

Everything That Happened
Parashat Vayishlach
November 19, 2010

We toss and we turn, through a long, lonely night. On waking we take our first few tentative steps, and wonder if something is missing, gone, forgotten. A piece of us is missing, but whether it is a part of us, a part of our story, a memory faded into mist we cannot say for sure. Wound up by the night, wounded by a fight with something inside or out, the petty smallness of our soul or something larger than we can name, it fades away and lingers only on only in some subconscious corner. We face the future, shaped by the past in ways we know and own up to... and also by that which we have forgotten, or never noticed.

Last week, Jacob slow-dances with destiny, Led Zeplin playing in the background, chords we heard hear, a “stairway to heaven.” Now, another encounter in the night, not looking up into the sky but rolling around on the ground, wrestling with yesterday and tomorrow. Alone he left the land of Israel and, incongruously, despite multiple wives and mistresses, offspring and livestock, alone he returns. He sent everyone else ahead. It’s almost as if it were driven by the story, set up so it had to be that way.

That night, something happened, that left a mark, and changed a name. That night, a man became a nation, and we’ve been arguing about what happened ever since.

Those of you who have studied with me know that I am fond of asking the following question: “What is the difference between the people of the Bible and us? More specifically, what do we have... that they did not?”

The answer, of course, is that we have a Bible, and they did not. And that makes all the difference. They lived their lives and we now look at their lives. Put another way, they worshipped God by killing sheep. And we approach their story by *reading about* the killing sheep. That makes our encounter with Scripture a fundamentally literary act, an interpretative one, a step removed, a sense of being on the outside, looking in.

You know, as well, many of you, that I will go even further, and argue that even the term I used, referring to “the Bible,” is problematic in and of itself. We sometimes mention “the Biblical view” of something... of God, of human nature, of life or of death... but it is an almost meaningless expression.

Think about the time-frame we are talking about. Abraham, the first Jews, the first figure of a historical narrative that can be said to step past the just-so stories and pre-history of the first 11 chapters of Genesis, Abraham lived... assuming Abraham lived... around 1800 BCE. Ezra, whom non-Orthodox Jews believe compiled the Torah into roughly its current form, proclaimed a public reading of sacred Scripture in the year 444 BCE. That’s almost 1400 years... and that’s just the Torah, not the remaining section of the Hebrew Bible.

So think about 1400 years, the development of ideas, of language, of culture over such a span. When did Shakespeare live? Late 1500's, early 1600's. That's just 400 years ago... and we're arguing about him, too. What's a "bare bodkin?" Someone might know. But many of us would have to look it up. It is... an unsheathed dagger. How about Chaucer? Late 1300's. Seven hundred years. Writing in English. "Whan that aprill with his shoures soote, the droghte of march hath perced to the roote." English. The words are recognizable but barely comprehensibly. And Beowulf? Nine hundred years ago; also in English, but it sounds more like German, and with hardly a word recognizable at all.

So when someone refers to "the Biblical view" of anything, keep in mind the time frame we are talking about, the development, the fact that the Bible is much more of a cultural and spiritual anthology than a comprehensive or systematic presentation of ideas. It is, indeed, a set of works in dialogue with itself. And it set up a conversation which we step into, literalists or allegorists alike, and carry on far beyond the bounds of the setting in which it emerged. We cannot always know *what* these words were trying to say, or what they were meant to convey to their original audience. Indeed, as with the Constitution of a country, the impact of these stories goes far beyond any original intent.

So we read, this week, one of the most famous passages in the entire Bible. Daniel will chant these ancient words tomorrow, and share his own interpretation of them, interacting with the commentators of the past in his

own particular style. This night I want to follow one of those other hermeneutical paths, one of the ways in which our tradition has re-viewed and reenvisioned for a new generation words that were ancient and puzzling, even then, and even to them.

In the 13th century, the Spanish commentator Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman, known as Ramban or Nachmanides, often took a mystical and allegorical approach to Biblical stories. He viewed what happened to ancient figures as hints of what was to come in the future. This kind of reading is called “typology,” viewing Biblical figures as “types” rather than – or not only as -- individuals in and of themselves. It is an approach that was made popular by Christian tradition, actually, which used this method to make figures from the Hebrew Bible serve as precursors and predictors to people and events yet to come.

Whatever the origin of the method, Ramban is quite explicit about what he is going to do with this story. “There is yet in this section a hint for future generations, that everything that happened to our father (Jacob) with his brother Esau will constantly occur to us with Esau’s children.”

Ramban thus views this wrestling in the night as somehow a contest between Jacob and... somehow... the spirit of Esau.

Given that this is the very place, this is the setting, this is the story in which Jacob becomes, becomes the Jewish people, moves from man to myth, what we are witness to is the primordial *and ongoing* struggle

between “us” and “them,” between our people and whatever “other” we are engaged with throughout subsequent history. Jacob is us, it is every Jew, now and then, yesterday and tomorrow. And Esau? Esau is Edom. Esau is Babylon. And Esau is Rome. Ultimately, Esau is Christianity.

