

V'YISHLACH; GENESIS CHAPTER 32: VERSES 25-31: AN EXPOSITION

The patriarchal period of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is located by some scholars as perhaps round about 1900 BCE – the beginning of the second millennium BCE - and occurs in Mesopotamia (Ur and Haran) and on the way to and from Canaan (W.F.Albright in Paul Johnson *A History of the Jews* p.11 fn18). It occurs in Canaan - the Promised Land in places like Shechem, Beersheva, Jericho, Hebron and in Egypt where Abraham and Jacob's sons go to get grain when there is a famine in Canaan. Abraham lets it be known that his wife is his sister – fearing that he might be killed if the truth were known in Egypt that he is married to such a beautiful woman. He is banished from Egypt by Pharaoh after plagues occur. This is in some way connected by Pharaoh to Abraham's white lie. This is but one domestic indication that Egypt is the hegemonic power in the patriarchal period. Canaan is Palestine/Israel but variously promised by God to the Chosen People as either from the Nile to the Euphrates or from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River going from the east to the west, and from about Lebanon in the north to the south including the Sinai Peninsula. One critique of the current "promised" land ideology of zealous Jewish settlers in the West Bank is that the promise varies as to which author or group of authors (J, E, P, D or R – see Johnson and *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* as to the Wellhausen hypothesis) is actually writing the Torah. David and Solomon (about 1000 to about 900 BCE) extended the united kingdoms of Israel and Judah further than the borders of today's Israel/Palestine to include Samaria and territory as far away as Syria. It is not clear (to me!) if this, the First Commonwealth actually encroached on Egyptian territory although it did include Sinai and Solomon had copper works near the coast of the Persian Gulf. However Egypt conducted incursions into Canaan and frequently captured Semitic slaves – Canaanites and Israelites in the course of brutal raids. The literature refers to a Pharaoh who erected a stele commemorating the total destruction of "Israel" probably in the pre-First Commonwealth period. This could have been propaganda and a reverse truth has been suggested: that Israelite slaves escaped from Egypt in the pre-Commonwealth, the Mosaic period. There was a Semitic dynasty in Egypt, the Hyksos, possibly coincident with some like Joseph being a vizier of a Pharaoh in the patriarchal or post-patriarchal period. Assyria destroyed Israel in the early 700's BCE, bringing the First Commonwealth of David and Solomon (about 1000-900 BCE) and the northern kings' reigns in the eventually separated northern kingdom to an end. Later Babylon brought about the end of the southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin (Judea) and destroyed the first temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Persia displaced Babylon and ended the exile in Babylon of the Judean ruling elite some of whom returned with Ezra and Nehemiah after about 50 years.

Meanwhile the Torah, which depended on written scrolls perhaps as old as the 900s BCE and before that on an oral tradition which were apparently edited in Babylon during the exile or at least a start was made in the redaction and the canon of Torah. Babylon was then displaced by Persia and it was Cyrus and Darius of Persia who allowed the return of the elite whilst the peasantry remained in Palestine/Israel. This was followed by Greek/Macedonian rule led by Alexander the Great in the 300's BCE. Alexander's empire was inherited by sub-dynasties: the Ptolemy regime in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria. Then Rome became a world power and Titus' soldiers destroyed the second temple of Herod in 72CE. It is important to remember this historical context because much of

