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Jacob Wrestles the Angel: A Study in Psychoanalytic Midrash

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This essay is a study in psychoanalytic *Midrash*: a literary and psychological meditation on the Biblical story of Jacob. The Hebrew verbal root from which the term Midrash derives means to investigate or explore. It is a genre of Biblical scholarship used to interpret the Bible in symbolic and inspirational terms. This essay examines Jacob as he moves from a character dominated by self-defeating neurosis through his transformation into a spiritual being and exemplar of principled leadership. Insights from Freudian and Jungian psychologies, mythology, and literary traditions are used to describe and explain Jacob's character metamorphosis.

Keywords: *psychoanalysis, midrash, transpersonal, Jacob, spirituality, religion, Jung*

This paper examines the Biblical figure of Jacob and his transformation through the lens of *Midrash*. It employs tools from developmental psychoanalysis, transpersonal psychology, Jewish Kabbalah, and literary analysis to explore, amplify, and develop the major psychological themes inherent in this legend.

The essay's structure reflects the integrative work of Ken Wilber (2000). He has argued that systems that are diverse on the surface share the same underlying metaphysical structure. All such systems see man as moving through a series of stages beginning with the primitive sensory motor stage of action, through the more interiorized and mentalist stages of thought/feeling, to the ultimate stage of spiritual presence and soul. The number and description of the stages differ somewhat from system to system, but all share these common parameters describing a matter-to-spirit axis and man evolving along that axis.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, began as an oral tradition. It wove together legends, folktales, poetry, and ethical imperatives and passed this wisdom from generation to generation. These words were incorporated into the fabric of Hebrew culture as guidelines for both ethical and spiritual practice. That culture was torn asunder in 586 BCE by the invasion of the Babylonian empire and the subsequent exile of the Jews to Babylon for 70 years.

When the Jews returned to Israel, they began to commit the *Torah* and other holy books to writing.

Perhaps, given their experience, they knew their time as an insulated and coherent culture had come to an end. The holy books would provide the cohesion that their homeland no longer could afford them. The compilation process continued for over 500 years until a unified canon was formed called the Tanakh, or, to Christians, the Old Testament (Robinson, 2000).

Soon after the canon was created, commentaries on that canon began. The commentaries on the moral, ethical, and legal codes were called *Midrash Halakah*. *Midrash* means to investigate or explore. These commentaries largely interpreted the broad principles of the 613 *mitzvot* (God's commandments) and applied them to concrete situations, much as our contemporary courts do today with congressional laws.

The commentaries on the legends, poetry, and folktales were labeled *Midrash Aggada*. These commentaries took a different form and were designed for a different purpose. The purpose of Midrash Aggada was for homiletic preaching, using such tales in sermons or teachings to inspire and inform. Midrash Halakah appealed to the rational aspects of the mind while Midrash Aggada related more to the emotive, creative, and archetypal. Midrash Aggada used stories to fill in gaps in the Biblical narrative, but it also interpreted Biblical stories in a mythopoeia narrative. This provoked the emotions and personal inspiration through tales of faith, morality, and social compassion and offered hope, guidance, and personal transformation to the beleaguered.

Strack and Stemberger (1996) have written extensively on the history of this form of commentary and analysis. Midrash Aggada is a literary, rather than legal, form of exegesis, “freer and more characterized by a playful element” (p. 238). In contrast to the legal/rationalist style of Midrash Halakah, Midrash Aggada begins its analysis with holes in the Biblical narrative, cryptic passages, or a problem suggested by inconsistency or incomplete thought. This Biblical problem is then answered through reference to other sources, sometimes a single source or sometimes like a nested Russian doll each reference leads to another reference in a process most similar to free association. In the initial Midrashim the interpretation often occurred through direct references to other passages from the Bible. For example, the book of Chronicles was seen as a type of Midrash on the books of Samuel and Kings. However, over time Midrashic exegesis has evolved. Beginning with Biblical narrative, Midrashim began to interpret these themes through elaborate exposition, often only loosely tied to the original text and laced with maxims and parables. In its later incarnations, Midrashim began to take Biblical narrative, characters, and themes and explicate them through numerous non-Biblical forms such as secular literature and psychoanalysis.

The growth of clinical psychoanalysis in the 20th century gave birth to numerous psychodynamic interpretations of the Bible. A number of psychoanalytic writers focused on Biblical narrative, psychobiography of Biblical characters, and psychological exposition of traditional Biblical themes (e.g., Ellen & Rollins, 2004; Freud, 1955; Jung, 2010; Rank, 2008; Zeligs, 1974).

