

Vayishlach

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I recently heard an interview with neuroscientist David Eagleman. He studies the way that our brains are constantly changing, completely malleable. In the interview he said that every time we meet a new person--every time we learn a new name, recognize a new face--our brains change. Our brains reshape and develop and evolve with every new experience.

So if our brains--our very selves-- change just by looking at each other, imagine how profound a change Yaakov must have undergone when he wrestled with an angel.

In the dark of night, unable to sleep as he prepared to encounter his brother for the first time in decades, Yaakov grappled with a heavenly being. He walked away with an injury, a physical reminder of the encounter every time he moved his body. If it left that kind of physical mark on him, how could it not touch his mind? His soul?

This essential change in Yaakov is captured in the gift of a new name. From the start of creation when God named all the pieces of the world to Avram and Sarai becoming Avraham and Sarah...this moment when Yaakov is granted the name Yisrael is the last time God names someone. It's the last time God offers a name that is at once a label and a blessing and a prophecy. The angel tells Yaakov that his name will now be Yisrael, explaining that this means "You have striven, you have grappled with the Divine and with humans and you have prevailed."

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld asks, why would this moment be crystallized with a name like Yisrael, which is connected to the word "sarita," meaning "you struggled." Why not a name connected to the last word in the verse--"va-tuchal, and you prevailed"? Wouldn't it be a greater gift, a greater sign of blessing to walk around with a name that says you overcame a difficulty, rather than a name that says you grappled with a difficulty?

Perhaps our answer comes from David Engelman, who believes every time we see a new face, something about us changes. Yes, Jacob survived a physically and mentally overwhelming encounter with a mysterious heavenly creature, but it's not the end of his story--there are still more faces, more encounters ahead of him. Having prevailed in this one instance does not guarantee that his struggles are over. It does not leave him in a fixed place, it does not mean he will remain unchanged from this moment on. Therefore, a name connected to "va'tuchal," a name connected to triumph, would not be appropriate.

Instead, God and this angel granted him a name that will move and grow with him. A name that will change shape as he evolves, as he encounters new struggles, grapples with them,

and, hopefully, prevails. Rather than denoting a single snapshot of his life, Yisrael is a name that celebrates fluidity and possibility.

May we, the inheritors of this name, b'nei Yisrael, the children of this ancestor who lived a life a grappling and struggling, cling not only to the times we prevailed, but also, and more fiercely, may we cling to the knowledge that we are ever growing, ever changing, and ever striving creatures, from the cells in our brains to our souls.