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I want to talk today about college, and about some of the controversies going on college campuses, but I want to start with mysteries.

We all like a good mystery. Sometimes the mystery regards what will happen. Sometimes we know what happened but the mystery is how. Sometimes the mystery revolves around discovering someone's true identity.

Jewish tradition loves a mystery as much as any of us today. When the Torah refers to someone only as "a man," for example, the tradition goes crazy trying to identify the mysterious, unnamed man. We have just such a mystery man this week, and it's the famous being with whom Jacob wrestles.

If you remember, Jacob, the younger son, had stolen the birthright of his father Isaac from his older brother, Esau, and then fled, because Rebecca, their mother, had told Jacob that Esau wanted to kill him. Twenty years later, married and with many children, Jacob is about to see Esau again. Esau has brought a posse; Jacob puts everyone on the other side of the river. Let me quote now (Genesis 32:25-33).

***25** And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. **26** And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained, as he wrestled with him. **27** And he said: 'Let me go, for the day breaketh.' And he said: 'I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.' **28** And he said unto him: 'What is thy name?' And he said: 'Jacob.' **29** And he said: 'Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed.' **30** And Jacob asked him, and said: 'Tell me, I pray thee, thy name.' And he said: 'Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?' And he blessed him there. **31** And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: 'for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.' **32** And the sun rose upon him as he passed over Peniel, and he limped upon his thigh. **33** Therefore the children of Israel eat not the sinew of the thigh-vein which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day; because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh, even in the sinew of the thigh-vein.*

So who is this mysterious man? Some say it was an angel, sent by God. Others say it was Esau's "celestial patron," a guardian angel looking out for Esau. Others say Jacob was wrestling with his brother Esau in the night. A more psychological explanation suggests that Jacob was actually wrestling with himself, or with his own conscious, trying to make peace with himself before confronting his brother, whom he wronged.

In many ways, this episode captures so many elements of the college experience. It happens at night. As we all know and remember, anything important that happens at college happens at night. It happens when Jacob is finally left alone. The wrestling or struggling (and I'll have more to say about this), and really the development that happens during college happens because of that aloneness—the student must find his or her own path, choosing

courses, friends, activities. So many of the choices are made alone, and without the guidance that kids have while still at home.

And let's talk about struggling, wrestling, now. There are so many ways in which college students struggle and wrestle. The academics are often a challenge. Navigating time and self-management requires struggle. Finding one's place, with peers, is sometimes a struggle. Choosing a path, a major, and perhaps, ultimately, a career, can feel like a struggle. These are all ways that we wrestle with ourselves, and with our environment.

But there are other kinds of struggles that happen too. The fall of my freshman year of college, my supersmart roommate was sure that he would major in English and wind up writing a thesis on *The Simpsons*, whose hundreds of episodes he knew by heart. But by the end of freshman year, he was deeply involved in the Student Labor Alliance, making sure that all our college attire was manufactured by adult—not child—workers working in safe conditions being paid a living wage. And since then, he's worked for non-profits seeking to improve transparency in campaign finance, among other things.

There was a struggling that happened within him that changed his heart, and his path.

Our college campuses today are hotbeds of struggle. Some of the most prominent recent struggles that have caught my attention have been around Israel and BDS (boycott, divest, sanctions), and issues of race, racism, cultural appropriation and cultural sensitivity.

The opportunity, or sometimes unavoidability, of wrestling and struggling with the political, social and moral issues rocking some of our campuses is a distraction from academics, and from college fun, sometimes. But it's also holy struggle. Sometimes the struggle is with those whom we really oppose (think Jacob and Esau). Sometimes the struggle is with figures in positions of power (think Jacob wrestling with an angel). Sometimes, the struggle is with ourselves, to figure out what we believe, and what the right side of an issue really is.

In every case, the learning is not only about the particular issue, but about the nature of struggling—with peers and others, with authority, with our own conscience, upbringing, and preconceptions.

The story of Jacob's wrestling ends with Jacob being given a new name, with Jacob's thigh wrenched, and a new tradition of the children of Israel not eating the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket. We too emerge from struggle, whether college or elsewhere, with a new identity, a new sense of self, a new reputation, perhaps. Something is often torn, hurting and paining us. And we come away with traditions and practices new to us that become our norms, our ways of doing things.

Jacob is renamed "Israel" during this episode, because "You have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." We are named Israelites, the children of Israel, because we strive to be people who struggle, in all different ways, with things divine and human.

May we all be worthy inheritors of Jacob, our struggling ancestor.