Judaism is an attempt to break free of the secular and pagan worlds, the non-Israelite worlds around them as a kind of spiritual sublimation into a reaction-formation: ethical monotheism is a reaction against paganism or polytheism. The episode of Jacob's struggle with the being who is interpreted as an angel is seen by the writers of the text (the "E" authors perhaps) as Jacob seeing an aspect of what Jacob calls Elohim's face, and the implication is that there is only one Elohim although this is only fully worked out by Moses about 700 years later. Jacob's twin Esau marries into the pagan Canaanites or perhaps into the cult of what becomes Baal and Astarte, although one of his wives, Mahalat is Ishmael's daughter and Ishmael is half-Egyptian through his mother Hagar. Ishmael is also half-Hebrew through his father Abraham. Elohim only becomes the only institutionalised ruling Deity much later first through Moses (1250 BCE) and Joshua and after the partial or total conquest by the invading Israelites (after the Exodus) supported by the Israelites (who remained settled in Canaan before and during the period of slavery in Egypt and never experienced life in Egypt). Before and after David and Solomon (about 1000-900 BCE) the settled Israelites in Canaan at the time other Israelites and other Semites were slaves in Egypt also had pagan gods in idol form and celebrated idolatrous and adulterous sexuality which we know about because of the reiterated critique of Moses, the Prophets and in Chronicles before and after the First Commonwealth. But a counter-pagan "epiphany" occurs on Jacob's way back from Haran in Mesopotamia to Canaan where Abraham and Isaac his grandfather and father have settled, but are surrounded by pagan Canaanites. Jacob takes the stranger/angel to be a representative or messenger of Elohim. But it is not absolutely clear from the legend if Jacob regards Elohim as the one and only God, or just the El that he happens to encounter at the place he calls Pen'i'el ("The Face of El" not "The Face of Elohim.) However he does speak to himself of Elohim – All the gods in the One God - not just El – the god of this place. Laban the father of Leah and Rachel is another Amorite or Aramean of the same ethnic group as the Canaan-based group of Habiru or Ivrim ("from across the river") the Hebrews. In this rather fateful way ethics are linked to ethnicity. This is not politically correct today but this is how Hebrew, then Israelite religion evolved. It was originally both ethnic and ethical and the two were intrinsically linked until conversion of proselytes became permissible in the later period, perhaps under Moses, certainly in the rabbinical Roman period. This is just my surmise. Jacob is encountered by night in actuality or we might surmise in a dream or a vision by simply "a man" (ish) but someone who is a stranger to Jacob – often interpreted as an angel of God - with whom he wrestles all night long. His opponent touches Jacob on the hollow of his thigh. As a result, this supernatural (dream-like, magical) touch causes Jacob to strain a sinew in his thigh. This supernatural injury induced in the dream / vision / Imaginary experience does not stop Jacob wrestling. Actually it is the stranger who asks to "be released" – "for it is dawn". (The night is when visions and dreams occur and many pre-modern peoples interpret dream-figures as divine or ancestral supernatural entities.) The text suggests that it is Jacob who shows that he has supernatural strength and if not for the supernatural touch of the angel injuring him, Jacob appears to be winning the struggle. And he bargains with what the legend suggests is a representative of God. He says he will not let the man go unless he blesses him, that is, sanctifies the struggle as a divine experience not a brawl. What becomes Israelite religion has a similar unconscious (dream-like) source as may have been the case with the religions of many early human and homo sapiens cultures in Palaeolithic and Neolithic times. Early homo sapiens goes back some hundreds of thousands of years but there were early humans who were not homo sapiens in the Palaeolithic millions of years before that according to Harari (*Sapiens – A Brief History of Humankind*, Vintage 2011) and the Neolithic period of civilization only starts in Turkey, the Fertile Crescent and Egypt

about 12000 years ago. However to the modern post-Freudian mind, this is what happens in civilized societies: struggle, violence, must be sublimated and transformed in religion, art, literature, sport which are inspired in part by dreaming and unconscious mental life – libido, aggression, sexuality, the survival drives. Israelite and Sumerian and other Mesopotamian religions contain patriarchal or monarchical ethics and legal systems as reaction-formations against the instinctual and the dream-unconscious. No irrecoverable injury should be permitted in religion and law except as allowed by the divine or the secular power. However the non-Israelite Semites in the Sumerian, Assyrian and Babylonian cultures tended to exact more severe punishment for crimes against property and the Mosaic law and commentary later tended to punish crimes against person more severely. At least the other Semites are seen by Mosaic, prophetic and rabbinical ideologies as wrongly allowing sexual freedoms prohibited to Israelites. Coming back to Jacob: the wounding of a hero adds to his (and our) sense of his (and our) own courage in defending ourselves and bearing our wounds without giving up the struggle. However the effect of the name-change leads to the whole of the Hebrew people thenceforth being called Israelites. This gives the episode a kind of supernatural, and if you believe it, a divine status, or at least the identity of the whole people is stamped with the visionary experience of a real or perceived legendary ancestor who is an heroic fighter. He has contended with both God and men and has prevailed is what the text actually says: he is himself chosen – not divine as a result of his physical strength, or his political skill as a tactician, or his ability to interpret his dreams or his supernatural experiences. Not even the Messiah starts off as divine. The Messiah starts off as a prince of peace but a man in the book of Isaiah. Thus Jacob is certainly not divine. Not even Moses is divine although in Maimonides' phrase he knows the mind of God and can enter God's presence as a result of which his face shines with a divine light. There are many versions of the Abrahamic religions – not just Jewish, Christian and Muslim but within each religion there are more or less narrow or more or less broad definitions of what is divinely good and demonically bad or, as I would put it philosophically ethical. As in a dream the wrestling just happens "out of the blue". However Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* enables us to decode what happens in dreams although there is also a neurological reason for dreams. Dreams occur in the brain as the major location of the sane, rationalising, reason-seeking mind which encompasses all the person's experience as subject not just a physical animal-object. Both mind and brain process and integrate previous and current experience at physiological and psychological levels. But our socialisation and education cause us to structure dream and Real experience ethically or ethnically, as broadly ethical, or in a narrow ethnic fashion. In the course of the vision / dream / supernatural experience Jacob asks the stranger what is his name and also realising that this is a divine or supernatural or Imaginary experience Jacob asks for the angel/man's blessing. The stranger cannot give him his name. This is a parallel trope (a literary theme) occurring in another supernatural episode: Moses 650 years later in about 1250 BCE is told during the burning bush experience that he cannot see God's face or be told his name other than "I am that I am" – "Eheyeh Asher Eheyeh." In other words God is eternal Being as such and does exert an influence on history or chooses in post-Holocaust theology to hide his face. He is for himself, exerts his will and knows himself in himself (pour-soi and en-soi) but allows freedom of choice and free-will. Only then can we derive from Being (Sein) the ethical meanings of beings (seindes). The bracketed words come from the French existential philosophy of Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* and the existential theology of Martin Buber in *Between Man and Man* in contention with Heidegger. In Levinas the ethical struggle (i.e. like Jacob and the Angel) has to do with the Same and the Other. Defeating ethical relativism entails Kant's categorical imperative: act as if for

