



Choosing Not to Run

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What was Ya'akov doing the night he was left alone on the other side of the river, the night he wrestled with an angel?

According to the Rashbam,¹ Ya'akov was trying to run away.

רשב"ם בראשית לב:כה

כדי לברוח דרך אחרת שלא יפגשנו עשו נתכווין.

Rashbam on Bereishit 32:25

He intended to flee in a different direction so as to avoid a face to face encounter with Esau.

It is no great surprise. Running away has been Ya'akov's preferred mode: first in his flight from home at his mother's urging,² and then again, recently, to escape from Lavan.³

¹ R. Shmuel ben Meir, 11th-12th c. France, grandson of Rashi.

² Bereishit 27:42-45.

³ Bereishit 31:20-21.



Now, about to encounter Esav for the first time since that first flight, Ya'akov again decides to run. Maybe he is playing for time before he meets his brother, hoping to come up with a plan that will save them all. Maybe, in times of terror, this is simply the only thing he knows how to do.

In the middle of the night, under the cover of darkness, Ya'akov helps his family cross the river. Finally, after everyone else has crossed, Ya'akov is left alone, ready to join them and, as he has done so many times before, flee.

This time though, Ya'akov meets a nameless man, and the story changes.

The encounter with the man who wrestles him until sunrise finally forces Ya'akov into a direct confrontation, something he has always avoided until this point.

This, perhaps, is the meaning behind the blessing the angel gives Ya'akov before he departs:

בראשית לב:כט

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאמָר עוֹד שְׁמִי כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי שָׁרִיתָ עִם אֱלֹהִים וְעִם אָנָשִׁים וַתִּגְדֹּל:

Bereishit 32:29

Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Ya'akov, but Yisrael, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

In this blessing of a new name, the man changes Ya'akov's conception of himself. "Look," he might be saying, "what you've done tonight! You have faced me; we wrestled together all night—and you survived. You are capable of facing a stranger face on, surely you are capable



of facing your brother as well. Running away is not your only option. You have learned tonight that there are other pathways forward.”

The blessing, however, is not the only souvenir that Ya’akov takes from his nocturnal confrontation. Ya’akov is left with an injury that he carries for the rest of his life:

בראשית לב:כו

וַיֵּרָא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיִּגַע בְּכַף יָרְכוֹ וַתִּקַּע כֹּף יִרְיָ יַעֲקֹב בְּהִאָּבְקוֹ עִמּוֹ:

Bereishit 32:26

When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob’s hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him.

Ya’akov’s injury functions as a counterpart to his blessing. Whereas the blessing is a form of encouragement, showing Ya’akov that he does not need to run away and is capable of facing his brother, the injury is a physical barrier that ensures that even if he wanted to, he cannot. Ya’akov’s limp presumably slows him down. By the time his wrestling match concludes at sunrise, he no longer is capable of fleeing to avoid Esav.

The combination of the blessing and the injury succeeds—to a point. Ya’akov does indeed finally meet his brother face to face the next day. It is a beautiful moment in which the two brothers embrace, and, it seems, old injuries are forgiven.

But Ya’akov’s pattern-breaking is only partial, quickly followed by a reversion to his previous tactics of lying and avoidance. At the end of his encounter with his brother, Esav invites Ya’akov to join him and his camp on their journey to Seir. Ya’akov demurs, saying that Esav’s camp will need to travel too quickly for his family to join them, and promises to meet his



brother later at his destination. There is no evidence in the Torah that Ya'akov ever does. As far as the Torah tells us, Ya'akov never meets his brother again.

One might assume that this is the end of Ya'akov's experiments with direct confrontation, that the result of his nighttime wrestling with the man is no more than a brief departure from his usual way of being. The story of the nighttime encounter, though, ends on a curious note:

בראשית לב:לג

עַל כֵּן לֹא יֹאכְלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת גִּיד הַנֶּשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר עַל כֶּף הַיָּרֶךְ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה כִּי נָגַע בְּכַף יָרֶךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּגִיד הַנֶּשֶׁה:

Bereishit 32:33

That is why the children of Israel to this day do not eat the thigh muscle (*gid ha-nasheh*) that is on the socket of the hip, since Jacob's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh muscle.

While Ya'akov's injury may have prevented him from fleeing only temporarily, something about his encounter with the angel and the injury he carried from it remains with Ya'akov's children and is ritualized through their refusal to eat the *gid ha-nasheh*. His sons, the young children who Ya'akov helped cross the river that night in his aborted attempt to flee, carry the memory of that night and pass it on to their children in turn. In refraining from eating the *gid ha-nasheh*, they maintain an embodied memory of the refusal to flee, and a ritual reminder of the man's blessing that we are capable of confrontation.

It is this memory, perhaps, that allows Ya'akov's son Yehudah, years later, to make a different choice when he encounters the viceroy of Egypt. The situation is remarkably similar: Yehudah faces (unbeknownst to him at the time) a brother he has betrayed, one with significantly more power at his disposal. It is another moment where confrontation could lead to calamity.



Yosef actually encourages his brothers to use Ya'akov's perennial strategy, telling them to leave Binyamin behind and flee.⁴

Yehudah, however, carrying the memory embodied in the ritual of the *gid ha-nasheh*, makes a different choice: rather than running, he confronts Yosef directly.⁵ And it is that choice, that confrontation, that creates the difference between this generation and the last, allowing the family to ultimately come together again.

Confrontation with those we have wronged, and who have wronged us, can be terrifying. So often it is easier to walk away or to tell pleasant lies that paper over wounds.

The man's blessing to Ya'akov, though, urges us to choose another way: to face open confrontation with all its dangers, because the rewards that it offers are worth it: because it is only through risking real confrontation with our brothers that we are transformed from Jacob's family into *Benei Yisrael*.

⁴ Bereishit 44:14-17.

⁵ Bereishit 44:18-34.

