



Shabbat Vayishlach  
14 Kislev 5778 / December 1, 2017

Dear Shir Tikvah:

In this week's Torah, Jacob has one of those sleepless nights I think we all experience on occasion - consumed by fear, anxiety, and/or conscience.

Jacob is about to encounter his twin brother, Esau, from whom he stole the birthright and blessing - and who vowed to kill Jacob last time they parted ways. (Genesis 27:41)

So Jacob goes to great length to protect his family, livestock, and entourage - he divides them into two groups, sends gifts ahead. Then he makes sure his immediate family is comfortable on the other side of the river (the side where they are heading) and goes back, to spend the night on his own. At this point, Jacob has DONE everything possible to prepare. But then he's left with himself:

25 Jacob was left alone. And an ish wrestled with him until the break of dawn.

26 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.

27 Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

28 Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob."

29 Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

(Genesis 32)

Some sort of being, this ish - man, angel, aspect of himself, God? - gives him a terrible night's sleep and actually injures him. But in the meantime, Jacob wrests a blessing from this experience.

What's going on?

Jacob's conscience is giving him a really hard time. He was that sneaky guy, a "heel-grabber." And he has given twenty years to establishing his own family, serving Laban his father-in-law seven years for Leah, seven years for Rachel, six years for the livestock - continually being tricked by Laban.

Now he's returning to his homeland and must confront his past, must confront his brother. Now Jacob has a lot at stake.

But instead of getting up in the middle of his tortured night and writing that email or that to-do list, Jacob and God negotiate some sort of transformation. He can't get rid of his original name and reputation, but he can be more, he can be better. He becomes "Israel" because he is willing to wrestle, with his conscience, with God, and make amends.

It leaves me wondering what we can do in these long dark nights of December, tormented by collective conscience. And it suggests something about needing an inner willingness, in addition to the outer busyness, for transformation. Our story reminds us that we can wrest a blessing from the struggle.

Shabbat shalom u'vracha (a Sabbath of peace and blessing),  
Debra  
Rabbi Debra Rappaport