

Parashat Vayishlach

"Hey Yaacov, Someone's Calling your Name!" "If it isn't Yisrael, I'm not Home."

by Zvi Bellin on Friday December 12, 2008

15 Kislev 5769

Genesis 32:4 - 36:43

I never realized this before, but Yaacov is renamed twice in this portion. Both times his new name is Yisrael. He is morphed twice from the One Who Grasps Ankles to the One Who Wrestles with G-d. The first time he is renamed by the man he wrestles with throughout the night. On the second occasion he is renamed by God. On both occasions Yaacov is first blessed and then renamed. An obvious question then is, why the double renaming? Is the man's renaming not good enough? It seems that there might be a hint to the answer if we look at what transpires between the two naming narratives.

After the first naming Yaacov's life goes on a rollercoaster of extremes. Yaacov walks away an injured man as he goes to face his brother Esav, and with Esav, he faces his past misdoings. It seems to me that the fear that Yaacov feels is rooted in the fact that he knows that he wronged his brother by sneaking the First Born Blessing from him. Taken at face value, the text suggests that Esav's expected rage is justified. Yaacov knows that he deserves a good whipping from his big brother.

What happens though? Miracle of miracles! Not only has Yaacov grown up over the years, but so has Esav! They meet, embrace, kiss, and weep. The Torah throws us a total plot twist and we can imagine that Yaacov's fear is transformed to elation. From here, Yaacov gracefully rejects Esav's offer for the brothers to sojourn together toward home. Yaacov, with his new limp, wants to take things a little slower, and he settles his family for a time in the city of Shechem.

As the plain text suggests, in Shechem, Yaacov's family suffers a terrible tragedy. Dina, Yaacov's only mentioned daughter, is raped and abducted by the prince of the land, Prince Shechem. Yaacov's reaction is to say nothing. Even when Shechem approaches Yaacov to work out some marriage deal, Yaacov remains silent. Dina's brothers, though, seize the opportunity for revenge and trick all the men in the city into getting circumcised. At the height of their pain, two of Yaacov's sons kill all the men in the city. The remaining sons pillage the city, taking riches, livestock, wives, and children. In a few turns of a page, Yaacov's family falls into a moral black hole. It is in this morally decrepit space that Yaacov is renamed Yisrael again, this time by G-d.

What can we, as GLBTQ people, learn from our forefather Yaacov/Yisrael in this portion? Each one of us has an ideal vision of who we want to be and how we wish to be perceived in our communities. I want to be fully expressive of my gay identity and not be afraid to go into an Orthodox shul, even my parent's Orthodox shul, with my beautiful partner. I want to fearlessly stand up to bigoted propositions that would deny me the right to be a father if that is the path I choose. I want to write this d'var Torah without any fear of who might read it. This is Yisrael, boldly holding on and demanding the blessing of acceptance. Yet sometimes, I am Yaacov. I become afraid and I settle into the *status quo*. I give in to my parents because I empathize with them. I introduce my boyfriend as one of my six housemates.

The narrative of *Vayishlach* teaches me that this is okay. We all flip-flop between our Yisrael and Yaacov moments. Ultimately, though we are called by G-d to express our truest selves. May we all be blessed to live that truth in each breath and to be reminders to each other to strive for our own personal and global ideals of genuine acceptance and equality.



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