

## Vayishlach 2010 – Prevailing Over Ourselves

Two weeks ago, I had the pleasure of meeting with the students and parents in our sixth grade class as part of our Project Mishpachah. The topic for the day was making the transition from childhood to adulthood. I asked the participants to fill out a chart with over thirty activities, from feeding oneself to marrying, and asked each person to write the youngest age they thought someone could do those activities. It was very fun for us all. I thought of that program yesterday, as I read an article by Betsy Hart in which she discussed the true meaning of growing up. She wrote:

I think you know when you are a grown-up when you are increasingly able to put the needs of others -- and your commitments to others -- before yourself. And I don't mean necessarily in some global sense, by, say, recycling or sending money to relief efforts overseas.

Those might be fine things, but don't really "cost" us anything. Being a grown-up costs something. In the day-to-day life of dealing with others -- most especially our marriage partners and children -- are we able to put their well-being -- not necessarily their wants and desires -- ahead of our own? Are we willing to pay that cost? Or do we more consistently focus on whether that person is meeting our needs?

With Ms. Hart's words ringing in my head, I turned to study this week's Torah portion, *Vayishlach*. In the portion we read about Jacob's reunion with his brother Esau, twenty years after Jacob tricked Isaac into bestowing Esau's blessing upon him and subsequently fled in fear for his life. As Jacob prepares to meet Esau he leaves his wives, children, and possessions on one side of the river Jabbok. We read:

"Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. 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 strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

Dr. Raphael Jospe of Bar Ilan University wrote concerning this episode: "If any one word can be said to characterize Jacob's life, it is *ma'avak* = contending, struggling, wrestling. Some even suggest that the name of the river Jabbok, the place where Jacob wrestled with the man, is a play on the same root: the crossing of the Jabbok was marked by struggle or *ma'avak*.....Jacob's life moved from struggle to struggle, from crisis to crisis. The name change itself gave him no promise of an easy life or of success. His future was not assured as was Abraham's or Joshua's. In the first pronouncement of his name change by the man with whom he wrestled, it says: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:29); in the second pronouncement no reason for the name change is given. This is no blessing of an easy life or of release from future struggle; rather, it is a statement of his ability to prevail. Many of the struggles in Jacob's life were internal; apparently he had had to work to obtain the blessings promised him, and so, too, in the future he would not receive his blessings for free. ....

The Sages, cited by Rashi (on Gen. 32:29), said: "It shall no longer be said that the blessings came to you ... through deceiving, but through prevailing and acting in an open manner." Thus

the true struggle was an inner, spiritual one: Jacob vs. Israel.” In Pirkei Avot we read: In Pirkei Avot, we learn: *Eizehu Gibor* - Who is mighty? He who subdues his passions, as it is written (Proverbs 16:32) "One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city." That is, according to the sages, a true hero is not someone who has an easy life. The heroic person is one who overcomes his evil inclinations, who rules over his emotions.

Dr. Yospe continues by explaining that the character of Jacob, who was at first described as a simple dweller in his mother's tent, was actually multi-faceted: on the one hand, he was fearful even though he had been promised blessings by the Lord; on the other, when the same simple tent-dwelling man reached Haran and set eyes on Rachel, he alone removed the rolling stone from on top of the well, something which normally even several shepherds together could hardly do (Gen 29:11).

Of course Jacob suffered from his crises and tragedies. The challenge, however, is not in what we think life does to us but in what we do with our life. Even though Jacob apparently suffered from Isaac's favoring Esau, he himself chose to favor Joseph over his brothers. This favoritism already becomes apparent in our Torah portion when Jacob, after his wrestling match, separates his children into groups, putting the children of the concubines closest to the front, then Leah with her sons, and then Rachel and Joseph.

Did Jacob not understand that his favoritism would cause problems for Joseph and his brothers? Not only that, according to the Sages, Jacob either directly or indirectly caused two other tragic occurrences that took place prior to Joseph's disappearance: the death of Rachel and the rape of Dinah. As for Rachel, when, unbeknownst to Jacob, she stole Laban's idols, Jacob said to Laban: "But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not remain alive!" (Gen. 31:32). The Sages, as cited by Rashi, commented: "From that same curse Rachel died on the road." As for Dinah, when Jacob forded the Jabbok, it says: "taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children" (Gen. 32:23), on which Rashi cites the Sages:

And where was Dinah? He placed her in a chest and locked her in so that Esau should not set his fancy upon her. On this account Jacob was punished – because he had kept her away from his brother for she might have led him back to the right path; she therefore fell into the hands of Shechem.

Because of the rape, Simeon and Levi massacred the people of Shechem. Thus the three tragedies that struck Jacob – the untimely death of his wife Rachel, the rape of his daughter Dinah (and the massacre of Shechem), and finally the sale of Joseph to Egypt – all were direct or indirect results of Jacob's actions. It was not what life did to him, but what he did in his life.

In the final analysis Jacob (Israel) had to struggle with himself, not with the angel; the blessing he was given was that he would "prevail." Therefore the blessing was repeated and confirmed by the Almighty Himself. "You whose name is Jacob" – you remain Jacob, but also "Israel shall be your name" – you, Jacob, can prevail over yourself and become Israel. Therefore, the man who wrestled with him remained anonymous and did not answer Jacob's question. It mattered not who he was, but who Jacob was: Jacob or Israel?

The first blessing that Jacob received from Isaac was obtained by deception. Nevertheless, in the end, he became deserving of the blessing as Israel. Isaac blessed him (Gen. 27:29) saying, “Cursed be they who curse you, blessed they who bless you.”

This was the first blessing that Jacob received from Isaac. When Jacob-Israel blessed his sons, he said to Joseph, “The blessings of your father surpass the blessings of my ancestors, to the utmost bounds of the eternal hills” (Gen. 49:26). This is the true blessing, also promised by Moses to all of the Israelites towards the end of his days: “and He will make you more prosperous and more numerous than your fathers” (Deut. 30:5). In the inner struggle Israel ultimately prevailed. For after all his troubles and hardships, despite all his outward struggles, at the end of his days Israel finally understood the first blessing which he had received from Isaac and could enjoy the benefit of that blessing: “Cursed be they who curse you, blessed they who bless you” – for “the righteous have sufferings first and happiness afterwards.” His sufferings were external, but in the end Jacob found inner happiness and repose. Ultimately Israel prevailed over Jacob. Therefore the blessings that Israel gave his sons were greater than the blessings he received from his parents: “It shall no longer be said that the blessings came to you through supplanting and deceiving, but through prevailing and acting in an open manner.” May we all be privileged to give our children blessings that will outshine the blessings of our parents, as Israel gave his children.

But like Jacob, we shouldn't let life's challenges and difficulties get us down. Rather we should always attempt to attain a sense of wholeness, whole with ourselves, whole with our families, and whole with God. Amen