Jacob, the third patriarch of the Old Testament, became the focus of numerous psychoanalytic exegeses. Zeligs (1974) offered a psychoanalytic explanation of Jacob’s striving, his efforts to free himself from the bonds of sibling rivalry, and the Oedipal dynamics of his family. Wiesel (1976) focused on the mysterious encounter between Jacob and the angel, which transformed Jacob from an isolate to a patriarch who fathered the people of Israel. Wink (2004) translated Jacob’s struggle to an intrapsychic plane, seeing this protagonist as facing and struggling with personal fear and his “abyss of pain” (p. 12). Sanford (1981), utilizing a Jungian perspective, analyzed God’s force in Jacob’s personal-spiritual growth. Kille (2004) examined the Jacob myth in its actual historical context as well as Jacob’s individuation process, from self-preoccupation

to God’s prophet. Finally, Zornberg (1995) combined psychoanalytic concepts, literary allusions, and Biblical exegesis to examine Jacob’s story. She saw Jacob as an inauthentic character, a trickster, an unformed creature alienated from God. She described his evolution as a movement to authenticity and sincerity, qualities that bring him within the spirit of God and evolve him to patriarchal status.

Pre-Liminal Stage

The anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) developed a tripartite system to outline the stages of growth in heroic myths and anthropological studies of institutional and personal transformation. In a somewhat more complex scheme, Joseph Campbell (1949) has outlined similar stages in his hero mythology. According to their schema, Jacob, as the Biblical story opens, is in a pre-liminal stage. He is a man of the mundane world subject to the usual desires of power, greed, ignorance, and lust.

The pre-liminal stage finds Jacob as an ordinary man, imbued with conflicts. Jacob’s birth establishes the earthly conflict he faces. Jacob was a twin, and his brother Esau was born first: “then his brother came out, his hand grasping Esau’s heel, and they called him Jacob” (Alter, 2004, p. 30).

The metaphor of grasping the heel defines Jacob’s most primitive, neurotic struggle. The heel (*akev* in Hebrew, which is one of the etymological hooks for the Hebrew *Ya’akov* or Jacob) is the back of the foot.

Zornberg (1995) drew nuanced meaning from this metaphor. To attack the heel is to come from behind, to be sneaky, to get one’s way through deception or trickery. This modus operandi, according to Zornberg, reflects Jacob’s lack of an inherent identity, a missing essential self-image due to being born second. Without such an inherent identity, which his brother Esau has by virtue of being the first-born and heir to the kingdom, Jacob defines himself only through his rivalry with his well-defined sibling. Jacob is dominated by envy. Envy is a regressive psychological state where one covets what another has and resents those who have what is desired. It is a violation of one of the Ten Commandments and a source of psychic imbalance dominated by hostility toward others, paired with a compulsive dissatisfaction and degradation for one’s own accomplishments or status. Interpersonally, it manifests itself in conflicts with the envied person and a competitive desire to have what others are entitled to by virtue of birth or hard work.

The theme of envy repeats itself in two more vignettes from Jacob's life. In the first, Esau a hunter comes home famished. Jacob bribes the slow-witted Esau with a bowl of lentils in exchange for Esau's birthright. If Jacob was not chosen to be the primary son, he would trick his way into it. Later when their father Isaac, now blind, orders his son Esau to hunt game and to use it to make a feast for him, a second manifestation of envy occurs. Jacob comes to his father pretending to be Esau and tricks his father into giving him the blessing meant for his brother.

Rebekah, Jacob's mother, fosters the sibling rivalry, by conniving to ensure that Jacob gets the blessings. She promotes manipulation by urging Jacob to take Esau's rightful heritage. In doing so, she encourages triangulation by setting Jacob against his father and brother. Jacob's self-image is promoted through these Oedipal dynamics, underscoring the character traits of rivalry and deception. Victory means defeating the brother and taking the place of his own father.

Jacob's early life is thus dominated by efforts to usurp his brother and to move into a place of primogenitor. The law of primogenitor ruled in the Middle East (Plaut, 2005), meaning that the first-born son, Esau, would receive all properties and goods and would become head of the family with the younger sibling getting nothing. Such conflicts foster the development of a deceptive personal core. He envies Esau's first-born status and the material and psychological rewards it brings. Guided by envy, he uses trickery to achieve his ends.

The British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (2002) conceptualized envy as a psychological phenomenon. According to Klein, the potential for envy develops at one of the early psychosocial stages and is often fed by sibling rivalry. Among siblings, a triangle will develop with these siblings competing for the praise and affection of the parent. The natural competitive atmosphere often lends itself to the development of envy on the part of the later-born sibling with deep antagonisms toward the favorite and efforts to get adulation from a parent.

Jungian psychology views conflicts such as Jacob's through an archetypal lens. Jacob's behavior is a manifestation of the trickster, an immature masculine archetype of the shadow system (Moore & Gillette, 1990). Singer (1994) called the shadow the inferior part of the personality, which cannot be expressed directly.

The repression of the shadow into the unconscious causes it to be splintered off and then manifested in action. The complement to this shadow is the "precocious child" or "a boy" (Moore & Gillette, 1990, p. 27).