mankind, which may mean limited war against the warlike and the terrorist, or it may mean acting through education and diplomacy.

Rav Avraham Kook sees God as mystical totality and so do other Kabbalists (see Daniel Matt *The Essential Kabbala*). Mystical Kabbalah contains and finds a use for the demonic and the Other. I agree with this, with qualifications, but strongly maintain that the ethical is a categorical imperative imposed *a priori* (from before) because of the inherent nature of a non-psychopathic relationship and society. (This is Kant's view.) Modern parent-child attachment theory suggests a psychological source for caring behaviour (see the works of Michael Rutter in *Maternal Deprivation Re-Assessed*, and *Helping Troubled Children*). But what do you do with psychotic and psychopathic children and adults whatever the causes – genetic and/or cultural – including psychopathic religious or political ideologies, short of or including police and military action?

The dream-like and mystical visions and certainly Kabbalah all have to be located in the Real of everyday waking life in a dangerous world full of psychopathic people, psychopathic subcultures and wholly psychopathic societies (like Nazi Germany). The stranger/angel asks Jacob for his name: "Jacob." We remember that Jacob's name derives from the Hebrew for "heel" – akev. Even as he is born he holds on to his older twin, Esau's heel, as if to "overcome" him. The stranger says from now on he will not be called Jacob but Israel – Yis'ra'el which means, he who defends God, or he who struggles with God, or he whom God defends. In other words he is given a kind of sanctification which "overcomes" his worldly ambition which motivates him to trickery against Esau and a way of increasing his flocks at the expense of his equally tricky father-in-law Laban. What we as ethical Jews feel at this point is that we are being told about the unhappy state of the real, material and social world which is full of deceit and magical/supernatural events which we may doubt. Given that science has other explanations for visions and dreams. But in the text Jacob is redeemed and he is saved from Laban's and Esau's anger and retaliation by the sanctification of the struggle with the "angel" (visionary personification of being with the other even when struggling with him – the I-Thou relationship rather than the I-It relationship). He has also arranged a kind of territorial and religiously sanctioned peace-treaty with Laban. However the being-with the other has to be supported by a categorical imperative that is universal and applies in the religious and in the secular worlds. The self and the Other, ideally, have to be treated as ends in themselves as long as neither violate the categorical imperative that when I act I should be trying to act as if I am acting for all mankind. If I and/or the Other break this rule we are liable to punishment or control by the state or some other cultural or societal agency.

Jacob has this struggle on his way back from Laban in Mesopotamia to Canaan. He has with him his two wives, Leah and Rachel, two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, and eventually twelve sons. The sons' names are given to the twelve tribes who will claim descent from Jacob/Israel's offspring. He has one daughter Dinah. He has the flocks and possessions obtained after working for seven years for each of the two wives as bridegroom's dowry given to his father-in-law and further years working for Laban himself. Laban and the text suggest that Jacob has used sympathetic magic to increase his own flocks at the expense of Laban, but also suggests that he increases the health and survival of his flocks at the expense of Laban's flocks. Laban accuses him of stealing his own (Laban's) flocks. Rachel (and Leah) act in a politic way by fleeing their father with their now rich shepherd husband. Rachel has with her, her father's teraphim – his household "gods" – symbols of her new family's rights of inheritance.

