

Wrestling: The National Sport of the Jewish People

Shabbat Va-yishlah 5774

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

When I think about all the sports I have either played or ever been the least bit interested in, there is one that doesn't even make the list. I have never in my life understood the appeal of wrestling. If you were a wrestler, or you have kids who wrestle, please forgive me for what I'm about to say. That full body contact to get your opponent pinned to a mat just seems, I don't know primitive and brutal. Yes, but you'll say I know you watch football and root for your Ohio State Buckeyes, Rabbi Raskin; everyone's talking about concussions and brain injury in football. And I get that, and I think we should be concerned with the alarming rate of serious injury in that sport. From a fan perspective, though, the game is interesting not only because of the tackle; there's a ball, there's kicking, throwing, plays and maneuvers...wrestling seems only to be about the physical clash of two opponents. And don't get me started on WWF wrestling. I grew up gawking at Hulk Hogan and wondering why anyone watched those matches which were clearly staged and completely fake. It's more theater than sport. But true wrestling is probably the oldest sport in the world...there are illustrations of wrestling matches from Egypt and Babylonia dating back to 3000 BCE, or from India in 1500 BCE, China in 700 BCE. And of course wrestling was the core of the ancient Greek Olympics dating back to 776 BCE. Recently wrestling departed from Olympic competition, only to be welcomed back after agreeing to the Olympic committees demands that the sport become more aggressive...seems like the matches had gotten too slow and boring...but its back now, with more aggression than ever.

Upon closer examination though, I think maybe I should reconsider my contempt for wrestling. After all, it's the only sport mentioned in the Torah, unless you consider Moses a mountain climber. And not only is it the only sport in the Torah, it is our sport. That is to say, when Jacob emerges triumphant from a whole night of wrestling with that mysterious opponent, his victory prize, his trophy is a name change.

*Lo Ya'akov yei'amer od shim'kha, ki im Yisrael...*Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel. And here is how the name is explained: *Ki sarita im Elohim v'eim anashim va'tukhal*. For you have striven, you with beings divine and human, and you have prevailed. And when the Israel Wrestling Federation was established they didn't have to invent a new Hebrew word for the sport or even Hebraicize an English word like they did for *beisbol* or *tenis*; all they had to do was turn to this morning's Torah portion. The Israel Wrestling Federation is called *Iggud Hei'avkut B'Yisrael*—*hei'avkut* is from Genesis 32:25, *vayei'avek ish imo*, a man wrestled with Jacob all night, until the break of dawn. Maybe wrestling is actually the national sport of the Jewish people. Maybe I need to reconsider all of my predispositions.

The question that perplexes many of the commentators as well as modern readers of this biblical wrestling match is who exactly is Jacob's opponent? This is no Lucha Libre, the flamboyant Mexican wrestler known for his colorful masks. This opponent is shrouded by the darkness of night. As the sun begins to peak over the horizon, the unknown opponent tells Jacob he needs to leave before his identity is revealed...and he flatly refuses to tell Jacob his name. I have encountered many beautiful speculations on the identity of Jacob's foe. For a long time I believed that Jacob's adversary was in fact himself. That he had a torturous night of sleep on the eve of seeing his brother Esau again after 20 years. He tossed

and turned with guilt and remorse and fear until he even dislocated his thigh. Then he awoke and met his brother in the flesh. Other midrashim suggest that Jacob wrestled with an angel—either a guardian angel of Esau’s or an angel of God. My resistance to that idea, besides the fact that it’s a bit too mythical for my taste, is that just a few chapters earlier, when Jacob dreams of angels going up and down a ladder between heaven and earth, the Torah calls them what they are: *melakhim*, angels. Here the Torah uses the word “*ish*,” which means a man. He wrestled with a man. And I want to suggest that the man Jacob goes to the mat with is none other than Esau himself.

