

JACOB 'S DESPAIR: A PSYCHOANALYTIC PORTRAIT OF WANING GREATNESS

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Near the end of his life, after long silence, elderly Jacob is introduced by Joseph, now vizier of Egypt, to Pharaoh. Pharaoh asks simply: *How many are the years of your life?* (Gen. 47:8). In this Egyptian land where 110 years is considered long life, here are Jacob's first words to this ruler: *Days and years of sojourn are 130; few and evil/bad were the days and years of my life; and I have not attained my father's in their days of sojourn* (Gen. 47:9).

Why this despair? Facing a ruler, employer of his favorite son, Jacob pours out bile, bitterness, falling short of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham?

To answer, let us explore Jacob's inner life. The better we understand this, the more we can grasp his contribution to the development of Judaism. The scale of blindfold justice shows what is being weighed in Jacob's mind. On one scale, Jacob has received the birthright; his blind father's blessing; marriage with Rachel, his first love; twelve sons and a daughter; and wealth.

On the weightier internal scale, watch the arms of justice tip:

1. he wrestles in his mother's womb, and later with an angel, attaining his new name Israel, a prevailer over God and man, but receiving a limp;
2. he deceives his father;
3. in exile for 20 years, he lives with a deceitful Uncle whom he deceives in turn;
4. he runs from Laban, Janus-faced, fearing the uncle pursuing and the deceived brother before him;
5. nearing his home, his only daughter is raped;

6. his sons go on a deceitful murderous rampage of Dinah's rapist and kin;
7. en route home, his beloved Rachel dies in childbirth, after Jacob unwittingly condemns her to death (around Laban's idols) and she is buried at the road side;
8. his eldest, Rueben, commits incest;
9. he is deceived by his sons to think that Joseph, whom Jacob sent into the field, was killed;
10. when faced with starvation, he sends his sons to Egypt, only to have Shimon imprisoned, then later to have the vizier demand Benjamin.

Even when he sees his son Joseph alive, now a vizier, Jacob's response also captures a life of dammed-up despair. As Joseph wordlessly embraces Jacob's neck, *weeping a long while* (Gen. 46:29, Israel said *I may die now, after seeing your face, for you are still alive* (Gen.46:30). We can weigh Jacob's blessings and his travails. But from his perspective from his comments to his son and to Pharaoh, Jacob enters the ring, heavy weight of despair predominating.

We know that in Jacob's family, sons struggle or are struggled over, and that a father will sacrifice his only son at God's command, or perhaps will come to knife's edge of sacrifice, believing that this God, unlike Moloch, does not need child sacrifice.

We are not told why Jacob has the idea that he should have Esau's birthright. We are left to the spare text and our attempts to interpret: but to interpret in a manner that respects the overall character development and the era of the subject.

Maimonides persuaded us that we are obligated to interpret Torah, not take it literally. But as in psychoanalysis, we must interpret carefully. We should sail close to the wind of meaning in the text, in order to arrive at our port: deeper, more accurate understanding of Torah and consequently of our Judaism; hopefully of ourselves. So, we should return to our text.

THE WRESTLER, THE HUNTER, THE SIMPLE

Jacob is born under family traditions and named meaningfully. What are these myths? How do they affect him? His mother, after ten years' barrenness, cries to God about her struggle within. God tells her she has twins and one will prevail over the other. And, like his mother, Jacob develops an identity of inner

conflict, as I will discuss later.

Jacob's name, like his son Joseph, points to a brother. Jacob's mother names him as the one who follows his brother. Jacob's name carries his pursuit of his brother and need to overtake him. Unlike his son, Jacob's name points competitively, enviously. And as they grow, Esau is favored by father, Jacob by mother. Esau is described by his vocation, a hunter, a man of the fields. Jacob? He is "simple," (*tam*), a "tent-dweller," (*yoshev ohalim*), a homebody, a mama's boy.

Jacob, we might say, is born under the "constellation", the family traditions of Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael; he is a wrestler, a follower, who strives to prevail. His identity points to another; he contends with those closest with him, his brother, his father, his father-in-law. While these are his constellations, his greatest gravitational pull is his mother.

But, Shakespeare cautions us "Tis not in our stars, dear Brutus, but in us".