Jacob fears a kind of retribution from his ousted brother Esau who has become a kind of sheik (like Abraham) in charge of four hundred men and from Laban. On hearing of Esau's imminent appearance with a small army, Jacob fears the worst and separates a flock of animals to give to his twin as reparation, a gift to make up for cheating him of his birthright and their father's final blessing - that is to appease Esau. But they embrace each other and weep and Esau says he has enough and refuses the gift only to be persuaded finally to accept it. Esau has married Canaanite women and is the Other, but behaves in a brotherly way – according to the laws of Noah and Noah is the ancestor of all men and women in symbolic terms. Noah is a good man who actually walks with God. The law of (the legendary) Noah applies long before Moses prohibits unjustified violence. Long before Abraham argues with the vengeful God who wants to destroy all in Sodom and Gomorrah and does so. So Judaism is both a particularistic and a universalistic religion. It has both ethnic and ethical implications. Fundamentalists argue that it is quite right that God should destroy all of Sodom and Gomorrah because of the sin of sodomy that is practised there. But the modern mind and the post-Enlightenment, post-Freudian or scientific mind will not accept this view. Homosexuality per se is not necessarily at all sinful and heterosexual adultery may be sinful. The latter is certainly prohibited by Mosaic law and the former is held in Liberal Judaism to be as without sin at all *per se*, despite its banning under Mosaic law. Esau avoids exacting the vengeance characterising another Other – Cain who murdered his more God-favoured brother Abel. But even Cain is protected by the mark that God puts on his forehead to deter others killing Cain as a murderer. Thus sometimes the early Israelite religion is enlightened and sometimes it is not. Sometimes it is reactionary, cruel and unjust to those whose sexuality is not a choice but possibly a genetic or psycho-social variation.

It is clear that Jacob's two visions or visionary experiences – Jacob's ladder to heaven on which angels ascend and descend – which he has on his journey from Canaan to Mesopotamia before he marries Laban's daughters, and his struggle with the stranger/angel which occurs after he is married and has become wealthy - are related. Jacob/Israel is essentially and existentially connected to Shama'im and to God's angelic messenger who the text suggests comes from Shama'im. Jacob/Israel is Chosen by God. He reaches the symbolic heaven of reconciliation by struggling with what Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* would call condensations and a series of displacements and various symbolisations.

The stranger, in Freudian and Kleinian terms is a condensation of the idea of reparation for, and redemption from, evil. (Melanie Klein was a disciple of Freud and wrote *Love, Hate and Reparation*). He, the stranger, God is some sort of material manifestation, is a reaction-formation, a shadow of the Esau whom he cheated; the embodied memory of the trauma of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. Both Abraham and Isaac both suffered because of the Akedah. What was bad is made good: it is transcended by a categorical imperative: being Chosen to carry God's (or the ethical) word. In Greek this is the *logos*. Or Plato's Ideas of justice and courage argued for by Socrates in Plato's Dialogues including the one describing the execution of Socrates after his last discourses. And Aristotle's *Nous*, *Phronesis* and *Sophia* – intuitive common sense, practical intelligence, and metaphysical wisdom. All these ethics are subsumed in Kant's categorical imperative. Isaac's terror, then, - nearly being sacrificed on an altar by his own father enduring a test of obedience is another frightening memory of a meaning embodied in the struggle. Jacob subsequently swears, takes an oath on "the Fear of my father" – condensing the whole moral/incredible experience of the Akedah into one phrase which for Jacob has the force of what we would call Kant's categorical imperative.

Another example of the categorical imperative is expressed in Abraham's great courage in questioning a God of vengeance with whom he, Abraham, had to plead to save the virtuous of Sodom and Gomorrah from general destruction although God does ultimately destroy these cities.

The stranger in the struggle with the angel legend is perhaps also the mirror image of himself Jacob – his previous self being overcome by a transcendental version exercised by his higher ethical self. Abraham can talk to God and Jacob can actually fight with a representative of God. This is the plain meaning of the text. However the homiletic, allegorical and mystical meanings of the text penetrate to the very heart of Judaism and the recesses of both the Freudian, Kleinian and Jungian unconscious and resonate with the whole history of philosophy going as far back as the ancient Greeks and as far forward as the Enlightenment ethics of the very founder of modern philosophy, none other than the Jewishly named Immanuel Kant, without whom we would not see the world as a potentially ethical globalised whole.