The mature masculine archetype of this dynamic is the magician, the archetype of awareness and insight, knowledge of the hidden and the magical (Moore & Gillette, 1990). The function of this archetypal wisdom is to disentangle the subtle, the unconscious, and mysterious in order to make necessary life decisions. Whether these life decisions are positive and whether they reach out to others constructively depends on resolving the shadow complex. The mature qualities of the magician archetype are those profound insights into the hidden nature of the world, clarity as to one's own motives, and the ability to access life energy in the service of growth. However, when the shadow component dominates, these powers are used to manipulate, place obstacles in the paths of others, and are destructive to self and others.

The trickster dominates Jacob. He is cerebral, clever, and goal directed. He is aware of the frailties of others. Whether he will use his power in a positive or negative way is still an open question. Whether he moves from the boy psychology of the primitive trickster to the man psychology of the wise magician is unsettled during the first phase of the Biblical narrative of Jacob.

Zornberg (1995), utilizing a more traditional Biblical analysis, underscored that at this stage Jacob is inauthentic. She noted in addition to the etymological connection to *heel*, the name Ya'akov also relates to *akov*, meaning crooked or indirect, suggesting a position equivalent to an idol worshiper: someone who is unconnected with an authentic God, a pretender who is not grounded in true spiritual beliefs and who is self deceptive, and therefore alienated from his creator as well as his authentic soul. She described Jacob as having an identity crisis and being torn between his own uncontrollable desires, which manifest themselves in deception for gain, and God's *ratzon* or ultimate purpose for him. His actions alienate him from God. Rather than accepting who he has been chosen to be, a reflection of God's will, and using his considerable skills to be the best he can be, he tries to be what he is not. Thus, his actions do not elevate his soul and bring him closer to God but reinforce evil, the *yetzer ha'ra* (evil inclination) putting distance between him and his

God. God is hidden from Jacob as Jacob's egoic needs control his actions, effectively blotting out God's light or purpose for him.

The Yiddish concept of *b'shert* or predestination (fate) amplifies this perspective on God's will as manifested in man. The Hebrew literature uses this concept of fate differently than it is used in the Greek literature. The Greeks cast fate as the tragic end. Ultimately, fate lures the characters of Greek classics toward self-destruction (Schwartz & Kaplan, 2004). In the Jewish liturgy, *b'shert* involves bringing the will or *ratzon* (desire, life energy) into line with the *ratzon* of God (obedience, submission; Zornberg, 1995). Each man is created with God's purpose. Through his own choices and mistakes, he ultimately learns that purpose. The conflicts of the lower stages block God's light according to Kabbalistic thought and thus block man from recognizing his God-given purpose. However, conflicts and even tragedy may eventually open a man's heart to the ultimate vision of who he is and who God has chosen him to be. This is climbing the ladder from the darkness of egoic conflicts to the realm of purpose and meaning. This is the evolution of the soul.

Traditional Kabbalistic imagery uses a Tree of Life to describe this process. The Tree reaches from heaven to earth. God's light shines down touching the upper branches first, and these branches represent our highest soul traits (*midot*): those traits closest to God. At the earthly site dense vegetative layers of unconscious conflicts, ignorance, emotional complexes and socialization, those ego processes farthest away from God's enlightenment, block His light (Halevi, 1986). It is only through the freeing of these earthly and personal concerns that man ascends the tree of life to transpersonal realms and ultimately to *devikut* or cleaving to God. Such is not yet the case for Jacob. All developmental systems, regardless of idiom, see him, by virtue of his emotional conflict, at the lowest stage of psychological and spiritual evolution.

Liminal Stage

The liminal stage refers to a threshold. It is the rite of passage where the protagonist must struggle with who he is and who he may become. At this point, his world (the pre-liminal) has collapsed. His sense of identity has dissolved. His life is ambiguous and indeterminate. However, the point of crisis has also made him psychologically open, open to a new identity. Typically, this stage is fluid, filled with difficulties, small

successes and failures. Ambiguity reigns until resolution occurs.

Jacob's transformation begins, as it does in most hero myths, with a journey (Campbell, 1949). The journey is a passage toward transformation, a rite of passage. After deceiving his brother Esau, the hunter, fearing for his life, Jacob flees abandoning community and family. He journeys to his Uncle Laban in an attempt to escape Esau's murderous wrath. On this physical journey, he stops to rest for the night. He places his head on a stone for a headrest. In his sleep, he experiences a dream: "lo—a ladder was set on the ground, with its top reaching to heaven, and lo—angels of God going up and down on it" (Plaut, 2005, p. 195; Genesis 28:10).

The dream sets the stage for transformation. First, it makes Jacob aware of choice. Just as the messengers of God travel up and down, so Jacob too can ascend to the highest of heights or remain mired in the earthly deceits, which have characterized his development. God shows Jacob possibilities. He may become a landowner and his seed will father a nation, a promise God also made to Abraham in Genesis 15:4-5, or he can fail to take his place in his historic lineage.

The dream also reflects the twin dynamics of ascent and descent, with the complementary processes of moving upward with our material lives and transforming into God's aspirations and God's light moving downward to enlighten us. It reflects movement from our lower self to our higher self, from our conflicted ego qualities to *midot*, those soul qualities closest to the divine (Morinis, 2007).

