

Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

Parashat Vayishlach

Confronting Your Fears

Yaakov's return to Israel would not be simple; the factors that caused him to flee all those years ago had not changed. His mother Rivka, who said she would send for him when his brother's murderous anger subsided, had not contacted him. To the best of his knowledge, his brother Esav was lying in wait, plotting deadly revenge. Nonetheless, Yaakov was coming back. What awaited him on the other sides of the Jordan River was unknown, unclear; the only certainty was the fear in his heart. The dread and anticipation of catastrophe would have paralyzed a lesser man; sometimes, fear is worse than the catastrophe itself. Yet Yaakov marched on, deliberately but cautiously.

In fact, his fears were not unfounded. He had no illusions about the nature of his adversary: He had begun wrestling with his brother *in utero*, leaving their mother Rivka distressed and bewildered enough to seek Divine guidance. This was no ordinary morning sickness, nor was their struggle the normal movement experienced in a twin pregnancy: God informed her that she was carrying two distinct nations that would be at odds for millennia.

Apart from the personal history between himself and Esav, Yaakov had another reason for concern: As the sun set, Yaakov was alone, and he was accosted by an unknown assailant. This was certainly not a good omen. In fact, rabbinic tradition identifies this nocturnal opponent as the spiritual power of his brother Esav.

In short, the confrontation he was about to face had been twice foreshadowed, first by the struggle in Rivka's womb, and again in the dark of the night before the actual encounter. To make matters worse,

as the sun rises, Esav approaches with four hundred ruffians. Yaakov's chances of survival seem dismal.

And then, something strange happens: The ruffians turn out to be no more than a benign prop, part of the scenery; as Esav is overcome with emotion and fraternal goodwill. The two brothers forge an understanding. Twenty years of fear, dread and anger melt away in a brotherly bear hug; friendly chatter takes the place of violence.

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As readers, this turn of events is more than unexpected; it seems the plot has taken an unimaginable turn. We have been witnessing the drama unfold for several chapters, watching the characters develop, feeling their animosity build. We have been waiting for the unavoidable collision, for the other shoe to drop. The loaded gun, as it were, was introduced in the first act of this family's story, and we fully expect that it will be fired in this climactic scene. Is it possible that Yaakov wrestles with Esav as a fetus, and again with his angel, yet when they finally meet on level ground, as two grown men who are prepared for violent confrontation, they settle their differences peacefully? What went wrong - or should we ask, what went right?

We may posit that the strange confrontation in the night changed the course of Yaakov's confrontation with Esav the following morning: By defeating Esav's spiritual representative, Yaakov had deflated his flesh-and-blood adversary.

Perhaps there is a more powerful lesson to be learned from the surprise outcome of this story: Even when all the signs point in one direction, history is not predetermined. Spiritual imprints may have been made by our personal or family history; precedents may exist in our relationships. Nonetheless, each of us is capable of changing the course of history, of rewriting the script. Our personal and collective fate is not predetermined; outcomes are neither prearranged nor

immutable. Cycles can be broken - cycles of violence, cycles of abuse, cycles of enmity. We can determine our future.

Despite premonitions, precedents, signs and omens, Yaakov uses his prayers and the skills he has acquired from a lifetime of living by his wits to extricate himself from what seemed an impossible situation. The message for all of us is that we must not let our past determine our future. We must not allow dreams or signs dictate how things will work out. We must take control, and truly believe that God has entrusted us with freedom of choice. We may not always succeed, but we must not allow past failures to determine our future. Sometimes, despite all the evidence to the contrary, things do work out. Just ask Yaakov.

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For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/11/audio-and-essays-parashat-vayishlach.html>