

# "HEELING" IN THE TORAH: A PSYCHOLOGICAL-SPIRITUAL READING OF THE SNAKE AND JACOB'S WRESTLING MATCH

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## INTRODUCTION

Although one might not generally connect the snake ("serpent") in the Garden of Eden with Jacob, they do share a connection with heels. When God metes out punishment following the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, He decrees antagonism between humans and snakes: *'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel'* [ve-attah teshufenu akev] (Gen. 3:15). Although these two species are forever at war, God delineates their modes of combat. People attempt a frontal attack at the snake's head, whereas the wily snake strikes at the heel.

Similarly, Jacob is named after a heel because he tried to catch up with the firstborn Esau: *Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau* [ve-yado ohezet ba-akev Esav]; *so they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born* (Gen. 25:26).

Following Jacob's deception of Isaac, Esau makes a pun on Jacob's name, giving it the sense of "shifty, underhanded." *[Esau] said, 'Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me these two times* [va-ya'akveni zeh pa'amayim]? *First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing!*' (Gen. 27:36). That is to say: he Jacob-ed me twice!

Significantly, each story also contains mythical aspects in the Torah's effort to demythologize the world by employing these imageries to convey religious-ethical teachings. In this essay, we will explore the talking snake in the Garden of Eden and Jacob's wrestling match with an angel. Through an analysis of the texts and midrashic insight, common threads will emerge. Both episodes reflect psychological-spiritual dimensions of the characters in the text and their development as people.

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## THE TALKING SNAKE

How could a snake speak a language that Eve could understand? The Torah does not refer to the snake's communicating with her as a miracle, unlike Balaam's talking donkey when *God opened its mouth* (Num. 22:28). Several commentators therefore insist that this story be read as non-literal.<sup>1</sup> Those who retain a literal reading offer creative interpretations to explain how a snake could communicate with Eve. For example, Hizkuni suggests that the snake accidentally ate from the Tree of Knowledge and consequently attained special powers. For his explanation to work, one must assume that the tree had magical properties, which is not necessarily the case. Alternatively, S. D. Luzzatto proposes that the snake wiggled in a manner that Eve could understand. In his commentary on chapter 22 of Numbers, Luzzatto has a similar explanation for Balaam's talking donkey.

Perhaps the most intriguing and compelling answer is submitted by the Zohar (*Bereshit* 1:35b), as well as by Radak, Sforno, and Yehudah Kiel.<sup>2</sup> The snake should be viewed as a personification of Eve's "evil inclination." In this reading, Eve was struggling with herself and temptation. Prior to her sin, the snake personified sin and temptation outside of Eve. Once Eve sinned, however, sin became an integral part of her personality and this, ultimately, is the "knowledge" she and Adam acquired. From this vantage point, the Torah employs the mythical image of a talking snake to convey a deeper psychological truth that applies to all people.

M. D. Cassuto adduces further textual support for this interpretation: *The man named his wife Eve [Havvah], because she was the mother of all the living [em kol hai] (Gen. 3:20). The name Havvah carries additional word-play with the Aramaic term for snake, hivya.*<sup>3</sup> One *midrash* also makes this association: "She was given to him for an adviser [*havveh da'at* = give an opinion], but she played the eavesdropper like the serpent [*hivya*]" (*Gen. Rabbah* 20:11). Thus, by using snake imagery in particular, the Torah depicts the external personification of Eve's temptation that became internalized through sin. It was enshrined as part of Eve's name and essence. The ongoing battle between man and snake (Gen. 3:15) represents this never-ending struggle of the application of free will for the good. One's ideal strategy is to frontally attack the snake with his or her heel. People must likewise confront their inclination to sin if they wish to prevail.

## WRESTLING WITH ANGELS

From the moment he deceived his father, Jacob became a refugee. He suffered the trickery of his father-in-law Laban, which is seen by the Torah as retribution for his own deceitful act.<sup>4</sup> Jacob lived in fear after running away from home, despite repeated promises of divine protection (Gen. 31:3; 32:7-13).

