

Parashat Vayishlach sermon December 2017

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Like many children of the 1960s, I spent my childhood and adolescence enthralled by aviation and space flight. For a bookish kid, that meant devouring volumes on aerospace exploits, history, and technology. Many such books quoted an ecstatic sonnet called “High Flight,” which John Magee wrote in 1941. It begins “Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth / and danced the sky on laughter-silvered wings.” This was written by a 19-year-old American kid, a pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He got to take a Spitfire on a test flight to 33,000 feet, and by the time the hypoxic teenager returned to earth, his sonnet had practically written itself. “...And while with lifting mind, I’ve trod / the high untrespassed sanctity of space / - Put out my hand, and touched the face of G-d.”

“Put out my hand and touched the face of G-d.” Now no one except another aviator would mistake this for great poetry, and we can agree that it’s derivative and sophomoric, but *dan l’chaf zchut-*—let’s cut the young man some slack: after all, John Magee was just an amateur poet, whose day job—fighting Nazis—allows us to sit comfortably 66 years later, *in a synagogue*, and discuss his poetry. And as far as being sophomoric, he should have lived so long to be a sophomore: Magee deferred college to go to war, and he never saw age 20.

But literary merits aside, Magee’s sonnet went viral, as poetry can in wartime. And like a successful virus, it’s firmly embedded in Canadian, British, and American cultural DNA: if you’ve been around any of the three air forces, you know those 14 lines by heart, and we heard Magee’s words in President Reagan’s TV address comforting the nation after the *Challenger* explosion: the President said the astronauts had “slipped the surly bonds of earth” to “touch the face of G-d.”

That phrase, the face of G-d, comes up twice in today’s Torah portion, Vayishlach, first after Jacob wrestles with a man he calls Elohim, and right afterwards when Jacob has his long-feared meeting with Eisav. Let’s consider those two texts as a package.

First, Jacob wrestles with the man whom he calls Elohim. The result is a kind of draw: the supernatural being refuses to speak his name, but does give Jacob a blessing, a hip injury, and a new moniker. That new name is *Yisrael*, which might mean ‘wrestles with G-d’ or ‘prince or champion of G-d,’ depending on which root you think the word comes from. Jacob in turn renames the location P’niel—meaning ‘face of G-d,’ saying (page 202, verse []), *ki ra-iti Elohim panim el-panim*, “because I have seen Elohim face to face.”

Now what does Jacob mean by *Elohim*? The most obvious answer is G-d Himself, and there’s plenty of support for that in the text. The being won’t say his name, which in literature suggests he’s a character you’ve met already. He gives a blessing, which angels don’t do. If Israel means G-d-wrestler, then the person Israel wrestled with would probably be...G-d. So it is easy to see this episode as a theophany, an appearance of G-d in the world, and further to see the Elohim figure as an avatar or

incarnation of G-d. Sure, a theophany in human form would be unusual for the G-d who prefers to appear in burning bushes, pillars of fire, and whirlwinds, but if G-d is omnipotent, why not appear as a man? Well, one very compelling *sociopolitical* reason why not is that theophany in human form is essential to other religions, some of which were rival to or even hostile to Judaism. For example, Zeus of the Hellenists and Jupiter of the Romans were always incarnating as men, to seduce some nymph or princess. And then our cousins the Christians made human-form theophany, the incarnation of G-d, a central pillar of their theology. So what would you expect Jewish authorities to do, finding one stray episode of human-form theophany in our Torah? One would expect them, mixing politics and theology, to tiptoe around it or sweep it under the rug.

And so they have. Our own *Etz Hayim* translates *Elohim* as “divine being,” and a footnote helpfully states that one other place in the Tanach, in the book of Judges, the term *Elohim* is used to designate an angel. That glosses over the hundreds of times *Elohim* is used to designate the One G-d—do you remember declaring 7 times, *Adonai hu ha-Elohim*, at Ne’ilah? But our *Etz Hayim* accurately reflects the rabbinic view that the obvious answer to the question, *whom did Jacob wrestle with?*, is not the Jewish answer. Once that is established, rabbis are then free to discuss whether it was the Archangel Michael, or Jacob’s own evil inclination, or the guardian angel of Eisav, or even Satan himself.

True again to what one might expect, given the theological incentive structure, Christian commentators use the plain meaning of the Hebrew text: the King James translation of *ra-iti Elohim panim el-panim*, is “I have seen G-d face to face.” Once that is established, Christian commentators are then free to discuss which person of the Holy Trinity this was: G-d the Father, or a pre-incarnate Son of G-d, a kind of Jesus-before-Jesus. In one of the Christian apocrypha,¹ Jesus appears as an angel who won’t say his name, a clear reference to our Jacob story.

