

Shabbat Vayishlach Shalom



Jacob Wrestling with the Angel by Alexander Louis Leloir, 1865

by Phyllis Chesler

Between [1999](#) and [2008](#), I wrote three devrai Torah on [Vayishlach](#). However, I never fully focused on Ya'akov's wrestling with a "man," who may resemble his brother—or who was God's angel. Ya'akov is surrounded by angels: a multitude appeared to Ya'akov on his way to Padam-Aram (ascending and descending a ladder), and one is waiting for him now as he is about to return to the Holy Land. As I understand it, an angel may resemble a human being (Avraham saw "anashim") but in reality, is a winged, large, powerful, perhaps even terrifying

expression of God's will. What kind of human being actually wrestles with one?

In the film, [*Michael*](#), John Travolta plays the Christian version of our Mi-chai-el. Michael reminisces about all the battles he's fought and, in one scene, charges a huge bull whom he leaves dazed and on the ground. What kind of mortal charges a bull—or wrestles with an angel?

But with whom does Ya'akov wrestle? Is this a dream or a waking vision? As Nechama Leibowitz asks, is it "an external event taking place in the world of the senses, or (is it) a wholly, inner, prophetic experience in Jacob's soul projected through the medium of a dream?" As the Ramban asks: Why does Ya'akov ask the angel for the angel's name? In *Sacred Fire*, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapira, asks: "Why did our father Jacob need the blessing of the angel with whom he had struggled, after God had already blessed him?"

All good questions. Shapira suggests a complicated and mystical answer to his own question that involves Ya'akov's changing the name of "Esau's angel" from Sammael to "Sael," thus rendering the angel more Godly, and ensuring Ya'akov's princely and victorious future.

But what an ancestor we have! Ya'akov has enough strength and determination to not let go of his formidable opponent until he is blessed by him. This is the tent-dweller who also unexpectedly managed to roll back the enormous stone that covered the well as soon as he saw Rahel.

Ya'akov becomes Yisrael, the man who has wrestled both with God and with men. "Sarita eem elohim v'eem anashim v'toochal." (32:29). Ya'akov has held his own, prevailed, triumphed, or won.

Won? What? Israeli writer Zvi Kolitz wrote a remarkable short story titled "Yosl Rakover Talks to God" (1946). Just as Ya'akov, wrestling, won't let God's angel go until he blesses

him, Zvi Kolitz's fictional Yosel Rakover, a doomed fighter in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, won't let God go—the Holocaust be damned! “You may insult me, You may chastise me, You may take from me the dearest and the best that I have in the world, You may torture me to death—I will always believe in You. I will love You always and forever—even despite You...I die exactly as I have lived, an unshakeable believer in You.”

The angel blesses Ya'akov—but the blessing also wounds him. Forever after, he will limp painfully with a hip joint out of its socket. Among other consequences, being blessed renders one marked and vulnerable. Nevertheless, as Kolitz's Rakover writes: “It is an honor to be a Jew. (A Jew) is a fighter, an eternal swimmer against the roiling, evil current of humanity.”

A blessed Shabbos to us all.