Why should Jacob have doubted God's explicit assurances? The Talmud suggests that Jacob was concerned that he had perhaps sinned, thereby forfeiting God's promises: *'Remember, I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go...'* (Gen. 28:15); "yet another verse reads: *Then Jacob was greatly afraid* (Gen. 32:8)! [The answer is that] he thought that some sin might cause [God's promise not to be fulfilled]" (TB *Berakhot* 4a).<sup>5</sup>

Alternatively, perhaps Jacob was worried about the ultimate fulfillment of such long-term promises, and God deemed his questions to be reasonable. A *midrash* states that "the righteous have no assurance in this world" (*Gen. Rabbah* 76:2). In fact, Jacob suffered considerably throughout his life, despite God's repeated assurances of protection. He was threatened by Esau and cheated by Laban; his daughter Dinah was raped; his wife Rachel died in childbirth; his son Reuben acted inappropriately toward Bilhah; and his sons sold Joseph into slavery.

Jacob prepared for his confrontation with Esau by dividing his camp, praying to God, and attempting to appease Esau with gifts. During the night, Jacob wrestled with a being generally assumed to be an angel:

*That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maid-servants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of the Jab-bok . . . Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled [va-ye'vek] with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for dawn is breaking.' But he answered, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me' . . . Said he [the other], 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed' (Gen. 32:23-29).*

Who was this angel? "R. Hama bar Hanina said: It was the tutelary Prince [guardian angel] of Esau" (*Gen. Rabbah* 77:3). Within this interpretation, the struggle with the angel represents Jacob's struggle with his brother. After prevailing over Esau's guardian angel, Jacob obtains forgiveness and a blessing from Esau when they encounter one another. Thus the mythical encounter with an angel is paralleled by Jacob's real-life experience.<sup>6</sup>

When Jacob and Esau subsequently meet, Jacob tells his brother that seeing him is like seeing the face of God. This is an unusual compliment, but Jacob knows that he has battled an angel representing physical and metaphysical Esau. Jacob wants Esau to accept his gift as atonement for past wrongs and refers to it as a *berakhah*: *But Jacob said, 'No, I pray you; if you would do me this favor, accept from me this gift; for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably. Please accept my present [berakhah] which has been brought to you, for God has favored me and I have plenty.'* And when he urged him, he accepted (*Gen.* 33:10-11).

Jacob has at last overcome the negativity of his deception over twenty years earlier.

A second midrashic opinion states that "he appeared to him in the guise of a shepherd" (*Gen. Rabbah* 77:2). This *midrash* apparently refers to Jacob's struggle with himself. The angel resorts to a sly, underhanded move during the struggle, reminiscent of Jacob's deceitful action and also parallel to the snake's efforts to strike at a person's heel. The angel thus represents that element in Jacob, whereas the latter prevails with a frontal attack. Jacob ultimately needed to confront himself if he was to move beyond that traumatic event. Once he wrestled with the angel, Jacob prevailed over the old ghosts of his deception. The angel therefore blessed him, declaring that he would no longer be called Jacob, referring to that deception, but rather Israel.

#### JACOB AND ISRAEL

In contrast to Jacob, Adam and Eve never took personal responsibility for their sin, shifting the blame to others instead. The interpretations in both cases are similar: the snake was an external personification of Eve's inner consciousness and Jacob wrestled with the personification of an aspect of his inner consciousness. However, in contrast to Adam and Eve, who incurred

the penalty of banishment for their unwillingness to take responsibility for their actions, Jacob was finally able to return home after this confrontation.

Although God subsequently renames Jacob once again (Gen. 35:9-10), His blessing does not seem to have a permanent effect. Despite this name change, Jacob is still called "Jacob" forty-five times up to the end of Genesis and "Israel" thirty-four times. Jacob subdued his proclivity to deception, but he and his descendants as a nation continued to manifest both names and traits. Not only is Jacob regularly called Jacob, but at the end of his life he blesses the firstborn sons of Bilhah and Zilpah with heel imagery: *Dan shall be a serpent by the road, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels* [ha-noshekh ikkevei sus] *so that his rider is thrown backward...Gad shall be raided by raiders, but he shall raid at their heels* [ve-hu yagud akev] (Gen. 49:17, 19).

Later prophets also express the dichotomy of the Israelites being children of Jacob and children of Israel. Hosea offers a critical reading of the Genesis story to rebuke the Northern Kingdom shortly before its demise: *Ephraim surrounds Me with deceit, the House of Israel with guile . . . The Lord once indicted Judah, and punished Jacob for his conduct, requited him for his deeds. In the womb he tried to supplant his brother* [ba-beten akav et ahiv]; *grown to manhood, he strove with a divine being* (Hos. 12:1-4).

