

Genesis 32:24-32

“Not Eating Hindquarters to Honor Jacob’s Injury”

“Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.’ But he said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ He said, ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him and said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for *he said*, ‘I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.’ Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh. Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew of the hip.”

One of the most classic scenes in Holy Scripture, of a human being demanding action and blessing of God, is that of Jacob wrestling through the night in Genesis 32:24-32. Jacob’s encounter with a Divine Being occurs as he proceeds to return to Canaan from Mesopotamia with his family and entourage, and in the process is desperately afraid as to what is going to happen when he encounters his estranged brother Esau (32:1-23). Jacob was specifically informed that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men (32:6), and as far as Jacob knew this was going to be the death of him and his company (32:7-8). Jacob cries out to God for His intervention, given the varied scenarios that he can conjure up in his mind (32:9-11). He sends out some of his livestock to Esau as a gift, as a means of appeasement (32:13-20). Jacob then waits all night in the camp (32:21), sending his family across the river Jabbok (32:22-23).

Jacob’s wrestling encounter in Genesis 32:24-32 is known more for Jacob’s tenacity (32:26), Jacob having his hip dislocated (32:25), Jacob being renamed Israel (32:27-28), and the identity of the being with whom he wrestled (32:24, 28b, 30) more than anything else. But a consequence of Jacob’s encounter was that the Israelites would not eat “the sinew of the hip” (32:32), from the hindquarters of kosher animals, to memorialize what had happened to Jacob.

32:24 As Jacob was contemplating his future, and a possible calamity that was to befall him, it is stated that “Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn” (NJPS). The text in v. 24 identifies the person Jacob was wrestling with as an *ish* (אִישׁ), meaning a man or a male. Yet further on in v. 30 Jacob states, “I have seen God face to face...,” implying that the Being was God Himself. There is, to be certain, significant debate, disagreement, and variance among interpreters. Some believe that the individual with whom Jacob wrestled was an angel as God’s designated agent,¹ and some Jewish traditions actually espouse that this being was actually Satan.² As a commentator, Walter Brueggemann is one who advises, “The adversary is only identified as ‘a man,’

¹ Cohen, 199; Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 112.

² Scherman, *Chumash*, pp 174-175.

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which leaves all the options open. The power of the stranger is as much in his inscrutability as in his strength...In the night, the divine antagonist tends to take on the features of others with whom we struggle in the day."³

That the individual with whom Jacob wrestles is later identified as "God" (v. 30) is something with which interpreters have had to surely wrestle! In *The Jewish Study Bible*, for example, Jon Levenson makes the assertion, "In the Tanakh, God and angels can appear in human form, as in 18.2...Josh 5.13-15; Judg. 13.6, 10. Jacob's mysterious adversary is surely supernatural..."⁴ In the Prophet Hosea's recalling of this event, he identifies the being with whom Jacob wrestled as a *malakh* (מַלְאָךְ), which while commonly represented as "angel" via its common Greek equivalent *angelos* (ἄγγελος), neutrally means "messenger" (*CHALOT*):⁵

"In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his maturity he contended with God. Yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought His favor. He found Him at Bethel and there He spoke with us" (Hosea 12:3-4).

Given the previous visitation of God in human form seen in Genesis 18:1-15, a similar encounter with God here in Genesis 32:24-32 is to be assumed. Significant discussions have occurred regarding the figure of *malakh ADONAI* (מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה) or "the angel of the LORD" throughout the Tanach or Old Testament, given the fact that this figure, while often recognized as separate from God, is most often treated as though He is God. In the view of Derek Kidner, "When God appears as a *man* in the Old Testament He is usually called the Angel of the Lord, a title interchangeable with 'God' or 'the Lord' (28, 30; cf. Ho. 12:3,4)."⁶

