

SPOILING FOR A GOOD TUSSLE

--This morning's reading is among the oldest and more complicated traditions included in the Bible's opening book. It is part of a much larger saga related to the early hero Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, the younger twin brother of Esau.

It is written down, along with the other Genesis materials, as early as 1000 B.C.E. There is no knowing, though, for how many centuries before that that it is already being told, getting more amplified all the time, till it arrives at the form that we have presently.

In other words, we've got an at least 3000 year old story here, which takes us back virtually to the beginnings of human consciousness itself. Given that, it can be expected to communicate to us some insight into things at the most fundamental level.

--What is at the epicenter this morning is the core-story of Jacob's encounter with the mysterious figure at the Jabbok ford.

Jacob gets up by night, takes his family and possessions across the ford at this stream, and sends them safely on ahead. He remains behind, intentionally available for the confrontation with some shadowy stranger.

Jacob, in short, is not caught by surprise by the sparring match that ensues; he has purposefully courted it. His movements at the ford are known by him in advance as just the sort of thing that will provoke the appearance of the guardian of these waters. It seems, then, that Jacob is just spoiling for a good tussle. And, most assuredly, he gets it.

In the earliest telling of this tale, the adversary with whom Jacob wrestles is not just "a man," as is termed here, and most certainly not "an angel," as a later Biblical version suggests (see Hosea 12.4)--he is much too dirty a fighter for that. What contends with Jacob is a spirit, specifically the minor, local spirit who protects this critical place of crossing. (Let it not be lost on us that a place of crossing is an "interim" place, a place of transition, which always evokes the elemental spirits.)

--The precise reason for Jacob's provocative challenge to this spirit may be inferred from what results from the hands-on contest between the two. Jacob is apparently a very worthy competitor, more than holding his own against his spirit-antagonist. As the dawn is breaking and the night-spirit seeks to flee, Jacob is able to exact from his shadowy counterpart a blessing. Specifically, the blessing takes the form of a name-change.

The ancients understand a person's name to carry that person's essence. If you know the name of someone, then you have direct access into his or her most basic nature--which is the meaning behind all the "what is your name?" stuff going on in this old tale. It follows, then, that a change of names signals an actual change of natures. The person who undergoes a name shift is literally not the same person.

Accordingly, reluctantly says the blessing spirit: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed" (Gen 32.28).

Our intrepid hero is originally named "Jacob," from the Hebrew "*Ya'aqobh*," meaning "to seize by the heel." At birth, it is said earlier in Genesis (25.26), Jacob emerges from his mother holding his twin brother's heel in his hand. It is immediately recognized as evidence of his character, and he is named accordingly for it. "Seizing by the heel" is taken to indicate a certain quality in Jacob's personality for "over-reaching" or for

“supplanting”--which, if you know the rest of his early personal details, indeed is a big part of his story.

“Jacob,” he who supplants, now becomes “Israel,” which means literally “he who strives with El.” “El” is an old name for “God” (as in “Elohim” or “El Shaddai”) so “Israel” means “he who strives with God.” The struggling that Jacob experiences with this local river spirit translates effectively, in a grander sense, to his struggling with God. The mere “usurper” now demonstrates himself to be a contender meaningfully engaged with God.

--Having said that, let us note that the willingness to wrestle with God is not viewed by this old Genesis account as something ignoble or reprehensible. Under ordinary circumstances this daring to struggle with Deity might be seen as presumptuous or arrogant, certainly ill-advised, and worthy only of condemnation and judgment--but not here.

Here, reflective of a more fundamental perspective, Jacob’s *chutzpa*--you know that Yiddish word?--a certain fearless audacity, is regarded as a distinctive virtue, as an indication of the strength, determination, and perseverance of his spirit in the face of even hefty odds against him.

Jacob is blessed for his boldly inviting the struggle, rather than shrinking from it. He is blessed for his strenuous participation in the struggle, implying that that’s the sort of person with whom God wants to be in covenant--i.e., someone with *chutzpa*. Why? Because anyone who is scrappy enough to wrestle courageously with God is also quite capable of tackling the powers of the inner and outer worlds. All others are simply not up to the task. What is required of the people of God is this vital *chutzpa*.

--I hope you realize by this point that all this is not just about Jacob, but about us. This great old story from the most ancient stratum of the Hebrew Scriptures reveals something about ourselves which we should find positively stirring.

Contradicting the assumption that God will honor and love only the broken and tamed human spirit--or that weakness, meekness, and nonassertiveness are virtues of the highest order--God here is revealed to have little sympathy for the ho-hum, the timid, the namby-pamby, or the lukewarm, because ostensibly there is nothing substantial there with which God can work. It is our *chutzpa* which gives us shape and form, and provides God with something solid and lively to which to relate. The rest, by comparison, are pale and anemic renditions of the basic human robustness and resilience to which God is inevitably, irresistibly drawn.

So, fellow walkers of the Way, let us consider ourselves alerted: Whether individually or collectively, if we would be in league with the God of “Israel,” then we’d better be prepared for some struggling.

Anyone out there just spoiling for a good tussle? Well, if there’s any of that to us, if there’s any of that among us, with God there’s always at hand an opportunity for it, often at some place of crossing.

So, what spirits are we wrestling with?

What are we made of?

What are we made of?

Is there any *chutzpa* here?