There is so much pent up emotion in this story. Twenty years earlier Esau was so outraged, so infuriated by Jacob’s actions after he manipulated him out of both birthright and blessing, that he vowed to kill his younger brother. Then Jacob escapes, fleeing home as a refugee, and Esau is left with all that pain and unresolved disappointment. There is no way to call Jacob, to send him a letter or an email, or to invite him to group therapy. Esau just has to live with that frustration for two decades. And then, lo and behold, the two estranged brothers are about to meet up again somewhere between Mahanaim and Se’ir. And Esau has a choice to make...Will he finally take revenge upon his brother, as he so desperately promised to do; or will he make peace with him? Friends, I want to make a radical suggestion...I don’t think Esau was at all sure what he was going to do right up until the very last moment. Remember he approaches Jacob with 400 men, striking fear in Jacob’s heart. Perhaps he did consider attacking and killing him, why else would he come with such an army? Perhaps he wanted to retain that option if the Jacob he meets up with again is as unrepentant and duplicitous as he remembered him to be. And so, under the cloak of night, he sneaks across the river, and seizes upon Jacob. As they twist and turn, I imagine both shed some tears as they remember past misdeeds and misunderstandings. As they try to pin each other to the desert floor, all kinds of catharsis and release of pent up anger takes place. As they roll around in the dust, they realize how much time has passed, and how far they’ve come from boyhood rivalry and jealousy. And when Esau realizes that this is in fact not the same Jacob he once knew...that *this* Jacob has been duped and tricked and has suffered his own pain over the years, he finally lets him go and hurries back across the river before sunrise. There will, in the end, be no murder; no violence; and no revenge.

And here’s the kicker, Jacob names that place where they wrestled not Madison Square Garden, but *Peni’el*, meaning a place of seeing God’s face. But before you say that this ruins my argument and that it really was an angel or even God, listen to what Jacob says to Esau the very next morning after they hug and kiss and reconcile together...he says, *raiti faneikha kir’ot pnei Elohim*, he says to Esau, seeing your face is like seeing the face of God. He named that location the place of seeing God’s face, and he tells Esau that seeing him is like seeing God’s face. Jacob’s wrestling match was not with an angel; not with God; not with himself, but with his long lost brother Esau.

It’s amazing you know, we all have a choice to make, just like Esau did. We have all experienced the feeling of being wronged, or hurt, or insulted. We’ve all faced disappointment from people who we expected more from; we all know what it means to be let down. And just as Esau had to decide whether to retaliate...to lash out and attack the person who so badly disappointed him, or to allow that hurt to stay in the past, and to live without that resentment constantly festering in our hearts. I feel that Esau is a hero in this portion. Remember how Esau cried, how he wailed to God and to his father...Remember

how deeply heartbroken and angry he was. And remarkably, he chooses to embrace his brother rather than harm him. I think one of the most touching scenes in the Torah is not where they hug and kiss, but sometime later. You see, the most remarkable thing of all is that they are able to reconcile with each other while their father Isaac is still alive. What a gift they gave their elderly father—he didn't have to go to his grave thinking that his own two sons were estranged from each other. When the Torah reports that Isaac dies *zakein ve'sova yamim*...not only old, but in the fullness in the satisfaction of a long life, I imagine it means that he died peacefully, knowing that his family, that his two children had finally been reunited. The very next words, *vayikb'ru Eisav v'Ya'akov banav*, and his sons, Esau and Jacob buried him *together*. I have long held that more than parents want their children to love them, they want their children to love each other. When siblings who are estranged make up and reconcile while their parents are still alive, they are honoring their parents in the deepest and most satisfying way...they literally allow their parents to die at peace.

I want to conclude with the following vignette: The great Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement in the 19th Century once brought a pair of shoes to a shoemaker to be repaired. Noting that the candle on the shoemakers bench was burning low and about to go out, the rabbi said, don't worry I'll come back tomorrow. The shoemaker responded, "Do not despair, as long as the candle burns, I can fix the shoes."

Friends, if the candle is still burning in a relationship in your life, if there's still time to fix something that's broken, take that opportunity while the light is still available. Like Jacob and Esau, I'm sure you won't regret it, and it may just be the best decision you've ever made.