There are many Christian theologians who have considered that the appearances of figure of "the angel of the LORD" in much of the Tanach (i.e., Genesis 16:7ff; 18; 22:11ff; 24:7, 40; 31:11ff; 32:24ff; 48:15ff; Exodus 3; 13:21; 14:19; 23:2ff; 32:34-33:17; Joshua 5:13-6:2; Judges 2:1-5; 6:11ff), are actually pre-Incarnate manifestations of Yeshua the Messiah.⁷ Others have acknowledged "the angel of the LORD" as legitimately being God Himself, but have not made any further conclusions or deductions from that.⁸ Messianic leaders, who hold a high Christology of Yeshua the Messiah legitimately being God, will often conclude that the figure who wrestled with Jacob in Genesis 32:24-32 was decisively Yeshua the Messiah.⁹

32:25-26 Jacob's persistence in wrestling through the night is to be recognized in how the figure he fought with, appears to grow tired of the contest. V. 25 records, "When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him" (NRSV). As the NIV puts it, "the

³ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 267.

⁴ Levenson, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 67.

⁵ *CHALOT*, 196.

⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*, 170.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 401.

⁸ For a review, consult J.M. Wilson, "Angel," in *ISBE*, 1:125; T.E. McComiskey, "Angel of the Lord," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, pp 61-62; M.F. Rooker, "Theophany," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, pp 863-864.

⁹ Intrater, pp 9-14.

man saw that he could not overpower him, [and so] he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man." The Divine Being could disable Jacob at any time, with a mere touch—and this is what precisely happens. But even in spite of Jacob being significantly hurt, *he continues on*. The Divine Being seems annoyed: "Then the man said, 'Let me go, for it is daybreak.' But Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me'" (v. 26, NIV). Jacob had recently been appealing to God's promises to Abraham and his progeny (32:9-12), and here he is demanding that those promises be carried through. **Jacob is not going to let go until God's fidelity to His word is realized.**

32:27-28 Jacob's insistence for an answer occurs in a very unique way, as the Divine Being asks him an important question. "He said to him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Ya'akov'" (v. 27, Keter Crown Bible). It is widely recognized that the etymology of *Ya'akov* (יַעֲקֹב) has been traditionally interpreted as meaning "supplanter," although it more specifically means "heel holder," as he grabbed his brother's heel at the time of his birth (Genesis 25:26).¹⁰ The Amplified Bible actually has for v. 27, "[The Man] asked him, What is your name? And [in shock of realization, whispering] he said, Jacob [supplanter, schemer, trickster, swindler]!" More importantly, to be sure, is how spiritually, psychologically, and missionally, Jacob experienced a status change in being renamed Israel:

"Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed" (v. 28).

There are, to be certain, significant theological associations to be made with the name *Yisrael* (יִשְׂרָאֵל). One need only look at what a few notable English Bible versions have for Genesis 32:28 to recognize this:

- **NJPS:** "Said he, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.'"
- **REB:** "The man said, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob but Israel, because you have striven with God and with mortals, and have prevailed.'"
- **Alter:** "And he said, 'Not Jacob shall your name hence be said, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and won out.'"
- **Fox:** "Then he said: Not as Yaakov/Heel-Sneak shall your name be henceforth uttered, but rather as Yisrael/God-Fighter."¹¹

TWOT provides the following summary on the meaning of the name *Yisrael*:

yisrā'el. Israel. Means "he contends with God" (Gen 32:28 [H 29]...). The noun *yisrā'el* appears 2507 times in the OT (plus its adjectival forms, *yisrā'ēli* and *yisrā'ēlî*), first as a name of honor for the patriarch Jacob, then for the nation Israel that descended from his twelve sons, then after 930 B.C. for the kingdom of Ephraim (the ten northern tribes) as opposed to the southern kingdom of Judah, and finally for the southern kingdom after the northern kingdom had fallen.¹²

¹⁰ L. Hicks, "Jacob (Israel)," in *IDB*, 2:782-783.

¹¹ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 155.

¹² J. Barton Payne, "יִשְׂרָאֵל; יִשְׂרָאֵל," in *TWOT*, 2:883.

The controversies regarding what has often been termed the "Two-House teaching" in the Messianic movement, which involves the split of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel, are addressed in *Israel In Future Prophecy* by J.K. McKee.

