

Shabbat Vayishlach - November 20, 2010
Rabbi Harold J. Kravitz
Adath Jeshurun Congregation
Minnetonka, MN

Intro to the Torah Reading

Invite congregation to compare wrestling scene Gen 32:27 p. 202 in Etz Chayim with Gen 27: 18. when Yaakov was asked by his father Isaac, “Who are you Mi Atah?” He lied to his father saying that he was Esau, his brother.

Take a look at these two sections of the Torah Gen 32 and Gen 27 with the assistance of Rabbi Harold Kushner at the bottom of p. 202 of the Etz Chayim. We will return to the questions raised when we are asked, “Who are you?” Also invite congregation to look at handout from Moment Magazine.

Sermon:

I hope you had a chance to compare the stories in Gen 32 and Gen 27 when our ancestor Yaakov was asked who he is. In our portion, Gen 32:27, p. 202 in Etz Chayim, Yaakov is returning from Haran where he has been since cheating his brother out of his birthright and the brothers are about to be reunited. The last time they saw each other Esau threatened to kill Jacob for having stolen his blessing from their father.

The night before his expected meeting with Esau, Jacob has a mysterious encounter with an angel, a divine being it seems, and they wrestle with each other through the night. As the sun rises, the two figures are locked in a standoff. Though asked Yaakov will not let go of the mysterious opponent.

Yaakov tells the angel, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”

Gen 33:28 Said the other, “What is your name?” Mah she-mecha

He replied, “Yaakov”

33:29 Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who prepared the interpretations at the bottom of our Etz Chayim Chumash, on page 202, cites the great medieval Bible commentator Rashi who compares Yaakov’s response to the angel’s question in Gen 33 “Mah She-mekha What is your name” to the story found in Gen 27:18 when Yaakov deceptively approached his father to receive the

first blessing, reserved for his brother Esau. Back then, when Yaakov approached the nearly blind Isaac his father asked, Who are you my son Mi Atah Binee? Jacob had the audacity to straight out lie to his father saying that he was Esau, receiving his father's blessing by deception! It is a shameful scene that Yaakov will spend the rest of his life living down.

But in this week's portion Yaakov is given a new chance. Here the angel, after Yaakov demands a blessing as the price of releasing the figure, asks a similar question of him: What is your name? Mah She-mecha? This time Yaakov answers directly saying, "Yaakov Jacob" and the only blessing he seems to receive is that of a new name. The mysterious figure tells him that he will now be named Yisrael, "one who wrestles with beings divine and human and prevails." As the great medieval interpreter Rashi explains, "It shall no longer be said that the blessings came to you through supplanting (akva hear the similarity to his name Yaakov) and deception but through honesty (se-ra-ra) ki im bese-rara (hear the similarity to the name Israel) - and by revealing yourself. v'gelui panim

I find this passage fascinating not only because of what it tells us about our ancestor Jacob who now takes on the name Yisrael. It is especially important because the Jewish people, the descendants of Jacob take on that name. We are b'nai Yisrael, the children of Israel, the ones who wrestles with beings divine and human. We are the ones who inherit that name and the blessings that come with it ultimately through an act of honesty and self revelation that our ancestor Jacob was finally able to demonstrate.

As a Jewish people we have been on a never-ending quest to figure out what it means to live up to our name Bnai Yisrael Children of Israel. It seems that we never seem to tire of asking ourselves the question, "who are you?" If you look at the hand out you received today, you will see that a national Jewish magazine has asked us to consider the question of who we are in the 21st century. Moment a national magazine of Jewish politics, culture and religion is celebrating its 35th anniversary this year. It was founded by Nobel Peace prize winner Elie Wiesel and by Leonard Fein, a social scientist from Boston who used this platform to enlighten the Jewish community and challenge our things. It was in the pages of Moment that Leonard Fein launched MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, an org calling on Jews to donate 3% of what we spend on celebrations. In the last 25 year MAZON has channeled \$50 million into the fight against hunger. In celebration of Moment Magazine's 35th anniversary, they asked 35 prominent Jews to briefly respond in the pages of their May issue, and another 35 to respond on their website to the questions (So it is a Jewish 35 as 70 people responded):

What does it mean to be a Jew today?
and What do Jews bring to the world?

There was a wide array of respondents from Leonard Nemoy to Sen. Joe Lieberman. I have brought a sampling of some of my favorites on the study sheet before you. I did not include a response offered by the comedian Mel Brooks so as not to give away the joke. Mel Brooks recalled that the first joke he ever wrote was that “You can’t keep Jews in jail, they eat lox.” No sign in that one of the great career he would have as a comedian, but it is telling that his first joke was on a Jewish theme. Reflecting more seriously on what Jews can offer the world Brooks speaks of our legal tradition going back to Moses and Maimonides asserting the value of our contribution of laws for human behavior, teaching what is right and wrong. Not being able to resist the crack he concludes that if people would prefer something tasty, “we can certainly offer matzoh brei.”

