

ROSH HASHANAH II
5776

Two cannibals are sitting around the fire and the one says: "I really do not like my mother-in-law." And the other one says: "Well, try the potatoes."

Thankfully we do not have to deal with issues of cannibalism but there is a lot we do have to wrestle with. Many of us are familiar with the Yiddish *shver tzu zein a yid*—it is hard to be a Jew." Or, "*dos gahnts-er ley-ben iz ah mil-khom-eh*—all of life is a war." The American Jewish poet Edward Hirsch wrote in his poem, "Gabriel:" "Look closely and you will see almost everyone carrying bags of cement on their shoulders. That's why it takes courage to get out of bed in the morning and climb into the day."

None of this should surprise us; we are the children of Jacob who wrestled all night until the sun came up when he was blessed by having his name changed to Israel because he struggled with G-d and prevailed. We are his children and like Jacob we must wrestle; we cannot be Jews if we do not. We are referred to both as *B'nai Yaakov*, the Children of Jacob and *B'nai Yisrael*, the Children of Israel. We are *B'nai Yisrael* only for a moment before we again are *B'nai Yaakov* when our wrestling continues. *Shver tzu zein a yid*.

Shimon HaTzadik said that the Universe stands on three pillars. One of these is work, *avodah*: spiritual work; inner work and self-improvement are struggles. Experiencing these High Holy Days as intended is work. To honestly evaluate our lives, accept responsibility for what we have done and for what we need to fix is work. Asking for forgiveness and forgiving is some of the hardest work a person can do.

As American Jews we struggle to consistently make Judaism, for example Shabbat, a central part of our lives and Jewish values, for example forgiveness, tzedakah and peace, a defining influence in our choices and priorities. What we believe, what we do not believe and what should we believe is big part of spiritual wrestling. For some of us it is a struggle to free ourselves of superstitions and *bubbe meises* and for others it is a struggle to elevate our Judaism beyond nostalgia and guilt.

Many wrestle with negative attitudes about Judaism because of something that happened to them years ago or because of how Judaism was presented to them when they were children. Some of us struggle with the fact that to live meaningful Jewish lives would require us to change our life styles with which we are so comfortable. Religion can be like a bottle of pop left without its top on for a day—not much if any fizz is left. It takes effort to keep the fizz in our Jewish lives. It requires us to make our Judaism very important. Some of us struggle to move beyond Sunday school. Others believe things that are irrational. There is nothing holy in believing nonsense. It is a struggle to understand how so many Americans including Jews believe so much nonsense that they call religion.

We wrestle with the fact that there are many observant Jews who are not nice people and non-observant Jews who are; that there are many self-proclaimed religious people who fly airplanes into skyscrapers, shoot up Planned Parenthood clinics, murder a prime minister of Israel and destroy religious antiquities. It is a struggle not give up on religion all together given the history of religions. Reverend Wayne Olson lamented that too often religions make it difficult for anyone to be religious. Personally, I think that all religious extremists of all religions should be shipped off to a remote island and let whatever happens happen. *Gei gezunt aray*.

There is however, a way to be religious. It is to believe and accept nothing if it does not bring more compassion, justice and peace into our lives, relationships and world. If something leads to violence, discrimination, oppression and dehumanization then it has nothing to do with being religious and certainly nothing to do with G-d. There cannot be, as Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky reminds us, any religious devotion enforced through ignorance, xenophobia and chauvinism.

Wrestling with these issues and others is what it means to be the Children of Israel. If we are to have meaningful, honest and sophisticated spiritual lives we need to wrestle and work; many of us are too lazy to do this. Rabbi Joshua Minkin reminds us that to live a religious life we must wrestle with our mistakes and sins in word and deed wherever we are and not just in synagogue. When we wrestle we learn and grow; when we do not we remain stuck where we are.

A friend shared how much he wrestles with the fact that there is Jewish domestic abuse and what a huge struggle it is for him to understand how this is possible after thousands of years of Jewish teachings and values. It is hard for us to accept that domestic abuse and other very problematic behaviors are just as much a concern in the Jewish community as anywhere else in our society.

One of the most ongoing and serious wrestling matches Jews are engaged in involves Israel. Now, we are struggling as American Jews with the Iran deal. Last summer we struggled with the war in Gaza. When have we not wrestled with Israel? Never. From the early 19th century, before Herzl, Jews wrestled with the question of Zionism. This issue contributed significantly to the birth of the Conservative movement in 1850. The first Conservative rabbis, led by Rabbi Zechariah Frankel, were Reform rabbis who left the Reform movement for a number of reasons but preeminent among these was the Reform movement removing all prayers from their new prayer books expressing hopes to return to Zion and Jerusalem. Today the Reform movement is 100% Zionist.

The Orthodox movement has always been divided—in the 19th century and today. There have always been Orthodox Zionists like my grandparents and Orthodox anti-Zionists like the Satmar hasidim. One of my favorite biblical commentators, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of modern Orthodoxy in the 19th century, was an anti-Zionist. Orthodox anti-Zionists oppose the secular democratic State of Israel because to them it is a sin to establish a Jewish government in the land of Israel before the Messiah comes. Our Conservative movement is the only movement that has been 100% Zionist from its inception in the 19th century.