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The thought of J.H. Hertz regarding the name *Yisrael* is that “The name is clearly a title of victory; probably ‘a champion of God’. The children of the Patriarch are *Israelites*, Champions of God, Contenders for the Divine, conquering by strength from Above.”¹³ Recognizing how Jacob was renamed Israel, because of his tenacity to wrestle with the Divine Being through the night—and hence have imparted to him and his posterity the privilege of joining with God in the battles of human life—is quite important. The Hebrew *ki-sarita im-Elohim v'im-anashim v'tukal* (כִּי־שָׁרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אָנָשִׁים וַתִּכָּל), “for you-struggled with God and-with men and-you-overcame” (Kohlenberger),¹⁴ was notably taken by the Greek Septuagint to be *hoti enischusas meta Theou kai meta anthrōpōn dunatos* (ὅτι ἐνίσχυσας μετὰ θεοῦ καὶ μετὰ ἀνθρώπων δυνατός), “for thou hast prevailed with God, and shalt be mighty with men” (LXE). Because of Jacob’s persistence with God, the blessing of Jacob having success with people will be granted. Richard Elliot Friedman observes,

“Jacob is changed after his experiences in Mesopotamia. He has been the deceiver and the deceived. He has hurt and been hurt. He is now a husband and a father, a man who has struggled and prospered. For the rest of the story he is no longer pictured as a man of action but, more often, as a relatively passive man, like his father Isaac, seeking to appease his brother, avoiding strife and risk. And precisely at the juncture that marks this change in Jacob’s character he has his encounter with God at Peniel. God blesses him in a remarkable etymology/etymology: ‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel [*yisrā-‘ēl*, understood here to mean ‘he struggles with God’], because you’ve struggled with God and with people and were able. Is this divine encounter the signpost of the change in Jacob’s character, or the cause? Either way, as his character changes, and he ceases to be the deceiver, just then he sheds the name Jacob (the one who catches) and becomes instead Israel (the one who struggles with God).”¹⁵

Jacob or *Ya’akov* received a name change to Israel or *Yisrael*, which would forever be something characterizing the people of Israel who would come from him, **and** doubtlessly also all those from the nations generally who would associate themselves with Israel and with Israel’s God.¹⁶ For, it might be said, that the transition of the Patriarch *from Jacob to Israel*, from a person who was reliant very much on his own human strength, cleverness, and cunning—to one who would have to be entirely reliant and waiting upon God—is a transition that each of us must make as well. Joyce G. Baldwin explains,

“In the same way as Jacob had needed the transforming power of God, so in every generation did his successors. The name *Jacob* stood for the raw material taken by the Lord to achieve his purposes, while *Israel* called to mind the transforming power which made a new man of Jacob.”¹⁷

Brueggemann, however, advises some caution with how one might approach the transition of *Jacob to Israel*, noting that it did come with a price:

¹³ Hertz, 124.

¹⁴ Kohlenberger, 1:90.

¹⁵ Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, pp 112-113

¹⁶ Consult the relevant sections of the publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?* by J.K. McKee.

¹⁷ Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-15* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 139.

“The *new name* cannot be separated from the *new crippling*, for the crippling is the substance of the name. So Jacob’s rendezvous in the night is ambivalent. He has penetrated the mystery of God like none before him. Jacob has dared to do what the Israel of Moses will not dare (Exod. 19:21-25; 20:18-20). And he has prevailed. But his prevailing is a defeat as well as a victory. There is a dangerous, costly mystery in drawing too near and claiming too much.”¹⁸

In many ways, the wrestling that Jacob experienced with the Divine Being throughout the night, can be compared to how many people must initially wrestle with the Lord as they confess their sins and transgressions to Him, and receive the salvation He has provided in Messiah Yeshua. Even with redeemed people receiving a cleansing of their sins, an impartation of His righteousness, and beginning a new sanctified life of holiness and godliness and transformation—salvation in Yeshua often does come with a price for every man and woman. There is often something that occurs at the moment of one’s coming to faith, which leaves an undeniable impact on each of us, that we never forget.