The Mussar tradition, a rationalist Jewish psychological perspective sees man as moving toward wholeness (*sh'lemut*), which is synonymous with the concept of holiness. According to this tradition, God has only planted seeds or potential. Man is born incomplete and must complete the work of his own creation. The great Mussar teacher, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (as cited in Morinis, 2007) elaborated:

God is certainly capable of making people, and all creation, absolutely complete. Furthermore, it would have made much more sense for Him to have done so, because insofar as He himself is perfect in every way, it is fitting that His works should also be perfect. But in his great wisdom he ruled it better to leave to people the completion of their own

creation. So he cut short His own trait of perfection and out of His greatness and goodness withheld Himself from His greatness in these creations and made creations incomplete. This was the way He wanted them made, according to his sublime plan. (p. 14)

The symbolism of the ladder with messengers of God running up and down reveals the choices Jacob can make. God offers the possibilities (up or down), but the direction of Jacob's evolution is chosen by the actions he takes. He may elevate himself through righteous intent (*yetzer ha'tov*) or sink down under the weight of the *yetzer ha'ra*, the inherent evil instinct. The liminal stage is characterized by the dialectical interchange between these two forces. At this point, the winner is unclear.

The glimpse of the divine, which sets up Jacob's choice, is also allegorized in numerous Midrashim. Schwartz (2004) has compiled Jewish myths, derived from several ancient Midrashim which center on the dream incident (Rashi on Genesis 28:11, Genesis Rabbah 68:10, Midrash Tehillim 91:7). All share the vision that Jacob's dream emanated from a sacred place. One *drash* (abbreviation for Midrash) states that the place of the dream was Mount Mariah, where Abraham took Isaac to be sacrificed (the ultimate allegory of complete faith in the divine) and the future site of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Another states that Jacob saw the fiery face of God at the top of the ladder—yet another that Jacob's vision entailed the birth of the future sacred Temple. The Temple was filled with God's earthly presence, the *Shekhinah*, a mirrored reflection of God's holy Temple in heaven (Schwartz, 2004). All reflect Jacob's first moment of enlightenment to his spiritual and historical possibilities. "Indeed, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know... how fearsome is this place! This can be but the house of God and this is the gate of the heavens" (Genesis 28:17).

Kille (2004), writing from a Jungian perspective, saw Jacob's flight as the first step in the individuation process. He is cut off from the known world of family and community and finds himself in the wilderness. The sacred place of the dream is a boundary, geographical and psychological. To cross that boundary, a protective figure and guide is necessary. God provides this womb of incubation and insight. The dream is an ascent into heaven, a vision and alternative state of consciousness necessary to make his life transition. For Jungians,

it represents the birth of the Self, the transpersonal consciousness, which may evolve out of the ego, the individual and personal consciousness. The ladder dream shows possible growth or decline based on what choices Jacob may make (Stevens, 1983).

The interface between spiritual evolution and individuation is reflected in some of the archetypal symbolism associated with the dream-place. The Torah emphasizes that prior to the dream Jacob sleeps resting his head on a stone that he gathered. Subsequent to the dream, he consecrates the stones with oil to mark it as holy place (Genesis 28:18). Von Franz (1964) has pointed out that stones were often used to mark places of worship due to their permanence and solidity. Thus, the placing and consecrating of the stone suggests a beginning: the beginning of the foundation of God's temple and the beginning of Jacob's transformation.

Stones, however, are also a symbol for the Self, which in Jungian psychology is the transformational aspect of personality (von Franz, 1964). In Jungian psychology, there is a differentiation between the ego and the Self. The ego is the "I," the purely personal. It is generated by our unique biological inheritance and individual socialization experiences. The ego is the stuff from which Freudian psychology is made. The Self is the bridge between the personal and transpersonal. In addition to personal history, it is formed by our collective and universal history as a species and a people. The Self is dominated by purpose, as well as by collective and universal meaning. The Self, as an experience, is capable of higher levels of consciousness, which are universal: dreams, symbols, meditative states, and complete ego loss.

The Self has the potential to guide us into our higher levels of being. In viewing the Self as one of several stages through which psychological and transpersonal development ensues (Wilber, 1986, 2000), the lowest level of Self entails both personal and transpersonal elements. It grows out of the ego, and egoic elements remain at this lowest level. These may manifest themselves in meditative states or in intensive prayer, which require the ego functions of will and practice to enter. Once there, we transcend ego-self. Our ordinary ego surrenders at least momentarily, and we touch a more egoless domain. We move toward becoming pure observation, and non-reactivity (Engler, 2003). The next level is that of the transpersonal. Wilber (2000) divided the transpersonal stage into both soul and spirit. Both of these subdivisions

represent a further loosening between the subject-object relationship and a graduated movement away from ego functions. The lower level of soul is best represented in dreams, but also in literary symbols and characters such as those, like Jacob, who populate the Torah. In Jewish mystical thought the *sefirot* of Kabbalah are transcendent qualities given literary expression in Torah (Addison, 2001). This is the archetypal level, which Jung thought contained universal symbols or pure forms. Wilber (2000) theorized that the highest transpersonal level is that of spirit, of ego-less-ness or the presence of subject but no object. It is formless. It is the realm of no self. This state is manifest in deep sleep but also represented in the mystical traditions: *nirvana* in the Vedic tradition and *Keter* or *Ayin* (concealed no-thingness) in Kabbalah (Weiss, 2005). In contrast to the ego (the “I”), the Self bridges the axis between man and God, between person and other, between personal and transpersonal, between the mentally mundane and the spirit (Wilber, 2000).

