

Notes

Jacob wrestling was composed in the fall of 2004 for TACTUS, the excellent contemporary music ensemble of the Manhattan School of Music, at the request of its conductor at that time, Patti Monson. The theme of the concert Patti had in mind was “Words and Music,” and she indicated to me that she was particularly interested in works that would combine spoken text with music. Though I had a certain amount of trepidation about trying my hand at using spoken narration, as I had always thought it very difficult to pull off convincingly, I nonetheless found myself greatly enjoying the challenge, and in the end I was quite pleased with the result.

The text that captured my interest is found in the book of Genesis. Jacob, who some years earlier had deceived his twin brother Esau into giving up his birthright and their father Isaac into bestowing on Jacob the blessing intended for Esau, now finds himself preparing for what he hopes will be a reconciliation with his brother. He sends his two wives and his children ahead of him, along with gifts to appease Esau. On the eve of his meeting with Esau, Jacob is described as wrestling with what traditionally has been assumed to be an angel or similar supernatural being, though the original Hebrew refers to him only as “a man.” Jacob receives from this man the new name of “Israel,” in tribute to his boldness in “striving with God and with man.” Since I am in general favorably disposed toward the notion that striving with God is not only acceptable but essential, my choice of this text was, in retrospect, only natural.

The two singers sing verses from the passage in Hebrew, and the majority of their musical material derives from the traditional melodic patterns that would be used in chanting this passage in the synagogue.

I would like to acknowledge Cantor JoAnn Rice, who provided me with a transliteration of the Hebrew and a guide to its pronunciation and prosody. Richard Jacobs, Rabbi Emeritus of Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York, where it has been my privilege for some years to sing High Holy Days services, provided me with some very useful and thought provoking commentaries on this text, for which I am very grateful.

—Hayes Biggs