

Vayishlach

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Yaakov seems to be on the run constantly (though this is tens of years after his flight from Esav). He has escaped from Lavan even though he was pursued by this acrimonious father-in-law, and now he faces his brother Esav. He had no option. He could not have stayed where he was. Now, terrified, he moves his wives and children across the river Yabok to meet Esav. He divides them up into two separate camps in the hope that if one camp is massacred the other will survive. And he is found on the other side of the river, the wrong side.

What was he doing there? The Midrash says he was collecting some pots and pans that had been left behind. But it makes just as much sense to think that he might have been having second thoughts, even possibly thinking of fleeing.

An angel grapples with him. They fight till dawn. Yaakov is "fouled", but he hangs on and only lets the angel go with a promise of a blessing. The angel tells him his name should now be Yisrael, meaning "he fights with God and God and wins". It seems that this gives him the confidence to go back and face his brother, and happily everything is settled amicably.

Some commentators talk about this incident as involving an encounter with a real angel; others see it as a dream. In modern psychological terms we can see Yaakov wrestling with himself, his own anxiety, and finally overcoming his fear. But isn't it interesting that the name Yisrael, Israel, actually implies that we are constantly in a state of conflict, spiritually and physically. Isn't this precisely the state of the Jewish people now, at odds with ourselves and at odds with our enemies? Yet this story tells us we should have the confidence that we can sort things out.