

PARASHAH THIRTY-ONE

Genesis 32:3–33:17; Obadiah 1:1–15; James 1:1-12

Notes by Tim Hegg

Wrestling with God

Firmly rooted in our Torah section today is the fundamental idea that those whom God has chosen are in a position to interact with Him at a very personal level. Far from the distant gods of the pagan nations, the God of Israel comes close to His chosen ones and intersects their lives. Wrestling with God has thus become a hallmark of the Hebrew way of faith. Rather than accepting the unexplainable without question, the long-standing tradition of the Sages is summed up in the term פְּלְפּוּל, *pilpul*, which roughly can be translated “discussion”, “debate,” (see Jastrow, “פְּלְפּוּל”). We “wrestle” with the issues of life and the teachings of Torah, attempting to know their true strength, and in a sense, to know whether or not they can be overcome by argument. This is because we define faith as divine knowledge, not a leap in the dark. Faith, from a Jewish perspective, is an acceptance of Divine revelation and an acting upon it. Far from the Greek concept of faith as mental agreement alone, the Hebrew definition is one of knowledge through interaction—through covenant relationship based upon divine revelation.

But there is a second aspect of faith from a Hebrew, or I might say, biblical perspective (since all writers of Scripture save Luke were Hebrew, and even Luke clearly writes from a Hebrew perspective as well): faith never negates personal responsibility. The mystical side of faith never diminishes or negates the requirements of each individual to do all within his or her power to accomplish what is right—to establish justice in one’s own life and in the world. The idea that one could pray, believe, and then remain inactive to see what God will do is foreign to biblical faith.

Our section today emphasizes in very dramatic ways how a covenant member, Jacob, acts when he is quite sure disaster awaits him just around the next corner. Let’s get the picture well in mind: he has left Laban, his father-in-law, after working for him 20 years—20 years in which life has not been easy, but in which God has blessed him abundantly. Moreover, in the recent past God has appeared to Jacob in a dream, assured Him of blessing, and given him divine instructions to return home with his families and wealth. Thus, with possessions and God’s promise in hand, Jacob leaves for the Promised Land. Now comes the important question: did he believe the promise God had given him, that he would be blessed?

It is not uncommon for bible teachers to suggest that Jacob’s faith was less than what it should have been, because when confronted with the approach of Esau, the text tells us “he was very afraid” (וִירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד). “If he had honestly believed”, some would tell us, “he wouldn’t have been afraid.” But this is not a biblical perspective of faith. In fact, increased faith often increases fear, fear of HaShem. And the fear of HaShem means that one is very careful how one lives life, knowing that HaShem is aware of every thought and action. A person of faith therefore “trembles at His word” (Is 66:2) Furthermore, Jacob’s fear caused “distress” (וַיִּצַר לוֹ, “and it distressed him”). Is distress a sign that one lacks faith? Once again, the biblical answer is “no.” Faith, in fact, may bring levels of distress. The *BDB Lexicon* takes the verb צָרָה, *tzarah*, to be from the basic root צָר (*tzar*) meaning “narrow,” from which concept we derive the English “straits” to mean “be in distress,” as in “he was in dire straits.” Jacob, realizing the approach of Esau with 400 men (the common size of a moving army, cf. Abraham’s 318 men in Gen 14 which is smaller than normal),

experiences fear and feels as though he is in a narrow passage-way without ability to turn right or left. In short, he recognizes there's no place to hide.

So how does Jacob demonstrate his faith in the God who has promised to bless him? First, he takes wise precautionary action: he divides the group in two. Why? Because he has come to understand the utter necessity of maintaining his family line. The covenant depends upon it. Therefore, if one group is attacked, perhaps the other will survive. Secondly, he rehearses the promise of God—he reminds himself of what God has said, and he reminds God! “God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac—HaShem Who said to me, ‘Return to your land and to your relatives and I will do good to you’” (v. 10, note also v. 13). Note well that he confesses who God is. He is the covenant making One, the God who has already established and maintained His covenant promises to Abraham and Isaac. What is the obvious implication? He will do the same for me! Next, he reminds himself of the very promise God has made to him. God had promised to accomplish good on his behalf. What God promises, God performs.

