

Ya'akov Is Left Alone: Wrestling From Darkness to Hope Parashat Vayishlach

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Delivered at The Jewish Theological Seminary (New York City)

I have always been intrigued by the lyrics of the song "Grey Street." [Dave Matthews](#) sings about a woman; a woman hurting deep inside. He describes her as living at the corner of "Grey Street" and the "End of the World." For me, these words conjure an image of this woman and what she must be feeling:

*Oh look at how she listens
She says nothing of what she thinks
She just goes stumbling through her memories
Staring out on to Grey Street*

*She thinks, "Hey,
How did I come to this?
I dream myself a thousand times around the world,
But I can't get out of this place"*

*There's an emptiness inside her
And she'd do anything to fill it in
But all the colors mix together - to grey
And it breaks her heart.*

Clearly, this woman is in pain. She is feeling alone, empty, trapped in darkness. And she can't get out of that place. Aloneness. Depression.

In Parshat Vayishlach, we read of our patriarch Ya'akov preparing for the confrontation with his brother Esav. It has been over two decades since he last saw his twin brother, his nemesis. The Torah teaches us that he is greatly frightened of his brother, and in his anxiety, he divides his family and all his flock into two camps. Should Esav, in his vengeance, attack one camp, at least the other would remain safe. Taking his family across the river with all their possessions, Ya'akov then returns to the other side of the river. *Vayivater Ya'akov levado* - And then, Ya'akov is left alone.

Ya'akov is left alone, but what are we to make of this? What happens to Ya'akov left in his aloneness? Left without his family to spend the night. Left alone in the darkness to contemplate his fate when he would once again come face to face with Esav. This was an intense night for Ya'akov. And in this night of utter aloneness, what happens? *Vaye'avek ish imo ad alot ha'shachar* - A man wrestles with Ya'akov until the break of dawn.

Biblical commentators have been puzzled by the identity of this mysterious man who wrestles with Ya'akov in the dead of night. All commentators agree, however, that whomever Ya'akov wrestles with is no ordinary mortal. It is Maimonides who sees this wrestling match as a dreamlike, internal struggle. He understands that Ya'akov wrestles with himself. To Maimonides, Ya'akov's struggle is symbolic of the history of the Jewish people. In every generation, we wrestle to perfect the world - to seek shlemoot, completeness. When we wrestle with ourselves, we struggle to find spiritual shlemoot, inner completeness.

To borrow a modern term, Ya'akov carries a lot of baggage. He sends his family across the river, finding himself alone, in the dark, to wrestle. He reflects on his troubled past. Ya'akov is involved in struggles from before he even breathes his first breath outside the womb. He deceives others. And others deceive him. He struggles with those around him - his brother, his father, his father-in-law. His life has not been an

easy one. This is for sure. And, it is now time for one more struggle. This time a wrestling match with his greatest foe - his inner self.

I am interested in this story from the Torah on an intellectual level, but Ya'akov's struggle takes on a very personal dimension for me as well, because someone close to me found himself *levado*, in the state of aloneness; the aloneness known as depression.

For three years, I watched as a close family member battled depression. My dad and I have often discussed those years together. He is quite open about his experience with depression in the hope of helping others. And I am grateful that he is permitting me to speak candidly this evening.

As a high school student, when I really needed my dad to be there for me, to guide me on the right path, to spend time with me, bonding as fathers and sons do, he could be found, on most days, alone, depressed. I can recall times when the weather would be uncharacteristically beautiful, and I would ask my dad if he would come outside to "play some catch." He would rarely turn me down, but this endeavor would often fail once we stepped outside. His gloomy demeanor would overtake his desire to spend time with me. Either my dad would be too lethargic to continue, or, what began as an age-old father-son ritual would quickly turn into an argument, with him headed straight back to his aloneness - into the dark abyss of his depression.

Understanding "*levado*" in the sense of despair and aloneness, we can look back to the Garden of Eden narrative where we learned God's view on being alone. *Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado* - God says, "it is not good for human beings to be alone." What does God mean by this? Why is it not good to be alone? After all, who doesn't appreciate a few relaxing moments, to unwind, to collect thoughts? So, is aloneness a positive or a negative experience? In the case of Ya'akov's aloneness, I argue it is positive.

In fact, while God emphasizes that humans should not be alone, the rabbis show that Ya'akov is in good company in his aloneness. In Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, Rabbi B'rechya teaches in the name of Rabbi Simon: "There is none like God; yet who is like God? Yeshurun, which means Yisrael the Patriarch [this is Ya'akov]. Just as it is written of God in the Book of Isaiah, And the Lord alone shall be exalted, so it is written of Ya'akov too: *Vayivater Ya'akov levado* - and Ya'akov is left alone." Thus, God is alone and so too is Ya'akov.

