Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

# Vayishlach

**“And in This Corner, Jacob!”**

In this week’s portion, Vayishlach, Jacob and Esau reunite after many years apart. As he prepares for their meeting, Jacob sends his wives and children across the river and remains alone on the riverbank. While there, he encounters a strange man.

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| **בראשית לב:כה–כט**<br>(כה) וַיִּוָּתֵר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר: (כו) וַיַּרְא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיִּגַּע בְּכַף־יְרֵכוֹ וַתֵּקַע כַּף־יֶרֶךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֵאָבְקוֹ עִמּוֹ: (כז) וַיֹּאמֶר שַׁלְּחֵנִי כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלֵּחֲךָ כִּי אִם־בֵּרַכְתָּנִי: (כח) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַה־שְּׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב: (כט) וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאָמֵר עוֹד שִׁמְךָ כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׂרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוּכָל: | **Genesis 32:25–29**<br>Jacob was left alone. And a figure wrestled with him until the break of dawn. 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. Then he said, “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” But he answered, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” Said the other, “What is your name?” He replied, “Jacob.” Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” |

- **Dawn is mentioned several times in these verses. Why might it be important to the story?**
- **Jacob receives a new name, along with an explanation of its meaning. What does your name mean, or what is the story behind how you were given it?**

The name Jacob receives from his mysterious opponent will play a central role in Jewish history, but the explanation raises questions. Who are the divine beings with whom Jacob has wrestled, and what does it mean that he has prevailed? The medieval French commentator Chizkuni addresses both questions in his commentary on this verse.

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| **חזקוני, בראשית לב:כט**<br>**כי שרית עם אלקים.** נעשית שווה למלאכים בשררה וממשלה אבל לא עליהם. | **Chizkuni, Genesis 32:29**<br>**For you have striven with beings divine.** You have now become the equal of angels, but you have not succeeded in outranking them. |

- **How does the Chizkuni answer the two questions posed above? Do you find his answers satisfying?**

- **What do you think it means for Jacob to be the "equal of angels"? What would it look like for him to outrank them?**

*Tze'enah Ure'enah* is an early seventeenth-century Yiddish work compiled by Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi. It combines biblical texts with teachings from rabbinic literature and medieval commentators. Historically, it was studied primarily by women, though intended for a broad audience. In this passage, Rabbi Ashkenazi interprets Jacob's victory:

***Tze'enah Ure'enah*, Vayishlach 39**
He searched for a sin that he had committed, so that he could harm Jacob and kill him. He found no *sin*; only that Jacob had married two sisters during their lifetime. This is the meaning of the verse "*he saw that he had not prevailed against him*" [32:26]. That is to say, the angel saw that he could find no sin in Jacob, and he could do nothing to him.

- **What does this source suggest about the powers and limitations of angels?**
- **Rabbi Ashkenazi explains that Jacob prevailed against the angel because he had never sinned. Is a life without sin something we should strive for? What role do mistakes play in human growth?**

Ibn Ezra, the 12th-century Spanish rabbi whose commentary on the Torah reflects his knowledge as a Hebrew grammarian and philologist, does not see the angel as a malevolent force. Instead, he explains that this encounter was meant to give Jacob confidence for his reunion with Esau.

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| **אבן עזרא, בראשית לג:י**<br>ורבי המפרשים אומרים כי בא המלאך ליעקב לחזק את לבו שלא יירא מאחיו כי הנה המלאך לא יכול לו, אף כי בן אדם... רק פירושו שר תחשב עם המלאכים, ואם אנשים שרים | **Ibn Ezra, Genesis 33:10**<br>Many of the commentators explain that the angel with whom Jacob wrestled came to encourage him not to lose heart and fear Esau. For if an angel could not overcome him, certainly no human could.... Our phrase (Gen. 32:29) means that you are considered a prince among the angels, and also among human princes. |

- **Based on this source, what can you infer about the natures of, and relationships between, humans and angels?**
- **Ibn Ezra explains that what seems on the surface to be an antagonistic force was actually there for positive reasons. Have you ever had an experience where something which at first seemed like opposition turned out to be helpful?**

Not all commentators agree with the Chizkuni, *Tze'enah Ure'enah*, and Ibn Ezra that the divine beings Jacob struggled with were angels. In an essay about Jacob's name change, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdoms, provides a very different reading of this verse, using it to teach a lesson about the national character of the Jewish people:

> ***Covenant and Conversation, Genesis*; "Jacob's Destiny, Israel's Name"**
> Jacob is not, at first glance, the most obvious figure in Tanakh to represent and epitomize the Jewish people…. Nor is the phrase "one who has struggled with God and with men and has overcome" the most natural characterization of Jewish identity… The classic function of religion throughout history has been to reconcile people to the random brutalities of fate, the injustices of society, the triumph of might over right, the brevity of life itself and the pains and disappointments with which it is fraught. In a thousand different ways, religion has represented an alternative reality, a "haven in a heartless world," an escape from the strife and conflict of everyday life into the quiet spaces of the soul, or the thought of life beyond death. Religion, faith, spirituality – these words conjure up ideas of peace, serenity, inwardness, meditation, calm, acceptance, consolation, bliss. Judaism is, intellectually, spiritually and emotionally, the great exception. For we believe that sufferings, evil and imperfections are *not* the inevitable lot of man; they are not woven into the fabric of the universe that God created and pronounced seven times "good." Justice, freedom, human dignity, equality of respect, integrity and compassion are to be fought for *here*, not in heaven… The Torah was not given to the ministering angels, but to humans, because humans need it. And in giving human beings freewill, God expressed His faith that one day they would learn to use it responsibly and morally and thus create a world of societal beatitude… And that means wrestling with God and with men and refusing to give up or despair.

- **Rabbi Sacks argues that Jacob is a surprising choice to represent the Jewish people. What figure in the Torah would you pick, and why?**
- **Do you agree with Rabbi Sacks that Judaism is unique among all religions in its relationship to "sufferings, evil and imperfections"?**

**Further Questions for Discussion**

1. Before learning these sources, what were your associations with angels in the Jewish tradition, if any? Did anything you saw on this sheet challenge those assumptions or surprise you?
2. Jacob's name recalls his birth, when he grasped Esau's heel. How do the origin and associations of that name compare with the meaning of his new name, Israel?
3. After learning these sources, what is one idea that will stick with you, and what is one question that you are left with?

**Suggestions for Further Study**

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Vayishlach, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Vayishlach page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Vayishlach topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Jacob, Esau, and Angels.

The source from Rabbi Sacks is excerpted from a longer work. If you would like to read the entire piece, you can find it on Sefaria, along with two other essays by Rabbi Sacks on this portion, exploring various aspects of Jacob's nighttime struggle.

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