But note thirdly what happens. Jacob makes a clear assessment of himself (v. 11): “I have been diminished by all the kindnesses and by all the truth that You have done . . .” (translation from the Stone Chumash). The Hebrew is quite interesting: קטנתי מכל החסדים ומכל האמת אשר עשית את עבדך, literally “I am smaller than all the loving kindnesses and all the truth which you have done with Your servant.” It is not so much, as the English translations have it, that “I am unworthy,” as it is this: “In comparison with your great faithfulness to the covenant promises (חסד ואמת is often used in relationship to covenant promises), I am very small.” True faith puts things into a proper perspective. “I am little; You, O HaShem—You are great.” In the words of John the Immerser, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30)

Then Jacob, in a true exercise of faith, makes a request to HaShem for salvation: “Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother” (v. 12). Faith never settles for what might be—it presses upon the heart of God through prayer the desires and needs of the moment. Faith brings the argument of justice and the petition for mercy to the “throne of grace” (cf. Heb 4:16), anticipating that both will be received. Jacob expects God to act according to His character by maintaining the promises He has made. This is faith in action—faith in prayer.

But fourthly, Jacob exercises faith by taking further precautions! Faith from a biblical perspective never negates the need of the individual to take action—to follow good lines of wisdom in attempting to head off the advancement of inevitable hurt or disaster. It is not enough to pray to God for deliverance. He may determine to deliver us through actions we take which are based upon wisdom and His divine guidance. Jacob therefore makes a military decision to (1) send messengers (the Stone Chumash, with Rashi translates “angels,” but the Hebrew מלאך, *mal'ach*, can be translated either “angel” or “messenger”) with gifts as tribute to his brother, (2) divide the company yet again, putting the children with their mothers, and (3) to go out ahead of the group himself and meet Esau one-on-one. Each of these measures is based upon wisdom—an understanding of human nature, and perhaps a specific understanding of Esau's nature. Rather than showing a lack of faith, Jacob's actions show genuine faith, a faith that results in actions. Had he turned and ran away from Esau, this might have shown a lack of faith. Or had he fled and left his family without protection, this would surely have shown faithlessness. Instead, he carefully lays a plan by which, in all likelihood, Esau would react favorably to him and would receive him back as friend and brother.

The final episode in our story, however, displays the very heart of faith. Jacob has already confessed the promises God has made to him, made prayerful request to HaShem for his safety,

and taken every precaution to protect his family (he put them across the river, and waited alone for Esau). Then, in a surprise turnabout, a wrestling match takes place, but not between Jacob and Esau, but between Jacob and “a man.” This unidentified “man” turns out to be none other than HaShem Himself (v. 29).

First, after it is clear that “the Man” has prevailed, Jacob’s name is changed to Israel, a play on the word “to strive with” (שָׂרָה, *sarah*) and the word God (אֱלֹהִים, *El*). Jacob has “wrestled” with God and man and has prevailed (literally “is able”). But next Jacob wants to know the name of the Man—he wants to have some control over Him. But to know the name of HaShem is not to control Him, but to submit to Him! And thus the question: “Why do you inquire of my name?” What do you really want by knowing My name? In short, what do you expect to get out of the exercise of wrestling with God?

This, then, is the final lesson we learn about faith from our passage, a lesson clearly reiterated in our apostolic passage. Faith is never satisfied with its present position. Jacob had the promise of God, he had the covenant, and he had been blessed. But it was not enough. There was far more about God that Jacob wanted to know, to understand, to live within. Here was an opportunity for Jacob to wrestle with God, to know Him personally, to interact with Him as never before. Here was an opportunity to discover about God what was only a mystery. And this opportunity Jacob would not let pass by, even in the face of Esau’s approach. But what he learns is even a greater surprise.

