

Parshat Vayishlach Obsessing About Blessing Alana Suskin - Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track

In this week's torah portion, Vayishlach, the Torah sets up a dramatic moment: Jacob is about to meet with his brother Esau after many years. Fearing that his brother is still angry about his birthright, Jacob sends a lavish gift, consisting of hundreds of animals

That night Jacob sends his family off and is left alone. Then, we are told, Jacob encounters something – the Hebrew says “a man,” but many rabbinic commentators understand this to be an angel or spirit of Esau – Rashi cites Beresheit Rabbah (77:3) and calls it *שר של עשו*, a minister or prince of Esau - who wrestles with him until dawn. Though this representative of Esau was unable to prevail over Jacob, he dislocated Jacob's thigh, and then says, “Let me go because the day is breaking.” Jacob responds, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” The angel asked Jacob, “What is your name?” When Jacob told him, the spirit says, “You will no longer be named ‘Jacob,’ but ‘Israel,’ for you have struggled with God and humans, and you were able to overcome.” Then the Torah adds “And he blessed him, there.”

Although there are a great many peculiar things about this episode, to me, what stands out is Jacob's insistence on *yet another* blessing: Jacob bought Esau's birthright, he stole his blessing, Isaac blessed Jacob again when Jacob was sent off to Laban to escape his brother's anger, and God has given Jacob a blessing as well, in a dream. So why is Jacob so obsessed with blessing? Why does he feel the need to be blessed, over and over again. Even God's blessing is apparently not enough?

There are two possible answers. The first possibility lies in the nature of blessing itself. What is a blessing?

Abarbanel says that a prophet or a tzadik becomes a conduit for God's *shefa* (flowing abundance), and their blessing is intended to prepare a person to receive the *shefa ha'elyon* – the divine flow from God.

But what does this divine flow bring? It seems at least some of the time to be material wealth. But Jacob had been wildly successful by the time he meets with Esau – so why would he need *yet another* blessing?

The Midrash Aggada offers another possibility. It suggests that in wrestling with Esau's spiritual representative, the blessing really means that he is demanding forgiveness from Esau:

“Jacob said to him, ‘Since you are the minister for Esau, I will not release you until you forgive me for the blessing with which father blessed me.’ He said to him, ‘Who is complaining about you?’ [Jacob] said to him, ‘Esau said to me, “Is not he rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times.”’ [Bereshit 27:36] ‘And he blessed him there’ [Bereshit 32:30] And this is the blessing that he blessed him, that he forgave him about the blessings.”

This certainly isn't the way we normally think of the word “blessing.” But perhaps it makes more sense if we put it in this context. Jacob and Esau have a terrible history between them, from the day of their birth, Jacob is grabbing at Esau's heel, he is a jealous brother, always wanting what Esau has, and their relationship is not improved by their parents' preferential treatment of each of them. Finally, when Jacob meets his brother by the riverside and his brother's spiritual representative finally tells him, albeit indirectly, “Look you, wrestle with God, not with me!” You will be Yisrael, not Yaakov.

In other words, your real struggle is not with me – I am not standing in the way of God's blessings - you are! God has already told you what your mission is: *וַיְבָרֶךְךָ בְּכָל-מְשַׁפְּחֹת הָאָדָמָה, וּבְזֶרְעֶךָ*

“In you and in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Beresheit 28:14), but this can't happen as long as you either fear your brother or are focused on what he has. For you to succeed, you

need to become the sort of person who can become a conduit for *shefa* to all the nations of the earth. To do that, you need both to let go of your fear, and also become someone not only focused on amassing your own material wealth.

Once Esau's spirit forgives Jacob and Jacob accepts the wound Esau gives him, they can meet as brothers, and they can weep and kiss one another. That is why when Esau refuses Jacob's gift – what Jacob originally intended as a bribe – Jacob insists by telling him, **קח-נָא אֶת-בְּרַכְתִּי אֲשֶׁר הִבָּאת לִי**

“Take my *blessing* that is brought to you.” (Ber. 33:11) As Nechama Leibowitz notes, this is a blessing that Jacob will not steal from him. Perhaps one might even say that Jacob has returned the blessing he took from their father.

Jacob has finally accepted that the nature of blessing is the transfer of a higher divine goodness. As long as we are focused on competition with others, on the blessings that others have, we can never really be a source of goodness for others. It is only when we can make of ourselves a conduit for *shefa* that we can become what we are meant to be. To do that, we must give up both fear and envy, and instead focus on giving our blessing to others.



Rabbi Alana Suskin is an *educator and activist*. She is a senior managing editor of the progressive blog Jewschool.com, called “The most important thing happening online in the Jewish community today,” by noted Jewish sociologists Ari Kelman & Steven M. Cohen. She has served on the boards of T’ruah, Jews United for Justice, and Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington and is currently one of the chairs of the Maryland Poor People’s Campaign. As an outgrowth of her long-time peace-building and interfaith efforts, she has recently co-founded the Pomegranate Initiative, which sends a pair of Muslim and Jewish religious leaders to churches in areas with small numbers of Jews and/or Muslims, to be in dialogue with and to build relationships across faith traditions in order to fight anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and increase understanding and friendship in the USA.