* **The Reluctant Warrior**

Vayishlach, Genesis 32:4−36:43

D'var Torah By:

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Because we know how it ends, we may not feel the suspense as *Parashat Vayishlach* opens. Jacob prepares to return home and confront his estranged brother, Esau, after 20 years apart. They had not parted on good terms. Esau vowed to kill his brother for stealing their father's blessing; Rebekah sent Jacob off to her brother Laban to wait it out until "your brother's rage cools down" (Genesis 27:44).

Two decades later, Jacob fears Esau's vengeance as much as the day he left home. His messengers inform him that Esau approaches, "accompanied by four hundred men" (Genesis 32:7), with motives unknown to Jacob. Do they come in peace or to make war? Thus, "Jacob was terrified. So anxious was he," (Genesis 32:8), scared for his safety and his family's in the face of what Esau might do.

Most readers are likely to gloss over this verse, but the Rabbis don't ignore apparent redundancy in the Torah. Every word has a purpose. So when the text describes Jacob as "terrified" *and* "anxious," there must be a reason for both descriptions. The midrash *B'* *reishit Rabbah* offers an explanation:

R. Judah bar R. Ilai asked: Are not fear and distress identical? The meaning, however, is that "he was afraid" lest he should be slain and "he was distressed" lest he should slay. For he thought: If Esau proves stronger than I, he might slay me, and if I prove stronger than he, I might slay him. ( *B'reishit Rabbah* 76:2; Bialik, Ravnitzky, eds., *Book of Legends,* [NY: Schocken Books, 1992], pp. 48-49)

In typical midrashic fashion, the Rabbis present a more complicated character of Jacob than is obvious in the Torah. In their eyes, Jacob fears both his brother and what he himself may have to do to his brother in his own defense.

This text comes to teach us a lesson about responding to violence in the world without compromising our own humanity. The principle at stake is the setting of moral boundaries around the wielding of power. There are times when we face legitimate threats to our safety or survival. In those instances, self-defense is a moral obligation, not just a permitted option. But Jewish tradition imposes limits on our use of force, even in legitimate self-defense, be it full-scale warfare or interpersonal conflict. It invites us to consider how to fight evil without becoming evil. Jewish values call us to be reluctant warriors—like Jacob in the midrash—who can balance self-preservation with the moral use of power.

A moral agent must use nonlethal force if that option is available. Maimonides affirms this principle in the Mishneh Torah:

When a person can save a victim at the cost of a limb [of the pursuer], and he does not take the trouble to do it, but instead saved the victim at the cost of the pursuer's life [by killing him], such a person is a shedder of blood and is liable for death. (Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Rotzeach U'Sh'mirat Nefesh* / Laws of Murder and Protecting Life, 1:13; see also Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 49a)

Even though the command to save a life bears great sanctity in our tradition, the Rabbis do not consider it a blank check. One who kills in order to save a life, including his own, is considered a murderer *if he had a nonlethal option and failed to use it.*

Jewish tradition also warns against the glorification of violence, even when justified. In a poignant exchange between father and son, King David explains to Solomon why God has chosen the son and not the father to build the temple:

"My son, I wanted to build a House for the name of *Adonai* my God. But the word of *Adonai* came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and fought great battles; you shall not build a House for My name, for you have shed much blood on the earth in My sight. But you will have a son who will be a man at rest, for I will give him rest from all his enemies on all sides; Solomon will be his name and I shall confer peace and quiet on Israel in his time. He will build a House for My name.'" (1 Chronicles 22:7-10)

King David fought wars on behalf of the Jewish people, conquered enemies, and paved the way for a powerful, sovereign Jewish kingdom based in Jerusalem. Now, in his old age, he acknowledges what God has already decreed. Even his violence on behalf of Israel has a cost; it has left him tainted as a shedder of blood. The sacred privilege of building God's Temple shall fall to the man of peace, not the man of war.

The Hebrew prophets' vision of the days of redemption aspired to peace. Isaiah spoke of a day when the nations "shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war" (Isaiah 2:4). Maimonides codified this aspiration into law:

The Sages and the prophets did not yearn for the days of the messiah in order to have dominion over the entire world. . . . Rather, they wanted to be free to devote themselves to Torah and wisdom with no one oppressing or disturbing them. . . . In that era, there will be neither famine or war, jealousy or competition. (Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Melachim U'Milchamoteihem* / Laws of Kings and Their Wars, 12:4-5)

We live in a world where violence confronts us and sometimes demands a forceful response. Yet we always aspire to peace, especially in the midst of war. As we acknowledge the necessity of exercising power as a moral obligation, we guard against the glorification of violence. It is a Jewish responsibility to find a morally responsible stance on the spectrum between total pacifism and the uncritical embrace of power. We must recalibrate and reevaluate continually as we live in the real world. We must assess reality soberly without succumbing to fear or naivete, remaining grounded in the prophets' vision of peace as our ultimate aspiration.

In this week's Torah portion, it turns out Jacob has nothing to fear. Esau greets him with a loving embrace, and the reunited twins cry on each other's shoulders. Fear can be a useful emotion, when it alerts us to danger and prepares us to take up the duty of self-defense. But fear can also lead us to misread cues and react defensively when the situation calls for a hand outstretched in friendship rather than violence. May God grant us the strength to fight when real threats confront us, the courage to pursue peace when the opportunity arises, and the wisdom to know the difference (paraphrase of "The Serenity Prayer" by Reinhold Niebuhr).

*Note: This selection of texts and ideas was inspired by the Shalom Hartman Institute* *'* *s curriculum, iEngage: Foundations for a New Relationship with Israel. Those interested in further study on these themes, and in particular on how they relate to the state of Israel and diaspora Jewry, should visit* [*the iEngage Web-site*](http://iengage.org.il/DVD_View.asp?Article_Id=8&Cat_Id=5&Cat_Type=DVD?Cat_Id=5&Cat_Type=DVD&Title_Cat_Name=iEngage:%20Foundations) *and encourage their rabbis and educators to bring this curriculum to their congregations and communities. The Aspen Jewish Congregation is one of 20 pilot congregations in the* [*Israel Engagement Active Learning Network*](http://urj.org/cong/cop/aln/israelengagement/) *, a partnership between the Union for Reform Judaism and the Shalom Hartman Institute.*

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- See more at: http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/vayishlach/reluctant-warrior#sthash.ofj0GkzZ.dpuf