

11/30/2017

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Being a Jew: What It Means To Wrestle With God

Zev Mishell ('16) | BronfmanTorah | Vayishlach 2017

Zev Mishell ('16) recently graduated from Rochelle Zell Jewish High School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is spending his gap year at beautiful Yeshivat Maale Gilboa in Israel and hopes to continue studying religion and Judaism when he returns to America at Princeton University. He loves literature, traveling, and pursuing his lifelong (but vain) attempt at learning guitar.

Parashat Vayishlach is, in my opinion, one of the most powerful in the entire Tanach. It's filled with stories as wide-ranging as the division of Jacob's camp before meeting his brother Esau, to the brief but important reunion between Jacob and his father, Isaac. The parsha is full enough for a hundred page dissertation, but thankfully for your sake (or not), I only plan on focusing on one scene, Jacob's night spent wrestling with an angel.

The moment seemingly comes out of nowhere. Jacob, after learning that his brother Esau is marching towards him with 400 men, anxiously divides his family into separate camps. He fears that his brother is going to retaliate for the fact that he stole his blessing and inherited the gifts of the firstborn. In a last ditch effort, he sends incredibly large quantities of cattle and wealth to his brother in the hope that flattery and submission may save his family's life.

Now this is where the story gets tricky. Jacob crosses his family and all his possessions over the river of Yabbok, and almost immediately the narrative shifts. The text states that Jacob is confronted by a mysterious being who begins wrestling with him in the dead of night. They struggle together until at the moment before Jacob prevails, the figure wrenches him in the hip. Jacob then demands a blessing and the being reveals himself to be an angel of God. The angel renames Jacob “Israel” because he “strove with a being divine and human and prevailed” (Bereshit 32:29).

Irrespective of the fact that the story seems completely outside of the arc of the narrative, what in the world is Jacob doing alone in the middle of the night? Why is he wandering beside the river, and from where in the world did this angel come?

These situational questions are important, but the question that strikes me most is this: What does it mean for the father of the Jewish people to be renamed a “wrestler with God?”

At Yeshiva this year, I have had the first-hand opportunity to be inside my Judaism in a way I never had before. Each morning I wake up early to pray and then continue throughout the day to struggle with Jewish text. A class on parshat hashavua is followed by a class on gemara which is followed by this and that, and I’m constantly being forced to wrestle with my learning, to be in dialogue with my tradition, and to try to get a grip on what exactly this thing called halacha is actually trying to accomplish.

While this process has been hard and at some points been deeply, deeply painful, the joy I find in grappling with my tradition is one I hope to carry with me throughout my entire life.

This parsha is in essence about what it means to be Jewish. It doesn’t mean that each and every one of us has to hole themselves up on a mountain to learn Torah for a year. It does mean though that we each should be in dialogue with the insights of our tradition and share in the joys of wrestling with whatever we find meaningful, whether that be science, Judaism, or even a shockingly difficult musical instrument. Because at the end of the day, what we struggle with most

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comes to define who we are as descendants of Jacob and, most importantly, as human beings looking for deep emotional, intellectual, and spiritual connections with our world.

Shabbat Shalom!

Continue the conversation. Send Zev your thoughts:

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P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact stefanie@byfi.org. We look forward to hearing from you.

Applications for the 2018 [Bronfman Fellowship](#) are open! Help us spread the word. If you know any talented Jewish high school juniors (or people who might know them), please tell them about this opportunity. Application deadline is **January 4, 2018**.



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