

## WWJD – What Would Jacob Do?

This week is another climactic Torah reading. *Vayishlach* recounts the confrontation between Jacob and his angry older brother, Esav. Jacob expects the worst when seeing his brother for the first time in twenty years. His fears are heightened when his messengers return with the news that Esav approaches Jacob's camp with 400 armed men. As Jacob prepares for, what looks to be, a bloody conflict, he faces the mysterious 'man,' with whom he wrestles and overcomes, though not unscathed. Jacob's fears were misplaced; in the end, Esav and he embrace and part ways amicably enough.

Jacob and his family move on to the next chapter in their life. They settle near Shechem. There, the text says, Jacob came to Shechem whole. The rabbinic interpretation of 'whole' is that Jacob's Torah was whole; he was whole of body, and whole of spirit. This is a surprising explanation of a strange word. After all, Jacob was injured by the angel. Jacob was thinner in the pocket; he sent many extravagant gifts to Esav as bribes to curry favor with his enraged brother. And, Jacob had lived with Lavan these last 20 years, surviving the wily trickery that his father-in-law embodied. It is conceivable, if not likely, that he was somewhat deficient in his Torah. Yet the rabbis interpret Jacob's life to be whole and perfect.

It is the follow up to this verse that strikes us and makes a demand of us. Jacob comes to Shechem and he is whole and, then the text continues: 'and he encamped – *Vayichan* – at the face of the city.' (Gen 33:18) The word encamp is taken to mean graced. Jacob was *Vayichan*; he encamped or gave *khen*, grace to Shechem. How did he grace the city? The Talmud offers a number of suggestions. He developed a coinage system; he built bathhouses; he built marketplaces. (See TB Shabbat 33a) As an expression of thanks to God for helping him survive, whole and intact, after his encounter with Esav, Jacob helped institute community advancing measures. [Or, this can be viewed as Jacob's expression of gratitude to the city of Shechem for hosting his family. (see Torah Temimah)]

Jacob feels compelled to give grace and share his goodness because he feels that he is blessed and gifted with goodness. In this sense, we might be similarly motivated to perform acts of Chesed and to help our society and our world. We, the international Jewish community, the American Jewish community and the local Jewish community, have been gifted – some would say miraculously so – with bounty and security and a state. We have been through much travail and, yet, we are whole. And like Jacob, our posture – in answer to our feelings of wholeness – must be *khen* – to give our grace, to give gracefully. The book of

Genesis is often thought of as a guidebook; lessons from ages past unto this day. While the historic events became part of our historic legacy, the ethical and character traits are our spiritual heritage and we carry those every day.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,  
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