Jeremiah also alludes to Jacob's deceitfulness when he rebukes Jerusalem shortly before its downfall:

*Beware, every man of his friend! Trust not even a brother! For every brother takes advantage* [ki khol ah akov ya'kov], *every friend is base in his dealings. One man cheats the other, they will not speak truth; they have trained their tongues to speak falsely; they wear themselves out working iniquity. You dwell in the midst of deceit* [mirmah]. *In their deceit* [be-mirmah], *they refuse to heed Me – declares the Lord* (Jer. 9:3-5).

Jeremiah likewise repeats the term *mirmah*, used earlier by Isaac in regard to Jacob's trickery: *ba ahikha be-mirmah – your brother came with guile* (Gen. 27:35).

On the positive side, Isaiah's prophecy of redemption speaks of a future transformation from Jacob to Israel when the crooked will become straight: *'Let every valley be raised, every hill and mount made low. Let the rugged*

*ground become level and the ridges become a plain* [ve-hayah he-akov le-mishor] (Isa. 40:4).

Unlike the permanent transformation of Abraham and Sarah, with their name changes, Jacob can never fully become Israel. Abraham and Sarah went from being childless to having a child and begot their covenantal nation. Their name changes reflect a one-time transformational event. For Jacob to become Israel, an ongoing process needed to occur. Jacob received his blessing from God and the angel when he was willing to confront himself and begin that transformation, but character change is a life-long process rather than a one-time event.

On a personal and national level, Jacob must constantly strive to become Israel. Israel means honesty, uprightness, willingness to confront adversity, taking personal responsibility. The internal struggle between the Israel and the Jacob continues through history on a national plane and also within every individual.

#### CONCLUSION

We have considered the relationship between the Garden of Eden and Jacob narratives. Both employ mythical imageries – a talking snake, a wrestling match with an angel. Both use these imageries to explore deep spiritual and psychological realities pertaining to the universal human condition. Eve's dialogue with the snake is best understood as the inner voice that leads her to sin. The narrative's conclusion, that man and snake will always do battle, reflects the ongoing internal struggle of using free will to choose the good. The snake guilefully bites a person's heel, but people can use their heels to vanquish the snake in direct confrontation, thereby overcoming their inner urge to sin. Jacob's wrestling with the angel is a spiritualized expression of his struggle with Esau and with himself over deceiving his father. By confronting the angel head-on, Jacob was able to face his brother and himself, and initiate the process of becoming Israel. In essence, Jacob used his heel to defeat his inner snakes and conflicts, thus emerging victorious. The Torah further teaches us that neither battle is ever won. People will never completely vanquish the inner snake driving them to sin, and Jacob will never fully become Israel. Yet by forthrightly addressing internal and external conflicts and challenges, one may steadily move in the right direction.

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of Rambam's view on reading certain texts non-literally, see H. Angel, "Rambam's Continued Impact on Underlying Issues in *Tanakh* Study," in Yamin Levy & Shalom Carmy, eds., *The Legacy of Maimonides: Religion, Reason and Community* (Brooklyn: Yashar Books, 2006) pp. 153-157; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006) pp. 41-47. For a general overview of traditional views on reading biblical texts non-literally, see J. L. Golding, "On the Limits of Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture from an Orthodox Perspective," *Torah U-Madda Journal*, 10 (2001) pp. 37-59.
2. Y. Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Genesis*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1997) p. 98 (Hebrew).
3. M. D. Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987) p. 114 (Hebrew).
4. N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis)*, trans. A. Newman (Jerusalem: WZO Department for Torah Education and Culture, fourth revised ed., 1981) pp. 264-270.
5. For a fuller excursus on rabbinic approaches to this question, see H. Angel, "Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith: The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Avraham Narratives and Commentary," in Jeffrey Saks & Susan Handelman, eds., *Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003, ATID) pp. 201-204; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens*, pp. 136-139.
6. E. Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parashot ha-Shavu'a*, series 1, vol. 1, ed. Ayal Fishler (Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2002) pp. 89-104 (Hebrew).



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