Who does Jacob become, born a wrestler, a contender, a follower who yearns to prevail, a simple tent-dweller? He shows he cannot accept the passivity of tent dweller, he is not simple. He is born under the "constellation" conflict, and lives out the name in the first part of his life. Even when he leaves and returns to his homeland, he "hits" the place or is hit by an angel.

REBECCA'S BEAUTY, ABIMELECH'S ENVY, PARENTS' BITTERNESS

In this birthright section, Jacob is not "simple" *tam*, but shrewd. He greets his famished brother with a stark offer: Esau's birthright for a bowl of red lentil soup. Eons later, the Dutch make such a good deal: Manhattan for \$24 worth of beads.

CHAPTER 26: LOOKING GOOD, FARING BADLY

After Jacob shows Esau the price of feeling famished, (and Esau tells us how his empty stomach of the moment is more important than some silly birthright), we hear that famine enters the land (as it does again, when the many-ed Jacob returns to Canaan decades later).

Hear what happens to Jacob's beloved mother. She is described as *comely and*
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beautiful, a portentous phrase echoed later about Rachel. Here, beauty is treacherous. Jacob's father, like his grandfather in Egypt, fearing for his neighbors' jealousy over Rebecca, tries to pass off Rebecca as his sister. Unlike his grandmother, Sarah, the local king does not take her as concubine.

While Abimelech "saves" Rebecca from concubinage and Isaac from jealous murderers, he can't tolerate Isaac's prosperity, and exiles him. And under envious eyes, he is moved again, until he can rest at his father's well, Be'er Sheva, the well of oath.

How are we introduced to Jacob's next and more powerful deceit of his father? One paragraph ends with Esau takes two Hittite wives, embittering his parents.

What does this clever Jacob say when his mother sets him up to deceive his blind father? He does not resist, question, lean upon principles, address the conflict between respect of his mother versus father? No. *Esau is a hairy man, and I smooth-skinned. . . Perhaps I will be a trickster in his (father's) eyes* (Gen. 27:10). He worries he won't get away with it.

This young man, *na'ar*, shows pragmatism, obedience to his mother, but no evidence of conscience, nor filial respect. In Jacob's adulthood, this lack of respect and deceit will haunt him in the guise of his sons. The sins of this father does not only rain down upon his sons, but like a gale, blows back from the sons unto the father. (e.g. Shimon and Levi's murders versus Jacob's pact; sons' disrespect of father over Dinah's rape; Reuben's incest with Bilhah; vicious deceit about Joseph resulting in Jacob's descent in the Sheol of unresolved mourning.)

And sadly, Isaac does not trust Jacob. After Jacob lies *I am Esau*, (Gen. 27:18), Isaac asks to feel him *Whether you are really my son Esau or not* (Gen. 27:21). There is tension between father and son. Again, a tension we will see between Jacob and Laban, Jacob and Leah, Jacob and his sons, possibly including Joseph. Jacob's identity is as a wrestler with others, particularly those closest to him; tension becomes a part of this identity (as if he can not feel alive without this?).

And his mother manipulates Isaac into saving Jacob's skin. Knowing that both she and Isaac were bitter over Esau's local marriage, she suggests that Isaac

send away Jacob to marry among Laban's clan. Isaac sends him off giving Jacob temporary reprieve from Esau's murderous rage.

JACOB THE DREAMER

Jacob is the first explicit Jewish dreamer. Laying his head on a rock, in the wilderness of the homeland he is about to leave, he dreams: *Here is a ladder/ramp set against (brought out of/coming out of) the ground and its head arriving in the sky/heavens and here, God's angels were going up and descending* (Gen. 28:10). For the first time, God talks directly to him. *I am the God of Abraham and God of Isaac, the land on which you lie, I will give you and to your seed.*

But this Jacob is a negotiator, as he was with famished Esau. He vows that if God: remains with him, protects him, feeds and clothes, and returns him safely home, then and only then will *God be my God*. As he put a stone for his head, he puts a stone as a pillar to God.

The dream is a challenge to interpret psychoanalytically, since we don't have typical free associations. But, we can use the context of Jacob's sociocultural situation and Erik Erikson's expansion of Freud's dream technique to get some interpretive leverage.

This man on the lam, this homebody, now without protective mother, dreams of a ladder. Jacob is sent allegedly to get a wife (and covertly by his mother to save his life). Freud cautioned that we need be cautious of dream symbolism interpretation when associations are lacking. But a ladder (or ramp) to the sky may represent a sexual assertion, a wish and salute by this young man, who may dream hopefully that angels ascend and descend his ladder, carrying him to heaven.