We have been arguing, debating, and disagreeing about Zionism and Israel since then. For any debate to be legitimate it must be *mentshlikh* and for it to be *mentshlikh*, as Jay Michaelson points out, the wing nuts on both extremes cannot be part of it. The wing nuts, as he refers to them, are the extremists on the left and the right, those who know it all, those who point their fingers accusing, impugning and insulting those who disagree with them. To be it at the table one has to listen and be able to disagree respectfully. For many of us this is more than we can do; it is a real struggle.

As Americans we must wrestle with why there is so much violence in our country; not only but especially gun violence. We must wrestle with why there is so much homelessness and hunger in our country and so much drug addiction. We must struggle with why the United States has more people in prison per capita than any other country in the world and why we are the only western country with the death penalty. We need to wrestle with the racism in our country and yes, the racism inside each of us which is so hard for us to admit to. Our country was founded by immigrants and we are the

children and grandchildren of immigrants. Our negative attitudes about immigration and our hostility toward immigrants are serious problems as is our apparent indifference toward the immigration crisis in Europe today. We have to wrestle with how much fear and hate there is in America and how this prevents us from truly being the Land of the Free.

Certainly, we have to wrestle with what we are doing to our planet and what will be passed down to future generations. It is a real struggle to understand when it comes to environmental concerns that there is not 100% consensus. As Jews we are to remember our rabbis' teaching: "I, G-d, am giving you this world; it is yours to treat how you will but know there will never be another one. I am asking you to be guardians of My creation; it is your choice." Jewish law prohibits doing anything dangerous or harmful; it also prohibits doing anything that is only potentially dangerous or harmful. How is it possible that every Jew is not on the same page with this?

Human beings have been struggling with why there is so much hardship and pain in the world, why do bad things happen to good people and why do innocent babies and children suffer? Paul Simon sang: "I don't know a soul who's not been battered, I don't have a friend who feels at ease, I don't know a dream that's not been shattered or driven to its knees." The novelist Jeff Shapiro wrote: "Every heart is torn apart at some time in one's life if not numerous times." The novelist Alan Cheuse who died recently shared: "Please keep my children from harm but no one can be kept from harm and hurt because to live is to be inevitably harmed."

It is a monstrous struggle to wrestle with how difficult and painful life can be. Being a person of faith requires us to engage in what arguably is the struggle of struggles. It is the one Jacob was engaged in until the sun came up; the one that the Holocaust will always confront us with; the one that accidents, hurricanes, sickness and disease force us into. Rabbi Bradley Shavit-Artson talks of how our hearts struggle to transcend solitude and the apparent meaninglessness of life. Every place and moment is where and when Jacob wrestled and where and when we must wrestle. At the end of the day there is no definitive answer to any of this. To believe in the ultimate meaning and goodness of life is a matter of faith. Anything that can be proven or explained does not require faith.

There are teachings that suggest that Jacob was wrestling not with an external opponent but with himself; Jacob had a lot to wrestle with given his past as each of us do. We need to wrestle with our resentment and anger, our jealousy and envy, our selfishness and greed; we need to wrestle with our indifference and unkindness, our arrogance and selfishness, our fears and phobias; and we need to wrestle with all of the "what ifs" and "only ifs" of our lives. The late author Peter Mattheisenn reminds us that our rage, bitterness and vengeful fantasies are fierce opponents that are prisons; that living by the rule that for me to win you must lose defeats us always with tragic consequences. This is not a righteous confrontation, wrestling with ourselves is. How much or how little we wrestle with ourselves determines who we are and what the real value of our lives is.

Why do we spend so much time and energy wrestling with inconsequential matters? Why do we get all worked up about how the Bengals and Reds are managed and do not lose sleep over how high Cincinnati's infant mortality rate is? What we wrestle with determines what is recorded in the book of our lives. Do we wrestle with the questions of why are we here, where did we come from, where are we going and what are we doing with our lives? These are questions that the children of Jacob must wrestle with to become the Children of Israel. To wrestle we must stay awake. Jacob wrestled all night until the sun came up. Only then did he become Israel. Dickens wrote: "Make me see." To see we must stay awake. Who has fought off drowsiness when driving? It can be a real struggle.

Staying awake spiritually is much harder. To be conscious and mindful human beings who are self-aware and aware of how we effect the lives of others requires us to stay awake; otherwise, we will sleep our life away and never see the sun come up.

Rabbi Aaron Schmucl Tamares, a 19th century Musar rabbi, taught that to be human is to bear a heavy burden. We are, all of us, fighting a great fight. We fight against our mortality, we fight for economic survival, we fight to be recognized for who we are and we fight for a place for our children to shine in the world. Some wrestle to find meaning in life and to live meaningful lives; others need to but do not. To be the Children of Israel we must stay awake and wrestle until the sun comes up.

So, whether we like our mother-in-law or not, we should not pass her by for the potatoes no matter how hard of a struggle this may be. We must wrestle to be strong; we must wrestle to be Jews. In this New Year may we wrestle and be filled with hope and strength and may the sun rise and shine forth on all of us.

SHANAH TOVAH