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# Jacob's & Herzl's struggle

Herzl's interpretation of Jacob's conflict also is indicative of his own

• GOL KALEV

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayishlach*, a mysterious struggle occurs as Jacob crosses back home to the Promised Land after 20 years in exile. Those two decades abroad transformed Jacob. In Haran, Jacob shaped his personality, accumulated wealth, and built a family that will soon turn into a nation. This transformation from Jacob the "tent dweller" in the shadow of his mother (Jacob 1.0) to Jacob the empowered businessman (Jacob 2.0) occurred entirely outside the Promised Land, and hence one could understand the natural trepidation Jacob has as he is about to cross the river and reenter the land of his past.

The bible describes the dramatic scene at the Jabbok "border crossing." Jacob arranges for the safe passage of his entire family and then remains by himself – the last night abroad before coming back home: "And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day."

Who is this man? What is this struggle? The bible is unclear. Biblical interpreters offers various opinions – one of the more common ones is that the man represents Esau, Jacob's brother, who symbolizes the world's nations. Hence, some concluded that Jacob's struggle is akin to the efforts the Jewish people have with the world when attempting to return home to their land.

One biblical pundit seems to offer a different interpretation using a similar theme: The struggle to return is not with the world's nations, but rather within ourselves. This interpreter is Theodor Herzl.

Herzl saw how addicted the Jews were to their lives in Europe. The fleshpots of Europe, just like that of Haran, created a natural tendency to stay and defer the return home to "some day."

Indeed, such failure to hear the call to return is a recurring theme for Jacob's ancestors and descendants alike.

Both Jacob's grandfather Abraham, who went to Egypt "temporarily" to weather the famine, and his father Itzhak who went to Garar for the same reason, did not return right away. In fact, they were both deported. Jacob himself, having fulfilled the 14 years he pledged to Laban in exchange for marrying his two daughters, opted to stay abroad longer in order to "provide for my own house." Jacob's descendants, who like Abraham went to Egypt to weather the famine, also suffered from the same "visa overstay" problem. So much, that when Moses leads the way back home, a pro-Egypt party emerged campaigning to remain.

*Even though he was winning, Herzl shifted his attitude from utterly dismissing the Opposition Jews, to courting them*

In all those cases, it seems there was a viable path back home, but for some reason there was a decision not to return. Such was the case in Europe during 18 centuries of exile. Contrary to common perception, it was not only political hurdles that prevented the Jews from returning home. It was also the Jews' own inaction.



'JACOB WRESTLING with the Angel,' fresco of Eugène Delacroix. (Wikimedia Commons)

HERZL UNDERSTOOD that such a Jewish mentality existed during his time. He recognized that even if he would get the world's nations to support a charter for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, his toughest battle would then be to convince the Jews to walk through the parting sea.

Herzl's primary struggle was with the Jews. Like Jacob, who the bible emphasis was left alone, it was an intra-Israel struggle.

The "Opposition Jews" who contested Herzl were mostly assimilated cosmopolitan Jews. They seemed to have adopted a new "religion": anti-Zionism. They slandered Herzl's movement, spoke ill of his ideas and became obsessed with Zionism-bashing. Herzl ridiculed their arguments. "Even the Jew-haters have more respect to the Zionists than to the other Jew," He commented in an article he in *Die Welt* on March 4, 1898. Indeed, Herzl felt that he is winning the struggle against the Opposition Jews: "We feel sorry for their future; their prophecy turned to shame," he wrote in the same article.

But then Herzl did something remarkable. Even though he was winning, he shifted his attitude from utterly dismissing the Opposition Jews, to courting them: "We must notice the trend in the Jewish Opposition. How can we tell the power of an Idea? In that nobody can ignore it – whether he is for it or against it." Herzl knew that the opposition Jews are defeated, and yet he refused to let go. This is when Herzl invokes Jacob, as he writes in the article: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."

Herzl sought the Opposition-Jews' blessing! In using those exact biblical words of Jacob's struggle, Herzl provides his implicit interpretation of who Jacob was struggling with.

Indeed, for both Herzl and Jacob, the refusal to let go of the opposition paid-off: "Suddenly we feel a complete change in the tone of the argument," Herzl wrote. "Our adversaries use our words, are proud of our ambitions, and now claim that they are the real Zionists." Similarly,

the bible tells us about Jacob: "And he blessed him there."

Herzl and Jacob persevered, but the struggle that occurs within Israelis when returning home to Israel continues. The excuses to defer the return to "some day" varies. For Jacob it might have been the fear of Esau (which turned out to be exaggerated). In our times, it might be the traffic jams or that the train from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem only has a 99% on-time arrival (as if elsewhere there are no traffic jams and 100% on-time arrivals). Herzl noted similar excuses used by European Jews of his time, such as: "The land of Israel is not worthy for us to aspire to since it recently snowed. As if cold and heat are not present elsewhere."

Neither Herzl nor Jacob had illusions about how easy it would be once they come back home. Indeed, Jacob prepared a carefully crafted strategy to appease Esau. But Herzl was able to internalize what seemingly it took Jacob quite a while to do – that once back home, he is no longer the "tent dweller" he was when he left the Promised Land (Jacob 1.0), nor is he any longer the refugee businessman that he was in exile (Jacob 2.0). Jacob, who was renamed at the outset of the struggle, is now Israel! (Jacob 3.0).

Herzl also recognized that the land to which we are returning to is not perfect, but this is no excuse to surrender in the internal struggle. Instead, Herzl articulated a principle that turned out to be true for both Jacob, and for today's Israelis as they return home: "The land will heal the people and the people will heal the land!" ■

*The writer analyzes trends in Zionism, Europe and global affairs. He is a board member of the America-Israel Friendship League and chairman of the AIFL think tank. For more of his articles, visit [europeandjerusalem.com](http://europeandjerusalem.com)*