

Parashat Vayishlakh: Wrestling to Win

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Bereishit 32:25-29

וַיֵּתֶר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיִּאְבֹּק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלֹת הַשָּׁחַר:
וַיֵּרָא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיִּגַע בְּכַף-יָרְכוֹ וַתִּקַּע כַּף-יָרְכוֹ
יַעֲקֹב בְּהִאָּבְקוֹ עִמּוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר
וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ כִּי אִם-בִּרְכָּתִי: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
מִה-שָּׁמַךְ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב: וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֹאמַר עוֹד
שְׁמֶךָ כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׁרִית עִם-אֱלֹהִים
וְעַם-אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּגַּל:

Jacob was left alone. And a figure wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

1. Jacob's Victory

Hosea 12:5

וַיִּשְׂרֹא אֶל-מַלְאָךְ וַיִּגַּל בִּכְהָ וַיִּתְחַנֵּן לוֹ בֵּית-אֵל
יִמְצְאוּנוּ וְשֵׁם יִדְבָּר עִמָּנוּ:

He strove with an angel and prevailed— The other had to weep and implore him. At Bethel [Jacob] would meet him, there to commune with him.

Bavli Hullin 92a

(הושע יב, ה) וישר אל מלאך ויוכל בכה ויתחנן לו
איני יודע מי נעשה שר למי כשהוא אומר
(בראשית לב, כט) כי שרית עם אלהים הוי אומר
יעקב נעשה שר למלאך

The Gemara continues to discuss Jacob wrestling with the angel. The prophet states: "**So he strove [vayyasar] with an angel, and prevailed; he wept, and made supplication to him;** at Beth El he would find him, and there he would speak with us" (Hosea 12:5). From this verse **I do not know who became master [sar]**, i.e., was victorious, **over whom. When** another verse **states**: "And he said: Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; **for you have striven with angels** and with men, and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:29), **you must say** that **Jacob became master over the angel.**

בכה ויתחנן לו איני יודע מי נעשה שר למי כשהוא אומר
ויאמר שלחני הוי אומר מלאך בכה ליעקב

The verse in Hosea states: "**He wept, and made supplication to him.**" From this verse **I do not know who cried to whom. When** another verse **states**: "**And he said: Let me go,** for the dawn has risen" (Genesis 32:27), **you must say** that **the angel cried to Jacob.**

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

Seforno on Bereishit 32:27	
לא אשלחך. שגדולים צדיקים יותר ממלאכי השרת:	לא אשלחך, this utterance by Yaakov confirms what the sages tell us that the righteous are greater than the ministering angels.

Hizkuni on Bereishit 32:27	
שלחני כי עלה השחר עד עתה עכבתיך ומעכשיו יש לך רשות ללכת. ד"א כי עלה השחר ואין לך לדאוג כי אין דרך מזיקים להתראות ביום.	שלחני כי עלה השחר, "give me permission to leave for dawn has arisen!" "Until now I held you up from proceeding according to plan; now you have permission to proceed on your way." An alternate exegesis of this strange conversation: The angel told Yaakov that since it now was almost daylight, he no longer had anything to fear from him. It is not customary for destructive forces to do their jobs during the daylight hours.
כי אם ברכתני ואז אהיה בטוח שלא תהיה נוטר איבה. ולא תזיקני על שנאבקתי עמך.	כי אם ברכתני, "unless you first give me a blessing." Yaakov meant that he would not accept the angel's words until he had demonstrated that he meant it, by giving him a blessing. After that he would feel confident that he no longer had reason to fear him and would not seek revenge because he had failed to disable him. (Rash'bam)

Or Ha-Hayyim on Bereishit 32:27	
לא אשלחך וגו'. זה הוא שאמר כי שרית וגו' ותוכל כי משל בו ולא היה המלאך יכול הלוח זולת רצונו...	לא אשלחך, "I will not let you depart, etc." When the angel said to Jacob that he had struggled with a celestial being and had prevailed, he meant that he now could not depart without Jacob's permission.

2. Israel's Victory

Max Dimont, <i>The Indestructible Jews</i> ,
<p>If we now shift our sights from a general view of the history of civilizations to focus on that of the Jews only, we see an equally incredible succession of events. We see Jewish history begin with one man, Abraham, who introduces a new concept to the world—monotheism—which he hands to his descendants. Now Jewish history hits the roads of the world. After a nomadic existence in Canaan, enslavement in Egypt, and settlement of Palestine; after defeat by the Assyrians, captivity by the Babylonians, and freedom under the Persians; after an intellectual clash with the Greeks, strife under the Maccabees, and dispersion by the Romans; after flourishing as mathematicians, poets, and scientists under Moslem rule; after surviving as scholars, businessmen, and ghetto tenants under feudal lords; after surviving as statesmen, avant-garde intellectuals, and concentration camp victims in the Modern Age, a small segment of these descendants of Abraham return—after a 2,000-year absence—to reestablish Israel, while the rest choose to remain in the world at large in a self-imposed exile.</p>
<p>Such a succession of events would be improbable were it not historic fact. What can we make of these events? Are they mere accidents of history? Are they but blind, stumbling, meaningless facts, a series of causes and effects without a definite design? Or is this improbable succession of events part of what philosophers call "teleologic history"—that is, a succession of events having a predetermined purpose.</p>
Winston Churchill
Without victory, there is no survival.