"*Vayyeitzei*: Struggling with angels and men"

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The sidrah *Vayeitzei* relates two encounters that Jacob had with angels. In the first he sees them ascending and descending on a ladder linking heaven and earth (Gen.28:10-15). In the second, they confront him on his journey back to Canaan after years of exile at the home of Laban (32:1-3). In the following sidrah (32:25-30) he has a third and most traumatic encounter with an angel who maims him, but from whom Jacob secures a blessing— a belated confirmation of the firstborn's blessing that was for so long at dispute between Jacob and his brother, Esau. This would have given his conscience no little unease, particularly at the subterfuge that he had been persuaded to employ in order to secure it. These three angelic episodes are problematic in the extreme, and may be construed as representative of a psychological or spiritual struggle within the soul of father Jacob over his relationship with the God whose guiding hand he so desperately needed to be assured of on this dangerous and fateful journey into the unknown.

The angels were ascending and descending, moving away and out of sight at one moment and coming into view at another, emblematic of his own sense of uncertainty as to whether he was deserving or otherwise of God's protective Presence. Had he committed an unpardonable sin in taking away his brother's birthright? Was God unprepared to collude in placing the sin on the debit account of his mother, even though she had reassured him — *alai kil'latkha b'niy*— that upon her his curse would be laid (27:13). Perhaps a curse is not a currency that can so readily be exchanged; perhaps it would adhere to him forever; perhaps that original vision was meant to send a signal that there was a possibility that the angels

might abandon him forever, return to their heavenly source, and leave him defenceless and at the mercy of Laban, Esau, and who knows who else?

He vacillates between self-justification and self-doubt:

> *But then, who knows? Perhaps it was divinely ordained that I should get the blessing*? *After all, my father, Isaac, was his father's younger son, yet it was clearly God's wish that his older brother, the firstborn Ishmael, should be banished and disinherited in my father's favour. Then again, did not my brother readily agree to the sale? And even after he ran, weeping and complaining to father that I had seized his blessing, did not father confirm me as its rightful recipient, saying,* gam baruch yihyeh*, "May he, indeed, be blessed." Could there have been any more authentic and prophetic revelation than that? And surely my mother would have disclosed later to father that she had absorbed any ensuing 'curse!' But, ultimately, father had neutralised it with that one affirmation,* gam baruch yihyeh! *Now, surely, the descending angels are here to protect me.*

For the entire twenty years he spent in exile, in Laban's home, he remained preoccupie4d with that mystery of the angels' upward and downward flight; with their alternating d tance from, and proximity to, him. He could not bear heaven's tantalising uncertainty. And as soon as he leaves Laban's home to return with his family to Canaan – in the final verses of our sidrah – he again (believes he) encounters angels. But this time it is not merely uncertainty that grips him; it is terror. Esau is bearing down on him; he fears for his life. He is gripped by

an existential doubt and a feeling of his spiritual unworthiness. What if the curse has not been neutralised after all, and the appearance of these angels is to put it into effect?

Vayomer ya'akov ka'asher ra'am ***machaneh*** *Elokim zeh* – 'And Jacob said, when he saw them, ''this is a heavenly camp.''' These are not friendly angels; they have formed themselves into 'a camp'; they are in battle formation!

He is so desperate to be exonerated of divine censure – to clear his conscience of guilt over the blessing he had taken from Esau and the curse that his mother assured him she would take away from him – that, understandably, his anxiety once again surfaces, concretised into the angelic apparition. And, as his anxiety level rises, it takes on the form not of angels confined to their *machaneh*, or barracks, but as one terrifying super-angel ready to impose divine retribution for his having deceived his father and supplanted his brother.

The angel leaps upon Jacob, and they wrestle the entire night. Neither can get the better of the other as Jacob oscillates between victory and defeat; between accepting his guilt and asserting his righteousness. As he becomes distracted at one moment by those overwhelming self-doubts, his adversary seizes upon his vulnerability to wound him in his thigh.

But Jacob—used to clinging on to adversaries from before he emerged from the womb—clings tenaciously to his belief in his own righteousness, demanding that the angel confers the blessing upon him*: Lo ashaleichacha kiy im beirachtani,* "I shall not let you go until you have blessed me." Jacob's growing confidence in himself, in his innocence and righteousness, gives him mastery over the hostile force. *Vay'varekh otto sham*, "And he [the

angel] blesses him there." Finally, that potential curse is removed. Jacob is vindicated. Vindicated, though maimed!

But why was he (or did he feel) maimed just in the thigh? Perhaps it was because there are no half measures in the process of self-exoneration. To satisfy his conscience, and ensure that all future self-doubting is expunged, Jacob has to have every unworthy act purged. But one such act remained outstanding, namely his imposition of an unnecessary oath on Esau. Jacob had impugned his brother's honour; he had refused to accept his word that he was transferring his birthright to him. He had demanded that Esau take a solemn oath – 'Swear to me first; and he swore unto him' (Gen. 25:33) – one that would have invoked the name of God.

In biblical times, taking a solemn oath involved placing one's hand upon the thigh of the one to whom one was swearing (See Gen. 24:2,9; 47:29). The oath was not to be imposed lightly. Its use was highly restricted, as were the conditions under which it could be annulled. It was certainly not to be employed merely to confirm a sale – even one as important as a birthright. So, Jacob's own thigh was dislocated as an act of 'measure for measure' catharsis.

Ironically, in spite of having been maimed, Jacob now feels *shaleim* (Gen.33:18) - emotionally whole, exonerated, at peace.

Shabbat shalom/shaleim!

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