

Parsha Vayishlach
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Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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Wrestling with Our Identity

Shabbat Shalom.

This past week, our government made great strides in a long-overdue process. With the release of the Baker-Hamilton Report of the Iraq Study Group, our country now has a significant blueprint for what has become a seemingly unguided international quagmire.

Whether or not the report is accepted at the highest levels of our government, and whether its suggestions are acted upon, the release of the report is in and of itself important. More than three and a half years after the war started, the report released this week offers us a painful, if not realistic look into a mirror.

The very existence of the Iraq Study Group deserves praise. That we as a nation could find ten individuals willing to put partisanship aside in order to sit down and craft a plan for future success speaks volumes about who we are as a people. We Americans, even if tardy, showed this week that we are willing to acknowledge our scars, and we are ready to accept the new reality that has become our 'normal.'

The report clearly states that our future will not be easy. Then again, the last three plus years have not been easy, either. Above all, the report, with its honest self-assessment, provides hope that we as a country have matured, and that our leaders can chart a new course with the wisdom that comes from facing challenges.

The psychologist Carl Jung gave a name to the growing that comes from learning life's hard lessons. He called it 'individuation' and related that most healthy adults go through a period of self exploration that leads to the development of a new identity. This process of growing occurs in children moving away from their parents, in siblings as they move out from the shadow of their nuclear family, and in all of us as we pursue our own unique path in life.

While Jung likely saw individuation as a process that a person undergoes by him- or her-self, I believe it is possible for a group of people, and even a nation, to individuate and grow. I hope that the United States will use these years of war in Iraq as a time to individuate, to grow and learn and mature from the lessons we have learned on dusty battlefields in far off lands.

Our Torah portion this Shabbat, Vayishlach, tells of a single person going through individuation. And in that story, we see also the individuation of our people, the people of Israel.

As our Parasha begins, Jacob finds himself alone though surrounded by people. Having worked for his uncle Laban for 14 years, Jacob decided to head out on his own. So he left Laban's home, and along with his wives Rachel and Leah, and their servants and livestock headed towards Canaan. Their destination was Jacob's home, a place Jacob hurriedly left after stealing the birthright from his twin brother Esau.

As the journey progressed, Jacob received word that his brother Esau was approaching along with many people. Scared, Jacob sent his wife and children to the other side of the river so that they would be safe. And he sent a messenger armed with many gifts to his brother. Alone and afraid, Jacob realized he was about to confront his past, about to end his years on the run.

Then, our Torah relates, Jacob saw a man appear. Soon, Jacob and the man were wrestling, and they spent all night attempting to subdue the other. The man seemed to know who Jacob was, yet Jacob did not know the man, and could not get the man to identify himself. As dawn approached, the man realized that he could not best Jacob, so he wrenched Jacob's hip from its socket.

As the man prepared to leave, Jacob grabbed him, and said to him that he would not let go until the strange man gave a blessing. So the man blessed Jacob, and said that Jacob would be known by a new name: Israel—Wrestler with God.

The name Wrestler With God describes more than just Jacob. The name also describes all of us as a people. We Jews have struggled to make sense of God, to understand God's commands, to see our connection to the Almighty. As individuals, like Jacob, many of us carry the scars and limps of our struggles. And as a people, we also carry the scars and marks of our struggles throughout our history.

Our lives are filled with challenges, and just as each of us can look at our own body and see the scars, so too can we look back on our lives and see the scars of living. Jacob's lessons teach us the importance of exploration, the value of confronting our selves and our souls, and the possibility of growth that comes with these endeavors. And Jacob teaches us to be unafraid of such challenges, to be willing to risk for the possibility of achievement. In fact, Jacob recognized the truth of Teddy Roosevelt's famous words:

It is not the critic who counts, not the one who points out how the strong man stumbled or how the doer of deeds might have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred with sweat and dust and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; and who, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.¹

Jacob teaches us to take the chance, to embrace the wrestling in our lives, to risk in order to learn and grow.

¹ See William Safire, Great Speeches in History. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, p. 514.