God touches Jacob on the hip, and causes a wound. Jacob would therefore limp for the rest of his life (or at least this seems to be implied from the text). Growth in faith brings personal humility—a humble and contrite spirit before the God who does all things well. Wouldn’t it have been better to approach Esau with an image of strength? Wouldn’t Esau feel all the more capable of destroying the brother who had deceived him, when he saw how vulnerable he was? Why would God ask Jacob to approach his brother on this, one of the most frightening mornings of his life, with a limp?! Because faith confesses that God’s ways are not our ways, and our ways are not His. He works in ways we could never imagine—He works in ways to extol His greatness. We, then, are privileged simply to be trophies of His grace, monuments for eternity of what He can make from nothing. This is the life of faith—a wrestling with God in which we come more and more to be enthralled with His greatness, and recognize how weak and needy we really are.

After the night wrestling had finished, and Jacob had time to reflect on the event, he realized that he had actually been face to face with God. He therefore named the place Peniel, “face of God.” In light of the later assertion that no one can see God’s face and live (Ex 33:20), the Sages understand this not as God’s face, but as the face of the Angel of the Lord (Targums Onkelos and Ps. Jonathan) or the face of the guardian angel of Esau (Mid. Rab. *Gen* lxxviii.3). But Jacob is clear: he names the place “the face of God.” As far as he was concerned, the “man” he had encountered was, in fact, the very God of His fathers Abraham and Isaac. Here, as often in the Tanach, the invisible God of Israel is found incarnate in the form of a man. The Torah never tries to explain this anomaly. Rather, the fact that God exists as both the invisible One of Israel, as well as the revealed One Who comes to His own clothed in human flesh, remains an accepted fact in the pages of the divinely inspired Scriptures. We are asked to accept what seems, in our limited understanding, to be an impossibility. We are simply asked to believe.

Our *parashah* ends with yet another difficulty: Jacob appears to enter into deceit in that he promises to join up with Esau, but then departs to his own destination. Esau plans to travel to Seir, and Jacob says he will come there as well (33:14), but at a slower pace, since he has women and

children, as well as flocks, who would need more time for the journey. But after Esau leaves, Jacob heads to Succoth and remains there. It should be understood, however, that Jacob's reasons for going more slowly were not simply excuses to avoid contact with Esau. His flocks were giving milk, and to drive them too fast would cause injury. Moreover, the fact that women and children were among his group meant that they would need to travel more slowly. He did travel to the region of Seir, in which Succoth was located, and may well have intended to visit Esau later, something he may have actually done, though the text does not give us the details. Furthermore, the language employed, in which Jacob declines Esau's offer of leaving some of his men for protection, is typical of the manner in which ancient negotiations were accomplished. Jacob did not need additional military strength—he was content with the promise of God's protection, and had sufficient men himself. Thus, we should understand Jacob's declining of Esau's offer as a polite way of letting Esau know that his offer was appreciated but not needed.

Jacob was living out his faith—he was depending upon God, and making decisions based upon God's promises. Once again, we see the maturing faith of Jacob, a faith in his God Who had promised to protect and bless him and his family. May we likewise learn from the life of Jacob, and place our faith in God Who promises to supply our needs as well.

The *Haftarah* chosen for this Torah *parashah* has an obvious connection: Edom is the nation descended from Esau (Gen 36:8). Even though in our *parashah* Esau greets his brother Jacob with tenderness and acceptance, such congeniality did not persist for long. Edom, the descendants of Esau, became the constant enemy of Israel and existed off and on as an independent nation until the later half of the 6th Century BCE. Obadiah's prophecy, who most likely wrote this prophetic oracle after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezer in 586 BCE, foresees the final destruction of Edom, and Malachi, writing around 450 BCE, confirms that Obadiah's prophecy was fulfilled, for he describes Edom this way:

"I have loved you," says Adonai. But you say, "How have You loved us?" "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares Adonai. "Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness." (Mal 1:2–3)

Edom's final destruction comes as punishment for their treachery against Jacob (Israel) and particularly at the time of Nebuchadnezer's destruction of Jerusalem and deportation of Judah:

On the day that you stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gate and cast lots for Jerusalem—You too were as one of them. (v. 11)

Rather than coming to the aid of his brother Jacob, Esau joined those who sought his destruction and aided them in their evil designs. As a result, Esau fell under the curse of the covenant: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Gen 12:3). Here is history from which every modern nation should learn an important lesson: The one who touches Jerusalem, touches the apple of HaShem's eye (Zech 2:8). No nation can expect to exist under God's blessing while at the same time helping and abetting the enemies of Israel.