In Jungian psychology, as well as spiritual traditions (Morinis, 2007), the focus on ego or “I” is an impediment to spiritual evolution. The more our ego identifies with a situation (e.g., *I am jealous over what Esau has*) the less energy we have toward the development of spirit. Spiritual development focuses on touching the larger and universal aspects of our life and our unique purpose in this schema.

At this dream point, Jacob also gains a perspective on the covenant, the contract with God that appears with other patriarchs—Abraham and Moses—and that signifies the fundamental interactive nature of Judaism. It means a questioning dialogue between man and God or, from a psychological perspective, man’s internal dialogue, which aims for clarity of purpose. God, in fulfilling his part of the covenant, has promised generativity to Jacob, through a marriage, through children, through becoming a patriarch, and ultimately in fathering the nation of Israel. It is unclear what Jacob must do for God as his part of the contract. This has not yet been revealed. Man must struggle with God—God in him, God outside—to see his chosen path or purpose and to align his *ratzon* with that of God or he will remain alienated.

In the sacred hero’s journey, Campbell (1949) referred to events such as Jacob’s dream as the crossing of a threshold, a nascent movement to a new phase. In this case, it represents a religious transformation with Jacob’s stone setting the foundation for the Hebrew

Temple and a personal transformation from an egoic to a transpersonal state.

After the prophetic dream, Jacob returns to the mundane world and is challenged by his own desires. He approaches the home of his Uncle Laban and sees Laban’s second daughter, Rachel, bringing sheep to the water. They instantly fall in love, and Jacob asks for her hand in marriage. Laban appears overjoyed. In a visionary statement, characterized by a double entendre, which foreshadows later mutual deceptions, he tells Jacob, “Indeed, you are my bone and flesh” (Genesis 29:14). Jacob agrees to work for Laban for seven years in exchange for Rachel’s hand. When his labor is over, Laban instead gives Jacob his oldest daughter, Leah, as his bride. The trickster has been tricked. Laban and Jacob are truly both of the same bone and flesh of chicanery.

Jacob works another seven years to secure Rachel and marries her, but she is barren and cannot provide him with children. Leah is fertile and provides him with six children. Jacob is despondent. He loves Rachel but desires the children Leah gives him. There is also a rivalry between Leah and Rachel. Leah feels unloved and is desperate for Jacob’s love. Rachel is loved but denied the gift of enabling her husband to fulfill the command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). Each is denied their desire, each envious of what the other has. Jacob is caught in the middle feeling helpless.

Finally, Jacob decides to leave the house of Laban and become independent. He takes his wives and children, livestock, and retinue with him. He barter with Laban for final payment, his well-deserved share of the herds, and his wives. By now, he had worked for Laban for 20 years. However, he tricks Laban to maximize his personal gain through an act of chicanery, and thus, he gains wealth but has fallen back into the world of deceit, drawing anger and opprobrium from Laban’s family. Despite suffering due to his past deceptions, Jacob remains the archetypal trickster. Where has his insight gone? Has he fallen off the ladder into the depths?

These themes—deception, sibling rivalry, and refusal to accept the rules of primogenitor—create intergenerational conflict and resonate from earlier times. To mix cultural contexts, they represent a karmic principle. Jacob’s early deceptions now resonate for him. He is caught in a web of his own making. What comes around goes around.

In summarizing ancient Buddhist texts Koller and Koller, (1991, pp. 233-239) saw *dependent origination*

as meaning all actions have a cause, and all causes have consequences. For some acts we pay in the present, for some we pay in the future, for some acts we pay in other lives, but our life always reflects our choices. Jacob must pay for his deceptions; and unless he transforms himself, he will remain on the great wheel of life with the same themes recurring.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Freud (2009) discussed the repetition compulsion. According to psychoanalytic theory, fixations or unresolved conflicts from earlier stages repeat themselves in future interactions. For Jacob, these themes originally generated in his nuclear family come back to rob him of happiness. His own deceptions with brother and father are turned back on him by Laban's deception. His inability to follow the rules concerning the rights and duties of the first born with Esau repeat with Rachel and Leah. His sibling rivalry with Esau resonates in the sibling rivalry between Leah and Rachel. Still he does not learn and instead responds to Laban's deceit with deceiving Laban about the division of the herd.