Even as we accept the opportunity to grow and learn, we must also confront that which Jacob confronted as he prepared to meet his brother: we must find a way to accept our imperfections and the imperfections in others. One of Jacob's great realizations in the wrestling match was that he was not perfect; he did not have all the strength or all the fortitude. And as he anticipated his reunion with Esau, he must surely have hoped that Esau too had come to see that no one is perfect, that each of us makes mistakes, and that with some good fortune, we can accept our mistakes and the mistakes of others.

Though we are still in just the early chapters of our Torah, we are already dealing with the third set of siblings who must confront the imperfections. Cain and Abel were the first sibling set to spar, and the first act of fratricide teaches us the sheer difficulty of individuation and making peace with our siblings.

The second set of siblings to face such issues was Noah's sons. While one son failed to show the proper respect for Noah, the others did, and the result was a growing apart, with the one brother being shut out of his family, and out of our history.

And the third set of siblings were Isaac and Ishmael, half brothers who, according to the Mishnah were friends as toddlers, then separated, only to reconnect and find peace as they gathered to bury their father.

In each set of siblings, we see examples of children who faced the challenges of individuation, the hard task of forming an individual identity separate from that of their parents. And in each case, our tradition shows us the reality of human existence: no one is perfect.

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes about imperfection in a wonderful volume entitled How Good Do We Have to Be? Writes Kushner:

...(W)e have to be forgiven first, we have to learn what it feels like to admit our mistakes and limitations and find out how wonderful it feels not to be rejected for being less than perfect. Once we have that experience, we can offer acceptance to the less-than-perfect people in our lives. And if we don't accept less-than-perfect people into our lives, we will be very lonely, because those are the only kind of people we will find.²

Jacob, through growth and tribulation, recognizes his foibles. He understands some of his limitations, yet he continues to find new challenges. He is an optimist, for he hopes his brother has also grown. And he decides that perfect or not, God has much for him to do, that life is all about experiments and tests and trials.

Jacob emerges from the nighttime encounter with more than a broken hip. He receives a new name and a new identity. Jacob starts the night as Ya'akov, a name meaning held by the heel. Our Torah teaches us that Jacob was given this name because he was holding his brother's heel in the womb. But long after those months of gestation,

² See Harold Kushner, How Good Do We Have to Be? New York: Little Brown and Co., 1996, p.66-67.

Jacob held on to that heel, afraid of his brother, afraid of his earlier actions. Jacob held the heel, and the heel held him.

But as the night dawned to day, Jacob realized that the heel no longer held him. He had learned to accept himself and his past, and he earns his new name, Israel, wrestler with God. Now Jacob has reached maturity. Now he can move forward, confronting the Creator instead of being held hostage by a heel.

The great Israeli poet Zelda writes of the power of names. She recognizes that, like Jacob, each of us is known by multiple names, some earned, some given. These names describe who we are and what we are, and maybe, like Isra-el, why we are. Writes Zelda:

Unto every person there is a name
Bestowed upon him by God
And given him by his father and
mother

Unto every person there is a name
Accorded him by his stature
And the manner of his smile
And given him by his style of dress

Unto every person there is a name
Conferred on him by the mountains
And given him by his neighbors

Unto every person there is a name
Assigned him by his sins
And given him by his yearnings

Unto every person there is a name
Given him by his enemies
And given him by his love

Unto every person there is a name
Derived from his festivals
And given him by his labor

Unto every person there is a name
Presented him by the seasons
And given him by his blindness

Unto every person there is a name
Bestowed on him by the sea
And given him by his death.

Friends, each of us enters this sanctuary with the name we were given, or the name we have earned. Let our prayers in this place, and our actions inspired by this sacred space lead each one of us to loose the grip of the heel, and bring us to sacred wrestling with God.

As we become Israel, may we be blessed with acceptance and understanding, may our scars yield strength, and may we ever embrace the evolution of our lives, from unknowing to knowing, from fear to fortitude, from pursuit of perfection to creating kindness.