

GRAPPLING WITH GOD

WHEN DO WE STRUGGLE WITH GOD? AND WHEN DO WE FEEL GOD'S EMBRACE?

TORAH BLESSING

ENCOUNTERING THE TEXT

The sermon draws on the following verses from Genesis 32:23-32:

That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of the Jabbok [River]. After taking them across the stream, he sent across all his possessions. Jacob was left alone. And 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 he answered, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, 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 God face to face, yet my life has been preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What is going on in this text? How do you understand this interaction between Jacob and the mysterious "man."
- (b) Why do you think Jacob understands his encounter with this man as one in which he has "seen God face to face"?
- (c) Jacob leaves this encounter with the Divine a changed man, with both a limp and a new name. Have you experienced a major turning point in your life? What, if anything, felt holy about that experience. Do you understand this as an encounter with the divine?
- (d) In the end, we do not receive a satisfying answer to who this man was. Why do you think the text leaves this unanswered?

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

In the sermon Cantor Cadrain suggests that to be Jewish or to become Jewish, "we don't have to definitively state our belief in God for all time. Instead, we are encouraged to wrestle with God – to engage with the idea of God and work to interrogate our own beliefs." She then offers "two different interpretations of this mandate to wrestle."

“In the first,” she writes, “wrestling has a violent connotation. And sometimes that is exactly how it feels. When we experience trauma, we might call out to God with rage and passion. In the face of darkness and evil, we might scream to God, “Where are you?!” This is one way of grappling with God, and it is important to allow ourselves the honesty of these moments of wrestling.

“In contrast, there is a calmer, more loving interpretation of wrestling, one that Rashi describes in his commentary on this portion. He depicts “two [people] struggling to overthrow each other, where one embraces [the other] and knots him with his arms.” This is a more intimate and gentle kind of wrestling. Maybe this how it looks when we’re feeling at peace with our lives and are curious about God’s role in that.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think about the idea that in order to be Jewish, we must be willing to “wrestle” with God, or with the idea of God?
- (b) When you think of your own life, do you tend to encounter or grapple with God more in times of pain and trauma, or in times when you feel embraced?
- (c) In Rashi’s commentary, he suggests that even as the two people are embracing, they are seeking to overthrow the other. What do you make of this juxtaposition?

Cantor Cadrain urges those of us who have concluded that God does not exist “to continue to engage in that wrestling so you can gain clarity around it. Sometimes what we are rejecting is a lingering image of a biblical, vengeful, bearded God. And if we can work to name and articulate whatever it is that we don’t believe in, we can also get closer to our own truth.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

- (a) What God do you NOT believe in?
- (b) How has your conception of God changed over time? What role has your own experience had in that change?
- (c) Think about moments in your life that have felt “holy.” What do those moments tell you about God?