

December 13, 2008, Vayishlach, The Blessing of Self Creation

The rabbis say in the Talmud that someone who studies their lesson a hundred times can't be compared to someone who studies it 101 times. And when I was in school and they told us that, I thought that was pure professorial propaganda. They just wanted us to go over it again and again and again and again.

But I'm beginning to think they had something. And I will illustrate it by what I talked about last night when we had a wonderful Friday Night Live service with many wonderful special guests. David Gregory, who's the new host of Meet the Press, was there. Rick Warren showed up and we celebrated together.

And I shared with them the fact that I had a revelation about this morning's Torah portion that I have read thousands of times. But the thousand and first time, I realized something that I had never seen before, and that at least so far, I'm sure a commentator noticed it, but I did a quick check and I didn't see anybody else comment on.

Jacob is wrestling with an angel. It's the day before he's going to meet his brother Esav. And we know that up to now, as those of you who have been attending the Torah class know in great detail, Jacob has not been the sweetest guy on the block, not only does he cheat his old blind father of the blessing that he intended to give to Esav. And by the way, when he cheats him of the blessing as his mother who instigates the whole thing, you should forgive me, but she does. When his mother says to him, I want you to go and cheat your father and put on this hair so that you'll feel like Esav, what does Jacob say? But I might get caught! What he doesn't say is, that's wrong. That he doesn't say, right? He just says, I don't want to get caught. She says, don't worry, you won't get caught and if you get caught, the sins on me. So he goes, okay.

But not only does he cheat his own blind father, but then when he gets kicked out of the house and God comes to him in this beautiful dream of the latter and so on and so forth, he wakes up. And what does he say to God? He says, if you take care of me and if you give me food and if you give me clothes, and if you bring me home safely, then I'll worship you.

Jacob has some issues. Now granted, he's also got a brother coming after him who wants to kill him. So it's not easy. And he is the only bearer of this great tradition that Abraham and Sarah passed down to Isaac and Rebecca. Now it all falls on Jacob. So what you have here is a massive struggle with who he is. And this angel comes and wrestles with him and he grabs the angel and he says, as the dawn is breaking, I will not let you go until you bless me. Until you bless me.

And the angel says to him, your name will no longer be Yaakov, which means the one who supplants the other, who takes the place of the other. You will no longer be Yaakov. From now on, you will be Yisrael. At that point, Jacob releases the angel and the dawn comes.

Now, as I said, I've read that story more times than I care to count, and it never occurred to me until this week when I read it again that the angel doesn't bless him. A blessing is, may you have children, may you have wealth, may you have health, may you have safety, may you succeed. But the angel doesn't say any of those things to him. He says, you got a new name. And yet clearly Yaakov understands this to be some kind of blessing because he lets him go.

So the question is, what is the blessing that Yaakov understands himself to receive from the angel who doesn't bless him? But really to ask the question is almost already to supply the answer. It's the blessing of self-transformation. The angel says to him, up to now you've been Yaakov, but you need not be Yaakov forever. You can be something new. You can change. Yaakov has had an ambiguous history and you might feel trapped by that history, but you don't have to because from now on you can be Yisrael. And bits of Yaakov, Yaakov-ness will always stick to you, right? You don't just toss out your old self as though it never existed, but it can be subsumed. It can be held under a larger framework of what it means to be Yisrael.

Now, that is a very powerful message, and it's a powerful message, not only because of the message itself, but increasingly in our world. We are told that what you are is determined for you. You are a product of your genes. You are a product of your environment. You are a product of your peers. You are a product of your parents. And none of those things do you really get to choose. Your parents send you to a school. There's your peer group. You're born with your genetics. Nobody picks their parents. And so you're stuck. There's nowhere to go. You're going to be Yaakov.

But where does the transformation in Yaakov come from? Here's a part of the story that every commentator notices, which is it says, *Vayevater Yaakov livado*, Jacob was left alone, *vayeavek ish amo ad alot hashachar*, and a man struggled with him until the coming of the dawn. So if he was alone and someone struggled with him, who struggles with Jacob? Jacob. And where does Jacob's change come from? Jacob. And who really decides that he's going to be Israel? Jacob.

And that is a crucial message, at any time of life and in any condition of society, because right now many people feel that they're the victims of forces larger than themselves. Their businesses are collapsing, their pension plans are destroyed, and they feel as though their corks on an ocean, and they have no determination in and of themselves where they will go or what will happen. And what Yaakov teaches us is it's not true that ultimately whatever happens to you doesn't determine you, it's you, and in your reaction to what happens that decides who you are, that Yaakov could change and become Yisrael.

That's the Hanukkah story. The Jews were subject to a much larger force in the world, and they could have collapsed and they could have disappeared. But instead, we light the chanukiyah. And I want to say something about the chanukiyah, which we put in a window, and we do it because we say *pirsumei nissa*, we have to advertise the miracle. Now, what's the miracle? Really, think about this for a moment. The miracle we say is oil that was supposed to last one day lasted eight days.

Now, what kind of miracle is that? That's really not stretching God's powers very much. He created the world. He can make oil last a few more days. It's making God, as I said last night, into a sort of inventive housewife. You know how she only has a little hamburger meat, but you'll make it last all week. Whereas if you or I had to cook it, it wouldn't last one day. So God makes the oil last for several days and we say, oh my God, what an incredible miracle. This from a God who can split seas, make the sun stand still, and create the world.

But I think ultimately that's not the Hanukkah miracle. The miracle itself is advertising the miracle. The miracle is that after thousands of years, when the temple no longer existed, when Jews were scattered all across the world, when there were repeated attempts to destroy our people and our tradition come this Hanukkah, you will all God willing, have a chanukiyah in your window. That's the miracle. And you don't do it because you have to and you don't do it in your genes. You do it because it's part of our creation of ourselves.

It's part of understanding what the Book of Mishlei of Proverbs means when it says the soul of a human being is God's candle. That's why we have these bags here, because we want to create that miracle for other people, to give them food, to give them clothing, to give their children books and toys because they don't have them.

That's our mandate. That's what Yaakov does. He recreates himself by rekindling the *ner* of his *neshama*, the candle of his soul. And even though he enters as Yaakov, he exits as Israel and so do all of us. We enter as individuals, as different, separate people with our own dreams and disappointments, but when we are together in this *kahal*, we are Israel. We make our own miracles, light our own candles. We are inspired by God to do that which God's children need. *Pirumei nissa*, to advertise the miracle, to fashion the miracle in some ways, in fact, to be the miracle.