Perhaps this dream is a hint of the inner danger Jacob feels on this journey of escape, bearing on only the purloined blessing of his father and a vision of a wife.

DECEIT OF THE DECEIVER (CHAPTER 29)

Here, Jacob is given his comeuppance by his Uncle Laban. The Laban family
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the future. In Genesis 30:25, we see a greater depth to Jacob's executive ego functioning. He is a shrewd bargainer, breeder, but continues to be marked, undermined, by his need to deceive and to escape. The latter is a character trait that remains with and marks him even over twenty years of exile. A second trait (shared with his forebears and his son Joseph) is that his competence evokes jealousy.

HOMEWARD BOUND, GOING HOME, HOMEWARD BOUND

Joseph's birth transforms Jacob: he decides to return home. When Laban offers him wages, Jacob refuses, but asks only to cull the spotted/speckled flocks. He breeds selectively and escapes Laban's fury. Laban catches him at Gilead, but forewarned by God not to harm (nor help) Jacob, plays "Let's make a deal." Yet, he demands the return of his stolen idols: stolen, unknown by Laban and Jacob, by Rachel. She now deceives both Laban and Jacob, sitting upon them, proclaiming her menses. Tragically, sure of himself, Jacob announces to Laban, that anyone who stole these will die.¹

In the next three chapters, we see two profound shifts in Jacob: He still seeks external blessings and wrestles an angel to do so. This appears to resolve his need to wrestle his way through life. He falls silent after his daughter's rape and Rachel's death. What do we make of Jacob's struggling from his mother's womb until his Angel wrestling, and his need for external blessings, whether from his father or an Angel? Jacob needs external confirmation and reconfirmation of his worth. This is unlike his grandfather, his father and we will see that it is quite unlike his favored son, Joseph.

Let us recast the situation. If Jacob felt internally secure about his worth (to his father, to his God, to himself), he would not need to keep seeking, struggling for blessings. Something is weakened, missing in him, a solid sense of self-worth. He doesn't feel blessed within.

His grandfather Abraham may argue with God (over Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction), but Jacob contends with his brother, his uncle and God's angels. Even God's messengers "injure" him, bump into him (Gen. 32:2), to jostle Jacob to realize that *this is God's camp*. Jacob's wrestling with a *man* (Gen.

32:25) ends his struggles, his blessing quest.

Facing and fearing his brother, fearful he will lose his family and flocks, he divides his camp in two, he implores God for succor, reminds Him of their deal twenty years earlier at Beth El. Alone, a man wrestles Jacob throughout the night, wounds him permanently, yet Jacob will not release him until Jacob is blessed.

This blessing is his last, this new name, *Israel* captures Jacob's core identity: he *struggles with God and man and won out*. What Jacob does not realize is how much he has struggled with himself, nor how much this has cost him; a sense of peace with himself, with those close to him, with his God. Yet, he does not consolidate this *Israel* identity: for the remainder of his life, he vacillates between his identities of Jacob – the earlier man, more conflicted, the deceiver, the striver, the blessing-seeker – and Israel, the God/man wrestler who has prevailed, who should be at peace with his achievements. For now, Jacob is either very politic or gracious towards his brother, or both. The narrative is unclear about his motivations.

His second transformation occurs in the blur of chapters 34 and 35, a darker shift of light, a chiaroscuro: Dinah's rape, as she strolls in the surround of her father's new homeland, and Rachel's death. Jacob the voluble, the wrestler, becomes recalcitrant, almost quiescent, a puppet of his sons' whims.

Jacob brings his family to his homeland and his only daughter, still a *girl* on a stroll is raped. The wrestling Jacob, the active man, falls silent until his two sons deceive the rapist and slaughter all the men of the village. Jacob's only response: that his sons have created trouble for him, a newcomer to this area. His son's response: *Like a whore should our sister be treated?* (Gen. 34:21).

Rachel dies in painful childbirth, ending this chapter. Dying, she cries out his name, *Ben-oni*, variously translated as son of my "vigor" or "sorrow." For the first time, Jacob renames a child, Benjamin, *son of my right* (hand). Rachel is buried on the roadside, near Efrat, perhaps one day's travel from Jacob's homeland in Hebron. Only at the end of his life, we learn from now-silent Jacob, how much he grieved his favorite wife.

