Dvar Torah for Parshat Vayishlach

Nov. 24, 2018

This dvar consists of three parts: a classic dvar for this parshah, a more modern interpretation and some personal comments for our special guest speaker.

“Not Jacob But Israel” –

Rabbi R. J. Adler – *A Tree of Life (1962)*

One of the strangest stories in the Torah is found in Genesis, Chapter 32, which will be read in the synagogue shortly. It is generally referred to as Jacob’s struggle with the Angel. This Biblical episode, properly understood, can teach us a very significant lesson. Let me briefly recall the circumstances of this strange encounter.

God told Jacob to return to his native land and had promised him protection from all his enemies. The Lord had previously warned Laban, Jacob’s father-in-law, not to touch Jacob, and he had carefully obeyed. This time, Jacob was confronted with another danger, his hostile brother Esau was approaching his camp. In an effort to ease the tension of previous years, Jacob decided to send a sizable gift to Esau. However, our rabbis point out, Jacob also prayed to God for assistance and in addition prepared for war in the event that this became necessary. It is at this moment that the very unusual incident occurred.

After having brought his immediate family to safety across the river, Jacob returned to the other side for an unknown reason, and there he was attacked by a stranger. Why was this difficulty added to Jacob’s burden? Had not the Lord promised complete protection and safety? Was this the answer to Jacob’s prayer? Why did God bring additional trouble to Jacob at this very moment?

There are more difficulties yet in this peculiar passage of the Bible. The stranger was not an ordinary human being, for he said to Jacob: “Your name shall no longer be Jacob but Israel, because you have wrestled with God and with men and have been the victor.” Again, why is this entire incident of such great importance that the Torah decreed for all times and for all Israel not to eat the sinew of the thigh-vein, because Jacob was hurt during this struggle at the river Jabok? What all-important lesson was in this dietary law to convey to the Jewish People for all ages? – I would like to suggest a possible solution to some of these questions.

The Lord had asked Jacob to return to his native land, face his hostile brother Esau with courage and thus cease to be a fugitive. Jacob had on other occasions refused to take a stand, but instead had used dubious means to avoid opposition. God loved Jacob and He remained with him, but the Almighty was not pleased with Jacob’s lack of courage. There was a need to teach Jacob the fundamental lesson, to face issues even if unpleasant and not to turn away from them or to postpone their solution. Therefore, when Jacob had prepared to meet Esau unreconciled, but in the last minute was about to weaken once again, a messenger of God stopped him and fought with him in Esau’s place.

God assisted Jacob by teaching him the lesson of strength and courage; Jacob, in turn, seemed to have mastered the subject quickly, for the Lord caused him to win the wrestling match. It seems further, that the Almighty was pleased at his attainment, for He blessed Jacob saying: “Your name is no longer Jacob, the dependent and low, but Israel, the contender and the brave.”

There is, then, considerable meaning in this strange episode of Jacob’s struggle, for when the name of our ancestor was changed, Jacob’s new qualities were recognized as an everlasting possession. Therefore the Bible feels that all of us must remember this incident and the great lesson it is trying to convey to us. As an additional reminder we are charged not to consume the thigh-vein of an animal unto this day, since this portion played a significant part in.

We have deserved the new name of Israel. I am convinced that we shall continue to keep our record clean – we shall persist as Israel. Furthermore, let us never forget that Israel is more than a name; it is an attitude toward life, a characteristic of our people. Why did the new Jewish state in Palestine decide on the name of Israel? Many other names had been suggested: Judea, Judah, Eretz Yisrael and Eretz Yehuda. Why did they finally accept Israel? Because Israel means prince, leader, the brave, the strong and the valiant. This was indeed a fitting name for our new Jewish State.

As the “man of God” promised our forefather Jacob, saying: “Thy name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel .”

Part 2 -- Paul Adler

That was a classic dvar written almost sixty years ago that describes the highlights of Parshat Vayishlach. It attributes human emotions to God. God spoke to Jacob and God loved Jacob.

However, belief in God has evolved since the Torah was written and since this dvar was presented by my father in 1960. In addition, our knowledge of the creation of the world has expanded since the first chapters of Genesis came into existence. Shawna Dolansky recently provided a fascinating picture of the ancient creation stories and how the Torah contains some similarities.

Scientists can explain how the universe formed following the Big Bang about 13.5 billion years ago and how the Sun and Earth were formed over 4.5 billion years ago. Astrophysicists and geophysicists, chemists and biologists agree that the Earth evolved over billions of years to the point where humans appeared and now make such a significant impact on this planet. Many scientists do not believe in God because they can not prove the existence of God. However, about 35% of the scientists who responded to a recent PEW survey claimed to believe in a Creator.

Rabbi A.J. Heschel wrote multiple books regarding this topic, including: *Man’s Quest for God, Man is not Alone*  and *God in Search of Man*. According to Heschel:

“The Biblical words about the genesis of heaven and earth are not words of information but words of appreciation. The story of creation is not a description of how the world came into being but a song about the glory of the world's having come into being.”

“God is not a hypothesis derived from logical assumptions, but an immediate insight, self-evident as light. He is not something to be sought in the darkness with the light of reason. He is the light.”

In his most popular book, The Sabbath, Rabbi Heschel connects Shabbat to creation like this: “ The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are all called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”

In 1965, my father invited Rabbi Heschel to spend Shabbat with his congregation, Ohev Shalom, in Orlando. At that time, we lived too far from the synagogue to walk from home. We stayed in the same hotel as Rabbi Heschel and we walked to and from the synagogue together. As we walked back to the hotel from Shabbat morning services, Rabbi Heschel asked me about the stars and planets because my dad told him that I studied astronomy. After we got to the hotel, Rabbi Heschel came to the door of our room and asked if I wanted to go for a walk with him and tell him more about the universe. At that moment, I heard a voice inside my head (my conscience or God), telling me to go with him. However, I said no. I wanted my father to go for a walk with him instead.

Have you ever heard a voice in your head tell you to go somewhere or do something? Is that the voice of God?

Belief in God is a personal matter and most people don’t feel comfortable discussing their personal beliefs.

From a scientific viewpoint, proving that the universe was not created or formed by accident is not a trivial thing. However, here are a few interesting questions to consider:

“ Did you know that if gravity was slightly more powerful the universe would collapse into a ball? Did you know that if gravity was slightly less powerful the universe would fly apart and there would be no stars or planets. Gravity is precisely as strong as it needs to be -- and if the ratio of the electromagnetic force to the strong force wasn’t one percent, life would not exist. What are the odds that would happen all by itself?

**The precision of the universe makes it logical to conclude there’s a creator. “**

(Sheldon Cooper from Young Sheldon, the spin-off of the Big Bang Theory.)

Last Sunday, we saw the remake of the movie “A Star is Born” with Lady Gaga. You may recall that Barbra Streisand performed in the previous version many years ago.

In the Torah, the first chapter of Genesis describes how God created the Sun, the Moon and the stars. Some people think that all the stars were created at the same time. However, in the past century, astronomers have discovered that stars are being created all the time and go through a life cycle from birth to death. Stars usually live for billions of years, but some are not so lucky. The Hubble telescope and other telescopes in space and on the Earth have detected new stars in nebula and planets forming around most stars. The miracle of creation is continuing every day.

In addition to the wonders of space and cosmology, miracles are happening on the microscopic and subatomic levels, too. Morris Schnitzer has observed amazing things in his lab during his lifetime. He would like to share a few of his thoughts and experiences with you.

Shabbat Shalom!