

## Finding Light in the Darkness: Vayishlach 2020

It is so dark these days... Every year I am surprised again by this season of short days and so many hours of darkness. This year, we might also say we are living through dark times. We crave light, actual, physical light and also emotional, spiritual light, and I hope we will find some of that in the upcoming celebration of Chanukah.

Yet we should not always be so quick to resist the dark. At this dark time of year, we read in the Torah about the power of darkness, in the stories of our patriarch Jacob, a man of the night. A movie of Jacob's life story might be a film noir, as so many significant milestones for him take place in the dark of night.

It was in the dark of night that Jacob first felt God's presence, or felt it in a new way, the night he ran away from home and slept outside on the ground, dreaming of angelic beings on a ladder, and hearing God's promise to him. As we read in last week's parsha, Jacob woke up, literally, and also woke up spiritually, as he realized: God is in this place, and I did not know it! Jacob had been in the dark. And there, in the dark, he experienced the divine, and began a new spiritual journey.

As this week's parsha, VaYishlach, begins, once again Jacob is on the road through the night, returning home after 20 years. Now a man of experience and wealth, a husband, and father to a large family, Jacob's old fears begin to surface. He is terrified of his brother Esau, who had vowed to kill him. He does not know: will this family reunion will be a friendly reconciliation, or a military battle to the death? In his fear, he prays for God's protection.

As Jacob journeys towards his brother, the Torah makes a point of remarking on the passage of the nights. One night, he stealthily takes his wives, children and possessions across the river Yabok – we imagine them silently crossing the river in the dead of night. Jacob then crosses back alone. It is a striking image – In the dark *Yakov* crosses *Yabok* – in the dark, he crosses a border that is an acronym of his own name. Something profound, maybe terrifying, maybe awesome, is happening to Yakov in this crossing. Some ancient traditions even read this dark scene as a metaphor for death – for crossing from this world into the next world.

Yakov is then left alone in the dark, and an "ish" – a mysterious stranger wrestles with him all night. As dawn is breaking, neither of them has prevailed. The "ish" delivers a final fierce blow, wrenching Jacob's hip, and asks to be released. Jacob demands a blessing first, and the stranger gives him his new name of Israel – God-Wrestler.

Who is this "ish" who wrestles with Jacob? The Torah never tells us explicitly. He seems to be a divine messenger, like those who have followed Jacob in the past. Perhaps through this messenger Jacob wrestles in the dark with his own fears, or with some vision of his twin brother before he has to face the real Esau in the light of day. Maybe he is wrestling with his dark past, and his own darker impulses. We do not know.

What we *do* know is that the nighttime encounter leaves Jacob wounded but also blessed, and with a new name. Something transforming has happened to Yakov, and it has happened, once again, in the night. In the light of day, Jacob declares that he has experienced the presence of the divine, just as he declared 20 years earlier when he dreamed of the ladder.

How fitting that according to rabbinic tradition, Jacob established the evening prayer service, *ma'ariv*. He was a man of the night.

Through the stories of Jacob, the Torah shows us that it can be in our darkest moments, in the night-times of our lives, that we may open up more deeply to ourselves and to God.

As we make our way through this dark time of loss, fear and uncertainty, we might wrestle with profound questions and consider: what really matters to us? Who and what has been neglected in our personal lives, in our communities, in our world?

Last week, in a column about the pandemic, Pope Francis wrote, "This is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities — what we value, what we want, what we seek — and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of. God asks us to dare to create something new."

During the night, we should sometimes not be so quick to switch on the light. Sometimes we should stay and wrestle in the dark, even wrestle with God, as in the name bequeathed to us by Jacob, God-wrestler, Israel.

We may struggle there, and even receive a wound, but we may then wake up to discover and receive our greatest blessings. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*, may it be so. Shabbat Shalom