Alter calls chapter 35 "miscellaneous notices" about Jacob, and later wonders

about the name *allon bakuth*, "weeping oak" that marks the burial site of Rebecca's nurse, Devorah. But, psychoanalytically, we understand 35 as the burial chapter, with each wave of burial building like a symphonic theme, to the ultimate climax of Isaac's death. We start with an ironic hint (Gen. 35:4): Jacob buries his family's idols (alluding to Rachel's theft?). Now, does he learn that his beloved stole her father's idols; does he remember that he unwittingly condemned her to death? We are not told, but the chapter hints tragedy, and within ten sentences, we hear. The idols he buries near Shechem, where his daughter was raped, his sons committed mayhem.

Then Rebeccah's nurse dies and is buried at *Allon Bakuth*. This weeping oak may be a totemic marker for the chapter: it states weeping, but we do not hear Jacob's weeping. Perhaps Jacob marks his tears with this mighty oak, its branches downcast. It forewarns Jacob of his parents' frailty, his timely return after two decades.

GOD NOW BLESSES JACOB, RENAMES HIM THE GOD-WRESTLER

Then, Rachel dies, *some distance from Efrat* (Gen. 35:14). Reuben commits incest (Gen. 35:22). Isaac dies (Gen. 35:28), uniting his wrestling sons once again, to bury him. Words become sparse from Jacob's mouth as we move to the last two deaths. His reactions are unstated, he becomes laconic for much of the rest of his life. Ironically, at the end of his life, we learn that it is Rachel's death that affected him, perhaps more deeply than his father's. Like a symphonic theme, Rachel's is the penultimate, rising to great emotional heights; Isaac's death, the ultimate theme, developing a denouement as if to release us from the intensity of deaths and burials.

JACOB, THE CHOOSER

Now we hear Jacob's transformation. After an interlude chapter, as if to reassure us that Esau too had 12 sons, had a prosperous life, we are abruptly jerked back to Jacob: Jacob, not Israel. Jacob, the son of a choosing mother, the grandson of choosing parents, chooses a favorite son, Joseph. Even at the end of Jacob's life, he contravenes Joseph to choose the younger grandson over the

other, as if to perpetuate the wrestling between siblings present since Cain and Abel.

Listen to the dual identities of this father. The chapter begins with Jacob, but after Joseph brings "ill report" of his brothers, we are told (Gen. 37:3) *And Israel loved Joseph more. . . he was a child of his old age*. Jacob rebukes Joseph over his second dream and *guarded the thing/word* (in his mind). Immediately following, Israel tells Joseph to check on his brothers in Shechem, the site of Dinah's rape, of buried idols. Jacob/Israel recedes from the story until his remaining sons beguile him into believing Joseph dead.

But, this command from Israel to his favored son raises questions not easily answered from the text. He favors the son; should know Joseph is hated by his brothers. Does he test Joseph, whether he can be a leader of his brothers? Does he put Joseph in his place after his provocative, apparently arrogant dream? His son answers *Hineini*, just as Abraham said to God before God commanded the Akedah. We listeners lift our ears at this *Hineini*. Is it an echo of the Akedah? Is Jacob testing Joseph dangerously, as God tested Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22:1)? This more troubling interpretation has some validity when Joseph ambivalently names his sons.

Jacob's sons took command after Dinah's rape; now they take greater command of this family, planning to kill, then to sell Joseph into slavery. Imagine what kind of nation, people, the Israelites would have become under the leadership of these ten sons had Joseph been killed. This lends narrative tension to this story.

