Genesis XXXII, 23-29

23-4 Jacob send over all his family and flocks

25 Jacob is left alone, and “there wrestled with him a man until the breaking of day”

Jacob doesn’t pass over the ford of Jabbok (Fox points out YBK is the root for Ya’akov, Yabbok, and Y’bk, wrestling, but makes no real argument out of this)—on the other side is the territory where his brother is to meet him with 400 men, where Ya’akov is afraid of the encounter. Ya’akov has already sent on drove after drove of flocks to “appease” Esau. He had left having stolen Esau’s birthright, which we might taking to be the blessing of the father, and the prosperity that the blessing would have brought. Now he is returning to his brother all the fruits of that prosperity, and having sent over all the rest of his family—it being detailed, 2 wives, 2 concubines, 11 children, and all the rest of his flocks—he is left alone. Line 25 says that “And Ya’akov was left alone”—a situation that perhaps parallels his aloneness when he left home in flight of Esau, but there is no mention of being left alone then. This line, Ya’akov was left alone, is unusual if not unique in the Bible. It is obviously a situation in which the figures in the Bible do not normally find themselves; it is unusual enough for the narrative to have to mention it; it is unusual and resonant with the potentiality for an encounter with self or other than would not otherwise normally arise. What did Joseph experience alone and cast off in that pit; Abraham returning down the mountain, alone with his thoughts of what he had almost done; Cain with the bloodied knife, guilty of his brother’s death. We who grew up in the 50s were exposed to such titles as *Man Alone* depicting the existential condition of human beings, intended to evoke the alienation that underlies our situation of being in the world, a condition to which Camus would attach the word “absurd,” thus defining the culture of a generation.

Immediately he is alone, line 25 gives us the subsequent line, “there wrestled with him a man until the breaking of day.” The wrestling until the break of day follows from Ya’akov having been alone. Whatever this wrestling means, it had to have been when the two were alone together, as it were; “alone together” for the entire night. The first thought is that this is not real; that Ya’akov was wrestling with himself, with someone identified only as “ish,” man, so that this other is the other to oneself, but ambiguously also within oneself—that which is other within oneself. What lends further credence to this is that they are so evenly matched that neither could prevail, and that nothing else is given other than they wrestled for the entire night. Trite notions follow: he was wrestling with his conscience, or with the limits of his own being, with his imperfections. We say of one, “he wrestled with himself,” when agonizing over a difficult decision. But here, he had made the decision when he sent over the Yabbuk, the river, all that he had, leaving himself vulnerable to that condition of absolute solitude. And there is no build-up to this wrestling; no thoughts of his brother to come, the next day at dawn, or even of Laban behind him. Nothing in the space between being alone and then the line, as Fox translatess it, “Now a man wrestled with him.” That’s it. Sometimes in life we find ourselves, all of a sudden, wrestling with someone else at night.

If it were god with whom he wrestles, there is also this part of the moment to consider: like Job, alone means being rendered destitute of all that he possessed and cherished, forcing him to reflect, why have I lost everything; why am I being punished in this way, since being totally alone then was not man’s existential condition, but rather a sign of man’s punishment before god, as with Cain who complained that it would be too great a punishment to bear, and as Adam and Eve’s expulsion from god’s presence also signified. If in this state of aloneness, Ya’akov is left to bear with his destitution, it could also be thought that it was his time of suffering, and in his wrestling was enmeshed in the struggle to deal with the thought that would torment Job, what is it for, this life in which we suffer. Bare life as Agamban puts it, contemplating life in a concentration camp; not man alone in a universe in which god’s answers are no longer accessible—the existential torment of the well off, but something closer to bare life, when there on the horizon before one there is nothing to offer a sense that pleasure can compensate for the bareness. The family and servants and wealth gone, what is left? And most importantly, only then can he ask, even if they were still there, what does he have to answer the final question, what is life for, what is life for if we suffer. This is the question for the concentration camp existence before which we all shudder, but it is the ultimate situation of desolation for us today, and it is replicated in the camps of desperate people throughout much of the world, from the congo to sri lanka to gaza. I learned recently that the name given, in the nazi concentration camps for those who had given up on life was Musselmänner—Muslim—a Yiddisch word denoting a human who had lost all hope, and who not going to make it.