Once a psychological dynamic becomes entrenched, it repeats itself *ad infinitum*. Buddhists refer to this principle as *dukkha* or being stuck on the great wheel of life, which carries us round and round in circles. Psychoanalysis sees the repetition compulsion. Spiritual psychologies such as that of Jung see such conflicts as fixations compromising our evolution to higher states of promise and potential. Kabbalists see such venal actions as interfering with God's light and thus our own upward movement in respect to the highest evolution of the *neshamah*, the pure and holy soul (Weiss, 2005).

Like an actor from Greek tragedy, Jacob's strivings lead to his own destruction. Schwartz and Kaplan (2004) commented that the Freudian view is colored by Greek tragedy, a view of man self-destructing with no redemption. While true, the theoretical schema outlined in this paper suggests that such dynamics only dominate the lower worlds of man's existence. In these worlds, life patterns are circular and repetitive. There is no exit. One cannot escape by repeating old patterns. One can only escape by entering a new world, by transcendence, by leaving the egoic world behind, and entering the world of non-egoic purpose.

The transpersonal world is the world of higher purpose and meaning. In Judaism, reaching into this world is translated into *ratzon*, bringing one's purpose in line with God's. For Jacob to escape this wheel of

repetition, he must not simply become more clever, but he must enter a different realm of consciousness and existence.

This liminal stage is represented by a series of trials and tribulations. Typically, the hero tries to grow by using his wiles or simply becoming more perfect in the way he expresses his flaws, but in doing so, he is doomed to repeat his life tragedies. The grasping of the ego continues, with the same themes of failure repeating. However, learning does occur gradually, and the hero starts to give up the old ways and to surrender to a new realm of meaning.

Jacob takes his wives and 11 children and flees. He tries another escape, exiting the community to resolve his problems, another failed attempt to deal with issues by running. By this time, Esau has become a powerful ruler of the kingdom. He is looking for Jacob to exact revenge. Jacob is ordered by God to return to Haran, the scene of his crimes, where Esau is now King. Jacob tries to placate Esau by offering part of his wealth while still holding back part. A trickle of deception still occurs.

However, there is a subtle change manifesting. In the Torah text, Jacob begins to refer to himself as Esau's servant (Genesis 32:18-20) and Esau as "Lord Esau" (v. 4). He is beginning to accept his role as the second son without resentment. This acceptance is predicated on the fact that Jacob, through struggle and conflict, is on the brink of a true spiritual awakening. He is on the cusp of superiority in his personal development. Through struggle he has transcended the earthly laws of primogenitor and the cluster of envy and competition that goes with it. The significance is unmistakable. It was God's will that Esau be the first-born, the societal laws of primogenitor reinforced this. However, Jacob would not accept the place God had chosen for him. He attempted to best his brother in a deceptive way, to deny his own place and, thus, God's will. Now, he begins to align his will with that of God. He accepts God's command to return. In spite of personal danger, he shows faith by obeying and trusting God. He ventures into his destiny to be first, but he does so by both his spiritual evolution and through honest forthright action. His destiny was to be superior, to be *first* in his spiritual evolution, not in the earthly structure of near-Eastern society. He is becoming his own person fulfilling his unique life purpose.

Esau marshals 400 men against Jacob. Jacob crosses the river to meet Esau, and this Rubicon

crossing marks the final transition into the post-liminal stage. Spending the dark night of his soul waiting to see whether Esau will forgive him or destroy him, he is approached by a man, and they wrestle until dawn. They wrestle to a draw; and as the light enters, the man states he must leave. Jacob will not let go until the man blesses him. The stranger, an angel or emissary of God, does this by changing Jacob's name to Israel, which means, he who struggles with God. Thus, Jacob finally transitions from a deceiver to holy man who will father the people of Israel and their perpetual struggle with their relationship with God. The stranger is an angel, God's emissary, representing God's will (Schwartz, 2004).

Jacob's struggle with the angel provides the ultimate transformation. It is one of the richest metaphors of the Bible. It entails numerous levels of meanings, all echoing transformation. The act of wrestling is an undoing and a transformation of Jacob's past relationship to Esau. At one level of meaning the angel represents Esau. Jacob's defeats of Esau have been accomplished in the past through chicanery. Now Jacob commits to face Esau/angel squarely—to enter into manly combat and to become Esau's equal legitimately. Jacob has shed deception as a way to handle his desires. He has realized both his own strength and the integrity of winning on merit. Defeating the angel through direct combat is a reworking of his earlier battles with Esau, done with Jacob's newfound power and sense of integrity.

Jacob also obtains a blessing from his opponent through will and determination, undoing the blessing through deception he got from his own father. Jacob uses his strength, talents, and tenacity to obtain legitimately what he got before through deception. This is genuine transformation, not the pseudo transformation gained through guile.

Jacob faces his fate through faith. He follows God's wish to return to Haran, alone to face Esau's wrath and his 400 soldiers. "God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac! Lord who has said to me, 'Return to your land and your birthplace and I will deal well with you'" (Genesis 32:10). He joins the same faith in God's wisdom as the other patriarchs. Personal fear is transcended by seeing purpose and meaning through following God.

