Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Vayishlach, Genesis, Chapters 30-33 | December 2, 2023

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Jacob's Struggle: A Mystery of Art History and a Message for Our Moment

Let us speak of one of the fascinating "Jacobs" of Jewish history, one little-known today, one whose name for much of his life was not Jacob. Duarte Nuñes da Costa lived in Portugal as a descendant of a converso family and a secret Jew. A valued minister to the king, he decided to flee to Amsterdam, escape the Inquisition, and start life anew, openly embracing the faith of his fathers. He took on a traditional Jewish name and became Jacob Curiel. In Amsterdam and then Hamburg Jacob Curiel raised two children, including his oldest, Moses, who became one of the leaders of Dutch Jewry. Amazingly, this very family that had preserved its Jewish identity under the nose of the royal house of Portugal proved so invaluable to the king that it continued to work on behalf of the monarch, only on its own terms. As the Jewish Virtual Library describes:

> Jacob Curiel, alias Duarte Nuñes da Costa (1587–1665), born a Marrano in Lisbon, moved via Pisa and Florence to Amsterdam and later to Hamburg. Having made himself useful to members of the royal house of Portugal in Hamburg, he was made Portuguese diplomatic representative. His elder son, Moses (Jerónimo Nuñes da Costa; died 1697), was a Portuguese agent in Amsterdam, where he was prominent in the Sephardi community and represented his coreligionists in cases before the Dutch authorities.

It is an amazing story; a man who had lived much of his life as Duarte, embraces life as Jacob, and raises a son named Moses. Both were Jewish leaders in their respective communities, and both continued to represent the Portuguese court even after they had abandoned the country and embraced their covenantal calling. As the historian Steven Nadler notes, the Curiels were also patrons of the arts, especially of the Dutch artist Romeyn de Hooghe, a source of so many Jewish scenes from 17th-century Amsterdam. One such scene depicts a circumcision in a family home. Given who paid de Hooghe's bills, it is possible that what we are looking at is a celebration of the Curiel family, so that the grandfather holding the baby would be Jacob Curiel:

Of this we cannot be certain. But we do know that Jacob Curiel and his ancestors experienced two sorts of struggles as secret Jews: a struggle against the physical terror of expulsion and auto-da-fé, and a struggle against the natural temptation to give in, to succumb to utter assimilation. We bear this in mind as we read of the struggles of the original Jacob, whose engagement with Esau has always been taken as a template for Jewish engagement with the Gentile world.

As our reading begins, Jacob, heading home, hears that his brother Esau, who has sworn vengeance, is heading his way with a band of 400 men:

> And Jacob feared greatly, and was pained . . . (Genesis 32:8)

Overcome with fright, Jacob prayed:

> Save me, please, from the **hand of my brother**, from **the hand of Esau**, for I fear him greatly, lest he come and strike me, mothers and children alike. (Genesis 32:12)

Note the seeming redundancy here: "Save me from my brother, from Esau." God, of course, knows who Esau is. One of the most famous homiletical interpretations of my great-great-great-grandfather, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, is a parsing of the verse. The repetition, he suggested, represents two different dangers: that of "Esau" and of "my brother." Throughout the centuries, Jews have been endangered by Esaus, by those who, like Esau of old, sought to kill the family of Jacob. It is far preferable to have the non-Jewish world stretch out a hand in brotherhood. We want that; we welcome it. But there is nevertheless a danger to Jewish identity embodied in the phrase "my brother," which hints at the possibility of assimilation in a brotherly embrace offered by the world. The hard truth is that Jews themselves have often desired to slip the fetters of identity and the struggles that come with it.

Or, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it:

> Jews have often wished to be someone else, the Esaus of the age. Too often, they knew what it was, in Shakespeare's words, to "look upon myself, and curse my fate,/ Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,/ Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,/ Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,/ With what I most enjoy contented least."

In other words, not only persecution, but also attempted assimilation, can be found throughout Jewish history.

The hard truth is that Jews themselves have often desired to slip the fetters of identity and the struggles that come with it.

We bear this in mind as we consider that Jacob is the patriarch who spent much of his life in exile; the unfolding of Jacob's story has therefore embodied, for Jewish tradition, the interaction of Jews with the non-Jewish world. This is especially true of the subsequent scene in the *parashah*. After assisting his family in crossing a river, Jacob suddenly encounters a mysterious individual with whom he wrestles in the dark:

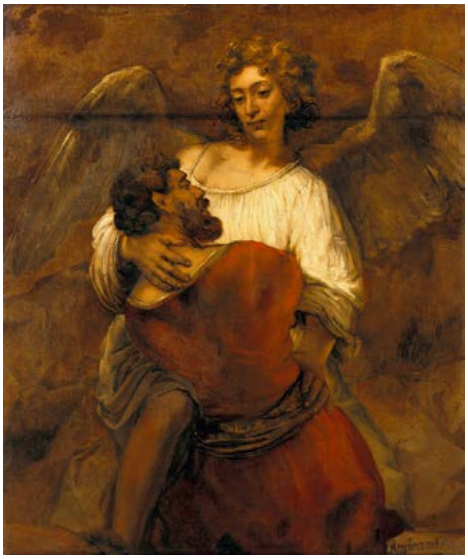
> And Jacob remained alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. (Genesis 32:25)

