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Dr. Phil Levine

*Parashat HaShavuah Series*

Parashat Vayishlach

This week's Torah portion contains one of the most dramatic and enigmatic scenes in the entire Tanach: Jacob's wrestling with an angel. After twenty years of service to his uncle Lavan, Jacob is now the formidable head of a large and prosperous family. Returning to his homeland in Canaan, he must face his brother and erstwhile archenemy, Esau, to reconcile their differences, or face potentially devastating and endless violence.

Jacob carefully divides his wives, children and valuable possessions into two camps, anticipating a battle. With great care, Jacob's loved ones and worldly possessions are escorted across the teeming Yabbok River. For some reason, Jacob chooses to return alone to the other side of the river. Perhaps he left some small packages behind (see Rashi, chapter 32, v. 25). Or perhaps he had second thoughts about pursuing his mission.

The narrative's stage lights dim. Jacob finds himself totally alone. Suddenly, he is attacked by a man/angel. The protagonists are entwined, wrestling and struggling through the night with neither able to escape nor defeat the other. Jacob's hip joint is painfully dislocated but he does not relent and release the angel until daybreak, when he exacts a blessing and earns a new name, Israel. Jacob's name change clearly reflects a transformation in his persona and fate.

Physically disabled, but emotionally and spiritually charged, Jacob limps away, and we are introduced to a new mitzvah, the prohibition of eating the "*Gid Hanasheh*:"

Genesis Ch. 32 v.33

*Therefore the people of Israel do not eat of the sinew of the vein, which is in the hollow of the thigh, to this day, because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the vein.*

While the Torah's dietary laws are not associated with justifications or explanations (they are in the category of "*chukim*"), there are at least two dietary laws for which justifications *are* given. We eat matzah and do not eat *chametz* to recall a pivotal national event, our redemption from Egyptian captivity and servitude. We may *not* eat the "*Gid Hanasheh*," the sciatic nerve, to recall Jacob's wounding during the nocturnal struggle with the angel near the Yabbok.

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*Dr. Levine is Chief of Psychiatry, YAI-National Institute for People with Disabilities. This D'var Torah is in loving memory of Dr. Levine's father, Chaim Aryeh ben Yisrael.*

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Why was the wounding of Jacob considered so important that it would justify the imposition of a dietary restriction for the Jewish people for all time?

According to Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam)

רשב"ם בראשית פרק לב פסוק לג

על כן לא יאכלו. לזכרון גבורתו של יעקב ונס שעשה לו הקב"ה שלא מת:  
*Therefore they do not eat; it is to recall the bravery of Jacob and Hashem's miracle that he did not die.*

However, earlier in the Parasha, the same commentator is quite critical of Jacob, suggesting that the attack by the angel was brought about as a punishment for cowardice and lack of trust, and to prevent Jacob from evading his fateful meeting with Esau.

רשב"ם בראשית פרק לב פסוק כט

ומה שלקה יעקב ונצלע לפי שהקב"ה הבטיחו והוא היה בורח.  
*"And why was Jacob wounded and crippled? Because Hashem gave him assurance but he tried to escape."*

The Rashbam goes on to connect the attack on Jacob to other biblical figures who are "attacked" as punishment for avoiding important missions, and with Hashem's steps to redirect them to follow His will. Moses is attacked and is nearly killed when, using his speech impediment as an excuse, he resists Hashem's mandate to advocate with Pharaoh on behalf of the Children of Israel. The attack takes place at an inn, where Moses stops to rest, and perhaps, like Jacob, gives in to paralyzing fears and inadequate faith in Hashem (see Exodus chapter 4, v. 24).

The prophet Jonah is attacked by a deadly storm, and swallowed by a great fish when he attempts to evade his assignment to preach in Nineveh. In all three cases, a great man is punished, and then redirected back to the original goal.

Does Jacob's behavior reflect bravery or fear? Was Jacob truly fighting a battle, or being held down to keep him from running away? Where do we find evidence of true courage? We must go back to examine Jacob's early development.

Our forefathers and foremothers, as described in the Torah, are never depicted as examples of total perfection. There is poignancy, as well as inspiration, in our ancestors' struggles with failure. Physical imperfections, including infertility, visual impairments, speech defects, traumatic injuries, and perhaps in Jacob's case, gross motor deficits are present, and we can identify with these challenges. Who among us doesn't have at least one real or perceived disability?

Jacob is literally left behind when his more nimble brother, Esau, pushes himself out of their mother's womb first. Though developing greater intellectual and moral character sitting in his tent (see Genesis, chapter 25, v. 27), his father, Isaac, shows clear favoritism to Jacob's more physically robust, adept and athletic brother, Esau.

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As so often occurs with individuals seen as weak or disabled, Jacob was vulnerable to exploitation by others. Would Lavan, with his highly developed skills in deception and trickery, have considered for even one moment switching brides if it had been Esau who was working for him? This would have been unlikely, or at least not apt to result in a peaceful ending!

Jacob had a deep sense of his own destiny, and the benefits of very clear and direct assurances by Hashem for success in his own life and destiny as progenitor of the Jewish people. Still, the lonely banks of the Yabbok River must have been the scene of a terrible inner battle. Jacob was cognitively aware of his likelihood of success with Hashem's promises on his side, but emotionally and experientially conditioned to expect disappointments.

Yet, Jacob was blessed with his mother's consistent love and encouragement, and God-given direction. His immense spiritual, moral, and intellectual skill would more than compensate for any real or perceived physical weakness.

Perhaps, in focusing on Jacob's hip, the angel was helping him to recognize the irrelevance of his physical limitations when given a meaningful opportunity to utilize his other abilities and passions. Jacob does not give up and will accomplish his mission even while limping.

The 13<sup>th</sup>-century French biblical commentator, Rabbi Hezekiah b. Manoah (the Hizkuni), focused on a different aspect of the dietary prohibition of eating the *Gid Hanasheh*: It was meant as a punishment of Jacob's sons, who should not have left him alone on the other side of the river. Had they shown more concern, perhaps Jacob would not have been injured. The message of this mitzvah to future generations is the responsibility never to abandon someone who is in need of assistance and support.

The story of Jacob's struggle with the angel is about courage, but with a little helping hand, in this case, from Hashem. Acknowledging our doubts and fears, but not running away from challenges, is a practical as well as a religious imperative.

The mitzvah of *Gid Hanasheh* should also remind us of our individual and collective responsibility not to leave people behind through indifference, intolerance, or insensitivity. We must always be aware of the difference a helping hand can make in the lives of people who have disabilities, especially when directed to helping them reach their potential and improve the quality of their lives.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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