

Rabbi Heath Watenmaker
Vayishlach 5782 - Combatting “Junk Values” with Meaningful Wrestling
November 19, 2021

Earlier this week, as I was driving home from a great night teaching at our Wednesday Night Teen Program, I caught the last few minutes of a show on KQED I hadn't heard before - Kelly Corrigan Wonders, and this week, she was focusing on the meaning of life¹. Easy to solve in an hour on the radio. More specifically, she was exploring a number of different religious leaders' and thinkers' views on what really matters, and where belief fits in. One guest, writer and at-one-time-disgraced journalist Johann Hari, spoke about the notion of “junk values.” Like junk food, argued Hari, which we know is not good for our bodies, but which we crave and eat anyway, junk values have a similar impact on our mental and spiritual health.

We hold onto “junk values” when we center our definition of being happy around material things like having more money, power, or success. One classic study led by social scientist Tim Kasser, explored this notion, looking at the differences between two different kinds of motives that drive human beings: things of *intrinsic* motive - meaning you're not doing something to get anything else out of it, but simply because you find the experience or activity worth doing - versus *extrinsic* motive - something you might do even if you don't think it is worthwhile, but you're hoping to get something out of it. We're all animated by a complex mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motives. As Hari explains,

“striving to get more money or status or expensive goods for their own sake are classic examples of extrinsic motivation... [What Kasser's study found is that] people who achieved their extrinsic goals didn't experience *any* increase in day-to-day happiness. None. Your promotion? Your fancy car? The new iPhone? The expensive necklace? They won't improve your happiness at all.

But people who achieved their intrinsic goals *did* become significantly happier, and less depressed and anxious. As they worked at it and felt they became, say, a better friend, they became more satisfied with life. Being a better [parent]? Dancing for the sheer joy of it? Helping another person, just because it's the right thing to do? They significantly boost your happiness.”²

In other words, if our values system is based on placing our hopes and dreams, and our general sense of well-being is tied to the acquisition of things, no matter how much we acquire, we'll always find ourselves feeling empty at the end of the day. As Hari puts it, “Junk food looks like food, but it doesn't meet our underlying nutritional needs. In a similar way, junk values don't meet our underlying psychological needs - to have meaning and connection in our lives. Extrinsic values, [junk values], are KFC for the soul. Yet our culture constantly pushes us to live extrinsically.”³

¹ “Kelly Corrigan Wonders: On the Meaning of Life.” Aired on KQED (88.5 fm on 11/17/21).

² https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-hari-kasser-junk-values-20180121-story.html?_amp=true

³ Ibid.

In this week's Torah portion, we're given a powerful example of the beneficial "fiber" of real, soul-stirring values, and the importance of engaging with what really matters in our lives. In parashat Vayishlach, we encounter an older Jacob, who has gone out into the world, acquired wives and wealth, and made a name for himself, who is now on his way to see his brother Esau for the first time in many years, after having he left his family for fear that Esau might kill him after Jacob tricked Isaac into giving him the blessing of the firstborn intended for Esau. Understandably, Jacob is a little nervous about how this encounter will play out. In what may be an attempt to appease Esau, and perhaps counter any vengeful thoughts he's still harboring, Jacob sends his servant and his wealth and eventually his wives ahead of him. After the last member of his camp crosses the Jabbok River, Jacob is left alone. Completely alone. It's a powerful image, if you think about it, this boyhood trickster -- finally about to reckon with the one person he hurt most, after years of hard work, getting tricked himself, and building a life away from his boyhood family, living out his stolen blessing -- finally has a few moments of solitary quiet.

And what happens next is at the core of why we, as a people, are called the Children of Israel, not the Children of Jacob. In the middle of the night, a mysterious divine being - or maybe a man, or maybe Jacob's internal demon's - assails him, and the two wrestle and grapple with each other until the break of dawn. At dawn, the assailant, seeing he has not overcome Jacob, wrenches Jacob's hip - a serious and lasting physical injury. Jacob still does not relent, and demands that this mysterious being give him a blessing. In response, the assailant gives Jacob a new name - *Yisrael*, Israel - explaining, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:29). The biblical translator Everett Fox translates *Yisrael* as "God-Fighter." We, Jewish tradition explains, are descendants of *Yisrael*, we have wrestling with the Divine in our very DNA.

Wrestling is, in so many ways, at the core of what being Jewish is all about: we don't just accept the interpretation or translation of one authority, we argue and debate over the meaning of our sacred texts; we don't accept one person's dogmatic statements, we grapple with the things that matter to us until we find something that is meaningful for us (and then we sometimes change our minds again). We are stubborn and curious. We are a people with many opinions and perspectives. Indeed, the wrestling, the grappling, is seen as holy work. When we disagree about sacred topics, it's not just a debate, it's a *makhloket l'shem Shamayim*, an argument for the sake of heaven. Even the idea of God -- belief in God, the very existence of God, our concept of the nature of God -- is something that is up for wrestling and questioning and debate.

This idea of wrestling is the antithesis of "junk values." If junk values are things that come easily, that aren't complicated, that just slide down our throats dripping with greasy convenience, then Judaism is like a boot-camp workout for our souls. We, your clergy, expect that one sign of deep engagement, of meaning-making, is that we'll sometimes disagree, that we'll be able to discuss and debate the many different paths to encountering the sacred. Because when we're struggling with something, we're engaged with it. We take it seriously. We're tangled up in the issue and in its outcome. It's perhaps an element of why we Jews have been able to hold on to hope as a core value, even in the darkest and most painful elements of our history. We refuse to accept

that the world as it may currently be - with all of its brokenness and injustice and inequality and pain - simply cannot be the world as we know it ought to be. And so we wrestle with the world around us, we fight for our core values of justice and decency. We look at our fellow human beings, no matter how different their lived experiences may be from ours, and search to find the image of the Divine within them. With this morning's announcement of the acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse, we struggle with what we may feel is a lack of justice in our criminal justice system, and together we'll find ways to lift up our voices to combat injustice when we see it. When we see brokenness in our world, we are called by our tradition to engage, not disengage, even if it's sometimes painful.

When we struggle, when we grapple with things of substance, when we carry ourselves with compassion and care, and conduct our lives with a spirit of giving and generosity, we are wrestling to combat junk values. As we enter this season of Thanksgiving, may we continue to reflect on what truly matters in our lives, and, if we're fortunate to have more than we need, may we also feel inspired to give to others in need. And may we always continue to stay engaged in wrestling and struggling with that which is sacred and meaningful - doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8).