Who is this ethereal individual? One common interpretation is that it is an angelic embodiment of Esau, one whom Jacob must physically face before making peace with his brother. According to this understanding, the battle throughout the night with an angel portends the many struggles against our enemies throughout Jewish history. Indeed, later in the reading, following the story of the horrific assault on Leah's daughter Dinah, which we will discuss next week, the Torah portion concludes with a long listing of Esau's descendants. It may seem utterly uninteresting, until we notice one name:

> These are the names of Esau's sons: Eliphaz, the son of Adam, the wife of Esau; Re'uel, the son of Bosmat, the wife of Esau. . . . And Timna was a concubine of Eliphaz, the son of Esau, and she bore **Amalek** to Eliphaz. (Genesis 36:10–12)

Amalek, of course, will become the great enemy of Israel, and the embodiment of Jew-hatred throughout the centuries. Thus the struggle throughout the night can be read as a struggle with a representative of Esau, predicting future terrible struggles yet to come.

But another possibility is that the mysterious man with whom Jacob struggles is himself. The wrestling match, in other words, takes place within Jacob; he needs to overcome the fear within, to muster the courage to embrace his identity in full, to face all that providence has set in store for him. Strikingly, in Rembrandt's depiction of Jacob's nighttime struggle, he gives us a Jacob with his eyes closed, as if the struggle is internal.



Is the struggle internal, or external? Both interpretations can be true; for upon emerging victorious, a new name is bestowed upon the patriarch: *Yisrael*, or Israel, which is connected to the word "*sarita*," "you have struggled." As the angel himself puts it to Jacob:

> You have struggled with spiritual beings, and with man, and you have prevailed. (Genesis 32:29)

The spiritual being with whom Jacob struggled is obviously the angel, but who is the human? This may be a reference to Jacob's scheming father-in-law Laban, but perhaps the "man" with whom Jacob struggled is *Jacob*—that is, Jacob had to struggle with his own emotions, his own fears.

After this mysterious nighttime encounter, Jacob strides forth in the morning to meet his brother, who is himself overcome with emotion:

> And Esau ran toward him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and they kissed and wept. (Genesis 33:4).

There are rabbis who interpret Esau's embrace as insincere, but others argue the opposite: that at this moment Esau was suddenly overcome by the sight of his long-lost brother. For Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the encounter with Esau portends a time when non-Jews will embrace the Jewish people out of a sense of fellowship, out of reverence for our Judaism, without asking us to give up our covenantal identity; then, Rabbi Berlin writes, that embrace will be returned, as Jacob embraced his brother. Understood this way, the encounter with Esau embodies both future anti-Semitism and also the potential for philo-Semitism, which we have experienced in America from so many biblically-inspired Americans. One thinks, for example, of a remarkable description by the archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles Chaput, of his visit to Yeshiva University's study hall, encountering hundreds of students studying the Talmud:

> I saw in the lives of those Jewish students the incredible durability of God's promises and God's Word. Despite centuries of persecution, exile, dispersion, and even apostasy, the Jewish people continue to exist because their covenant with God is alive and permanent. God's Word is the organizing principle of their

identity. It's the foundation and glue of their relationship with one another, with their past, and with their future. And the more faithful they are to God's Word, the more certain they can be of their survival.

Jacob's nighttime wrestling match reminds us that Jews have courageously struggled to resist persecution and assimilation; and we have continued to hope for moments when, embraced by the non-Jewish world, we return that brotherly embrace.

Jacob's nighttime wrestling match reminds us that Jews have courageously struggled to resist persecution and assimilation; and we have continued to hope for moments when, embraced by the non-Jewish world, we return that brotherly embrace.

Rembrandt's painting of Jacob and the angel—reflecting struggles external and internal, within and without—is thus a portrait for our age. The story of the man named both Jacob and Israel is linked to the struggles Jacob has with Esau's angel and with himself. It thereby represents the two struggles of Jewish history: the physical encounter with our enemies, and the Jewish struggle within ourselves to remain true to our covenantal calling.

Rembrandt's remarkably original way of portraying this scene inspires us to ponder the provenance of this painting, to ask for whom exactly he might have made this masterpiece. Here, I engage in what I admit is utter speculation, a guess, but I hope an educated one; after all, when I admitted to an art historian that my thoughts about this are just speculation, he told me that much of art history is no more than speculation.

