

Parshat Vayishlach: Dancing Toward Dawn

Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler

*Director of Spiritual Development, Maharat
Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2018*

This week's parsha, Parshat VaYishlach, contains one of the most iconic scenes of the Jewish canon, Yaacov's nighttime encounter with the "ish"--the mysterious being--on the banks of the Yabbok River.

25 So Jacob was left alone, and a man ("ish") wrestled ("va'ye'avek") with him till daybreak. 26 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled ("be'he'avko") with the man. 27 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 28 The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. 29 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." 30 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. 31 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." (Bereishit 32: 25-31)

כה וַיִּתֵּר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֶק אִישׁ עִמוֹ עַד עֹלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר: כו וַיֵּרָא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיַּגַּע בְּכַף-יָרְכוֹ וַתִּקַּע כַּף-יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֶאָבֶקוֹ עִמוֹ: כז וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחְנִי כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ כִּי אִם-בְּרַכְתָּנִי: כח וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מִה-שְּׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב: כט וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֹאמַר עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׂרִית עִם-אֱ-לֹהִים וְעַם-אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוֹכַל: ל וַיִּשְׂאֵל יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידָה-נָא שְׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לְמָה זֶה תִּשְׂאֵל לְשָׁמִי וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ שֵׁם: לא וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם פְּנִיאל כִּי-רָאִיתִי אֱ-לֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים וַתִּנָּצַל נַפְשִׁי: (בראשית לב: כה-לא)

Artists and commentators have imagined this confrontation in a myriad of ways. Yaacov wrestles with an angel; struggles with the guardian of Esav; battles the demons within himself. En route to meet his brother Esav after twenty years of hiding, full of fear and maybe guilt, Yaacov encounters an adversary internal or external and fights for his life. The result is transformative. A bit scarred, but still strong, Yaacov emerges from this scuffle with a new name and with a capacity to literally confront his fears.

In the very next scene, he and his estranged brother finally meet and the encounter is unexpectedly gentle.

And Esav ran toward him and embraced him ("va'yichabkehu"), and he fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. (Bereishit 33:4)

וַיֵּרֶץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיַּחֲבֹקְהוּ וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְאָרוֹ וַיִּשָּׁקְהוּ וַיִּבְכּוּ: (בראשית לג:ד)

From one great struggle, a much-dreaded struggle is averted and an embrace is born. How did Yaacov's experience of direct battle yield such reconciliation? Is it not the time-tested truth that violence tends to yield violence? How did Yaacov's pugilistic confrontation with the *ish* prepare him for this kind of conciliatory confrontation with Esav? I believe that the answer requires a re-examination of the original encounter.

Rashi offers two very different perspectives on just what took place that night.

"And a man wrestled": Heb. קָבְאִי. Menachem explains: And a man became covered with dust, derived from קָבַא ,dust, for they were raising dust with

וַיֵּאָבֶק וַיִּאָבֶק אִישׁ. מְנַחֵם פִּרְשׁ וַיִּתְעַפֵּר אִישׁ, לְשׁוֹן אָבֶק, שֶׁהָיוּ מַעֲלִים עִפָּר בְּרַגְלֵיהֶם עַל יְדֵי

their feet through their movements. I believe, however, that it is a term meaning that "he attached himself" (II Kings 9:14), and it is an Aramaic expression [found in the Talmud]: "After they became attached (דאביקו) to it," (Sanhedrin 63b) "and he would tie it (קייבמ יהל יקבאו) (Menachot 42a), for so is the habit of two people who make strong efforts to throw each other down, that one embraces the other and attaches himself to him with his arms (see Chullin 91a). (Rashi on Bereishit 32:25)

נענועם. ולי נראה שהוא לשון "וינתקשר" (מלכים ב' ט:יד), ולשון ארמי הוא, "בתר דאביקו ביה" (סנהדרין מב ע"א), "ואביק ליה מיבק" (מנחות בב ע"א) לשון עניבה, שכן דרך שנים שמתעצמים להפיל איש את רעהו, שחובקו ואובקו בזרועותיו (חולין שם).

The RaMBaN (on Bereishit. 32:2) agrees with Rashi's latter view and adds:

The term "*avika*" [frequently translated as "wrestle"] is often used by the rabbis to mean "chavika," hug.

