

Bible study 1

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The struggle with people and with God in the context of palliative care

Genesis 32, verses 22-32

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So, Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, 'Let me go; for it is daybreak.'

But Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' The man asked him, 'What is your name?'

'Jacob,' he answered.

Then the man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.'

Jacob said, 'Please tell me your name.'

But he replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' Then he blessed him there.

So, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.'

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day, the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

Jacob's life is set in the context of struggle, frustration, and success in failure. Jacob has a twin brother, Esau. From the very beginning, he is in a duel. Esau is the firstborn, but Jacob also lays claim to the birthright. While Esau relies on his birthright, a certainty in the tradition of the family, Jacob must fight for his birthright, which he does with his cunning move against his brother. In an undignified fashion, Esau sells his birthright cheaply for a bowl of porridge, or rather red lentils. In the Old Testament, the colour red is associated with blood, i.e. with the cultic-ritual background of the time. If something is red, then it contains blood, which is life, and it has a magical meaning. Esau is caught up in a Babylonian magic trick, which speaks of his 'pagan' faith. I trust my eyes. What is in front of me is real. Red food promises magical power and physical superiority over others. The lust for power is more important to Esau than the birthright. This weakness is noticed by Jacob.

If we look at the big picture, Jacob, in the first phase of his life, thinks that he will conquer something, gain his birthright. He puts a great deal of foresight and cunning into everything. Jacob is harsh at the beginning of his story. He is a pragmatist. He is an ambitious child who wants to overwhelm everyone else and get his own way. How can we look at all this through the eyes of *Medicine de la Personne*?

Jacob is a very ambitious medical student in his work and intentions. He wants to get to university, study and be the best, to gain an advantage over everyone. He is a healthcare professional who will pursue every treatment and wants the best for his patient. Perhaps some of you will remember the initial flame when we began to serve our patients, that direction, that enthusiasm and the huge effort that can sometimes lead to the extreme desire to heal everyone, to help and solve all the problems of the world.

Jacob ends up buying the firstborn blessing from Esau. However, this is not enough. The older brother is still his father's darling. In the story Isaac craves food above all. He becomes a senile old man hungry for food. As Esau longed for red food, so Isaac longs for wild game. In fact, he probably also wants something red (the tasty food that he likes). Thus, Isaac and Esau are both somewhat in thrall to the magical concept of the world, the captivity of Babylon.

Sometimes in medicine it happens that the doctor succumbs to the delusional siren call of modern science. Advanced technology and a large number of investigations distract the doctor from the person. Only looking at the objective results of all the investigations is to inhabit the magical world of Babylon. They give an apparent certainty and the evidence on which to plan the next steps. Sometimes they are a means of power and a way to do more and more tests. Isaac and Esau are stuck in this magic wheel of power, and there is no way out for them.

But Jacob is the one who escapes the magic, or rather the devil's circle. Jacob's ambition goes beyond the ordinary. Jacob goes outside the framework of tradition, stereotypes, and rigidity. He wants a blessing for himself and his life. He is looking out for his own future. By his peculiar step, he goes outside, even at the cost of deception, and seizes his blessing, which almost costs him his life and he has to run away from his own brother. He becomes a refugee.

In the moment of flight and exile, he encounters the God of Isaac and Abraham. Heaven opens and he sees God's ladder. A true ziggurat is one by which God descends to man, not man towards God, to intoxicate him with a human burnt offering. Jacob sees God's appearance and descent. The ladder connects him vertically to God. Not surprisingly, later in the Judaic tradition, Jacob's ladder is associated with prayer and mystical union with God. Jacob's ladder, or more accurately the steps (ZKR) in Hebrew, is a kind of mockery of Babylonian Ziggurats. The house of God (Bethel) is everywhere where God is and cannot be conjured up or rooted in a particular place by magic.

What to make of this for our interpretation of *Medicine de la Personne*? Reality cannot be objectified but must be experienced. Evidence-based medicine is important, but it must not become an idol or a ziggurat. It is necessary to see the connection, to look, to use judgment and, above all, to dare to look outside the box. To trust intuition and at the same time listen to the patient's world.

When Jacob comes out of Bethel to Laban, he meets the love of his life. He begins to serve with Laban. The service proves difficult. He eventually gets Rachel, but he serves twice seven years and is still under the scrutiny of Laban's sons.

Do you recognize this effort from your medical practice? In medicine, but also in other helping professions, one must work for at least 10 years to become an expert and after 20 years of practice you really know something! Jacob is also toiling and striving. Everything he touches prospers. He even come up with many ways to improve and redo things. He is successful in the eyes of the world, yet he has no home. His wives are struggling with each other, and he doesn't really get the peace he wants. In the field of science and medicine, great success and fame can be achieved. Many sheep can be bred, but Jacob still lacks something. He has been blessed. He has also gone through suffering, but the main test is yet to come. He must take everything and leave Laban and take the risk.

Here we come to the key point in Jacob's story. Jacob must go home again and leave everything. He risks his own life and at the same time wants to conclude the conflict with his brother. He knows that the only way will be the path of humiliation and humility. He will break up his household into small groups, and all are to surrender one by one to Brother Esau. In the end, Jacob is left alone and wrestles with God. Jacob struggles all night until he finally gets a new name, Israel (which means 'he struggles with God').

What to make of this for *Medicine de la Personne*? Jacob is going through a difficult struggle and his life is at stake. He seems to win a duel, as if God Himself had prepared him for the struggle with Esau, but at the end of the battle he is wounded and he is limping. For palliative care to function well, it is necessary to experience the initial struggle of victorious medicine. Maximal deployment of treatment options until all possibilities are exhausted. But in palliative care, it is crucial to accept the weakness and fragility of reality. The match has been lost. All their life has been about maintaining health, about cure, but now is the time to accept weakness, exhaustion, and the end. Now is the time of reconciliation and orientation towards gratitude and quality of life. Jacob gives up all his possessions and puts himself in the hands of Esau. Jacob wrestles with God to obtain his blessings, even though he depends on Him. In the end, he receives the gift of weakness.

Palliative medicine in this context is the medicine of God's weakness. It is the acceptance of helplessness, which leads to hope, but not to healing, but the act of acceptance is the catalyst for reconciliation and embracing what we fear most.

Finally, I would like to present one of my personal case reports. For about two years I met with a young man, Martin, who had severe sarcoma that grew into his bones. He spent six years undergoing treatment, but in the end only palliative chemotherapy was possible. We played chess regularly during his chemotherapy. On Monday he beat me sometimes. On Wednesday I beat him. On Friday we reversed the moves. He taught me to strum the guitar and learned *Stairway to Heaven* by Led Zeppelin. Our meeting was not just about chess, but about fighting. Man against man. Martin always fought until the last piece. Eventually, he refused palliative care in its entirety and went home to hospice at home care, where he could not bear to watch his tormented parents. He decided to go into a hospice for their sake, where at the moment when he was dying he wanted to see heaven and he died in the company of his father. He made his stairway to heaven. He fought

and won at the same time, even though he lost. This is Jacob's struggle with God and men. Only in weakness will strength be revealed. In chaos and terror, God's light shines and God's ziggurats appear. This is Stairway to Heaven.