The treachery of Edom is described by Obadiah as even more insidious than their former alliance with Assyria. When the Holy City was being destroyed, Edom waited "at the fork in the road"

to destroy the few who were able to flee the city. Like Amalek who preyed upon the weak and feeble in the exodus from Egypt, so Edom took pleasure in slaughtering the fugitives of Jerusalem or forcing them into slavery (v. 14).

The punishment of Edom is in equal measures: “As you have done, it will be done to you” (v. 15). In the same way the Edom sought to possess Judah and take his wealth, so Judah and Joseph will be the fire that burns up Edom like stubble so that there will be no survivors (v. 18).

The primary lesson we learn from Obadiah’s prophecy is clear: God will always be faithful to Israel and even though He may use Israel’s enemies as a means of punishing her waywardness, He will never abandon Israel and ultimately, her enemies will be destroyed. In the final days, when the battles are over and the dust clears, “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26).

The Apostolic section chosen for this Torah portion focuses upon the theme of trials that come into the lives of God’s people, and finds its connection to the trials Jacob experiences. Why was it necessary for Jacob to meet Esau at this time in his life? Why couldn’t God simply appear to him and bless him with his new name rather than requiring a wrestling match? Are the trials we face simply the consequence of living in a fallen world, or is there more we are to understand? James tells us that there is. He says that we are to “consider it all joy” when we encounter various trials. Now James is not a masochist trying to teach us to enjoy pain! Nor is he trying to diminish the fact that trials are just that—situations that bring grief, sadness, hardship, and undue toil. So on what account does he admonish us to face the trials of our lives with joy—not some joy or a little joy, but “all joy?” He does so because he expects that we have the knowledge of divine wisdom: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing . . .” He does not base his exhortation to have joy in the midst of trials on some sort of psychological mumbo-jumbo or some kind of existential philosophy that concludes life is meaningless and so we ought to laugh off its absurdities. Rather, he expects that we have come to know something to be true and that we are willing to live within the realm of that reality. What is it that we *know* which allows us to have joy, all joy, in the midst of life’s trials? We *know* that God is sovereign—that He is in control, and that He has promised to cause all things to work together for good for those who have been given the ability to love Him through His divine act of calling them to Himself (Rom 8:28). Since we know this to be true, we accept trials that come into our lives, not as the random events of a world gone mad, but as allowed and even purposed by God to shape us into the image of His Son. So James continues: “knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect (=mature) and complete, lacking in nothing.” He teaches us that *cognition* is not enough. We must live in accordance with what we know to be true. He writes: “And let endurance have its perfect result. . . .” By this he means that we must persevere while in the trial and not give up. This does not mean that we go about with a plastic smile on our face as though the trial is really no trial at all. No—we moan and weep; we cry and struggle; we hope the trial will pass and we long for shalom. But what we do not do is give up. We don’t throw in the towel and abandon the struggle to be all God has determined we shall be. We persevere, and in doing so, we “let endurance have its perfect result” which is nothing less than growing up “to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Messiah” (Eph 4:13), or as James describes it: “. . .so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

These words of James offer us a lesson in community building. Very often, the trials we experience come in the context of relationships, and particularly in the relationships we hold most dear. When our friends misjudge us, or when we carelessly say or do things that cause offense; when we

fail to meet the expectations of others or when others fail to meet our own expectations—then the trial of community presents itself. Sometimes we react with anger, seeking to hurt those who have hurt us. (This usually includes some form of *lashon hara*, evil speech.) Other times we withdraw and may even abandon the community in order to escape the trial of strained relationships. Still other times we try to forget about the problem and pretend it really didn't happen (but the “elephant” still remains in the room). But if we recognize that letting “endurance have its perfect result” is often done in the context of maintaining relationship within the community, we will strive all the more to do what must be done to repair and strengthen our communion with one another. This will inevitably require humility and submission to God's way of forgiveness and restoration. But in the end, if we are willing to act upon what we know to be true (as James exhorts us), our community will be strengthened as each individual within the community becomes more and more conformed to the image of Yeshua through the trials we endure together.