Reform Voices of Torah
Union for Reform Judaism
Shabbat, December 14, 2019 / 16 Kislev, 5780
Vayishlach, Genesis 32:4−36:43
The Torah: A Modern Commentary, pp. 217–237; Revised Edition, pp. 218–240
The Torah: A Women's Commentary, pp. 183–208
Haftarah, Hosea 11:7–12:12
The Torah: A Modern Commentary, pp. 349−351; Revised Edition, pp. 241−243

D'VAR TORAH

Facing Our Faults on the Other Side of the River
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

The stories in Genesis are heavy with human experience; they turn on every conceivable emotion, and life and relationship challenge. In this way, Torah in general, and the Book of Genesis in particular, provide a spiritual mirror that reflects back to us our best, and sometimes most disappointing, selves.

Each week we read a segment not only to understand the literature in its historical context, but also to derive wisdom that intersects our own life and experience. Torah is not his-story or her-story. It is *our* story.

In Adam and Eve, we see ourselves toiling to make a living, raise a family, and understand our difficult realm on the other side of Paradise, east of Eden.

In Abraham, who demanded God's justice for the innocent of Sodom and Gomorrah, we find inspiration to speak truth to power.

In Sarah and Rachel, who struggled to conceive, we empathize with all couples who seek help with infertility.

In Jacob, who, in this week's Torah portion, *Vayishlach,* wrestled with the night messenger, we see ourselves struggling with great challenges that bring pain, but from which we might extract blessing.

The Rabbis aptly taught, "Turn it [Torah] over and over again because everything is in it" (*Pirkei Avot* 5:22).

In this week's *parashah,* once again we encounter Jacob and Esau, brothers who share a most painful past and separation. This week they are to be reunited. It is a moment fraught with tension and uncertainty. Will Esau greet his brother with open arms or will he harbor a grudge for Jacob's youthful trickery, stealing Esau's blessing and bargaining for his birthright?

Esau has 400 men under arms travelling with him; will a war between brothers erupt in their meeting?

Jacob for his part wrestles with God and his own destiny. What does God want from him? How should he protect and enlarge the sacred relationship with God that he has inherited from his father? Must he vanquish Esau to prove his worthiness as a leader of the Jewish people? How should he apologize to someone he hurt so deeply and can he ever be forgiven?

At times in our lives we have each been Jacob and other times we have been Esau; we have been the victim and the advantage taker. We have stood as Jacob does on the river's edge between our present circumstance and confronting the reality of our past.

What does Jacob do?

He stands with trepidation on the shore of the Jabbok River; his brother fast approaches from the other side with an army of 400 men. Does Jacob run and hide or does he cross over? If he does cross over, will he come face-to-face with the reality that he cannot escape?

With literary brilliance and intrigue the Torah builds the suspense as Jacob ponders what to do over night. He sends his family and all of his possessions across the river to Esau's side and is left alone on his shore. He lays down to sleep, but sleep eludes him. He tosses and turns, wrestles with an angel—or, some say, grapples with himself.

The angel is strong—and nearly prevails over him, pulling at Jacobs's leg, badly wounding him. But Jacob summons an inner strength and courage; he holds onto the angel, overpowers him, and demands from him a blessing. The angel changes Jacob's name to Israel (*Yisrael*), meaning "the one who struggles with God." This experience (or perhaps, dream) gives Jacob the courage and conviction to cross the river to confront his brother and the reality that awaits him.

Jacob is now a changed man. He is not the young boy who bargained for his brother's birthright over a bowl of soup; he is not the adolescent who stole his brother's blessing with trickery and gall. He is now *Yisrael*; a man who knows his own flaws and limitations, a man who bears the scars and burdens of his past and allows them to inform his present perspective. Jacob is humble and pragmatic. He limps toward his brother, his hip still sore from the struggle of the night before, and with repentance and humility he asks his brother's forgiveness.

Esau rushes toward Jacob and we don't know if Esau is planning to attack him. But Esau knows. He senses that his brother is a changed man, and the Torah relates that Esau falls on his brother's neck and kisses him.

“Esau, though, ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him. And they burst into tears.” (Gen. 33:4)

Torah is full of teachings, and in this portion, perhaps it imparts the most important lesson of all: to have the courage to change. It teaches that in order to change, we first have to know who or what we are changing from: We have to know ourselves to be able to confront what may be ugly or painful or shameful within us. But self-knowledge alone is not change. Jacob could be self-aware and still not cross over the river.

With self-awareness, we need to take the next step and deal with our failings; we need to cross the river and confront them. We have to be *Yisrael,* to struggle with our faults and risk experiencing more pain in the process, because life is not lived on this side of the river! Life is not lived running and hiding from the wreckage of our past. Life is on the other side.

What does Jacob do after Esau kisses him? Right there on the other side of the Jabbok, Jacob builds a house. He is done running and has nothing else to escape from. He has found himself and therefore he has found his home; he has finally found peace. Before he crossed over, fear and uncertainty obscured his vision, broke his hope. Now, after struggling with past misdeeds and receiving forgiveness, he sets down roots and builds for a future that he could not have imagined just a short while ago.

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