Psychoanalysis speaks of object relationships (Fairbairn, 1981). This refers to our intra-psychic

organization. Our mind contains images of self, others, and of the relationship between self and others. Thus, we do not really relate to another person. According to analytic theory, we relate to the mental representation of that person, which is called an *object*. Wrestling with the angel changes these intra-psychic object relations. It is equivalent to a profound insight in psychoanalysis, which transforms and creates a new psychological dynamic. Jacob truly becomes an adult, one who can face obstacles squarely and confront the difficulties in a forthright manner. The inner relationship with Esau becomes one of equals—peers—each with a unique set of skills. Envy is thwarted by Jacob becoming his own person. He has his own unique qualities to cherish and develop. Envy and acquisition by deception are replaced with internal strength, direction, and personal integrity.

Wink (2004), echoing depth psychology, also saw the wrestling as an internalized dynamic. He saw Jacob wrestling with his shadow, the repressed and negative side of his character. The shadow side must be made manifest and acknowledged in order to be conquered and integrated into the personality. Jacob faces his own treachery, deceit, and dishonesty; and in doing so, he conquers this split-off side to become whole. Jacob overcomes his fear of Esau, which is the motive root of his deceptive behavior.

Resolution of the personal neurosis of envy opens the door to a spiritual transformation. The major spiritual transformative vehicle in Judaic thought is repentance or *teshuvah*. Luz (1987) has pointed out that *teshuvah* has two complementary meanings. It derives from the verb to return or to going back to the straight path, to one's origin, or to an authentic way of life after a period of absence. The second meaning derives from the verb to reply: a response to a call originating outside of one's self. *Teshuvah* embraces both meanings: a return to one's source or essence and a divine call. It is central in Judaic thought, which sees the relationship between man and God as ethical in nature, a partnership where both God and man have a role in bringing the world to perfection (*tikkun olam*).

When there is an ethical break and the covenant between God and man is shattered, *teshuvah* repairs it. From the perspective of Biblical history, it creates a return to the ideal state—the Garden of Eden—that only existed prior to sin. Kabbalists speak of *tikkun olam* or repair of the world. Ethical breaches shatter the spiritual world, and *teshuvah* restores it. Through the

act of teshuvah, there is individual repair and a return to the spirit of God as manifested in the ideals of the Jewish community. Jacob's story could be the template for the process of teshuvah.

Practically, teshuvah entails three processes (Luz, 1987). The first is insight or recognition of wrongdoing. Jacob had to recognize that his actions toward Esau were wrong. This involved insight and action, knowing and doing. Rather than simply finding a more refined means of deception or a continued effort to get what Esau has, Jacob acknowledges the God-given relationship and his own assigned role in it. This is constructive repentance, entailing real change.

Teshuvah also is the recognition that we have broken our covenant with God. Egoic actions block God's light, and we fall from His grace. Repentance entails recognition that there are higher and lower worlds. Our inauthentic actions mean we have been living at the lowest level. Teshuvah opens us up to God's higher mission for us, to our true authenticity. The second step is compensation. Undoing the wrong means making the victim whole. Obviously one cannot reverse a temporal action, but compensation, both psychological and material, can be made. Jacob both apologizes to Esau and attempts to give him a portion of the wealth he has accumulated.

Thirdly, the offender must loose the desire, the seed, which began the destructive process. Learning must occur, so that the same actions do not repeat. Sometimes this learning occurs as a peak experience (Maslow, 1998), but more often it entails a series of practices that counter the yetzer ha'ra. For Jacob, this meant both the acceptance of Esau as his father's heir and the establishment of his own unique identity as a patriarch. For example, in the Mussar tradition meditation, prayer, creative visualization, chanting, and other techniques are utilized to develop counter-habits which neutralize and then transform dysfunctional desires.

In respect to the narrative, Jacob compensates Esau, humbles himself before Esau's might: "bowed to the ground seven times" (Genesis 33.3). He faces possible death from Esau and his army but finally meets him face to face. Reconciliation takes place. Each brother recognizes their differences but is content with who they are. Each has a different life mission, but both are carrying out their unique Godly purpose.

The universal meaning of this transformative process is mapped and illustrated in the Jewish Kabbalah.

Kabbalah (to receive) sees the world as the recipient of God's light. As people, we are the containers, the vessels of that light. While God is infinite, we are not, so we must contain and channel his divine light.

The Kabbalistic developmental ladder is called the Tree of Life. It is the lattice on which the soul ascends like ivy growing up a trellis. The Tree has 10 branches, which are not wood or fiber but points or wheels of light called the sefirot. Each sefirah is a contained manifestation of God's light or essence. They are God's attributes through which He conducts the world. God's light is strongest at the top, which represents the highest human values, those closest to God, such as Wisdom. The lower branches are closest to earth and farthest from Godly infusion. These are the incarnate action patterns. Spiritual development involves the integration of the lower branches with the upper branches. The complete man functions on all planes with each branch forming a supportive and cooperative relationship with all others.

