

# **Jacob and Esau — Lessons Learned for Israeli-Palestinian Relations**

## **A D'var Torah on *Parashat Vayishlach* (Gen. 32:4 – 36:43)**

**By Allen and Toby Cohen**

*“Vayishlach Ya’akov mal’achim l’fanav el-Eisav achiv...”*  
*“Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau...”*

*Parashat Vayishlach* is an extensive chapter with several disparate ideas and themes. The most famous portions of *Vayishlach* include the reunion, after many years, of Jacob and Esau. The dividing of the Jacob’s family and Jacob’s remaining behind while his entourage crossed the Jabbok, raise questions as to his courage. Jacob’s wrestling with an angel is a defining moment in the start of the nation of Israel. Dinah’s rape and the subsequent massacre of the people of Shechem is a tragic story, as is Jacob’s worried response to the massacre. Jacob travels to the Promised Land, destroys the idols in his midst and receives a blessing from God. Both Isaac’s death and Rachel dying in childbirth with Benjamin are in this parashah. The chapter concludes with the listing of the sons of Jacob, and then a long listing of the descendents of Esau who moves to Seir to be separate from Jacob.

The parashah brings some hope to me that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can eventually be resolved. Genetic studies have shown that the Palestinians and Israelis have a close DNA match. If we can assume that we are brothers and sisters to them, then reconciliation can be possible. There will be fear on both sides, similar to Jacob’s fear of Esau’s army and Esau’s fear of another of Jacob’s tricks. The Palestinians fear the Israeli army, and the Israelis fear the suicide bombers. It may take a separation of years with, in modern terms, a fence, to set the conditions for a meeting of peace. The tenacious struggle of Jacob with the angel presages the internal struggle and questioning that the Israeli nation will have with little interaction to undergo before developing a new persona that can create a fair and just peace. Jacob’s wrestling symbolizes both the success and the pain that might result from reconciliation. In Jacob’s case, his hip was wrenched from its socket. In the case of Israel, the settlements may be wrenched from the land. It may be necessary for Israel to bring gifts, in our case, maybe money for resettlement of the descendants of the expelled families in Palestine to propitiate them. Similar to Esau moving to Edom so that he did not have to interact with his brother, Israel and Palestine probably will exist separately.

In the description of Jacob trying to analyze the best way to reunite with his brother Esau, we see Jacob as having a conniving mind. Esau plans to meet Jacob with a 400-man army. Jacob is a nomadic shepherd, moving with wives and flocks but no army. This situation can be looked at in many ways.

Jacob, called Israel by God, is indeed like Israel, especially in the wars with its neighbors in 1948, 1967, and 1973. Israel cannot match its Arab enemies man for man so it must use cunning, plots, and Jacob-like assessments. But Jacob in the Torah portion is willing to divide his holdings and perhaps risk half in an encounter with Esau. The state of Israel does not want to risk any of its people.

In Jacob's wrestling with the angel, perhaps Jacob is struggling with his conscience. We, as individuals, have life-long struggles with our conscience and should always try to do the right, ethical thing. Sometimes the right choice is not as clear as we would like. We "wrestle" as Israel does to make a just peace. Nothing is entirely black and white, whether it is a government issue, a community issue, or even a private family issue. As Jews, we want to wrestle with our conscience to be the fairest and most effective.

The problem is that often a person or a group will attempt to decide what is best for him or for the larger group. In Israel, the various parties and religious groups may be dogmatic and one-sided. The wrestling match, unlike Jacob's, seems unending.

The story of Dinah's rape and the killing of all the people of Shechem by her brothers seem awful. First, it isn't entirely clear that Dinah was raped, and perhaps she was more than willing to take as a husband the prince of Shechem. Her brothers demand that all the men of Shechem become circumcised as they (Dinah's brothers) and their tribe are. Then, after the men of Shechem cooperate and comply, they (including Dinah's lover) are murdered by Dinah's brothers. This is treachery, a war crime.

This treacherous behavior has been seen in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Whenever, Jews and Palestinians came close to peace, Palestinians were quick to murder, a person of peace and even a Jew felt compelled to assassinate Rabin when peace was nearly at hand.