3:29-30 The mystery of Jacob’s opponent is highlighted for readers: “Then Jacob inquired, and he said, ‘Divulge, if you please, your name.’ And he said, ‘Why then do you inquire of my name?’ And he blessed him there” (v. 29, ATS). Jacob was just renamed Israel, so it is not illogical to see the question asked. But the Divine Being answers, “Why is it that you ask my name?”, and we see that this is a narrative prompt for what Jacob names the site of his wrestling encounter:

“Ya’akov called the place P’ni-El [face of God], ‘Because I have seen God face to face, yet my life is spared’” (v. 30, CJB).

The name of the location where Jacob and the Divine Being sparred throughout the night is *Penu’el* (פְּנִיאֵל), which means “face of God” (the Septuagint having *Eidos Theou*, Ἔϊδος θεοῦ or “Face of God,” LXE). But it is not just enough for this location to be designated Peniel or Face of God, as the text of v. 30 communicates *ki-ra’iti Elohim panim el-panim* (כִּי־רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים), “I have seen God face to face.” Recognizing how the text directly states that Elohim or God was present here—and what this would mean for later debates between Judaism and Christianity over the identity of Yeshua of Nazareth—one should not be surprised to see Jewish versions render this with “I have seen a divine being face to face” (NJPS), “For I have seen the Divine face to face” (ATS), or even “For I saw GOD[’s angel] face to face” (Keter Crown Bible).¹⁹ However, we see that later Moses is said to have spoken with God “face to face,” *panim el-panim* (פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים; Exodus 33:11), and it is seldom doubted or challenged that this was actually God Himself.

32:31-32 As the encounter closes and the day begins, it is noted, “The sun was rising as Jacob left Peniel, and he was limping because of the injury to his hip” (v. 31, NLT). Jacob walking with a limp, would be something that he would carry for the rest of his life, as a perpetual reminder that he had this night wrestling encounter with a Divine Being. What is then interjected into the text of this narrative, closing it off, is a bit perplexing:

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 270.

¹⁹ Jewish versions that are a bit more honest with Genesis 32:30a include: “for I have seen GOD face to face” (Jerusalem Bible-Koren), “I have seen God face to face” (Alter, Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 157).

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"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" (v. 32, NJPS).

It is described, presumably at the time of Ancient Israel in the wilderness, that the people did not eat *gid hanasheh* (גִּיד הַנֶּשֶׂה), "the sinew of the hip" (RSV, NASU), "the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket" (NRSV), "the displaced sinew on the hip-socket" (ATS), or "the tendon attached to the socket of the hip" (NIV). The purpose of this practice was to obviously memorialize Jacob's fight, and to remember it in a very tactile way.

Being careful with butchering this part of a kosher animal, namely cattle and sheep, has since passed into the *halachah* of traditional Jewish *kashrut*, as Hertz details that "This, together with other arteries and tendons, must be removed from the slaughtered animal, before that portion of the animal can be ritually prepared for Jewish consumption."²⁰ The *ArtScroll Chumash* similarly describes,

"Two primary tissues are forbidden in the hindquarter: The inner sinew—the sciatic nerve—which branches out from the rear of the spinal column and runs down the inner side of the animal's leg, is forbidden by Torah law. The outer sinew—the common peroneal nerve—which runs across the thigh on the outer side of the animal's leg, is forbidden by the sages (*Chullin* 91a). Every last trace of these nerves must be removed, as well (*ibid.* 92b). Additionally, the six nerves which look like strings and certain other veins are removed."²¹

Levenson, representing a more Left-of-Center Jewish perspective, hints that not eating certain parts of an animal based on Jacob's hip dislocation in Genesis 32:32, seems a bit anachronistic:

"The Rabbis saw this norm, unparalleled in the Tanakh, as a commandment ('mitzvah') and thus an indispensable element of the Jewish dietary system ('kashrut'). A majority position in the Mishnah maintains that this 'mitzvah' was first announced when the Torah was given on Mount Sinai and only written down in its current location to draw attention to its underlying rationale (*m. Hul.* 7.6). In other words, the prohibition did not come into force until the revelation on Sinai."²²

