

Parashat Vayishlach - Gen. 32:4-36:33 Rabbi Yael Ridberg



Jacob is the most complex of the patriarchs. He is portrayed as the most human and vulnerable of them all and we can see one of his drivers is anxiety and uncertainty, which could be understood as fear. Last week he ran away because he was *afraid* of Esau's reprisals for having taken the birthright. This week, *Parashat Vayishlach* opens 20 years later, and Jacob is on the verge of reuniting with Esau. Jacob sends his children and wives ahead for safekeeping, and he crosses back and remains alone to wait for his brother. He knows Esau is coming with 400 men, but he does not know if Esau comes in peace.

Since Jacob left home, he has fallen in love, became a father 13 times over, and even had a divine encounter. Jacob at the river was alone and vulnerable, with a now heightened anxiety anticipating a reunion after a 20 year old unresolved conflict may not go well

As he waits, someone comes and struggles with Jacob at the *Yabbok* river until the break of dawn. There is some play in the text between the words *avak* (dust), *y'avek* (to struggle), and *Yabbok* – the name of the river. Jacob wrestles with the being, kicking up dust, his hip is wrenched, and he limps away. Jacob emerges a changed man, with a new name: *Yisrael* – one who wrestles with beings divine and human and prevails.

While anxiety has driven Jacob, he finds stasis in his new state. His fear and awe took him to a deeper level as he waited for Esau. The Zohar (Genesis 11b) teaches that there are three kinds of fear but only one is real. Fear that what you have will disappear, which causes you to dig in; fear that you will be ridiculed or punished for your actions, which exhausts your strength; and fear which holds power to create a new beginning.

This third fear is genuine and "sacred" and is so important because it enables us to grow and learn in life. This is the kind of uncertainty and anticipation that can open new doors to a future we have yet to imagine.

In the "dust up" of our lives and our striving, what are we striving for and towards and how best can we get there? What new beginning awaits us when we push through our fears?