

Vayishlach: Wrestling with ourselves

I would like to share with you a very beautiful lesson I learnt from a sermon given by Rabbi David Wolpe, and it has to do with a very strange story in the life of Jacob, probably one of the most enigmatic stories of the whole Bible.

After living for 20 years with his uncle Laban and getting married to Leah and Rachel, Jacob prepared himself to meet with his brother Esau, the one from whom he stole the first-born blessing and threatened to take his life as a revenge. Jacob doesn't really know what will happen in this meeting: Does Esau want to kill him? Does he is willing to forgive Jacob and make peace? Our patriarch prepares himself to cover all the possibilities: He divides his camp to prevent a disaster in case of a war, and he also prepares a convoy of presents for Esau to show him his good willing.

But before the encounter with his brother, in the middle of the night, Jacob had a fight with a mysterious man. The Torah tells "And Ya'akov was left alone and some man wrestled with him until daybreak". Jacob fought with him and won the battle, but before letting the anonymous man go he ask him a special request: "I won't let you go unless you bless me". And the man, answering Jacob's request, gave him the following blessing: "From now on, you will no longer be called Yaakov, Jacob, but Israel".

And here we should ask the following question: Jacob asked from a blessing, but what he received? Not a blessing, he received a new name! A blessing is the expression of a wish for other person, and here we have a change in a name.

But Jacob let this strange person to go, so we can conclude that he understand that change in his name as a kind of blessing for himself. So what is the blessing that Jacob understands he is receiving from this person who doesn't bless him? What could be that blessing?

If we take on account Jacob's difficult and complicated life and personality, we may answer that question thinking that the blessing he receives is the blessing of self-transformation. The man would be saying to him: Until now you have been Jacob, the Jacob who took advantage of your brother and got from him the first-born rights. You have been the Jacob who dressed up like his brother in order to deceive his blind father and to receive his blessing, the Jacob that behaves like the meaning of your name: "twisted". But now even though you have been that Jacob until today, you need not to be that Jacob any more, you can change, you can transform yourself and be something different. You can be "Israel" which comes from the word "straight – yashar". You can be something new, you don't have to be trapped by your history...

And certainly Jacob already started to live that transformation: During the 20 years in Laban's house he discovered what it feels to be alone, without any protection. He was deceived by his uncle, he worked seven years for a woman that he didn't love, he understood what treason means and he learnt to grow by suffering and hard work. And after that experience, where he received exactly what he did to others in the past, Jacob was now another human being.

And I think this an incredible and powerful message for every one of us: How many times, like Jacob, we feel that we are conditioned by our past actions, by our mistakes and the way we are? How many times we say to ourselves: We are just that way, we can't change, we have to learn how to live with our failures?

Many times, we limit our capacity to grow sending ourselves messages of resignation, trying to live with the idea that we just can't be better, that we cannot change our past or give to ourselves new opportunities. As any human being, we also fail in our personal relationships, within our families, in our businesses and in professional life. We have successes and we also have flaws. Every one of us has a little of the "twisted" Jacob, and like him we also have the option of seeking that blessing of self-transformation, if we can overcome our own fears and stagnancy.

The Torah is very clear in telling us that this particular fight between Jacob and the unknown man happens when our patriarch was "left alone". In the middle of the night, without the presence of anyone, even without God, Jacob was able to confront himself and let go his past.

Our rabbis gave many interpretations to this strange story: Some of them say that Jacob was fighting with Esau, other say that he was wrestling with an angel or even with God himself. But from all the interpretations I like the one that says that Jacob was fighting with himself. When it comes to grow and to be a better person, "fighting" with ourselves can be the starting point to achieve the blessing of self-transformation.

As human beings, as a family, a congregation, and even as a people, when we are able to confront our challenges and difficulties, we open the door for receiving new names and new opportunities for the future. May God give us the strength to do it.

Shabbat Shalom,

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