D'var Torah: Vayishlach – Crossing the River
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – TEMPLE SHOLOM
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This week's Torah portion is one of my favorite. Those that pay attention to my sermons will note that I say that almost every week when I talk about the Torah. In truth I love the Torah – particularly the book of Genesis which we are well into now in our weekly reading and will complete in just a few more weeks. I love the stories in Genesis because they are heavy with the human experience; they turn on every conceivable emotion and challenge of life and relationship. It is for that reason among many others that I am such a fan of the Torah in general; because for each of us no matter our level or religiosity or belief if we

interact with it Torah can 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 history. 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 wrestled with the night messenger, we see ourselves struggling with great challenges that bring pain, but from which we might extract blessing.

Miriam represents that part of us which longs to dance and sing exuberantly, uninhibited.

Aaron the High Priest can be seen in the part of us drawn to ritual and self-sacrificing service to others and our temples.

Through Moses we glimpse lands of Promise that we wistfully realize we may not enter.

As for us, The rabbis aptly taught, “Turn it [Torah] over and over again because everything is in it” (*Pirkei Avot* 5:22).

For an understanding of right and wrong, our people have always turned first to Torah. Above and beyond the Ten Commandments which delineate essential “Thou shalt nots,” our Sages identified 613 mitzvot that form the backbone of a lifelong quest for holiness.

These also include the myriad of “Thou shalts” that we too often forget. We fulfill “obligations without measure,” says the Talmud: “to honor parents, perform acts of love and kindness, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, pray earnestly, share joy with celebrants and sorrow with mourners, make peace when there is strife; and,” we read at last, “*talmud Torah k’neged kulam:* the study of Torah leads to them all” (*Mishnah Pei-ah* 1:1).

Torah speaks about our past, present, and future—our roots and lives and destiny. In epic prose and poetry, it records a story of enslavement and escape. It tells of

struggles with peoples of different languages, culture, and values, the seduction of false gods of silver and stone, and the false gods of burgeoning wealth and power. Ultimately it tells a story of hope and redemption.

If you are a teacher, a lawyer, a judge, a physician, a business executive, a salesperson, a chef or an artist, Torah has something to tell you about the practice of your profession. If you are a parent, a child, a sibling, a spouse or a friend, Torah has something to tell you about love, peace, respect and relationships. If you have ever experienced illness, Torah can show you healing. If you know loss, Torah can show you courage.

Torah is the birthright of every Jew, the one thing our people has always shared, regardless of geography, ethnicity, politics, or ideology. If you look into the sacred scroll you can find yourself inscribed there.[1]

In this weeks parsha we encounter Jacob and Esau brothers who share a most painful past and separation are 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 the trickery that Jacob played on him in their youth, stealing his blessing and bargaining for his birthright?

[1] Rabbi Jonathan Blake, URJ 10 Minutes of Torah 10/9/2006

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

Jacob for his part wrestles with God and his own destiny. What does God want from him, how is he to 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? Jacob wonders aloud how do you apologize to someone who you hurt so deeply, and can they ever forgive you?

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 with his army of 400 men is approaching him fast from the other side. Does he run and hide or does he cross over? Does he cross over and come face to face with the reality that he cannot escape?

With literary brilliance and intrigue the Torah builds up the suspense as Jacob ponders what to do over night. He sends his family and all of his possession 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 pulls at Jacobs's leg; badly wounding him, but Jacob summons an inner strength and courage and holds on to the angel and overpowers him and demands from him a blessing. The angel changes Jacob's name to Israel the one who struggles with God. This dream and

experience give Jacob the courage and conviction to cross over and confront his brother and the reality that awaits him.

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

before and with repentance and humility he asks his brother's forgiveness.

Esau rushes towards him we don't know if he is going to attack him, but Esau knows, he senses that his brother is changed man, and the Torah relates that Esau falls on his brother's neck and kisses him.

The Torah teaches us many lessons and this week it teaches us perhaps the most important lesson of all, **to have the courage to change.** That in order to change you have to know who or what you are changing from, you have to know yourself, to confront that which may be ugly or painful or shameful. **But self-knowledge**

alone is not change. Jacob could be self aware and still not cross over the river.

With self-awareness we have to take the next step and deal with our failings, cross over the river and confront them - we have to be Yisrael – we have to struggle with them; risking perhaps 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, he has nothing else to run from – he has found himself and therefore he has found his home, he has finally found peace. And so he sets down roots, and he builds for a future that before that moment he could not even imagine, as fear and uncertainty obscured his vision, broke his hope.