

Struggle for Health
Kol Nidre
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Rabbi Stephen Wise – Shaarei-Beth El Congregation

This summer I embarked on another of my annual canoe trips with a group. This time we went to Killarney National Park, about an hour west of Sudbury. We entered into the park through a smaller, out of the way entrance, where we picked up our permit, gave them our itinerary and rented our canoes. As we filled out the paperwork, the man behind the counter, after discussing the various canoe routes we might take, looked down at my friends name and read it aloud. "Cohen...eh? We had a Cohen here last year". That was all he said. I laughed inside and struggled to keep from letting it out as I looked eyes with my friends. We chuckled as we loaded the canoes with our gear, food and tents and headed out on the lake. We had an incredible trip, we saw a bear, a snake met us on our hike, we swam beside a turtle, and of course the ever beautiful call of the loon lulled us to sleep.

As we got back to the park lodge at the end of the trip to return our canoes, the man from the park office came down and said that there was a message for us. He pointed at me and said, "Call home". As I headed up to the lodge to find a phone, he turned to my partners and said, "I knew you guys were Jewish; I've only gotten 2 calls here over the years, and they were all from Jewish mothers"

It was a bittersweet moment, because while I had a wonderful trip, the call home was to Cheryl to find out what had happened and in the coming weeks we struggled with various health issues, most of which had no answers. In many ways, the body is still an incredible mystery, despite the excellence of our doctors, medical technologies, state of the art tests and breakthrough drugs. As one doctor told us, after ruling out all the things the illness wasn't, he said, "medicine is a very humbling profession, there is too much we don't know". When we think of the most important things in life, we always list health as one of our top priorities. Each one of us this year can probably think of a time we struggled with health issues, whether ourselves, our parents, our siblings, our children or our close friends. I hear you when you call out a name for a misheberach. I have seen you in the hospital. I have seen the frustration and feeling of helplessness. I have seen the faces of doctors who want to help so badly but sometimes are stumped by the curious nature of disease and symptoms and pain. Health can be a struggle.

Perhaps we might gain strength from our tradition, and one of the classic lessons from the Torah is the story of Jacob struggling with an angel of God.

Many of you are familiar with its background. Jacob and Esau were twins, but though Jacob was born second, he always felt he should be the one to receive the special first-born blessings. So he went about tricking Esau. When they were teenagers, Jacob convinced Esau to sell his birthright to him for a cup of lentil soup, as Esau crawled in starving from the fields.

Later on, through the manipulation of their mother Rebekah, Jacob appeared before his father Isaac, dressing like and smelling like his brother. The blind patriarch unwittingly blessed Jacob leaving Esau furious. Jacob was forced to run away fearing Esau would kill him.

Over time the two brothers Jacob and Esau overcame the painful moments of childhood, got married, had children, and became successful tribal leaders, yet never reconciled. On day as Jacob was moving his flocks and family through the desert, word came that his long forgotten brother was on his way to meet him. Jacob was frightened, believing that Esau would avenge the stolen birthright.

Now the scene is set. Jacob sends his wives and children to the safe side of the Yabok river, leaving him alone to contemplate his fate. That night, he had a remarkable dream, imagining he was wrestling with an angel of God. At the end of their battle, the angel wrenched Jacob's hip socket at the thigh muscle. At this point, feeling the excruciating pain, Jacob knew this was not a dream, but reality. Yet he would not let go of the angel.

As dawn broke, the angel of God understood that he could no longer prevail against Jacob, and he said to him, "let me go for dawn is breaking" but Jacob answered: "I will not let go unless you bless me." The angel of God bestowed upon Jacob this compelling and powerful blessing: "*No longer shall you be called Jacob but Israel for you have struggled with beings both divine and human and have prevailed.*" The angel then fled leaving Jacob limping along the banks of the river.

Let us imagine for a moment how Jacob could have reflected upon his life journey up to this point. Unlike so many tribal leaders of his time, Jacob was not a hunter. The Torah calls him a man of the tents. According to Rabbinic legend, Jacob preferred the quiet solitude conducive to studying Torah rather than learning the survival skills of the wilderness. Jacob could well have been a loner, protected by his mother Rebekah, immersed in study. Jacob lacked both people skills and physical skills as he struggled to win the respect of his father Isaac, his brother Esau, and himself.

Perhaps, this is why Jacob's youth was plagued by failure and trickery. Jacob failed to win the favour of his father who was drawn to the macho hunting skills of his twin brother. Jacob failed to win the respect of his father when he permitted his mother Rebekah to clothe him as Esau in order to deceive Isaac into giving him the blessing of birthright.

Jacob failed himself when he was shocked to discover that his Uncle Laban had deceived him into a marriage with Leah, whom he did not even love forcing him to work for seven more years in exchange for marrying Rachel, the love of his life. Yes, Jacob experienced the pain of failure over and over again.

Yet, despite his painful inner wounds, Jacob made the decision to continue to wrestle with the angel of God. Jacob truly reached the turning point of his life journey. Jacob won the right to be named Israel, one who struggles with beings Divine and human and prevails!

Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin teaches us that a single moment of illuminated awareness is worth more than all the wealth of the world. Like Jacob, we have all at some point of our lives been there. We have all struggled and failed, wounded through the wilderness of life. And so, many of us are still struggling. Perhaps Jacob's words to the angel of God can become our own chant, our own mantra: "I will not let you go unless you bless me!" All of us can use a little blessing.

Ernest Kuntz provides for us a contemporary analogy using the game of Baseball. This is one humbling sport that teaches us early on how to deal with failure. When you go up to the plate to hit, you get 3 chances or you're out. And guess what, the best players in the world get out most of the time. If you actually get one hit out of four chances, that is considered very good. If you get two hits out of 4, failing 50% of the time, you are considered an all-star. Moreover when playing the field, baseball keeps track of your errors, they are part of the game. What other sports track where we went wrong? Failure is the norm in baseball and perfection is an almost impossible goal.

Had therapy existed in Jacob's day, Jacob's therapist would have reminded him that *Failure is the norm in life*. Errors are part of the game of life, part of life's rigorous truth. We all struggle, with health, with life, it's not always easy. We don't have enough time. We are tired. There's too much to do. There is darkness.

But there are also moments, when you can push through to see the light, when it's worth it to go the extra mile, when the struggle produces results. Anyone who has trained for a marathon race or charity walk can attest to training hard for a day, and competing. My son this summer competed for the first time in a triathlon. It was for kids, ages 5-16. At each age group, participants have to at least swim, bike and run. The tagline of the event is, "don't compete, complete". No one cared what your time was, and it was impossible to even compete against another person because there were staggered starts and finishes.

I am so impressed by how many are involved in charity tournaments, bike rides, and runs. Lawrence Zimmering and Larry Hyett this year again biked from Toronto to Niagara to raise money for cancer research. My cousin who is only 7 walks to fight anaphylaxis; is hyperaware due to her severe nut and fish allergies. Last year with your help I raised, along with my fellow hockey players, close to 1 million dollars to find a cure for Alzheimer's. While we know these diseases and causes cannot be solved over night, or by walking or running or biking or playing – at least we can participate and engage in the struggle and make some headway in the race, instead of waiting on the sidelines.

Jacob's decision to not let go until he received a blessing was his spiritual homecoming. And the blessing he received from the angel of God became his spiritual validation. Like Jacob, so many of us have experienced the pain of being wounded, physically, emotionally or both. Like Jacob, so many of us have experienced failure and even failure upon failure. Yet, how have we also experience heightened moments of joy, validation and completion – when we feel like Israel having struggled and overcome.

As the book of Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is a time for everything: **Time for**. And there is a time for every event under heaven —
A time to give birth and a time to die;
A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.
A time to be sick and a time to heal;
A time to tear down and a time to build up.
We aspire to find the balance.

Rabbi Simcha Bunam said to his disciples: To find balance in life, everyone must have two pockets, so that one can reach into the one or the other, according to his or her needs. When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket and there are to be found the words: "bishvili nivrah ha-olam - For my sake was the world created". But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket and find the words, "Anochi afar v'avar - I am but earth and ashes".

When you feel that you deserve more than someone else, when your pride gets the best of you, grab the note of humility, you are but ashes. When you are feeling beaten down, unworthy and take out the note of joy and remember you are unique, so it is completely appropriate to see the world as made specifically for you to act in to fulfill your unique purpose.

Rabbi David Wolpe, who has a pulpit in Los Angeles, has weathered a host of tragedies throughout his life, including two separate battles with cancer for himself and his wife. In trying to get through the darkest times, Rabbi Wolpe turned to one of the rabbi's stories about Adam and Eve. The first time Adam saw the sun go down, he was terrified. He has seen day, but had never experienced the night. God took pity on Adam and gave him two stones to rub together in order to create fire. The name of one stone was afelah, darkness and the other mavet, death. As the spark emerged, Adam said Blessed be the Creator of light (baruch ata adonai yotzer hameorot). Out of darkness and death, the first human being realized that we can create light.

In facing his fears of encountering his brother Esau, Jacob came home to his own humility. Jacob realized that he is but earth and ashes. Jacob was ready to struggle. Jacob was ready to be wounded. But most important, Jacob was ready to continue to struggle, to not let go, Jacob was ready to become Israel. And so what happened after Jacob wrestled the angel and went to meet his brother after years of fear and enmity? No words were spoken. They walked towards each other, and embraced. Brothers were humbled before one another and happy to be together again. Jacob learned to face his fears and his struggles and overcome them, and then he saw light and life.

Our task this New Year is to strike a spark, to carry light in the shadows.

On this holy day of Yom Kippur, we think about struggle, about our health and about wounded moments. We think about our loved ones lost, and about actions we regret. We think about being hurt and saddened by life. But we know that though at times we all work in darkness, unknowing, uncertain, if we do what we can, our passion can ignite each other's souls. Light can help erase struggle, or doubt, it allows us not to let go, even after we have been wounded. Jacob who struggled with angels, and though his wounds remain, he found the inner strength to move on and overcome. Indeed we all experience moments when there is no other choice, but to build and to plant. Light allows us not to let go, it gives us the strength to continue the struggle. Until we can say, "Blessed be God; don't let me go until you bless me".

Shana Tovah!