December 9, 2022
Weekly Message, Rabbi Peltz
*VaYishlakh*

Of all of our patriarchs, Jacob is the most complicated. He deceives and is deceived, he runs away from home and then comes back, and, as we read this week in *parashat VaYishlakh*, he wrestles with God and man, and receives the name *Yisrael*. For all these reasons, it is surprising that, of all of our ancestors in the Torah, we as a people are named after Jacob/Israel. Why not the children of Abraham or Moshe? Why *b’nai Yisrael,* the children of Israel? The practical reason is that Jacob had twelve sons, who became the twelve tribes. Since these tribes are the foundation of the Israelite community, first in Egypt and then in the land of Israel, it would make sense that we would inherit his name. But I think there is another reason why we are called *b’nai Yisrael*. According to a *midrash*, all three of our patriarchs encountered God at the same place, but each one related to this place differently. The place was Mount Moriah, the future site of the Temple in Jerusalem. Abraham arrived there for the *akeidah*, the binding of Isaac. He saw it as a mountain, a place of high holiness. Isaac experienced Mount Moriah as a field, a low and simple plain to encounter God. When Jacob arrives at Mount Moriah, the *midrash* says, he dreams, and sees a vision of a *bayyit*, a house of God. He is the one who envisions this spot as the future site of the Holy Temple, the place where all of Israel will come to worship God. This *midrash* gives us a deeper understanding as to why we became known as *b’nai Yisrael,* the children of Israel. Jacob is the only one who comes to this holy place and has a vision of a house that will bring the Jewish people together. It is this vision of community that entitles Jacob to become our namesake. Being in community, whether in-person or virtually, gives us strength and comfort. It also allows us to make a greater difference than most of us can make on our own. There is another way in which we can understand the reason for naming ourselves after Jacob. The fact that Jacob is our most complicated patriarch also means that he is our most human. He suffers ups and downs, living through successful accomplishments and heartbreaking tragedies. His experiences are the truest reflections of our lives. We are called *b’nai Yisrael* because we struggle with the same human questions that he did: how to live with one another, how to love, how to raise families, how to move through difficult times. Like Jacob, we too turn to God and to each other for how to best to address these questions. Jacob’s story serves as a guide for our own life’s journeys. He goes to sleep in a field, alone and lonely, dreams, and awakes with a sense of vision and purpose that will inspire his children for generations. Jacob was able to rise above his flaws and challenges to set a meaningful path for himself, his family, and his people. When we are able to do that, we become living participants in our ongoing journey as *b’nai Yisrael*.

Shabbat Shalom