Rembrandt's painting of Jacob, like Jacob himself, has a twin of sorts, another biblical scene that Rembrandt produced immediately after this one. It is one of the most famous of the artist's biblical works: Moses descending Mount Sinai clutching the tablets of the Commandments in his hands:

The two paintings are joined not only in chronology but also in style; many have noted the rough earthy brown tones of both depictions. Today, they hang across the room from each other in Berlin:

Gary Schwartz, a Rembrandt scholar, has written that these two paintings are clearly somehow linked. Meanwhile the Moses painting is linked to another artistic creation: the ark later designed for the Sephardi synagogue in Amsterdam. As the Israeli art historian Shlomo Sabar noted, the tablets atop the ark are similar to those painted by Rembrandt.

This ark, as Steven Nadler tells us, was funded by Moses Curiel. To summarize: the Jacob painting is mysteriously linked to the Moses painting, created in the same year. And the Moses painting is linked to the ark in Amsterdam, funded by Moses Curiel, the son of Jacob Curiel.

Does it not make sense to suggest that both of these paintings—of Jacob and of Moses—might have been commissioned by Moses Curiel himself, a patron of the arts in Rembrandt's Amsterdam? What better way to memorialize, to celebrate, his family's own triumphant encounter with the Gentile world, and its emergence as a symbol of living according to the Torah, than these two paintings? In celebrating his own role as a Jew, we have the original Moses bearing the Torah before Israel. In honoring his father Jacob Curiel, who escaped the Inquisition, we have the original Jacob's battle with the angel taken by many to be an embodiment of Esau.

For the Sephardi scholar Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270), the nighttime struggle of Jacob, and his emergence at dawn, wounded but triumphant, embodies Jewish history itself:

> The whole matter represents an allusion to our future history, that there would come a time when the descendants of Esau would overcome Jacob almost to the point of total destruction. . . . But we endured it all and it passed us by.

We now can see why a man like Moses Curiel would have celebrated his father by commissioning from Rembrandt a painting of Jacob engaging with the angel. Because for Jews such as his father, to see such an image was to see a struggle that continued long after the original Esau, a struggle undergone by his father Jacob Curiel in Catholic Portugal, a struggle in which his father triumphed. The painting speaks to a struggle that was also internal, that took place not only within Jacob, but within the Jews of the future: a struggle against the fear of our enemies, and against the temptation to assimilate and to abandon the faith of our fathers. Is it not the perfect painting with which to remember Jacob Curiel?

The story of the Curiel family speaks to all of us, for in every age, we encounter Esau; we have our own engagement of the non-Jewish world. For some Jews the danger has been persecution; for others, especially many today, the danger is the temptation to assimilate and to lose our identity.

The striking fact of our current moment is that the two struggles have become intertwined. In Israel, our brethren are physically engaged with an enemy that has, to paraphrase Jacob, attacked "mothers and children alike." In this battle, Israelis have, like Jacob, revealed themselves truly to be "Israel"—truly capable, morally, and physically, of engaging in this struggle against the enemy. But another struggle has begun in the Diaspora: a wrestling by many Jews with their identity, the sudden rediscovery by some descendants of Jacob of their own covenantal calling. One example is given by a Chabad rabbi, Avraham Berkowitz, who attended the rally in Washington, and recounted online an encounter on the Metro:

> We met Rob on the Metro on the way to the March for Israel rally. Rob told us he never had a bar mitzvah or put on *t'filin* in his life. He told us that his grandfather left him a pair of *t'filin* that he had worn, but it got lost and he never put them on. Rob told us with tears in his eyes how happy he was to do this *mitzvah* and have his bar mitzvah now, on the train to the March for Israel, and specifically for the miraculous return of the hostages.

Thus did one elderly Jewish man, so many decades after he ought to have had a bar mitzvah, embrace the faith of his fathers, overcome with emotion, emerging victorious in a struggle for his identity, inspired by the genuine physical struggles of his brethren overseas.

The story of Jacob has thus been seen throughout history as a tale of the Jews' encounter with the world. That is how Jacob and Moses Curiel would have seen it, and we, with our own challenges, should see it that way as well. These faithful art connoisseurs of Amsterdam were part of the larger culture, served in the courts of kings, but with the courage of those who resisted assimilation, risked the scrutiny of the Inquisition, and built a proud Jewish life in freedom.

Today, another battle with Amalek is engaged, and the Jewish people finds itself, in the dark night of struggle, like Jacob of yore who battled till dawn. We yearn for the bright light of victory in the Holy Land; and we also long, in the Diaspora, for a new dawning of a radiant embrace of Jewish identity.

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World is generously sponsored by Ivan Kaufman.

Rabbi Soloveichik's podcasts and essays on the Book of Genesis are generously sponsored by Brad Forney and the BCF Group.

This week's episode is generously sponsored by Juan Mesa-Freydell.

May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

If you are interested in sponsoring an episode of Parashah and Politics, please contact Director of Strategic Engagement Lauren Shapiro at lshapiro@tikvahfund.org.