And then this story, at this season, as November slips into December... this becomes our story, and our identity... finding our balance, keeping our sense of ourselves... struggling and wiggling... walking, wounded, into the waking world, as a minority who is still here.

I am confident that this was not the original intent of this story. But. This is its impact. This is its power over time. It is you, and it is me. It becomes about the here and now, and the wrestling we do, over who we are.

And if this is what the story is about, if this is a wrestling match between Judaism and Christianity, then *ashreinu, mah tov chelkeinu*, how fortunate we are, how lucky is our lot! For there has been more progress in the past generation, more forward movement and positive growth in Jewish-Christian wrestling in the past forty years than in all the 2000 years before that.

Some of you may remember what it was like, not all that long ago. Catholics were not even allowed to enter into a Protestant Church, much less a synagogue. Everyone thought they were right and everyone else was wrong in

some kind of sense that the truth is out there, and there was only one truth to be had. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960's and similar changes in mainstream Protestant churches, finding ways to view competing claims as siblings in search of a larger circle of truth have simply revolutionized relations between Jews and Christians.

And the fact of our living with each other, amongst each other, having neighbors and, in many cases, family members from other faiths, what a different world we live in now. It is hard for our young people to imagine how much has changed, in how short a time.

Sometimes I wonder whether the prevalence of marrying someone from a different tradition is the *result* of more positive views of each other, the *cause* of such a development, or whether both are the outcome of religious life being less pervasive and even taken less seriously as a whole than once it was.

What I can say with certainty is that I am grateful... and excited... to live at a time in which the wrestling we do with other traditions is seen in a figurative way, as a wrestling with ideas, as an opportunity to learn from each other. Those who step into the rink of interreligious dialogue with us are our partners in a strengthening of the spirit, and the search for a greatness we cannot reach alone.

On the other hand, however, the demons of another day remain underneath the surface. And we live at a time with the progress of the past is not permanent, unless we act to make it so.

There is a new book which I just ordered, by Rabbi James Rudin, who served for many years as the National Director of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee. His book is called *Christians and Jews, Faith to Faith: Tragic History, Promising Present, Fragile Future*.

Knowing both Rabbi Rubin and something about his perspective on this topic, I assume I can guess, from the title – as can you – where he is going in this work. It would not take long to recall and recite to one another the fringe extremists found in all of our faiths, hoping hate will gain traction and the triumphalist supercessionism that so plagued us in the past will return in full force. Here, just around the corner at a local high school, the vicious hate group Westboro Baptist Church was a blessed no-show in their announced protest against the Laramie Project, but they have been here before, all the way from Kansas with their provocative placards that “God hates Jews and fags.” Recent rulings from the Vatican seem to call into question or even undermine some of the broader-minded ecumenical pillars of Vatican Two, especially the fundamentally important assumption that there are more than one paths to discover God and spirituality and authentic truth. The Islamaphobia we read about around the country is not entirely absent from our own midst: Beth El of Old Georgetown Road, we read in today’s Washington Jewish Week, was all set

to rent worship space on Friday afternoons to a local Muslim group, and the better angels of our nature may yet prevail and have them affirmatively act to do so... but not before there were angry objections based on the most vicious of stereotypes. We can name with ease all those who make strange or distorted comments about us, the Glenn Becks and Rick Sanchez' of the world, but let us not forget that insanity and incitement spare no group, and there are rabbis in Israel who sanction the murder of gentiles and dare to call their treatises part of the living Torah. Or that a group called Kahane Chai preserves the memory of that racist Meir Kahane, who argued that democracy was antithetical to the Torah. As far as we have come, and we have come a long way... the future path of interreligious acceptance and the joy we have been able to discover not only in similarity but also in differences with one another... that future is fragile indeed.

Ultimately, this is a future that will be determined not by conferences or councils or commissions, not by institutions but by individuals. The wrestling to take place is not a one-time event on a center stage for all to see, but in all of our hands, and all of our lives.

My friends, I turn to you, for examples you can think of, for anything you are willing to share, of the wrestling with the "other" that has happened in your own experience. There may be times when you avoid conversations with committed friends of other faiths for fear of confrontation. But for Jews, inevitably, eventually... it is not just rabbis or leaders of our people, but all of

us, all of you... whether we like it or not, each one of us is an ambassador of an ancient and still living people.

So, are there any examples you can think of, anything you can share... of moments of interaction that changed your life or, perhaps, maybe, might even have changed the outlook of others. And how did you walk away from such a match? Were you limping, or were you whole? How have we done, with the legacy of four thousand years... resting on your shoulders?

[Discussion.]

We toss and we turn, through a long lonely night. But dawn comes, and the shining rays of a new day. Who are we? Our story is told not just in the name we want to give ourselves. The reality of the blessing we bring is based, just as much... on the name that we are given by others. How they see us, based on how we handle ourselves. How we act in the world.

Shabbat Shalom.