

Shabbat Parashat Vayishlah  
Being “God Wrestlers”

In this week’s *parasha*, Yaakov is preparing for his reunion with his estranged brother Esau, from whom he ran away twenty years earlier. He has gathered up his entire clan (2 wives, 2 handmaids, 11 sons, 1 daughter, several servants) and all of his livestock and set off to return to his homeland, the land of his birth, the Promised Land, the land of Canaan. On the way, he learns that his brother’s even larger clan is travelling in his direction and that they will meet along the road. The night before their meeting, Yaakov is sleeping alone after having sent his family safely on ahead, when a “man” awakens and wrestles with him through the night until dawn. Yaakov does not allow the “angel” to flee at the break of light, asking for a blessing in exchange for the freedom he will bestow upon him. What Yaakov receives is his new name: “Yisra’el,” meaning “he who wrestles and will wrestle with God.”

In Judaism, God never has been, never is, and never will be “easy.” Throughout the *Tanakh*/Hebrew Bible, we read of struggles between God and the Israelites. During our long and difficult history, the Jewish people – as individuals and as a collective – has been brought into times and situations when we have been compelled to question and/or doubt God. God is not easy. However, what this week’s *parasha* reminds us is that it seems that God intended it this way. That is not to say that God has intended to make us suffer. However, life can be difficult, frustrating, and unpredictable. It is only natural to challenge one’s belief system in the face of such experiences. Yet, to bless Yaakov with a name which means “he who wrestles and will wrestle with God” seems to mean that struggling with faith is part of Jewish identity and the Jewish experience. It is safe, acceptable, and incredibly Jewish to challenge, question, and doubt God. If our ancestors in the Torah did it, then so can we.

Two of my favorite teachers, Rabbis David Wolpe and Steven M. Brown, taught me that in order to be able to talk about God with children, you have to have thought about, struggled with, and talked about God with yourself. And it is OK to share with children that we, as adults, don’t have all the answers. This response empowers children who have their own questions, knowing that they are just like the adults in their lives. Finally, if we do not grow up knowing about the strength and acceptability of our tradition of “God wrestling,” then we may never feel safe doing it, leaving our children (and even ourselves) with under-developed ideas and thoughts about God that will force them to search for God, spirituality, and meaning as adults instead of feeling safe and comfortable in the Jewish tradition that welcomes their search and struggle. This may be the single most important lesson that Yaakov/Yisra’el’s life and experience teach us.

May we all find our space to wrestle with God and share our God questions and experiences together as families, living up to our ancestry as *b’nei Yisra’el*, truly the children of Yisra’el, the one who wrestled with God.

Shabbat Shalom!