

Parshat Vayishlach, *Mah Nishma*, Leffell School Newsletter

The number of compelling personalities in Parshat Vayishlach could make our heads spin. There are so many powerful characters in Genesis 32:4-36, the few chapters that make up our week's portion. Which one is our hero—or for that matter, our antihero—this week? Who should be our focus?

It is easy to be drawn to Jacob in this, perhaps his best moment. He finally thanks God for what he has been given, he is generous with his brother after years of self-involvement, and he has a mystical wrestle with a man or angel who grants him blessing, as well as the name which we take on as our own. Both psychologically and spiritually, we want to feel empathy for our ancestor Yisrael, the God-wrestler.

And yet, we cannot help but notice other figures who cast their shadows over these chapters. Esav, the sworn enemy brother, takes center stage in the encounter with Jacob, and his lineage provides the final 41 verses of the *parasha*! Maybe HE is the main character of the week. Or perhaps we should focus on the story of Dinah. This week marks the first “Shabbat Dinah,” a new initiative in which over 50 synagogues around the world have committed to speaking out against rape, domestic violence, and sex trafficking this coming Shabbat. Even if it wasn't actually rape (as Anita Diamant's midrashic novel *The Red Tent* suggests), do we not have a responsibility to address her story? Or should we look to Simeon and Levi for their willingness (or, their overzealousness) to act in defense of their sister? Which of these people is our model for this week? From whom should we take our most serious lessons?

I must admit, Jacob remains my favorite personality of the week. For years, I have been sure that the highlight of *Vayishlach* was his encounter with the strange “ish”—the strange man or angel who visits him in the middle of the night and fights with him. Like our greatest commentators, I have always wondered who this “ish” is. Could Jacob actually have fought with an angel? In his 13th century *Guide for the Perplexed*, the great rationalist Maimonides claimed that no angels actually appeared in the Torah! Rather, for Maimonides, every time an “angel” is described, the Torah is relaying a dream sequence or a vision that God provided for the person who experienced it. A dream sequence! No wonder, then, that Jacob becomes the embodiment of the people Israel. If, as dream researchers tell us, every person we encounter in a dream represents an aspect of ourselves, then every person in our *parasha* might, perhaps, be an aspect of Jacob's personality. Transitively, if Jacob is Israel, then every one of them is an aspect of *our own selves as nation*.

Each of the stories in our *parasha* is connected through this moment. If the Torah is our people's story of self, then perhaps each of these characters provides a glimpse into who we are. Each of us is represented in the story of Dinah: part victim, part victimizer, part overzealous avenger. Each of us is Jacob and Esau, a part of a family dynamic in which we sometimes play “good child” and we sometimes play “bad child.” We are sometimes the generous ones, giving over half of our goods to another, and we are sometimes the fearful, withholding ones. Each of us has, as psychotherapist Carl Jung wrote, a “Shadow self.” For Jung, the process of growth and self-knowledge requires an ability to become conscious of the darkest aspects of one's

personality. “Everyone carries a Shadow, and if [it...] is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it.” As individuals, we can look to the Torah for a variety of models through which to view each aspect of our own selves. For our people, the Torah can help us to confront that shadow side within ourselves.

In her book *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*, Biblical scholar Aviva Zornberg names *Parshat Vayishlach* “The Quest for Wholeness.” She points to a key verse which describes Jacob’s journey to Shechem just after his wrestle. *Vayavo Yaakov shalem ir Shechem*. And Jacob arrived whole (*shalem*) to the city of Shechem (33:18). For her, this word *shalem* is the apotheosis of Jacob’s story.

“...Jacob must expose himself to fear, to face-to-face encounter with what he most dreads, ... and the mirror identity of the face of his dread. He comes to know his courage and his vulnerability, simultaneously... what he has gained is...a strong goodness—a paradoxical, “whole” condition.”

Jacob, in whose eyes we can see all the other personalities of our *parasha*, confronts his own shadow self and in doing so, becomes whole. May we—the people of Israel who bear his newly acquired name—learn to see Jacob’s story as our own, and may we, too, find wholeness in seeing all parts of ourselves. *Shabbat Shalom*.