

Shabbat Vayishlach 5786
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Shabbat Shalom.

Some old movies are timeless — Airplane is one of them, full of memorable lines.

Including this one:

Flight Attendant to passenger: *"Would you like something to read?"*

Passenger: *"Do you have anything light?"*

Flight Attendant: *"How about this pamphlet: Famous Jewish Sports Legends?"*

Yep, that's our people. Most of us are not exactly built for football. But we can hold our own at certain other sports, like wrestling. And if you will follow me today and see wrestling as a metaphor also, then Jews have not only participated - we've excelled. To write that history of Jews wrestling with challenges and obstacles — well, that's not a pamphlet. That's a full encyclopedia set.

The first chapter in that hypothetical book series opens with Genesis, and Jacob would have the longest chapter. It's impossible to tell his story without mentioning the wrestling match in today's Parsha, Vayishlach.

Here's the blow by blow from the Torah:

Jacob was left alone. A man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him.

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

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

He said to him, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob."

He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there.

So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." (Gn. 32:25-31).

This is when Jacob becomes Israel — the origin of our people's name and, eventually, our national homeland. We are literally named after this struggle.

Let's focus on that word, Israel. Jacob's wrestling opponent is a mysterious creature, called a "man" in verse 25 and "the Divine" in verse 31. Whatever it is, he bestows the name Israel because Jacob has wrestled with G-d and people, and has overcome.

Jacob struggles with G-d: in this moment, he wrestles the angel to a draw. That's called a win! Earlier in his life, as he runs away from home and a vengeful brother, Jacob struggles with his faith, unsure if G-d will remain beside him.

And Jacob clashes with people too - his brother Esau and father-in-law Laban.

This wrestling match is a turning point in Jacob's life. Previously he ran away from his challenges, but now he has matured to face his challenges head.

Here is the Etz Hayyim 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 am afraid of facing up to the situation.' By [wrestling the angel], Jacob wins. He outgrows his Jacob identity as the trickster and becomes Israel, the one who contends with G-d and people instead of avoiding or manipulating them."

He has thus shed his earlier identity, represented by his birth name - Jacob. He is now worthy of a new name that reflects a more mature identity - Israel.

This name Israel fits us as well, the children of Israel. For we too as a Jewish people continue to wrestle with G-d, with other people, and with challenges in the world around us.

Here is just a partial list of what Jews wrestle with today:

Why does G-d let bad things happen to good people?

Why doesn't G-d speak to us the way the Torah describes Him speaking to our ancestors?

What does it even mean to be Jewish in 2025?

In a world with ever-increasing antisemitism, how can we keep ourselves safe and still be openly proudly Jews?

In a global society that is increasingly hostile to Israel, how do we compellingly make the case for Israel and Zionism?

How can we be one Jewish people in this time of deep internal divisions?

How can we counter steep cultural assimilation with increased Jewish pride and commitment?

How can we provide young people with a robust Jewish education when doing so is time-intensive and expensive?

In a society that venerates individualism and the freedom to choose, how can we encourage Jews to observe Jewish law, rituals, and Mitzvot?

And ultimately, how can we transmit a love of being Jewish to the next generation, so that the Jewish people is even stronger in the future?

Responses to each of these questions would be a book unto itself. And not exactly light reading either.

Being Jewish has never been easy. Not in the past, and not today, though it was certainly easier before October 7th.

We all need strength right now, and strength comes from clarity — from knowing what we stand for.

As I said on Yom Kippur, in two words, we're about sanctifying life. Taking something ordinary and making it extraordinary. Or in the words of the Torah, "Choose life - *Uvaharta Bahayim* - in order that you will live, you and your children" (Dt. 30:15-19).

At the same time, we must remember that it's in the struggle itself that produces meaning. When we face challenges, we must not run away from them. We must follow the mature Jacob and stand our ground. This is how we will fortify our identities. As Leonard Cohen said, "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

Speaking of light...in just eight days we will light the first Hanukkah candle. And the following night we will increase that light by another candle. Then, on the 8th night, eight candles plus the Shamash will capture our eyes and illuminate our homes.

When you light your Hanukkah candles at home this year, start with the candles, of course, along with the blessings, the dreidels, and the latkes. But don't stop with the rituals. Immediately after you light the candles, tell your children and grandchildren why Hanukkah is *important*. Why being Jewish *matters* to you. What Jewish peoplehood *means* to you. Hanukkah is not only fun and joyous, but important and compelling. Tell them how our people almost met our end 2,000 years ago. But the Maccabbees fought back because being Jewish is worth fighting for, and thank G-d we were saved. Even today, the Jewish people faces significant challenges. But with faith in G-d, and the spirit of the Maccabees, we too can face them boldly. Like Jacob, we too can stand our ground, motivated by deep conviction. And when we do that, we too will prevail.

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