Vayishlach 5787 We contain multitudes

I've always had a hard time figuring out how I feel about Jacob in *Parshat Vayishlach*. On the one hand, he seems to be at his finest moment: he finally thanks God for what he has been given, offers an open hand to his estranged brother Esau, and has a mystical wrestle with a being who grants him a blessing along with the name we take on as our own. Yet in the very same portion, we also watch the old Jacob resurface—calculating as he splits his camp to hedge his bets, haunted by a past built on deception, and strangely passive when crisis strikes his family at Shechem. Between the schemer, the coward, and the spiritual hero, I sometimes wonder: which one is the real Jacob?

The more I read this story, the more I think the answer is all of them. The key lies in Jacob's mysterious midnight encounter with the *ish* (man)—the stranger who grapples with him until dawn. Maimonides explains in *The Guide for the Perplexed* that angelic encounters like this take place inside a prophetic dream or vision. And as the Talmud in Tractate Berakhot 55b observes, a person is shown in a dream only what emerges from the thoughts of their own heart.. Put those two classical insights together, and the opponent Jacob faces in the dark isn't an external enemy at all—he is wrestling his own psyche, locked in a clash between every competing side of his personality.

Maybe the reason Jacob's story stays with me is because I recognize that tug-of-war in my own life. At any given moment, I might be trying to show up as my best, most generous self—and just as easily catch myself keeping score, playing it safe, or acting out of fear. In *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Carl Jung writes: "How can I be substantial if I do not cast a shadow? I must have a dark side also if I am to be whole." Real growth—both in our individual lives and in the life of our people—starts when we stop pretending that shadow isn't there.

Walt Whitman captured that same truth in *Song of Myself*: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" And the Torah echoes it right after Jacob's nightlong struggle, when he arrives at the city of Shechem:"And Jacob arrived whole (*shalem*) to the city of Shechem" (Genesis 33:18). Wholeness in the Torah doesn't mean being simple, pure, or free of conflict; it means being substantial enough to cast a shadow—large enough to contain multitudes, holding our courage and our fear, our generosity and our flaws, without splitting apart.

Carrying the name *Yisrael* means inheriting that same complexity. Like Jacob, we all contain multitudes. Being *shalem*—whole—and finding *shalom*—peace—doesn't come from defeating our shadow; it comes from having the courage to hold all of who we are. Shabbat Shalom.