On a common thread – to law, not matzoh brei- Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whose comments I have reprinted, also focuses on the idea that the demand for justice runs through the entirety of Jewish history and tradition. She hopes that in her service to the court she has remained “steadfast in service of that demand”

There are a number of wonderful answers that I really liked and have reprinted such as that of the author Dara Horn. She is a well regarded Jewish author who says that Judaism teaches that our goal in life should be holiness rather than happiness. There is also that of Josh Foer, a science writer, who compares Judaism to, *The Clock of the Long Now*, at the Science Museum in London. Like “*The Clock of the Long Now*” Judaism helps us to always pay attention to the big eternal questions. I would hope that reading Moment Magazine’s questions: What does it mean to be a Jew today and what do Jews bring to the world? might motivate all of us to reflect on how each of us would answer these core questions of Jewish identity.

Moment Magazine is not the only place asking people of faith to consider who we are in our faith and what is our place in the world. Prof. Robert Putnam, Prof of Public Policy at Harvard and David Campbell of Notre Dame have recently published a significant study of all American religions called: *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. There is much to digest in his wonderful book and I expect to return to it for lessons to share with you. But for a start it is interesting that even though Jews are not much bigger than some of the groups they throw together in the category they call “Others” (such as American Muslims, Hindus, etc) we are discussed as a category of our own.

Perhaps they discuss us separately because Putnam himself is a Jew by choice. Perhaps it is because we are such an enigma as a religious group. Putnam and Campbell demonstrate from their careful analysis of recently gathered survey data that Jews show the least religiosity of all Americans, as demonstrated by our answers to questions about regular congregational attendance, reciting of blessings at meals and belief in God among other factors. The only American group that indicates less religiosity than Jews are the category he calls “Nones (with an o not a u) that is those who when asked their religion say “none”, but who apparently still indicate some religious practice and belief. We are a curious religious group and I would suggest that our people are missing out on a lot by not bringing the richness of Jewish spiritual practice into their lives and benefiting from the nourishment that the synagogue has to offer.

As the respondents in Putnam and Campbells *American Grace* demonstrate and as the Moment article confirms, Jews give a wide spectrum of answers to the question “Mi Atah? Who are you?”- What does it mean to be a Jew today? and to the question “Mah Shemecha What is your name?” which we might transpose into the question, what do Jews bring to the world today?

Let me call your attention to one last respondent to the questions posed by Moment Magazine, the comment of Harvard medical school Prof Jerome Groopman, who has written brilliantly about the spiritual dimension of healing. He brings our discussion back to this week’s parsha. As you can see on the study sheet Groopman, who considers himself a Conservative Jew, recalls our ancestors wrestling with God saying that this is what Jews do: We Wrestle with God. We wrestle with others, and most fundamentally we wrestle with ourselves ” He sees this wrestling as providing a foundation to scientific progress and at the same time he writes of his appreciation of our prayers for healing of body and soul reflecting an ancient recognition that healing is not only physical, but also has emotional, psychological and spiritual dimensions.

With that I want to offer one last answer to the question posed to our ancestor Jacob Mi Atah Who are you?” and “Mah shmecha What is your name?” as discussed by the Bible commentator Rashi when he reflects on the story of the wrestling match. Rashi cites a passage from the Prophet Hosea, which could have easily served as today’s haftarah, the parallel text from the books of the prophets. In Hosea Chap 12, which records the prophet’s words to the Israelites of his generation, he invokes our ancestor Jacob who strove with an angel and prevailed. Hosea goes on to says that we

must acknowledge God directly, not through an angel or a substitute and he concludes:

“You must return to your God! Practice goodness and justice and constantly trust in your God.” Heb *Vatah Beohalecha tashuv, chesed u'mishpat shmor, v'kaveh el elohecha tamid.*

Perhaps I am influenced by my study of this week's portion, but I think that Hosea has provided us with a pretty good answer to the question of who are we as Jews and what do we bring to the world when he says:

We are to practice goodness and justice and be faithful in our relationship with God. Heb: *chesed u'mishpat shmor, v'kaveh el elohecha tamid*

From this we learn that we are to be models of what it means to be decent human beings and we are to preserve the practices and covenantal responsibilities that have always distinguished us as a Jewish people. That works for me. I am not sure, as revealed by Putnam and Campbell that most Jews would say this is their formula for being Jewish. But it seems to me that unless we have religious basis for our faith that it is grounded in our relationship to God, I doubt that we will last as a distinct people. On the other hand, if we only have a distinct identity as Jews, and it does not model goodness and justice in how we relate to all people, then there is not much of a point in preserving it.

Each of us who wish to continue to identify ourselves as Jews will have to be able to honestly answer the question that our ancestor was asked- Who are you? Mi Atah? And what is your name Mah Shemecha? How we answer those questions honestly and with openness will determine whether we are around for more generations and whether we deserve to be.