So, for the purpose of this discussion, let’s use the *pshat* and assume that Jacob really believed that at night he had met G-d face to face, had struggled with Him body to body, and received His blessing. That ought to have given Jacob some confidence for the day ahead. But in the cold light of morning, Jacob is back in the treacherous world of nomadic pastoralist diplomacy. When the actual meeting with Eisav occurs, before Jacob has the chance to start any prepared speech, something radically unexpected happens—this is on page [], verse 4 (Gen 33:4): *va-yaratz Eisav likrato*—Eisav ran toward him, embraced him, fell on his neck, and kissed him—and the word *va-yishakehu*, and he kissed him, is punctuated by six Masoretic *nikudim*, one dot above each letter. By this measure, *va-yishakehu* is the single most emphasized word in the entire Torah.

The rabbis explain away Eisav’s actions. Eisav wanted to kill Jacob, we are told, but he was spooked by angelic messengers, so he made a false show of cordiality. Or, Eisav actually bit Jacob’s neck, hence the six bite-marks over *va-yishakehu*, but Jacob’s neck turned to ivory, breaking Eisav’s teeth. Now nothing Eisav could possibly have done would persuade the rabbis of his good intentions, in the light of who Eisav’s descendants would become: Amalek and Edom. That is, Amalek the eternal

¹ *Book of Mary’s Repose.*

tribal enemy of Israel, and Edom, a rival confederation spuriously but permanently identified with the Roman Empire, first pagan and then Christian.

But let's read the text as it is, stripped of rabbinic commentary. Eisav has never been a trickster; he's a man of strength and impulsive action, and unlike Jacob, quite incapable of guile. Eisav is Thor to Jacob's Loki. Eisav's kiss just has to be genuine, and his reconciliation with his weaselly little brother, now somehow so much like a grown man, is as impulsive and heartfelt as it is shocking to both parties. Jacob is stunned, for a moment speechless, so he drops his script and for once in his life, and just for a moment, Jacob speaks from the heart. And he says, in verse 11 (Gen 33:11): *ki al-ken raiti faneycha kirot p'nei Elohim*—[inasmuch as I have seen your face, it is like seeing the face of Elohim].

Jacob has seen Elohim face to face at night, and then in the morning, when Eisav volunteers that astounding, unanticipated reconciliation, Jacob blurts out that, for the second time today, he has seen the face of G-d. We know from all cultures, not just our own, that seeing the G-d's face must be both sublime and dangerous. First, the dangerous part: remember that Eisav has sworn publicly to kill Jacob, and now he has shown up in battalion strength, with 400 armed men. And then the sublime: Eisav brought forgiveness which was neither sought nor deserved. And Eisav's impulsive generosity produced a complementary impulse in Jacob: as he gropes for words (Gen 33:10-11), Jacob first calls his gifts to Eisav a *minchah*, or tribute, and then he lights upon the correct word, in verse 11: *kach-nah et-birchati*—take my *brachah*, my blessing, he says. The *brachah*, their father Isaac's blessing, was the very thing that Jacob stole from Eisav; it was the source of their alienation, and why Jacob had guiltily feared this reunion for two decades. So Jacob is shocked into an act of *t'shuvah*, of repentance, and quick study that he is, he realizes that his simple, red-faced, lumbering, bloody-minded brother has made him a better man, both freer and closer to G-d. Now, having done *t'shuvah*, Jacob can re-enter Canaan and take up his birthright. Now he can build that altar at Beth El, the one he promised when G-d surprised him the first time, 20 years back, when he was just callow, sophomoric would-be patriarch. The nocturnal wrestling match with Elohim, mysterious and spectacular as it was, was just a prelude for this awe-inspiring, self-rectifying moment of clarity and growth. Jacob had become Israel, the G-d-wrestler, at night, but he became Israel, G-d's prince or champion, in the morning.

So there are two bookends to Jacob's development, the Beth El episode, when G-d reveals a mysterious vision, and the Peniel episode, when G-d reveals something more, both through the mysterious wrestling match and through the miraculous generosity of Eisav. Jews and Christians both celebrate the Beth El story in the names of their communal institutions. Here we are at Congregation Beth El, facing a *parochet* that quotes the young Jacob: *Mah norah hamakom hazeh*—How awesome is this place!" (Gen 28:17). The significance of the Beth El episode is obvious to anyone who reads Genesis as scripture, so it doesn't feel odd that we share the Beth El name with countless Protestant Christian institutions, including, in San Diego County alone, 8 churches and one evangelical seminary.

