

Fear of Men and Angels

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

In his autobiography *The Book and the Sword* survivor and scholar David Weiss Halivni makes a remarkable observation. Pondering the fears and courage that have marked his own life, he notes that Jacob wrestled with the angel, but he was frightened of Esau.

Why did Esau frighten Jacob, while he fearlessly faced an angel? Is it because Jacob was less afraid of God than of man? Perhaps Jacob knew that God was ultimately merciful, but Esau was unpredictable, violent, capricious — and wronged.

It could be Jacob's fear lay in his conscience. He did not wrong God, except inasmuch as he stole from his older brother. But he had wronged Esau. Esau was the living reproach to Jacob's past sin. To be confronted with one's sins is frightening. More frightening, perhaps, than to struggle with God.

Another answer (questions of Torah are never that simple). The midrash claims that the angel was Esau's guardian angel. So in a sense Jacob struggled with Esau twice — spiritually and then physically. For some people the spiritual struggle is less disquieting than the physical. In his book, that is Professor Halivni's ultimate point, and it might be taken as an analogy for Jewish history: our spiritual struggles have been mighty, but fearless. Physically, however, our people have been repeatedly decimated. We long for a time as a people and a world when we will still struggle in spirit, but our physical selves will be safe from harm.