Now, we hear Jacob's mourning: his clothes are rent and his gray head will go to Sheol. The mourning we did not hear after Dinah, Rachel, Isaac, now we hear. Jacob/Israel disappears from the narrative for some thirteen years in favor of Joseph. In chapter 42, he reappears, urging his "fearful" sons to get food from Egypt. In chapter 43, Israel resurfaces, rebuking his sons for jeopardizing Benjamin. Finally, he is brought back into the narrative as Jacob, whose *heart stopped* when he hears Joseph lives, then as Israel, who insist on seeing Joseph while alive. Is it Jacob or Israel?²²

Before we reach Jacob's articulation of the pinnacle of his despair, listen to his

battling identities since his angel wrestling (Gen. 32:26). When Abram becomes Abraham, gaining the "H" that brings him closer to God, he stays Abraham thereafter. But, Jacob/Israel's identity shifts with context until his life ends as Israel. After his renaming, we hear "Israel" used twenty two times, four of which for the "sons of Israel." But "Jacob" is used 42 times. Does this show how he thinks of himself? When he feels most humanly vulnerable, he is Jacob, especially in the burial chapter, when we hear "Jacob" fourteen times; "Israel" when God blesses him amidst the buried. But when he feels closer to a God, to a father of a people, to a more solid identity, he is "Israel": when he commands Joseph to his journey; when he sets out to see Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 46:1) and when he feels it is his time to die and bows his head (Gen. 46:29-30). At the end of his life, he is more Israel (eight times) than Jacob (twice).

I began with Jacob's despairing statements at 130 years, before Pharaoh. We have now journeyed through his life to understand why he felt despair. But Jacob has a predisposing internal deficit, in addition to the external vicissitudes cited, that made him vulnerable to despair, difficulty with mourning. Jacob, had a defective Ego Ideal, that part of our inner structure that softens the demanding, harsh Superego, that encourages us when we are uncertain, that is a balm of our souls when we are in Gilead. It is the font of creativity, of *joi de vivre*. Jacob/Israel lacks liveliness, joy, a sense of comfort with himself. The Ego Ideal is the heir to adolescence, much as the Superego is heir to the Oedipus. Whereas the Superego is heir to resolving our love for the parent of the opposite gender, the Ego Ideal is heir to our love of the parent of the same gender. Only when we can feel the reassuring, softening quality of the love of our own gender, can we more comfortably imagine ourselves as heir to that parent, as continuing his or her ideals. That prepares us for successful mourning.

Jacob did not achieve this stage. This is a tragic flaw. Not only was he not favored by his father, but also he deceived him. This shows a deficit in Superego. He left home without coming to resolution of his conflict with his father; he returned in time to bury him, not praise him. This episode in late adolescence set the defective foundation for a defective Ego Ideal. He did not have a loving internal figure to guide him, and he knew this, as he keeps

striving for someone's blessing.

Because of this, Jacob/ Israel – this man of mercurial, shifting identities – has a defect, a vulnerability in his character that predisposes him to the chronic wrestling, blessing-seeking and finally a partial shift in identity closer to the father-God, but an uneasy identity, like living on an earthquake fault, never certain of one's ground.

Both Ego Ideal and identity begin to consolidate at end of adolescence. As Jacob is unable to resolve late adolescent issues, specifically addressing his need for love from his father, love of his father, he is left with an imbalance. He has a surfeit of Oedipal victory: his mother's extraordinary love of him. He is left with a surfeit of rivalry with his brother. He transforms himself from a "simple" fellow, to a schemer. But without the softening touch of the Ego Ideal, he is left with a harsh need to seek external approval, blessing, always be wrestling, struggling with those closest to him.

He reawakens to his identity after his beloved Rachel has her first son, Joseph. He demands release from bondage to return home. But his return home is marked by tragedies. After the coup of Dinah's rape and Rachel's death, we see Jacob transformed. He becomes laconic, somber, even as he finally achieves the pinnacle of blessings, God's naming him as Israel. He cannot fully enjoy this achievement, this victory.

Fortunately, Jacob does not end with full despair. His 17 years with Joseph permitted some healing. Jacob blesses his grandsons, although perpetuating sibling strife, over Joseph's protests. His death bed scene begins with a harsh screed against the eldest, but softens for the rest. He hints at a shift to integrity. He dies as Israel, who has wrestled God and man, and prevailed, and can rest.

NOTES

1. Like Jephthah, who upon military victory, offers to sacrifice the first thing he sees on his return home, finding, instead of a sheep or a goat, his enthusiastic and beloved daughter dancing forth to greet him.

2. Later, we learn that Joseph is given a new second name by Pharaoh, "Tzofnat Paneah", Egyptian for "God speaks" or "Creator of Life." But Joseph's reaction to this second naming is not

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like his father's. Joseph doesn't try to take on this other "face". The name is never again used; Joseph doesn't struggle the rest of his life with dueling identities. Joseph's inner identity is more secure than his father's.