



5 Ways

to enter the sacred storytelling

As we proceed in our Torah reading the sages teach us how a single word, phrase or verse in the bible can capture our religious imaginations and open up whole arenas of contemplation and spirited debate. Five examples follow. Add to them by sharing the word or phrase that particularly caught your attention.

1. *Jacob crosses the Jabbok river.*

The movement of people and goods described in 32:23-24 is interesting. Can you picture the scene, and how Jacob comes to be 'left alone' (v.25)? A river-crossing has often symbolized prevailing over danger and going forward into a new stage.

2. *Contrast of night and dawn.*

Ramban (13th c.) likens this to Jewish suffering, 'when wicked governments instituted religious persecution...For the exile is like the night.' By contrast the breaking of the day is 'the salvation of Israel' when the opponent recognizes that it cannot tear Israel away from God.

3. *'...unless you bless me' (32:27).*

'Blessing' is a highly sensitive term given the history of Esau and Jacob! Is the text here referring to the past, to the present, or both?

4. *Change of name.* Jacob becomes 'Israel' (32:29) only with God's help; not passively but through an intense interaction. Does this speak to your life of prayer?

5. *"For to see your face is like seeing the face of God,"* says Jacob to Esau (33:10). Ponder this in the light of 32:31. One interpretation notes that a synonym for the Divine is 'Shalom.' Jacob senses Godliness in his adversary, Esau, and responds to his desire to be reconciled.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

"Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:29).

Author's note: In preparing this week's Torah portion I was particularly struck by the commentators' reflections on Jewish identity. Through Jacob's wrestling match with a mysterious man he acquires a new name: Israel—the name by which the Jewish people would come to be known through history. Long before Israel came to be the name of a modern Jewish state, in a religious sense it referred (and continues to refer) to the Jewish people as a collective—past, present, future; a people defined by a sacred calling.

It is important for us as Christians to ponder this biblical moment when the election of Abraham finds new expression in the struggle of Jacob. It is important for understanding Judaism, Jesus' Jewishness, as well as grasping our own call to 'be' Church—not undermining or abrogating the Jewish covenant which (as today's church teaches) remains valid, but rather learning from its enduring truth.



Genesis 32:4—36:43

Vayishlah:
'he sent'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 32:4–36:43

In this Torah portion Jacob is heading home after a twenty year sojourn outside the God-given land of Canaan. Along the way he learns that his brother Esau, together with 400 men, is coming to meet him. Fearful that Esau still harbors murderous rage over a long-ago conflict, Jacob prepares for the worst (32:4-22). The night before the two brothers meet Jacob wrestles with a mysterious man, thought to be some kind of divine representative (Gen. 32:23-33). The events of the next day are surprising (Gen.33).

Let's explore the significance of Jacob's struggle in the context of the Jacob-Esau reunion.

Tasting Torah

"Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him...he kissed him; and they wept" (33:4).

The brothers' reunion is very different to what we might have expected. Last time they were together Esau was out to kill Jacob. Yet now he shows nothing but love toward his brother who deceived him all those years ago. Could the events of the night before have had something to do with this dramatic change in fraternal relations? The sages certainly think so. Rashi, with reference to the midrash,¹ understands Jacob's wrestling partner to be 'the ministering angel of Esau.' Before Jacob is ready to meet Esau in the flesh, he has to undergo a spiritual confrontation.

Touching Torah

One store of Jewish interpretation focuses on the psychological dimensions of the story. Thus Jacob is seen to be wrestling with his personal history, his anxieties, his guilt. The blessing he grasps is the blessing of having endured a crisis, confronted his inner demons and matured in the process. In this view, Jacob emerges a different person: free from fear and defensiveness, at peace with himself and those around him. Esau senses this, it disarms him, and reconciliation becomes possible.

Does this interpretation resonate with you? Can you think of a time when you wrestled amidst a crisis, 'alone', 'in the night' and came through a stronger, wiser, more mature and conciliatory person?

Depthing Torah

There is another strong current in Jewish interpretation: one which relates Jacob's ordeal to the struggle of the Jewish people in coming to terms with the fact of their election by God. After all, wouldn't it be easier just to fit in and be like the rest of society; to *not* be identified by circumcision or Shabbat or dietary practices? It would certainly have saved them centuries of persecution and suffering.

Yet struggle is part of fidelity. To study and live the Torah means to strive for righteousness, for fullness of life, for the ways of God; not settling for moral mediocrity nor despairing of the possibility of a transformed earth. Yes, it can mean wounds that at times produce a limp. But it also holds the priceless blessing and responsibility of belonging to God and God's people.

In today's complex political climate there are many who are quick to judge the Jewish people. Yet Israel itself has aplenty its critics and prophets within, and this too forms part of its struggle. Certainly Jacob's story invites us to wonder at the fact that throughout history the Jewish people have struggled against extraordinary odds, and have prevailed again and again to grasp anew the irrevocable blessing of their God-given identity and calling.

Doing Torah

How does this reflection stimulate your own sense of vocation as a Christian? For you, how does living by God's Word involve a holy struggle?



A papal perspective

"For the Jewish people themselves, Catholics should have not only respect but also great fraternal love; for it is the teaching of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that the Jews are beloved of God who has called them with an irrevocable calling."

John Paul II, Sydney, 26 Nov 1986.
Address to Jewish Leaders

1. Genesis Rabbah 77:3; Tanchuma 8.
Bibliography: Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (NY, 1995, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006); Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Jerusalem, 2009).
Scripture: NJPS.