

In Praise of Broken Things: Shabbat Vayishlach
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I have spent a lot of time thinking about the value of broken things—probably because I am personally responsible for breaking so many of them. As a child it seemed that everything I touched would crumble in my hands: spilled milk, dropped dishes, torn clothes, ruined toys, broken windows and occasionally doors. It happened so often that I began reflexively yelling, “Don’t come in, I can fix it!” which would invariably send someone running into the room to find me sitting in front of yet another mess. Eventually, you start to get a reputation for this kind of thing. Maybe you even start to believe it.

I’ve spent as much time counting my breaks as I have my blessings, and for a long time the math never seemed to add up. What made up my life, I thought, were all of these *broken* things, these ruined things. (When I cleaned out my bedroom in my mother’s house after her death this spring, I discovered entire boxes of broken stuff that I’d secreted away just so I wouldn’t be found out.) Broken things, piles of them, nothing but junk: a life full of it.

But what this parsha teaches us is that I was wrong—that broken things are holy remnants of great value, damages that sanctify us, wounds both healed and unhealed that remind us of who we are. And maybe, just maybe, those broken places are the lightest and most radiant in our hearts.

The story of Jacob wrestling with God’s nameless visitor is my favorite moment in Torah, and at first it was because of what it teaches us about the sanctity of struggle. Jacob emerges at daybreak with a new name, a new self. “You have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed,” the angel tells Jacob after he has wrested a blessing from the visitor. He has become Israel, one who struggles with God. Yet I wonder if that’s the most important

thing he gets from this fight. After all, it's a name for him that we rarely use. Even as we are his struggling nation, he is still, and mostly, just Jacob. The new self doesn't replace or even repair the old.

What Jacob also gets, what I think we might notice more carefully, is a new *body*. Like his new name, it does and does not replace who he was before. This new body is broken, but not because Jacob has been defeated. He has been struggling all night with the angel, his strength undiminished. It is only after hours of fighting that he is injured or weakened—and the text tells us that it doesn't happen as we'd expect it to. "When [the angel] saw that he had not prevailed against him," we are told, "he wrenched Jacob's hip at his 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." Jacob is injured, but it's not the injury that ends the struggle—it's not a defeat.

The injury he sustains in the struggle comes *after* the angel realizes that he can't overcome Jacob. It's not a weakness or a vulnerable point. But what is it? Maybe a reminder . . . a reward . . . a change . . . a blessing. For Jacob, life after this encounter, alone in the desert at night, is not, *cannot* be the same. The injury the angel gives him—a santification like his new name—becomes this reminder: "The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip. That is why the children of Israel to this day do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, since Jacob's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh muscle." That injury breaks him and changes the shape of his life to come in a very ordinary, very daily way: with each step he returns to those sacred hours, comes back to the things he learned there. They become written into his body in the shape of his scar, shadowed in every uneven stride he will ever take as he leaves Penuel. Even more than that, this injury, this brokenness, changes the shape of a future that is to Jacob unfathomable. *He* walks with a limp and *we* are instructed to commemorate that

limp every day: so profound a remaking that it extends beyond him for generations.

What we might take from this parsha, then, is not just a lesson about the sanctity of struggle, but also about the sanctity of brokenness. Our knotted scars and changed bodies are not signs of weakness or failure or loss. They are reminders that our struggles change the shape of our lives in profound and real ways—we are not, cannot be unchanged by our own encounters in the desert. They are marks of sacred struggle, of things broken and made holy. We are broken not by the weight of grief or loss or pain, but by our willingness to stand up under them, to wait alone at night for the unknown and unwelcome visitor. The broken places, the broken things, are where our bodies collect our stories.

And, I believe, they are places not just of memory but of profound transformation, out of which we come to grow in ways we could never have expected. Limping on that hip, Jacob finds a kinder welcome with his brother Esau than he ever would have expected. “To see your face,” Jacob says to his brother, “is like seeing the face of God”—no faint praise from one who has so recently “seen a divine being face to face.” His struggle and his brokenness pave the way for an encounter with Esau that might not have been possible otherwise.

For me it is no coincidence that dawn breaks as Jacob leaves Peniel in his newly-broken body. I have come to believe that the broken places are where the light enters us—that when we are at our most fragile, we are also best able to be shot through with the kind of divine light that changes us much more than any scar ever will. Broken places are ones of profound possibility, broken things suggestive of the radical transformations we can experience when we are shattered. In these breaks we are not lost or damaged, but made and remade--not without pain, but with no small sense of wonder that we will emerge whole and somehow new.

I think about the trail of broken stuff I’ve left behind me with much more affection these

days, because I've also come to see, like some divine x-ray, the trail of broken stuff in my body, scars and shards that remind me of every holy place I've ever been. "I can fix it," I used to say as a child, when one thing or another fell apart in my fingers. The thing I didn't know when I was trying to hide it was that I *couldn't* fix it, whatever it was, I didn't *need* to, probably didn't even *want* to.

Like Jacob, we are sanctified in our struggles—and the marks the struggles leave behind? Turns out those are sacred, too.