In his resource *The Jewish Dietary Laws*, compiled from a Conservative Jewish perspective, Samuel H. Dresner summarizes the differences present in applying Genesis 32:32 between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews. The latter actually thinks that it is acceptable to cut around the different nerves in the hindquarters of kosher animals, whereas the former considers it a bit too difficult:

"According to Genesis 32:32, it is forbidden to eat the sciatic nerve (*gid hanasheh*) of cattle and sheep (this does not apply to fowl). The custom commemorates the struggle of Jacob and the angel, and Jacob's injury. It is necessary, therefore, to remove the sciatic nerve, a procedure calling for special skill and training. Ashkenazic authorities have decided that we are not sufficiently expert in removing the *gid hanasheh*, and that kosher homes and restaurants may not serve meat from the hindquarters (containing T-bone and sirloin steaks).

²⁰ Hertz, pp 124-125.

²¹ Scherman, *Chumash*, 177.

²² Levenson, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 68.

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“In Sephardic communities, however, and in Israel, specially trained *menakrim* (people who remove veins and nerves) do exist, and it is possible to get kosher meat from the hindquarters.”²³

32:32 application There has not been a huge amount of discussion, or even consideration, at all, by most people in the Messianic community surrounding Genesis 32:32: “This is why, to this day, the people of Isra’el do not eat the thigh muscle that passes along the hip socket—because the man struck Ya’akov’s hip at its socket” (CJB). There are a few comments one will find, here or there, about it, but nothing that substantial. In his *Walk Genesis* book, Jeffrey Enoch Feinberg asks, “To this day, ‘sons of Yisra’el’ do not eat filet mignon, the sinew of the thigh...Explain the importance of preserving this memory. Why is this an appropriate first use of the term, the ‘sons of Yisra’el’?”²⁴ This would be a question in alignment with an Ashkenazic Jewish tradition that does not eat the hindquarters of kosher animals. In his 2012 *Biblically Kosher*, Aaron Eby, in contrast, states that while “Completely removing this piece [sciatic nerve] is a tedious surgical procedure. Nonetheless, there are some highly skilled individuals who are capable of doing so.”²⁵

What is the on-the-ground reality of how a majority of kosher-friendly Messianic people are going to approach Genesis 32:32, and how traditionally hindquarters of kosher animals like cattle or sheep have not been eaten? While there will be Messianic people who observe the Ashkenazic Jewish stipulation of avoiding cuts of meat from the hindquarters, or try to acquire cuts of meat where the sciatic nerve has been cut around—most will see Genesis 32:32 and its reference to *ad ha’yom ha’zeh* (עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה), “until this day,” as actually being more of an ancient than a modern memorial. While it may be preferable, at times, not to eat meat from the hindquarters of kosher animals, some may view this as being more of a custom than a commandment.

Derek Kidner observes how “The ban on eating this part of an animal does not reappear in the Old Testament, but is found in Rabbinic Judaism (e.g. *Pesahim* 22a,83b).”²⁶ With only one verse making an observation on how meat from the sinew or hip-socket would not be eaten by the Ancient Israelites—versus multiple places that describe something about meat and dairy, certainly multiple places which prohibit the consumption of blood, and two significant places in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 which classify clean and unclean animals—many Messianic people adhering to a kosher-style diet will feel free to approach Genesis 32:32 as an *ancient custom* and not as a *commandment* for moderns. And with this in mind, Messianic people need to give some room for individuals and families to maneuver, as some feel that it would be much more significant to avoid unclean meats like pork and shellfish, than to totally avoid T-bone steaks or filet mignon.

²³ Dresner, 67.

²⁴ Jeffrey Enoch Feinberg, *Walk Genesis: A Messianic Jewish Devotional Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer, 1998), 144.

²⁵ Aaron Eby, *Biblically Kosher: A Messianic Jewish Perspective on Kashrut* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2012), 77.

²⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*, 170.