

GRAPPLING WITH GOD

CANTOR JULIA CADRAIN, PARASHAT VAYISHLACH 5777

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

BIG QUESTION: HOW DO WE WRESTLE WITH OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD?

In this sermon, Cantor Cadrain considers when and how we “wrestle” with our own conceptions of God, and urges us to take this on as a lifelong struggle. When Jacob wrestles with a mysterious man, he asks for a blessing and instead receives a change of name, to Israel, “he who wrestles with God.” Noting that Jews as a people continue to carry the name Israel, Cantor Cadrain encourages us to become God-wrestlers ourselves. This discussion will allow participants to reflect upon their own struggles or encounters with the idea of God, and to consider the value of continuing to grapple with God’s challenges and mysteries.

DISTRIBUTING THE SERMON:

Links to a video recording of the sermon, as well as a copy of the written text, are available on the CORE Groups page of the Central Synagogue website. A few days before your meeting, you should contact your group members to let them know which sermon you will be discussing, so that they can watch and/or read it in preparation for the discussion. (It is helpful to include a link to the materials in your email). In order to keep the sermon fresh in everyone’s minds, you may wish to recommend that participants make a note of any questions or reactions they have immediately after watching it. Even if you saw the sermon in person, please at least review the written text before the meeting, so that you can participate fully in the discussion.

NAME TAGS:

For at least the first several sessions, please ask everyone in the group to wear a name tag (or, if seated around a table, to place a name card in front of them). Even if most people know one another, it is important that no one feel uncomfortable for not remembering everyone else’s name.

INTRODUCTION AND ICE-BREAKER:

Ask each person to introduce themselves, and to share with the group:

- (a) their name; and
- (b) one image that comes to mind when they hear the word “God”

OPENING ACTIVITY

Who Is God to You?

Materials: pens, copies of “Who is God to You?” sheet.

This activity will allow participants to reflect on what metaphors for God resonate most for them.

1. Distribute copies of the attached sheet: *“Who is God to You?”*.
2. Read through the introductory material as a group.
3. Ask each person to take 5 minutes or so to choose 3 names for God that they like the most, and 3 that they like the least.
4. Bring the group together to compare their answers.

WHO IS GOD, TO YOU?

One of the difficult things about talking about whether we “believe in God” is that the word “God” can mean so many different things to different people. As rabbis have said for years, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in. I probably don’t believe in that God either.” In fact, the nature of the entity or energy we call “God” is uniquely difficult to describe through metaphor, if only because any metaphor will necessarily place a limit on what we assume to be limitless and eternal and all-encompassing. Nevertheless, we have, over the centuries, called God by many different names, which highlight particular divine attributes, or serve to explain how we conceive of God.

Please look over the following list, and pick the 3 names by which most evoke your understanding of God, and 3 names which you would absolutely not use for God.

Adonai / “My Lord”	The Holy One, Praised be He	Rock of Our Lives	Everlasting King
King	He	The Good One	Everlasting Rock
Lord	Heaven	He Who is Merciful	Everlasting Arms
World-Soul	The Eternal	Maker of Peace	Everlasting Life
The Divinity	Father of Mercy	The Merciful	YHWH, “He who causes to be.”
The Fear of Isaac	Judge of the Earth	The Holy King	I am that I am
Mighty One of Jacob	The Awesome One	Master of All	Lord of Hosts
The One Who is Forgiveness	Eternal One of Israel	The Creator	Creator of Heaven and Earth
Everlasting God	Lord of His People Israel	He Who Caused His Name to Dwell in this House	Holy One
God Almighty	The Ransomer	Our Shepherd	Holy One of Israel
God of Vision	The Redeemer	Mighty One of Israel	Shepherd of Israel
God of the Covenant	Hidden of Hiddens	Our Healer	The Rock
King of Israel	The God of Truth	Former of All	The Compassionate One
Guardian of Israel	Shield of Abraham	Rock of Israel	King over the King of Kings
The Name	The Awesome One	My Rock	The Power that Makes for the Fulfillment of all Valid Ideals
Our God, God of Our Ancestors	God of Abraham	Lord of the Universe	He Who Spoke and the Universe Came Into Being
The Mighty One	The Living Lord	Rescuer	Lord, Man of War

TEXT STUDY

Attached is a text-study sheet that you may use to facilitate a discussion of the themes and issues raised by the sermon. Please make sure to either make a copy for each member or ask everyone to bring it themselves, in paper or electronic form. If you choose the latter course, you may still wish to print a few extra copies for those who may forget to bring theirs.

Here are some things to consider:

- (a) It is customary to recite a blessing before studying Torah.

BARUCH atah, Adonai
Eloheinu, Melech haolam,
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי
אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

BLESSED ARE YOU, Adonai our God,
Sovereign of the universe,
who hallows us with mitzvot,
commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

- (b) Our tradition teaches us that Torah study can be a source of healing and blessing. You may want to ask members of the group if they would like to dedicate their study to anyone in particular. This is a nice way to help the group get to know one another, and to learn about significant events in each other's lives.
- (c) Depending on the preferences of your group, you may choose to distribute this sheet the week before the meeting, so that participants will be familiar with the texts, and can begin to think about their own responses.
- (d) You can choose to either work through the texts as one group, or to break up into pairs ("hevruta") for an initial period of discussion, and then allow the pairs to share something they learned with the group.
- (e) The ultimate goal of these groups is not for participants to master a particular number of Jewish texts, but to connect with one another. If group members are sharing their own stories and experiences in a way that seems fruitful, there is no need to cut off that conversation in order to make sure you "finish" the text sheet. If you are unsure, you can always poll the group to decide whether it is time to move on.

CONCLUSION

We recommend that you wind down the text study about 15 minutes before the end of the session, to allow for a meaningful conclusion. This conclusion may take any shape you wish. Some possibilities are:

- (a) Ask each person to name one insight they have gained, or one question that they are taking with them.
 (b) Ask each person to offer a blessing to the group, drawn from your learning together.
 (c) Ask each person to say one word to represent how they are feeling coming out of your discussion.