

December 1, 2012 – Vayishlach

This week we looked at the meeting of Jacob and Esau, after 20 years of estrangement between them because Jacob tricked their father into giving him the blessing that should have gone to Esau. We also looked at the unfortunate episode commentators refer to as “the rape of Dinah,” and about what has been called “Jacob wrestling with the angel.” In addition, we studied some of the commentary discussing what the wrestling showed us about how Jacob’s character has changed, especially with regard to his approach to the earlier blessing and to a blessing he demands from the being with whom he wrestles.

While this being is described in the Hebrew as "ish," which we know means "man," there is solid textual evidence that Jacob might have been wrestling with God. Certainly he thought that he was, or he would not have named the place "Peni-El," which means "face of God." This perception is reinforced by the description of Jacob's demand to be blessed. And what does the being ask immediately after Jacob demands the blessing? "What is your name?" Why would this be the question? One answer may be that, when Jacob demanded an earlier blessing, he did it as Esau. Names are important things in Biblical times. Would this being have blessed Jacob if he had not owned to his true identity? We don't find out, because Jacob answers truthfully. And owing to the identity he has hidden before may be one of the things that allows the being to tell him that Jacob is ready to move on into a new identity, that of "Israel" (yisra-el), which means "he struggles with God."