The ten sefirot are in three groupings. The supernal triangle consists of those qualities closest to God, the esoteric teachings. The lowest triad is the practical sefirot of action, God's expression in the way we behave, the earthly emanations. The middle triad, divine emotion, includes those human qualities of the heart, which express God's perfections in thought and feeling (Halevi, 1986).

The middle sphere of divine emotion is represented by the three patriarchal archetypes of the Bible. Abraham is the archetype of compassion. His son Isaac is the archetype of justice. Jacob is the perfect balance, integrating justice and compassion, and called Tiferet, which is usually translated as beauty (Addison, 2001).

Structurally, Tiferet is the bridge between God's manifestation in the earthly world and His heavenly domain. Therefore, Jacob represents the transition between our manifest actions and the higher realms, those closest to God's light. When there is perfect balance, God's light reaches down and guides our earthly actions, and our earthly actions reach up to the divine (such as our day-to-day actions being guided by God's wisdom). Jacob is thus the transformative figure, a gatekeeper to allow the integration of higher and lower worlds. This is a Kabbalistic meaning of wrestling.

According to Ariel (2006), the transformative nature of Jacob "creates souls" and then transmits these

souls to the sefirah of *Malkhut* (earthly manifestation) bringing them forth into the world. Jacob represents the transition between the earthly manifestation of man and the development of his soul, imbuing earthly pursuits with spiritual purpose and transforming spiritual energy into our daily actions.

Jungian psychology regards man's development through what Hillman (1999) called the acorn theory. The acorn carries within it the blueprint for the oak tree. A pattern of development is inherent in man's nature and its sequence is unvarying. The stages of man's development are each archetypal, a pure form, but the particular expression of the form will differ from individual to individual. The four archetypal stages of man's development are the primitive man, the romantic, the keeper of the word, and the embodiment of wisdom (van Franz, 1964). The movement from stage to stage is temporally facilitated by conflicts. Jacob's odyssey begins as the primitive man and moves through the romantic or questing phase, where he attempts to anchor his earthly life. He then becomes a father, businessman, and leader of his own clan. The struggle with the angel transports him into a man of wisdom, who then carries within him the seed to foster a new nation built upon the covenant with God.

Jung (1960) might have viewed the struggle with the angel as dream phenomena. Jung saw dreams as prophetic, as arcane puzzles which had to be deciphered, but once solved, as vehicles of inspiration that reveal the life purpose to the dreamer. His view of dreams was teleological. Jung's dream theory is in this way similar to the way dreams are portrayed in the Bible, such as Joseph's dreams predicting his brothers' murderous envy toward him and the famine that was lurking in Egypt's future. Freudian dream psychology is reductionist, relating dreams to unresolved childhood conflicts. Jung felt dreams revealed our cosmic purpose. Jacob's struggle points to his life mission. It is a symbol of transformation, from one who is preoccupied with the mundane aspects of life to one who carries the torch of spirituality. It shows a willingness to engage with God, to question and struggle to find his place in the pantheon where man and God merge in *devekut*.

Jacob's wrestling match can be viewed through numerous idioms: traditional Hebraic, Jungian, and transpersonal. All, however, stress the structural transformation from ego-centered conflict to higher states of universal purpose and meaning.

Jacob Wrestles the Angel

Post-Liminal Stage

The post-liminal stage refers to a new level of integration. It represents the synthesis and incorporation of previous conflicts into a new, more adaptive dynamic. As with all stage theories (Erikson, 1980; Turner, 1967; Wilber, 1986) this incorporative stage represents a higher level of hierarchic integration, where older conflicts are resolved and transformed into a more flexible and evolved way of organizing one's world.

In transpersonal psychology there is a general evolution from ego dominated stage(s) to the transpersonal stage. In respect to the story of Jacob the hero evolves from a character dominated by neurotic envy to a transpersonal stage wherein he recognizes and accepts God's purpose for him; he moves from an ego dominated stage characterized by anxiety fed deception to one of faith where he trusts God's wishes and His protective hand. Through facing conflicts and the resolution of such conflicts, the individual obtains a higher level of spiritual and psychological being. Jacob's story is a paradigm of this dialectical evolution.

Jacob became one of the great patriarchs of the Bible. His 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel, the foundation of the Jewish state. His narrative eventually led the Jews to Egypt through his youngest son Joseph. This is where the central historical and religious motifs of Judaism—oppression and exodus—were born. These motifs have resonated throughout the life of that people. His path is exemplary of how God's chosen ones grow in understanding of the divine element in their lives (Plaut, 2005).

Although the other patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac, had their personal struggles, Jacob's conflicts were more complex and arduous. He had to learn and earn his basic life purpose through struggle and adversity. God, from Jacob's birth on, determined that Jacob would be the patriarch of the Hebrew people, not Esau. However, Jacob had to discover his place. He had to transform before he could understand the mission God had chosen for him:

Two peoples are in your belly,
Two nations shall branch off from each other
As they emerge from your womb.
One people shall prevail over the other,
The elder shall serve the younger
(Plaut, 2005, p. 173, Genesis 25:22).

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