

Parshat Vayishlach
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Do you know who Tariq and Michaela Salahi are? Of course you do. Their picture has been everywhere in newspapers, on TV. They are the couple that crashed the White House State dinner last week. Why did they do it?

Remember the balloon boy hoax? The Heene parents reported their son Falcon missing possibly in a runaway balloon causing a search and rescue mission of massive proportions and of course wall to wall coverage by all the major TV networks and newspapers. Why did they do it?

In the case of the Salahis, Bravo, the TV network, had been following the couple and taping them with the possibility of featuring them on an upcoming series. The Heene's also seem to have been trying to position themselves for a possible reality TV show and it appears that people will go to almost any lengths to land themselves on a reality TV show and win their 15 minutes of fame. But with all the competition – winning that fame and earning your spot in the sun seems to get harder and harder as each new act needs to be more outrageous than the previous one in order to garner our attention.

On YouTube it is even simpler. Anyone with a video camera can post their exploits and appeal directly for public attention. Success is measured by the number of hits your video receives and here too – the competition to be outrageous is fierce causing individuals to risk life and limb not to mention any notion of modesty or shame – in order to gain attention and get people to notice.

Reality TV is not really new. Those of us who grew up in the 50's remember Allen Fund's Candid Camera where people did all kinds of silly things – and even though they were unaware at the time of the filming – they did give permission for these embarrassing moments to be televised and thus a genre was born. But the genre really took off in the last 10 years or so: Survivor, American Idol, The Apprentice, Dancing with the Stars, Wife Swap, Big Brother, Jon and Kate plus 8 – there are even television networks now solely devoted to reality TV shows. And what all of these shows seem to have in common, is the notion that people will do almost *anything* in order to be seen and to be known.

Harold Kushner in one of his books, asks the question: Which is worse? Not to know, or not to be known? And he answers by suggesting that he believes that not being known is much worse than not knowing. We can live without knowing a lot, we can live with doubt, but it is impossible to go very long without being known, without a sense of being known, without someone recognizing you and embracing you. Being known and being seen is a fundamental human need.

Today's *parasha* of *Vayishlach* would seem to agree. It could be argued that in one way or another – the entire *Yaakov/Esav* story has been a journey to get these brothers to learn how

to see each other. They are born as twins – they shared the same womb together! Can one possibly get closer to another human being than that? And yet – even from their time inside the womb the Bible makes it clear that these two brothers could not have been farther apart – in demeanor, in personality, in temperament – in practically any category you can think of they were opposites. *Esav* was the hunter and *Yaakov* was the shepherd. *Esav* was the favorite of his father and *Yaakov* was the favorite of his mother. *Yaakov* was destined to become *Yisrael* and the father of all Jews, his brother would be *Edom* – the father by one account of Rome, by another the Arab nation – by either account – our rivals, our enemies. And from day one; the problem between these two brothers seems to be that they just did not see each other.

Martin Buber in his classic work “**I and Thou**” suggests that there are two primary ways to relate to the world – one captured by the term I-Thou, the other by the term I-It. One is the world of relationship and the other is the world of experience. We can, suggests Buber, experience things or we can enter into relationship with them. In the world of nature, in the world of our fellow human beings and in the world of God – it is possible in all three of these worlds to have experiences and to have relationships. In the world of experience I remain I and It remains It and I can see it, touch it, appreciate it, -- but it remains it. In the world of relationship the boundaries blur – it is a wholly different way of relating to the world, to others and to God.

Initially *Yaakov* and *Esav* cannot seem to get beyond the I-It. They are rivals, they are competitors for their parent’s affection – they see each other and are seen by each other as objects to be manipulated and maneuvered. *Esav* is the first-born but Jacob sees himself as the one worthy of his father’s blessing – that is the way his mother sees things as well. So *Esav* is tricked and father Isaac is maneuvered into giving the “wrong” – “right” son the blessing. *Esav* is outraged at being treated this way by his brother and seeks revenge – he threatens to kill him?

