

Shabbat Shalom! I am Valerie Klein, the community manager for the Institute of Southern Jewish Life. At the ISJL we connect, support and celebrate Jewish life in the south. We have three departments, spirituality, culture (Joe Buchanan) and education – where I come from. It has been such an honor and a privilege to work your teaching staff, Michael Roberts & Rabbi Block to prepare for this weekend. I have been looking forward to this trip, getting to know the community even better.

This week's Torah portion is *Vayishlach*, and it is a meaty one! So much happens. After stealing his brother Esau's birth right 20 years previously, Jacob prepares to meet his brother for the first time since that fateful day. The night before the big meeting, Jacob wrestles with a man, who the rabbis say was an angel. Jacob finally gets the upper hand and won't release the angel until the angel blesses him. So, the angel changes Jacob's name to Israel. Jacob and Esau finally meet and part peacefully, each going his separate way. Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob is attacked by a man named Shechem, who lives in the town Shechem that was ruled by his father. Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi take revenge by murdering all the males of Shechem, and Jacob's other sons join them in plundering the city. Then, Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin. Then, Isaac dies. That's a lot of action! So many stories, each worthy of study and introspect.

Tonight, we are going to focus on Jacob's struggle with the angel. Why, the night before meeting his brother did God send someone to wrestle with him all night? Jacob was already "greatly afraid and distressed". It says that exact thing in the Torah which means that Jacob was feeling some big feelings because there are two adjectives describing how he feels. Fun fact about the Torah, if something is in there more than once, we are supposed to notice and pay attention. So, Jacob clearly is legitimately terrified and gets almost no sleep because he has to wrestle with someone all night. AND the man he is wrestling with really hurts his hip. Can you imagine getting your hip wrenched in and out of socket and still being able to wrestle with someone. To be honest, I can't imagine wrestling with anyone, let alone after an injury. AND at the end, Jacob doesn't let the angel go until Jacob gets a blessing. WITH the painful hip and the lack of sleep. It's pretty impressive.

Rabbi Michael Dolgin, thinks God sent the angel down to give Jacob confidence so he wouldn't be afraid for his meeting with Esau, hoping Jacob would think "if I can beat this angel guy, I can handle my strong and burly

brother who has 400 armed men with him". I find that one interesting, but it doesn't really speak to me.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks had a different theory that I connect with much more. Jacob is not Abraham or Isaac. Each of these patriarchs experiences faith in a different way. Abraham experiences faith as love. Abraham loved God so much he was willing to leave his land, home and father's house to follow him to an unknown land. He loved people so much that he treated passing strangers as if they were angels (the irony is: sometimes they were angels). Abraham dies "at a good age, old and satisfied." A life of love is serene. Abraham was serene.

Isaac is faith as fear, reverence, and awe. He was the child who was nearly sacrificed. He remains the most shadowy of the patriarchs. His life was simple, his manner quiet, his demeanor undemonstrative. Often, we find him doing exactly what his father did. His faith is experienced as tradition, reverence for the past, continuity. Isaac was a bridge between the generations.

But Jacob is faith as struggle. Often his life seemed to be a matter of escaping one danger into another. He flees from his vengeful brother only to find himself at the mercy of deceptive Laban. He escapes from Laban only to encounter Esau marching to meet him with a force of four hundred men. He emerges from that meeting unscathed, only to be plunged into the drama of the conflict between Joseph and his other sons, which caused him great grief. Alone among the patriarchs, he dies in exile. Jacob wrestles, as his descendants – the children of Israel – continue to wrestle with a world that never seems to grant us peace.

Here is another fun fact, this one about me. I love being Jewish. I think being Jewish is a gift and a joy. But that doesn't mean that it is always easy to be Jewish. Even Jacob spent a good bit of time on the struggle bus, yet Jacob never gave up and was never defeated.

And as modern Jews, we struggle as well. It can be challenging to be a minority in a predominantly Christian country. It can be hard to be proud to be Jewish if you struggle with the current Israeli government's choices. Many Jews are Jews by Choice or come from interfaith families. Especially this time of year, it can be a struggle to balance family and faith. Let's face it, it can be really difficult sometimes.

However, I sincerely feel that the struggle is worth it. Struggling with something can make us feel stronger about our own beliefs and values. As Jews we are encouraged to disagree, discuss and struggle with text. It's how we learn and internalize Jewish wisdom.

There is such beauty in Judaism, in our traditions, our culture and our faith. And, there is guidance and knowledge in our ancient texts to help us in this modern world. Wondering how to handle a modern situation? There is a Jewish answer for that! That's what responsa are for! What are responsa, you might ask? Responsa are a body of written decisions and rulings given by rabbis from all branches of Judaism in response to questions addressed to them about Jewish law. Because responsa is still written, our guidance and structure on how to follow mitzvot or commandments is as up to date as possible.

Back to Rabbi Sacks. I love his conclusion that we each experience Judaism differently. There are so many ways to connect to Judaism for each of us, some of them, like *tikkun Olam*, prayer, or meditation were not part of the conversation this evening. Thinking about how you connect to your faith, what do you think? Figuring how you connect can help you connect on a deeper level.

Regardless, the concept of Judaism and faith as a struggle is something most people feel at one point or another. And struggling is not always a bad thing. It builds resilience, and grit and strength and self-worth. Struggling builds knowledge and faith and can connect people, create new ideas and reinforce old ones. It is hard, but it is worth it in the end. So, if you are ever on the struggle bus like Jacob, it may be difficult in the moment, but it will pass and remember, you have thousands of years of wisdom to lean on to help you through. Shabbat Shalom.