

Parashat Vayishlach 5774, 2013

*The Dual Identity of the Jewish People*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Jacob remained alone. A stranger [appeared and] wrestled with him until just before daybreak. (*Sefer Bereishit* 32:25, this and all Torah translation, *The Living Torah*, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*)

Our Sages in *Talmud Bavli*, *Chulin* 91a, *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 77:2, and Rashi (1040-1105) explain, “Jacob remained alone” as a reference to his having lingered on the far-side of the Jabbok River in order to retrieve small bottles that he had forgotten. Rabbi Elazar explains that from here we may see the value placed on possessions by *Tzadikim* (holy individuals without moral blemish), since they do not engage in even the minutest forms of stealing.

I would like, however, to analyze the phrase, “Jacob remained alone,” in an entirely different manner. In my estimation, I believe it is actually an existential statement that precisely describes the theological position of our people for all time. Moreover, my interpretation is strongly buttressed by Balaam’s famous prophetic vision wherein he declared: “I see [this nation] from mountain tops, and gaze on it from the heights. It is a nation dwelling alone at peace, not counting itself among other nations.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 23:9, underlining my own) Here, too, we are met with the notion of remaining alone in the clearest possible terms. Indeed, Rashi underscores this idea when he comments on

this verse: “This is [the legacy] their forefathers gained for them - to dwell alone...”  
(Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In a public lecture held in 1964, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, examined the concept of our “nation dwelling alone” in his explication of *Sefer Bereishit* 32:18-20. He noted that verse 32:18 contains three questions that Yaakov anticipated Eisav would ask: “When my brother Esau encounters you, he will ask, ‘To whom do you belong? Where are you going? Who owns all this that is with you?’” The Rav opined that the first two questions refer to theological and spiritual questions, rather than being questions of status (i.e. ownership) and destination:

“To whom do you belong” – To whom do you pledge your ultimate loyalty? “And where are you going?” – What objectives and goals do you seek for yourself in the future? Who is your G-d and what manner of life and discipline will He require of you and your descendants? These two inquiries relate to Jacob’s soul and spiritual identity. (*Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin editor, pages 174-175)

Rav Soloveitchik maintained that since these first two questions dealt with our inextricable link to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He), they demanded an uncompromising and forthright response:

Consequently, Jacob commanded his representatives to reply boldly, clearly, and precisely that their souls, their personalities, their metaphysical identities, their spiritual future, and social commitment were the private concerns of Jacob. “They are your servant Jacob’s,” [32:19] and no human power may interfere or attempt to sever this eternal bond with G-d, which had been established in the covenant with Abraham. (Ibid. , p.175)

At this juncture, one might easily err and believe that the Rav was advocating that we should sequester ourselves from the rest of mankind and retreat into some form of

quietism in regards to our stance to the world at large. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth:

Jacob anticipated, however, that Esau would also ask a third question: “And whose are these [cattle, gifts etc.] ahead of you?” – Are you ready to contribute your talents, capabilities, and material resources toward the material and cultural welfare of the general society? Are you ready to give of your oxen, goats, camels, and bulls? Are you willing to pay taxes, to develop and industrialize the country? This third question is focused on secular aspects of life. To this question Jacob instructed his agents to answer in the affirmative: “It is a present to my lord, Esau.” (Ibid.)

In Rav Soloveitchik’s view, it is also essential for our people to join all of mankind in assuring that the world will be transformed into a better and nobler place. In this way, we can fulfill Yeshiyahu’s sublime charge to our nation: “...but I will make you a light unto nations, so that My salvation will be until the ends of the earth.” (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 49:6) Thus the Rav stated: “Yes we are determined to participate in every civic, scientific, and political enterprise. We feel obligated to enrich society with our creative talents and to be useful citizens.” (Ibid.) Given this position, is it any wonder that, to date, 188 Jews have received a Noble prize in fields that have consistently enriched the entire world? This is all the more amazing when we view the actual statistics:

Nobel Prizes have been awarded to over 850 individuals, of whom at least 20% were Jews, although Jews comprise less than 0.2% of the world's population, (or 1 in every 500 people). Overall, Jews have won a total of 41% of all the Nobel Prizes in economics, 28% of medicine, 26% of Physics, 19% of Chemistry, 13% of Literature and 9% of all peace awards.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Jewish\\_Nobel\\_laureates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Jewish_Nobel_laureates)

May Hashem give us the strength and wisdom to emulate *Yaakov Avinu* so that we, too, may develop his fierce loyalty to our Creator and his unbending commitment to improving the lives of all mankind. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

\*\* Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: [@theRavZatzal](https://twitter.com/theRavZatzal) and [@Torahtech613](https://twitter.com/Torahtech613).

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