

Did Jacob Wrestle with G-D or with G-D?

What I am about to share may be uncomfortable for you to read and you may even choose to reject it completely. But I would ask that you at least read both the text from Genesis 32 and my commentary and consider it before simply having a knee-jerk reaction to a different possibility and point of view.

The biblical story of Jacob's wrestling match in Genesis 32 is one of the first seeds I can remember that ultimately grew in my life and resulted in my becoming a rabbi, or teacher, of the Bible. I can still vividly remember the moment when my Hebrew school teacher read the narrative to our class and her anger toward me when I questioned everything she was saying. Looking back at those moments, I understand her dismay at the level of grief and embarrassment that I caused her that morning.

After all, she was simply following the lesson plan for the day and reading the information provided to her. I asked her, "Do you really want us to believe that Jacob was wrestling with either G-D or an angel and neither of these celestial beings could best Jacob in hand-to-hand combat?"

Just a few verses before, Jacob was so frightened of Esau that Jacob sent everything that was ahead of him as gifts to Esau, including his wives and children, just in case Esau was going to attack. My teacher wanted me to believe that a man who was so engulfed in fear of his human brother was somehow too strong when matched against a heavenly being.

I am sorry but there was absolutely no way she could convince even my six-year-old mind that an angel from heaven (or as we were told – it may have even been the G-D of the universe, the One who spoke the world into existence and cast the stars into

the sky) was not powerful enough to defeat Jacob in a wrestling match.

As a six-year-old, I had to settle for knowing that while the Torah was absolutely right, it was very possible that my Hebrew school teacher and also my principal (who was quickly called upon to end our loud debate) were wrong.

Actually, it wasn't until many years later after I became a believer in Yeshua that I found what I believe to be an answer to the question of what really happened that night in the place that became known as Peniel.

To set the stage for the events of the end of chapter 32, let's remember that Jacob has left Laban's house with his wives, children and flocks, and is heading back to the land of his fathers. He knows that Esau is there and is expecting a violent confrontation to take place when they meet again. He has divided his family, herds and servants into three groups and sent them ahead to test the waters and the next thing we read is Genesis 32:25 (TLV):

"So Jacob remained all by himself. Then a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn."

Notice that as we begin to read, Jacob is all by himself; this statement is important to the great narrative of what is taking place. It is also important to note that here in Genesis, the person Jacob wrestled with is called a "man." However, we know it actually was an angel because we are told so in Hosea 12:4-5:

"In the womb he grasped his brother's heel, and in his vigor he strove with God. Yes, he wrestled with the angel and won; he wept and sought his favor. At Bethel he will find us, and there He will speak with us."

So Jacob is obeying G-D by going home in response to G-D's command to return, as we find in Genesis 31:3:

"Then Adonai said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.'"

He is confronted by two forces: the power of his faith in G-D, who has proved Himself to be faithful to His promises; and the power of his fear of Esau's hatred. Jacob is alone at night and an angel shows up to wrestle against him. This is where most of us get the story wrong. Just as I was taught in Hebrew school, most of us were taught that this was an angel of G-D or even G-D Himself. However, I believe a better interpretation of who this angel is in the context of what is taking place is explained by Paul in Ephesians 6:12:

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the worldly forces of this darkness, and against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."

That's right. I believe the angel that Jacob wrestled against was a fallen angel. I believe this wrestling match was not between Jacob and G-D but was actually Jacob and G-D fighting against evil.

To help with understanding this further, let's look at the rest of the narrative where this will not only be made clearer but it hopefully will speak into our lives and encourage us.

"Then He said, 'Let Me go, for the dawn has broken.' But he said, 'I won't let You go unless You bless me.' Then He said to him, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he said. Then He said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but rather Israel, for you have struggled with God and with men, and you have overcome'" (Gen. 32:27-29).

Notice in verse 27, the angel pleads with Jacob to let him go because the sun is rising and it is getting light out. Remember, Paul says we wrestle against worldly forces of darkness. We are going to discuss the changing of Jacob's name in a moment but before we do, look at the end of verse 29:

“Your name will no longer be Jacob, but rather Israel, for you have struggled with God and with men, and you have overcome.”

It says, “for you have struggled with God and with men and you have overcome.” We often read these words as struggle against G-D and against men. But what if the first time we read “with” it means “alongside” rather than against, and what if the second “with” means “against”? What if that portion of the verse was translated, “for you have struggled alongside God and against men and you have overcome”?

If we read these verses this way, the rest of the text makes sense. Jacob is attacked by a fallen angel and, with the help of G-D, is able to ultimately make the angel surrender. Please note that in a wrestling match against an angel, fallen or not, Jacob or any man by himself, would lose. So what about the “blessing” or “name change”?

In Judaism, when a boy is born and enters into the covenant through circumcision, his name is given to him and their names have meanings. Names are not simply chosen; they are prayed over and the parents have an expectation that the child’s character and nature will match the name. Jacob was first named Jacob, which means “supplanter,” which is often interpreted as someone who seizes, circumvents or usurps. But now as he is returning home, a battle takes place between good and evil (within Jacob’s heart) and when evil is defeated and surrenders, Jacob insists upon a blessing.

The angel understands his request to be that Jacob is asking the angel to recognize that evil no longer has any power over him; that he is no longer Jacob the supplanter, the deceiver, the trickster. Jacob demands that his enemy verbally proclaim that Jacob is no longer Jacob. The angel responds with the words, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but rather Israel, for you have struggled with God and with men, and you have overcome.”

Understanding these verses is especially important for those of us who have been born again. Just as Jacob's character and nature were changed, when we start wrestling alongside G-D against the adversary, instead of trying to defeat the enemy of our souls on our own, we need to remember Paul's instructions about who we are wrestling against and we also need to remind the adversary that our names have been changed because we too have struggled alongside G-D and prevailed; and we are now a part of the commonwealth of Israel. {eoa}

Rabbi Eric Tokajer has served the community of Brit Ahm Messianic Synagogue in Pensacola, Florida since 2006. In addition to serving at Brit Ahm, he also helped to establish six other Messianic synagogues along the United States, Gulf Coast. He is also a sought-after speaker for both national and international conferences and events and has authored 12 books. In addition to his duties as a rabbi, he also serves on the board of several Messianic ministries and as the theology team facilitator for the Tree of Life Version Bible.

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