His aloneness is positive, for in this night of solitude and solicitude, Ya'akov is given the opportunity to come to terms with his life - to wrestle with himself, alone with his conscience. Yet, we must remember that Ya'akov is not totally alone; not totally in seclusion. His loved ones are on the other side of the river. During Ya'akov's struggle, the Torah is silent about them; but if we listen closely, can we not hear what they are saying? They are worried about their husband, their father. They desperately want to cross back over the river to be by his side, to help him defeat his foe. Yet, they know that he must struggle alone. It must be he, on his own, who defeats his shadow self. Even as Ya'akov struggles alone, his family is very much with him.

In this case, aloneness is positive. And necessary. Only in his aloneness, fighting against anxiety and depression, can Ya'akov discover his destiny to become Yisrael, the namesake of the Jewish people for eternity. Martin Buber saw Ya'akov's wrestling match as a metaphor for all of humanity's struggle with life's existential questions. Although I am not suggesting that Ya'akov is experiencing clinical depression, I do think that we can use elements of his struggle, his wrestling with his conscience on this dark night, as a model for examining, and perhaps better understanding, the struggle with depression.

Although depression often goes undetected and untreated, it is estimated that between two and four percent of people suffer from clinical depression. This translates to roughly seventeen-and-a-half million Americans each year. We have an obligation to stand by those seventeen-and-a-half million people. Some of those people are right here in this room. We need to support them in their wrestling experience on the journey toward healing.

In Ya'akov's struggle, he finds healing. And we find hope. Understanding that Ya'akov wrestles with his own conscience, we also bring to light the other rabbinic interpretations theorizing the identity of Ya'akov's opponent. Ya'akov wrestles with his shadow self, but in so doing, he also takes on his brother Esav, he fights with the angel of death, and he wrestles God. He wrestles with himself, and he wrestles with his past.

As dawn breaks, his opponent asks Ya'akov to let him go. *Lo ashaleicha'cha ki im-berachtani* - "I will not let you go," Ya'akov says, "unless you bless me." And from this point on, Ya'akov is no longer to be Ya'akov. He is now Yisrael. Transformation. Having successfully confronted his inner conflict, Ya'akov musters the courage to face Esav later this day. Out of the darkness, out of his aloneness, Ya'akov returns to his community, to his family. Out of the darkness, he is transformed.

He is transformed, and yet, his struggle is, in no way, an easy one. It leaves him with a permanent reminder of the experience, a scar. The Torah tells us that Ya'akov limps for the rest of his life from the injury sustained while wrestling. We can understand this injury metaphorically. Through our inner struggles, we become transformed, and yet, we still bear the pain of the struggle.

It has been said that one has to lose oneself before one can find oneself. For my dad, I believe this to be the case. He too went through a transformative experience. He too emerged from the darkness a new person. The key word is "*levado*." Through his existential struggle, he came to see life differently. Was my dad ever truly alone? Absolutely not. He felt alone even though we were there by his side. We too, were just on the other side of the river.

Being alone did not lead my dad to further despair and loneliness. We, who love him and care for him, showed him that we were there with him. But we came to understand and respect his need to be alone in his inner struggle toward transformation. This aloneness empowered him to pursue a *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of his soul. He was able to chart a new course, setting forth the goals about which he is most passionate. Today, he has a completely different outlook on life.

Not everyone who is in a dreadful state of darkness will be able to wrestle out of it. But we, who care very much for them, must encourage them to seek this transformation. And the journey from darkness, anxiety, and depression to aloneness, struggle, and then transformation is an arduous one. It is up to us to be there for those who are suffering in our community. It might be a spouse, or a parent, or a child, or a friend, who is hurting so deeply inside. We must find help for them. And sometimes, we must stand on the other side of the river as they cross back over to struggle with themselves, always reassuring them with our love and with our consolation.

One of the purposes for our praying for those who are ill is to relieve their sense of aloneness. In the *misheberach*, the prayer for healing, we ask God to relieve those in our community who suffer from illness. We pray for *refuat hanefesh u'refuat hagoof*, a recovery from not only physical pain and suffering, but a recovery of the soul as well. We pray for a recovery from mental anguish. A recovery that Ya'akov realizes.

Ya'akov is like that woman living on Grey Street. After his reunification with his brother Esav, the Torah describes him as *shalem* - whole, at peace with himself, and with others. No longer alone, he is transformed, and filled with hope.

*There's an emptiness inside her
And she'd do anything to fill it in
But all the colors mix together - to grey
And it breaks her heart*

*How she wishes it was different
She prays to God most every night*

*And though she swears it doesn't listen
There's still a hope in her it might*

There's still a hope in her. She cries out to God for help. Perhaps she cries the words of the Psalmist, *Lo irah rah ki atah imadi*. "I fear no evil for You are with me!" Through the darkness, through the struggle, there remains hope. From struggle comes healing. We all have loved ones who need us to listen to their cries for help. Our charge is to recognize and accept others in their times of aloneness. We need to listen to their cries for help, and respond by being present for them. Any one of us could live on Grey Street. But there is hope. There is the hope when we meet friends and loved ones in the dawn following their night of struggle.

Shabbat Shalom.