JACOB AND THE ANGEL:
TERROR AND DIVINE PROVIDENCE

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Jacob's welcome in the house of his father-in-law, Laban, had worn thin. Yet returning to Canaan with his family and livestock, he now faced an inevitable confrontation with Esau, the vengeful brother he had fled 21 years before. Praying for Divine providence, he nevertheless planned for the worst.

As he drew near, he sent gifts of great value and conveyed his subservience, veneration and obeisance. This was especially important since it was the birthright that was the brothers' main bone of contention. Nevertheless, he knew it would be hard to appease his violent brother.

Reports of Esau's approach with 400 men only exacerbated Jacob's anxiety. In a desperate attempt to stave off the looming disaster, Jacob divided his family and possessions in the hope that, while half might be attacked, the other half would be able to flee. On the eve of their encounter, Jacob moved his camp across the Wadi Jabbok. Leaving his family, the agitated Jacob returned to the near side of the stream. Alone in the dread of night, he wrestled till dawn with a powerful enigmatic figure. Many take the battle to be with an angel, a theophany.[1] Others suggest he was merely a mortal emissary from Esau, or a nightmare born of his own terror.[2] We have, after all, only the sparse details of the biblical narrative.

Traditional commentaries, following the last half of *And Jacob's thigh was strained as he wrestled with him* (Gen. 32:26), believe that in the course of Jacob's life-and-death struggle, the mysterious stranger grasped his thigh, leaving him disabled.[3] Signaling the significance of this incident to our people and not just to Jacob, the *Halakhah* forbids the eating of the *gid hanasheh,* the sciatic nerve of kosher land animals (Gen. 32:33). Careful reading of the biblical description in the first half of verse 26, however, reveals that the adversary touched his thigh only *after* he realized that he was unable to defeat Jacob: *And when he saw that he could not prevail against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh.* This took place after the fight was over.

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What then was the significance of this touch? I suggest that it was an act of submission and fealty, sealing a sacred oath to preserve him and his family. Just as Eliezer had done before setting out to find Isaac a wife: *And Abraham said to his servant . . . 'put your hand under my thigh'* (Gen. 24:2), so did Joseph before Jacob's death: *If I have found favor in your sight, put your hand under my thigh ... bury me not, I pray, in Egypt* (Gen. 47:29) – and so did the mysterious stranger after his failure to defeat Jacob. Each of these incidents relates to a solemn pledge concerning the continuity of our people and its spirituality. Isaac is to be the next stage in establishing the Jewish nation, and Joseph's mission is to strengthen the bond with the Promised Land even in Egypt.

Chief Rabbi Hertz on Genesis 24:2 believes that the "thigh" refers to one's progeny who spring from the father's loins.[4] Thus it is the sons who are the ultimate guarantors of the father's solemn pledge. Taking hold of the "thigh" (probably a euphemism for the genitals)[5] actually represents, like today's more mundane handshake, sealing a pact of supreme trust between the two parties, especially where the welfare of one's progeny is at stake.

The stranger's touch was not part of the struggle, but its outcome. The stranger intended not to harm Jacob by injuring his thigh, but to save him by doing so.[6] Thus, with sunrise, Jacob was assured of God's help in confronting Esau. How, you may ask, was God's intervention on behalf of Jacob manifested? We tend to think of God's help expressed in strength, but it may also be expressed in seeming weakness. Imagine, if you will, Esau harboring in his mind's eye the image of the vigorous young man that was his brother over two decades ago. Instead, whom does he find on that fateful morning? Not the indefatigable Jacob who struggled mightily all night against the mysterious stranger but a hobbled wretch, hardly capable of limping forward to return his brother's embrace, bowing and scraping in transparent pain, burdened, as we are told in Genesis 33:13-14, with a slow-moving vulnerable camp and many mouths to feed. Who, he must have asked himself, has thrived more from Isaac's blessings over the years, he or Jacob?[7]

Not only did the encounter bring about a surprising change of heart in Esau, it profoundly changed Jacob as well. The Bible relates laconically that Jacob arrived at Shechem *shalem* – whole (Gen. 33:18).[8] He no longer suffered from the physical disability visited upon him through Divine providence in

anticipation of his meeting with Esau. Having been reconciled with his brother, he was once more at peace, emotionally and spiritually. Setting aside the past rivalries of his youth, he could now face the challenges to his role as patriarch that were to appear soon enough.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Rashi, Rashbam, Radak and Sforno on Genesis 32:25.
2. Naomi Rosenblatt, *Wrestling With Angels* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1995), pp. 298-9.
3. See, for example, Rashbam, Hizkuni and Ibn Ezra on Genesis 32:26.
4. J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1965), p. 82.
5. See Ibn Ezra, Genesis 24:2. Also, Robert Alter, *Genesis – Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 113, Rosenblatt, p. 218.
6. Skeptics may claim that Jacob merely dislocated his thigh in the struggle, but his limp may well have been brought on psychosomatically, by the sheer terror of his nocturnal encounter and his fear of what awaited him that morning. Trauma counselors and psychologists call such physical manifestations of profound fear "Conversion Disorders" and they are well known in the literature. See *The ICD Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders: Clinical Descriptions and Diagnostic Guidelines* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1992).
7. See also the commentary of Benno Jacob, who understood the injury to Jacob in a similar manner: Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible – Genesis* (Newark, N.J.: Ktav, 1974) pp. 223-5.
8. See Rashi, Genesis 33:18.