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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

### WRESTLING WITH THE KLINGONS Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

According to xenohistorian John M. Ford, Klingons play chess using only one set of pieces for both players. Every sword in the game is double-edged; whatever almost kills your opponent makes you desperately vulnerable.

Biblical grammar often plays Klingon chess with pronouns. Every "he" and "him" can refer to both characters in a dialogue or confrontation. Thus "He saw that he could not overcome him, so he touched the hollow of his thigh." Who saw that who could not overcome whom? Who touched the hollow of whose thigh?

The great teacher of rabbinic commentary Nechama Leibowitz of blessed memory, whom I had the privilege of studying with, believed that the ambiguity indicates that Yaakov wrestled with an aspect of himself. How else can it be simultaneously true that "Yaakov was left alone" and that "a man wrestled with him until dawn"?

Put this insight together with the compelling argument that the "man" in some way symbolizes Esav, and Yaakov's battle with the angel becomes an identity crisis. In her book *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*, Avivah Zornberg suggests that Yaakov found the role of Esav, which he acted in order to obtain the blessing of Avraham from Yitzchak, to be disturbingly congenial. In this nocturnal struggle Yaakov develops a sense of self that is finally authentic and not either a reaction to or an imitation of his twin.

I suspect that almost every modern reader find this approach obvious. So it is worth recognizing how little of it is a necessary reading of the text.

To begin with, of course, the text never acknowledges that Yaakov's wrestling partner is a metaphysical creature. He is introduced simply as "a man". He engages in physical confrontation. Unlike the angel who appears to Shimshon's mother, he does not perform wonders or disappear into flame.

Nor does anything in the scene recall Esav. What drives the rabbinic notion that the man represents Esav is the location of the story, and a clever notion that when Yaakov describes Esav as having an E-ohim like face, he means that Esav's face resembles that of his wrestling partner. This is strengthened by the justification for Yaakov's renaming, that he had established mastery over both E-ohim and human beings. But experienced readers of Tanakh know that the word E-ohim has many meanings.

We have not yet mentioned Rambam's position that angels appear only in dreams. Rambam is comfortable with the conclusion that our story is a dream, but Ramban wants to know then why Yaakov ends up limping. Ramban is so exercised by this question that he declares Rambam's position "forbidden to hear, let alone to believe".

What if we accept both Rambam and Ramban? What if angels only appear in dreams, and so this man must not have been an angel?

Rashbam is happy to accept angels in the physical world. But the rationale he gives for this angel's presence could just as well be filled by a human being acting on a dimly understood impulse.

Yaakov, says Rashbam, was afraid of Esav, and desperately wanted to stay out of his way. Yes, he sent messages toward Esav – but that was only because he thought Esav was already on his way, and so bribery was prudent. Yes, G-d had promised him protection – but perhaps his merits had run out. So Yaakov planned to flee, perhaps in a direction different than either wing of his already divided camp. He was alone by design. But G-d wanted Yaakov to demonstrate faith in His promise. So G-d sent an angel – who might as well have been a drunk and disoriented college wrestler – to obstruct Yaakov’s flight.

Rashbam here is attempting a subtle but methodical dismantling of Rashi’s presentation of Yaakov.

Rashi presents Yaakov as carefully preparing for all contingencies. Prayer is first, but depends on G-d’s favor; so bribery is also in order. But bribery works only on someone who doesn’t realize that he can have it all by force, or isn’t angry enough to be willing to make the effort – so martial preparations are called for.

Rashbam presents Yaakov as helter-skelter panicked. He prays, he bribes, he divides – not as organized alternatives, but as often contradictory or nonsensical plans. In the end he puts no faith in them anyway.

Moreover, Rashi presents Yaakov as responding to a very real threat; Esav’s anger had not cooled, and it is Yaakov’s clearheaded and calm preparations that leave him with the emotional and mental strength necessary to defeat Esav’s angel. Rashbam, by contrast, argues that G-d has already tamed Esav’s heart before Yaakov prays or bribes – the four hundred men are intended as an honor guard. Perhaps the only way that Yaakov can turn Esav into an enemy is by presuming that he is an enemy, and fleeing him as a monster rather than greeting him civilly.

But what if Rashbam’s Yaakov read Chumash with Rashi? How was he to know that Esav was tamed? What if Rashi’s Yaakov mistakenly read Chumash like Rashbam, and his preparations for war became a self-fulfilling prophecy?

This is not a purely literary and theoretical issue. The relationship of Yaakov and Esav often frames conversations and determines attitudes about the relationship of Jews and the West, especially the Christian West. Legend, reflecting or creating history, has rabbis throughout the ages reviewing Parashat Vaishlach to prepare for crucial meetings with Western leaders.

The usual lesson derived is to preserve all options, and be wary of excessive entanglement. But for Rashbam, the thing to fear is fear itself.

And here we are back to Klingon chess. It turns out that our parashah can be our political salvation or our undoing, depending on how we read it.

But Klingon chess is also a metaphor for all human relationships. We can only “win” in life by opening ourselves to love, and therefore to betrayal.

My experience as a judge in rabbinic divorce court is that among the most destructive forces in human relationships is “anticipatory aggression”, or the idea that one must attack the other person in order to defend against their “first strike”. As in nuclear war, such notions make little sense when the other side regardless retains the capacity to destroy you, perhaps many times over. And this is almost always the case when close relationships break up, let alone when there are children involved.

In the end, what is often utterly crucial is to determine whether your battle is really with someone else, or rather with your projection of them and their motives.

In other words: The surrealist readings of our parashah assume that Yaakov is battling his internal Esav. But what if we merge them with Rashbam, and assume that Yaakov is battling an Esav who exists *only* in his own head?

Beware of anyone who tells you that they can derive clear policy directives from Torah narratives.

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