

Shabbat Vayishlach 5784
What I'm Wrestling With Right Now
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

In the Jewish tradition, a name is never merely a sound. Instead, a name is a story, a destiny, a way of honoring the past and guiding us to a distinct future. We see this most clearly when parents at a baby's Bris or baby naming almost always speak about why they chose the baby's particular name. Usually they speak of deceased relatives who excelled in certain traits and who they hope guide the way for their new child. For Jews, a name is a torch lighting the way forward.

The closest we get to a parent's speech, as it were, about our people's name Israel comes from this morning's reading, Vayishlach. In it, Jacob wrestles with the mysterious figure in the dark, called both a man and a divine being. Let me read you a few verses:

Then the angel said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking."

But Jacob answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob."

Said the angel, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel - Yisrael - for you have wrestled with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

That's our name, folks. We are the ones who wrestle with G-d and people. This was true of Jacob, who physically wrestled with the angel and struggled with his own brother Esau. This was true of Moses, who asked G-d to reveal G-d's face in order to understand G-d's ways, and who confronted the wicked Pharaoh face to face. This was true of every generation of Jews ever since, who struggled to understand what G-d is and what G-d meant in their lives, and who contended with anti-Semitism among their rulers and neighbors in so many communities over time. And this is true of us today, not just generally but specifically.

Since October 7th, I too am struggling and wrestling. I know many of you are as well. I have all sorts of gnawing questions connected to being Jewish, connected to Israel in this important moment. My theological questions I will leave aside for another time. I recognize that I myself am not wrestling with Hamas in Gaza; the brave men and women of the IDF are, may G-d protect them. But I myself am struggling as I follow the news from home. I wrestle with the numerous voices deeply critical of Israel that swirl about us in posts, articles, videos, and more. Israel is not perfect and is subject to making mistakes, including in this war, and it's fair to point out their tactical errors. But

I'm speaking about something else, the dangerous voices around us that go much further.

Here is where I am struggling and wrestling, and I want to give credit to New York Times columnist Bret Stephens for articulating many of these points in a recent speech:

-Why do hardly any news outlets refer to Hamas as a terrorist group? If what Hamas did on October 7th to innocent Israeli civilians and others is not terrorism, exactly what is?

-Why do so many articles and opinion pieces about Israel seem to begin almost with a disclaimer: "Israel has a right to self-defense, but..." And then what follows seems to be a long list of what Israel is doing wrong in its war against terrorists intentionally hiding among civilians?

-Why do so many criticize Israel's wartime actions and not give equal attention to calling out Hamas?

-Why is Israel accused of "occupying" Gaza even though not a single Jew has lived there for 18 years?

-Why is Israel criticized for both not doing more to evacuate Palestinians from war zones in northern Gaza AND forcing Palestinians from their homes?

-Why is Israel, in Stephens' words, "the victim of one of the greatest massacres in memory" on October 7th, seen by so many as "the real aggressor"?

-Why do many demand that Israel pave the way for a Palestinian state - which it has in previous peace offers - and not equally demand that the Palestinian leadership accept a Jewish state in principle next door?

-Why did it take the United Nations leadership 7 weeks before calling for an investigation into Hamas sex crimes on October 7th?

-Why are American Jews and Palestinian Americans attacked and their gathering spaces vandalized for what's happening across the ocean? All of this is completely unacceptable.

Truthfully, I know the answers to many of my own questions. Today's sermon is not about providing specific answers, though they are important. It frustrates me to no end that we American Jews have to struggle with these voices and challenges as we follow

the war from Chicago. I also know that polls say most Americans are on Israel's side. And that Israel has unbelievable allies among American citizens and government officials. That's important, and we can't take that for granted. Additionally, I know that innocent Palestinians in Gaza - those who are not Hamas - are suffering tremendously. What is happening to their families is truly devastating and heartbreaking, and supporters of Israel should not minimize that. Instead, we should make clear that Hamas is ultimately responsible when they intentionally embed their fighters and weapons among innocent civilians and residential areas like hospitals.

I share this all to express that I'm struggling, and I sense that many of us are as well. Just articulating our frustrations is an important first step. But the next step is to engage, to not turn away. To be more like our patriarch Jacob.

This Jacob of Genesis matures tremendously over time. The Jacob who wrestled the angel in the dark was the same one who previously ran away from challenges. Here is a thought from the Etz Hayim Humash commentary: "We can imagine Jacob saying to himself, 'Until now I have responded to difficult situations by lying and running. I deceived my father. I ran away from Esau. I left Laban's house stealthily instead of confronting him. I hate myself for being a person who lies and runs. But I'm afraid of facing up to the situation.' [But then Jacob stands his ground in the wrestling match.] Jacob outgrows his identity as the trickster and becomes Israel, the one who contends with G-d and people instead of avoiding or manipulating them."

This is our call as well. To face the challenges of being Jews and Zionists head on. To engage in these debates and not to cower away. To call out lies that we hear and read about and not to ignore. To learn the facts about what's happening today though they are heartbreaking. To learn the details of Israel's history, though that is time consuming. The challenge is there, and our name Israel calls us to to struggle, to wrestle, to strive, even when it is tempting and understandable to walk away. But we may not do that. Our name Israel points to the path we must follow.

Recall how that instructive verse about our namesake ends. "Said the angel, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel - Yisrael - for you have wrestled with beings divine and human, *and have prevailed.*'" Jacob prevailed, Moses prevailed, our ancestors prevailed, and one day, so will we.

Shabbat Shalom.