All of these actions and counter actions, all of these emotions and counter emotions are in the realm of the I-IT. Jacob sees his brother as an object to be manipulated – like a piece on a chessboard to be moved and arranged. He does not really see his brother. *Yaakov* also has trouble seeing God, and this we discussed in last week’s sermon. On his way out of town, fleeing from his brother he has a dream of a ladder reaching to heaven – God tries to help him see – but *Yaakov* is still not there yet – he bargains and negotiates with God following this dream. “If You will be with me,” says *Yaakov*, “If You will protect me; If you will bring me back safely to my home – *then* You will be my God.” As I mentioned last week – the rabbis had enormous difficulty with Jacob’s language – this is not the language of relationship – this is the language of I-It, of experience – Jacob sees not only his brother – but his God as an object to be negotiated with, manipulated for his goals and his needs.

But today, in *parshat Vayishlach*, we see a very different Jacob – we meet him 20 years later. He has come to the river *Yabok*. He was to meet with his estranged brother *Esav* after an absence of decades. And what followed was a very anxious night. As the Bible says: *Vayivater Yaakov l’vado* “Jacob was left alone... *vaye-aveyk ish imo...* And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.” The Bible calls it a man, but all the traditional commentaries say this may be for want of a better term. As day breaks, Jacob overcomes his opponent, who

pleads with him to let him go, whereupon Jacob says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me!" And the stranger asked: "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And the stranger, man, angel – whatever, replied, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but *Yisrael*, for you have struggled with beings divine and human and have prevailed." And the stranger blessed him there. Jacob responds by calling the name of the place *Pineale*, "For I have seen God face to face and lived!" The next day, the meeting between the two brothers turns out to be an affectionate reunion. They hug each other, they embrace each other and they cry in each other's arms.

What is going on here?

Jacob has a dream on the road, leaving town, and he has a dream on the road when he returns to town. Both of them have God revealing Himself to Jacob – but what is more interesting is the Jacob that is revealed to God. Leaving town, God sees Jacob, but Jacob is not yet truly prepared to see God. When he returns to town, he has grown, he has learned – and now we have a Jacob who knows what it means to see God – and the place is given a name: *Pineale* – literally, "the face of God" as the Bible explains, "for I have seen God face to face and lived." By the way this is how we know it was a dream – because what is the one thing we *know* about humans "seeing" God? "No man can see My face and live!" No this is not about *what* Jacob saw – but *how* he saw it. For the first time – Jacob learns what it means – not to see God but to be in relationship with Him.

When Jacob had fled town – he fled a God he was not able to truly see and he also fled a brother that he had not been able to truly see. His brother was seen only as an IT, an object of his manipulation. But upon his return – here too Jacob has grown, he has learned – and now he is truly prepared to meet his brother – as his brother – to see him, as he wants to be seen – and they embrace, and they cry. In the intervening 20 years Jacob has learned how to see – he has learned how to see God and he has learned how to see his brother.

Like Jacob we too live in a world where we are desperate to be seen, we are hungry to be known – and we like Jacob mistakenly think that if we make ourselves visible enough, out there enough, famous enough, noticeable enough, lovable enough, -- we will be seen, we will be known. So we do outrageous stunts in the hope it will get us on TV – in the hope that it will get us seen and we will be known. And yet – after our 15 minutes of fame – after we achieve our goal – we like Jacob realize that we have not accomplished anything. We still feel empty, we still feel lonely – the fame, the notoriety – does it help? Ask Tiger Woods.