So even if ya’akov was able to trick esau, his father, and laban, he cannot escape this moment which brings its intense suffering. Ya’akov’s virtue was that he would not flee to avoid the struggle, that he made it through the night, persisting so that his opponent had to beg to be released. But he did not escape unscathed. Were they both touched by this ordeal, Ya’akov who would limp through the rest of his life, marked by a new name; and the man, the angel of god, having failed to conquer a mere man. Ya’akov was wounded in the hollow of his thigh, line 26-9: “When he saw that he could not prevail against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; the socket of Ya’akov’s thigh had been dislocated as he wrestled with him. Then he said, let me go, for dawn has come up! But he said, I will not let you go unless you bless me. He said to him: what is your name? and he said, Ya’akov. Then he said, not as ya’akov shall your name be henceforth uttered, but rather as Yisrael.”

At the end of this night of wrestling, the man said, “Let me go, for the day breaketh.” What kind of struggle would it be, all night, with one who fears the breaking of the day?

At night we struggle in our dreams in ways that are different by day. Throughout the bible, dreams and the struggle to understand occur at night; at day, all seems clearer. The wrestling is framed by its nighttime setting. The action is only wrestling. The result is, 1.ya’akov wounded in the hollow of his thigh; 2. The man asks to be released; 3.ya’akov bargains as he had with the hungry esau, for the blessing in return for giving something to the man who requests release.

Esau wasn’t being greedy; he was faint with hunger, faint with his need which he could not bear; a need for which he pays for the rest of his life: a mythic need, like the mythic need of this wrestling man who begs to be released.

But before he agrees to provide that blessing, he asks Ya’akov, What is your name? and ya’akov has to utter his name to this unnamed stranger, saying Ya’akov. (29): “Thy name shall be called no more ya’akov, but Israel. For thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed.”

Can a struggle be a divine and a human struggle all at once, and what does this mean? A struggle with one’s self and one’s limits both beyond the self and commensurate with it—and this struggle will mark one forever (with a limp), so that one will be both in this world and beyond it (limping), and understand that this encounter with the Other is the condition for life. 31: “I have seen God face to face and my life has been saved.” A life preserved means a life saved by prevailing through the struggle.

Now “the man” with whom he struggled is no longer Esau, or his father or Laban, to be tricked and defeated; not even with himself, but rather with someone with whom the meaning of his life, given here as his name, can be obtained through struggling, through a wrestling. If this “man” is the other, even some other within the self, then can the other be ultimately conquered by acquiring knowledge of him, his name? “Then ya’akov asked and said, ‘Pray tell me your name. But he said, Now why do you ask after my name?”

The conundrum of the meaning of the struggle remains, and all we have to understand it is that 1.it lasted all night, 2.with a stranger who remains unknown; 3.that it, or he, confers a blessing on Ya’akov; 4.that as sign of it Ya’akov limps; 5.that the man tells Ya’akov that he has fought with God and men, and that ya’akov will then call this place Penuel for there he has seen god face to face.

At this point, at the end of the episode when its meaning is meant to be made clear, when we expect to be told, this is why, we are instead presented with another mystery, which is given in the form of an explanation: “Therefore the children of Israel do not eat the sinew that is on the socket of the thigh until this day, for he had touched the socket of Ya’akov’s thigh at the sinew” (33), this information coming as the sun rises on Israel who is crossing over, or by, this place, or river, called Penuel. The mystery lies in the question why preserving the memory of this struggle (given in the form of an injunction not to eat the nerve of the thigh socket) is somehow the clue to providing us with the meaning of the struggle. The reason for the injunction is given, “because he touched the hollow of Ya’akov’s thigh, even in the sinew of the thigh vein” (33).

Neither Esau nor Isaac touched Ya’akov in the sinew of his thigh, that is, in his heart. Maybe his mother Rebecca did; maybe Rachel did, and then she died, and her two children, at one point or another, were also lost to Ya’akov. For each of them he suffered with the feeling of loss, and only after that feeling was there some restoration, and the blessing.

Ya’akov is the figure of struggle, with struggle being the condition for the blessing. Neither Abraham nor Isaac had to struggle to get it—each of them was situated before god as the one who receives passively the covenant. Ya’akov has to go out to the wilderness and struggle in order to return with the blessing—the wives and children and flocks. And only alone, at night, can be come to encounter the stranger who will give him a new name and this blessing. And then, changed, he will be known by another name, and his children will be called b’nai israel.