says: “shimcha Yaakov- Your name is Jacob; and that his name would no longer be Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.”

However, in a number of places after this event, in fact all over the Book of Bereishit, Jacob is called Israel but he is also called Jacob, and it seems to be interchangeable.

And later on in the Chumash, the Israelites are referred to in both terms as the beth Yaakov –the House of Jacob and the bnei yisrael- the Children of Israel.

Indeed when Bilaam ends up bestowing a bracha on to Israel- he says: “Mah Tovu ohalecha Yaakov mishkenotecha Yisrael-How goodly are your tents O Jacob- Your dwelling places O Israel.” This is a blessing which we recite every day as we enter the Synagogue. So the names are used sporadically throughout The Torah.

Jacob and Israel reflect two personalities in the Jewish psyche. Jacob comes from the fact that when he was born: “veyado ochezet ba-**akev** esav- His hand was holding on to the **heel** of his brother.” Jacob denotes submission and humility.

And when Jacob had tricked his brother Esau, he said: “Vaya-akveini- he has **deceived me** twice”- he’s taken my birthright and my blessings. The name Jacob implies the obtaining of the blessings in a deceptive way

Israel though is: “Ki sarita im elokim ve-im anashim vatuchal- You have wrestled with the Divine and with men and prevailed.” Yud Shin Reish – comes from the word yashar- direct or upright. No longer will you receive the blessings in a deceptive manner, but direct from G-d.

What is the message of this story?

We need both personalities in our Jewish psyche. First, we need to be like Yaakov, we require on a personal level to possess the humility and understanding that we are always in the presence of God and to follow His ways.

On the other hand, we need to always remember that we are Israel. We need the pride to put our heads up and never to be afraid to proclaim who we are and from whence we come and where are going.

Have a wonderful Shabbat