Vayivater Yaakov l'vado "Jacob was left alone." This I believe is the key to the understanding our entire torah portion for today. The story dramatizes one night in the life of Jacob – a moment when Jacob is forced to face the truth about himself. Up until now Jacob's life had seemed one long success story. He had over the course of his years outwitted Esau, Isaac, and Lavan. He was now coming home married, with a large family, a prosperous, successful man. By all outward appearances he was a phenomenal success. Yet, as the Biblical camera zooms in on father Jacob on that fated night, we find him sitting all alone and successful was not how he saw himself. The poor fugitive lad who left his father's home penniless and in a short time became an Eastern potentate, a Mesopotamian tycoon, sits alone, on a dark night,

preparing to meet his brother and he is gripped with fear, terror. He is overcome with guilt. Old memories are awakened; old fears rise up from the past in which he had tried to bury them. And all alone, on the eve of his meeting with Esau, in the middle of the night, Jacob comes to understand that he is not the masterful person he had liked to imagine that he was, that the world thought he was. During the busy daytime, it was a confrontation he could avoid, but now in the quiet and loneliness of the desert night, he could no longer avoid the truth; he was forced to confront himself. And as he probed his own personality he saw a strange intermingling of two natures. Jacob, like all of us, was a child of two worlds, of heaven and earth.

In his early years his lower self had been dominant. Here was an earthly man who could be a party to a cruel hoax played on his father and brother. Here was an earthly man who had deceitfully taken the birthright from Esau. Here was the earthly man who fought Lavan's treachery with crafty schemes of his own. But, Jacob also realized in the quiet of that night - that this was only half of his story. He realized that there was a heavenly side to him as well, one capable of great moral growth and great spiritual achievement. He was also a man who had visions of a God whose words he was dedicated to preserve and whose truth he would transmit to his descendants. And, at this moment in his life, in the quiet of the night a most bitter struggle took place between his fears and aggression and his ideals and his hopes. Which Jacob would survive the night: The earthly Jacob or the heavenly Jacob? In this Divine struggle Jacob comes to see himself more clearly. **Jacob meets God and this time he is able to truly see Him.** And when the sun rises and he meets Esau, who runs to embrace him and kiss him, he is now prepared to meet his brother and for the first time truly see *him*. *Raiti et panecha* "to see your face," Jacob is now able to tell his brother, *kir'ot p'nai elohim* "is like seeing the face of God." "I know this feeling," says Jacob, "I just had it for the first time last night."

I want to end by telling you a story – a very short story from the Talmud. I learned it just this week, but I so fell in love with it that I wanted to share it with you. It is from the tractate Hagiga and can be found on page 5b. Rabbi and Rabbi Hiyya were traveling together on a journey. They came to a certain town and they asked if there was a rabbi, a scholar in the town. Here were two of the great rabbis of that generation, the *nasii* – *rebi* was the titular head of all the rabbis so I guess they wanted to pay their professional respects if there was a colleague in town and they were told: "There is a rabbinical scholar here and he is blind. Rabbi Hiyya turned to Rebi and said: "You rest and don't diminish your dignity – after all you are the *nasi* – I'll go and pay my respects. But Rebi, took hold of Rabbi Hiyya and insisted on coming with him. They visited and spoke and when they were taking leave of him, this blind rabbi gave his visitors a blessing; he said to them: *atem hikbaltem panim hanirim v'aynan roin – tizku l'hakbil panim haroim v'aynan nirin* -- "You have visited one who is seen but does not see; may you be granted to be in the presence of He who sees but is not seen." This beautiful and incredible story ends with Rebi turning to Rabbi Hiyya and saying – see, had I listened to you, you would have deprived me of this blessing!"

Wow, what a story. And what a blessing: *atem hikbaltem panim hanirim v'aynan roin – tizku l'hakbil panim haroim v'aynan nirin* -- "You have visited one who is seen but does not see; may you be granted to be in the presence of He who sees but is not seen." "You have taken

the time to see me,” he says, “I hope you will have the privilege of knowing what it means to be seen as well – by no less than God himself.”

That is all we really want – to be seen; to be known; to be recognized. We need to know that we matter, that someone cares – that the Someone cares. And the lesson that Jacob learned in today’s *parasha* and the lesson that Rebi and Rabbi Hiyya learned in their visit to the blind scholar is that the best way to be seen is to see – the quickest way to be known is to bestow recognition on others. Forget YouTube and Reality TV – it will not get us what we seek. When we embrace, we are embraced, when we love we are loved – and when we are prepared to see others – then and only then will we merit to be seen by them.