ואביקה בלשון חכמים חביקה שמשו בה הרבה

This interpretation dramatically reimagines the encounter between Yaacov and the force that he engaged. Whether with an angel, a person, or the demons within, the locking of arms and the touching of hips was not a brutal attack, but a dance of sorts. The confrontation was aimed not at subverting an opponent's strength but gently redirecting energy toward embrace. The two protagonists were not antagonists arguing, but awkward partners moving, finding their rhythm.

Yaacov - - who wronged his brother years ago when he stole the birthright from him and who was sent away by his mother lest fratricide result - - came to the river full of anxiety, guilt, self-hatred, and resentment. He was "very frightened. . . and distressed" (Bereishit 32:8). He feared for his life and he felt unworthy of his life (see Bereishit 32:11). So much remained unresolved. So much pain, deceit, distance, uncertainty over his own fate and that of his family. In the midst of that angst-filled mix, the mysterious "*ish*" enters and invites Yaacov, so desperately isolated ("ויותר...לבדו") by the heaviness of his own plight, to dance. To confront all that he is holding; to open to all the ambivalence that is weighing him down; to awaken to all the darkness that has taken up residence within him and to embrace it "עד עלות השחר", until the light could enter. Yaacov had to learn how to live mindfully and gracefully with a complex array of hard feelings - - not to ignore them, reject them, or be paralyzed by them, but learn how to dance with them, to integrate them fluidly, into the evolving choreography of his life.

Said Rebbe Nachman of Breslov in Likutei MoHaRaN, Tanina 23:

. . . When one is pulled into a circle of dancers, one should not leave one's troubles outside, but invite them into the dance to thereby transform them and heal them. It is usually the case that in such situations, one would be inclined to leave their troubles outside the dance. But one ought to in that moment pursue their troubles, seize them, and bring them into the dance, to heal them and transform them into joyfulness (translation condensed)

בענין השמחה על פי משל שלפני אדם שמחיים ומרקים אצי חוטפים איש אחד מבחוץ שהוא בעצבות ומרה שחרה ומכניסים אותו בעל כרחו לתוך מחול המרקדים ומכריחים אותו בעל כרחו שיהיה שמח עמם גם כן יש בענין השמחה כי נשאדם שמח אצי המרה שחרה ויסורים נסתלקים מן הצד אבל מעלה ותרה להתאמץ לרדף אחר המרה שחרה דוקא להכניס אותה גם כן בתוך השמחה באפן שהמרה שחורה בעצמה תתהפך לשמחה שיהפך המה שחורה וכל היסורין לשמחה כדרך הבא לתוך השמחה שאז מגדל השמחה והחידה מהפך כל הדאגות והעצבות והמרה שחרה שלו לשמחה נמצא שחוטף המה שחורה ומכניס אותה בעל כרחו לתוך השמחה, כמשל הנ"ל

This was not a lesson easily learned by Yaacov. It was even a little wounding. But it was life-saving. Says Yaacov after the אביקה/חביקה, the struggle-dance:

I have seen the face of God and my soul, my nefesh, has been restored. (Bereishit 32:31) ... כִּי-רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים וַתִּנְצַל נַפְשִׁי. (בראשית לב:לא)

And the sun shone on *him* indeed. (Bereishit 32:32) וַיִּזְרַח-לּוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ ... (בראשית לב:לב)

Having learned how to embrace himself, Yaacov is now, more understandably, ready to embrace and to receive the embrace of another. The next morning, he raises his eyes and he sees his brother. And rather than be overwhelmed by fear, he is ready for movement.

He stepped out in front of [his family] and prostrated himself seven times until coming close to his brother. (Bereishit 33:3) והוא עבר לפניהם וישתחו ארצה שבע פעמים עד-גשתו עד-אחיו: (בראשית לג:ג)

And Esav ran toward him and embraced him ("va'yichabkehu"), and he fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. (Bereishit 33:4) וירץ עשו לקראתו ויחבקהו ויפל על-צוארו וישקהו ויבכו: (בראשית לג:ד)

Yaacov's reluctant and clumsy dance-toward-dawn finally pays off in the full *chibuk*, the emotional hug, of his brother. Open and present and whole, together they cry tears of regret and tears of joy. Two more men may now dance toward the future, still fraught, but so much more real.

May that circle dance of strugglers-cum-revelers continue to grow.



Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler is the Director of Spiritual Development at Yeshivat Maharat, where she teaches Chassidut and Pastoral Torah. She is also a faculty fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She earned her PhD and MA from the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and her BA from Harvard University. In 2018 she received semikha from Maharat's Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track.