Jacob's dream at Beth El took place at the start of his career, when he was young and unproven, having his first experience of awe—about the time of life and about the level of sophistication of the heroic and short-lived John Magee, who in boyish courage and innocence "put out his hand" to "touch the face of G-d." Now all honor to both youngsters, but unlike John, Jacob had the good fortune to

become a grown-up, a man in full, a clan leader, and the founder of a people. And the twin theophanies he experienced at Peniel allowed Jacob to see the face of G-d as only a mature person could see it. Not despite but because of strife, guilt, frustration, forgiveness, repentance, fear, injury, and redemption, Ya-akov could discern the face of G-d in that unlikeliest of places, the face of his enemy brother and would-be killer Eisav. These arguments suggest that Peniel may be an even more important place than Beth El.

But even if you favor a more traditional interpretation of the story, you must admit that his wrestling with Elohim and his meeting with Eisav were crucial for Jacob, and the two episodes remain crucial to understanding Jacob's story. And it is uncontested that Peniel was the birthplace of Yisrael: the place where our eponymous patriarch got his new name name; and the launching place for Israel's confident return to the Holy Land.

Since the significance of the Peniel episodes is obvious to anyone who reads Genesis as scripture, one would expect that both Christians and Jews would use the name Peniel for their communal and religious institutions. And, on the Christian side, the Los Angeles-based Peniel Missionary Society left its name on villages as far away as India and South Africa. Kids can attend a Camp Peniel, ("where you can meet G-d face to face") in any of six states from New York to Texas. There are Christian seminaries named Peniel on four continents. Here in San Diego we are bracketed by the Templo Cristiano Peniel in Tijuana, and the Peniel Assembly of G-d in Escondido. In other words, our Protestant Christian cousins treat Peniel like Beth El, using the word to name countless religious institutions, in recognition of the theological significance of what happened there.

And then there's the Jewish use of the name Peniel. Not one camp, not one JCC—OK, perhaps those are named after donors, but here's the key fact—*not a single synagogue, not anywhere in the world*. Actually there is a Kehilat Peniel, in Tiberias in Israel, but it's a Messianic congregation—that is, yet another Protestant Christian group. So it seems that Peniel is under some sort of a ban or boycott on the Jewish side of the family. Beth El we allow ourselves, but Peniel is forbidden.

Omissions are only glaring when there is a suitable counterexample, but we have that in Beth El, so now we face a glaring omission that demands explanation. My guess: we are embarrassed by the possibility that Jacob wrestled with G-d in human form, as the text seems to say. Back to that analysis of the incentive structure for Jews and Christians over the ages: because of what sure looks like human-form theophany in the Peniel episode, you'd expect Christians to embrace it, and you'd expect Jews to shy away it.

Last week Rabbi Shulman spoke of Neil Gillman's challenge to Conservative Jews to gather sacred fragments, recovering Jewish theology in and for a modern world. Well, here is one such opportunity, in the mysterious theophany at Peniel. For practically the first sustained period in our complex and fraught intercommunal history, Jews and Christians are at peace and in postures of mutual respect and understanding, and each group has less incentive than ever in the past to cleanse itself of all elements reminiscent of the other. Perhaps a modern Jewish theological renovation might start here, in Parashat Vayishlach, with the question: do we believe the traditional stricture that our omnipotent G-d

could appear in any form, as long as it is not--perish the thought--a human form? Or might that artificial restriction be considered merely a product of its time and place, and might we then revisit Jacob's statement that he has seen G-d face to face, and its even more unsettling implication that he had put out his hand and touched G-d's body? As a Conservative Jew, it gives me the willies to even mention the concept of G-d's body, so let's retreat a step and simply ask for clarification: exactly why are we still embarrassed by this critical episode in the life of our patriarch Ya-akov? Do we cede to the Christians sole ownership of the Peniel story? If so, then why do we call ourselves Yisrael, and if not, then why can't we name a Jewish synagogue Kehilat Peniel? Could we and our Christian cousins perhaps *share* the idea of a limited human-form theophany, since it seems already to be in our Torah? Would it make us any less Jewish to do so?

These are questions for debate, but here's one partial response. At some point, when you're wrestling with fear, surprised by unlooked-for goodness, or discussing Jewish texts after Daily Minyan, you may feel the awe of the *Shchinah* and catch a glimpse of an unfamiliar, familiar face. Don't miss that theophany, whatever form it comes in. Put out your hand.