

Shabbat Shalom. Our Torah portion for this week is *Parashat Vayishlach*, in which we read about the journeys of our patriarch Jacob and his family after Jacob completes his service for Laban, his father-in-law. G-d commands Jacob to return to the home from which he fled many years before just after stealing his older brother Esau's birthright as the first-born son of Isaac and Rebecca. Jacob and his family's return will necessitate at the very least a meeting between Jacob and Esau, if not also a confrontation, since the two brothers had not seen each other since Jacob's deception of their father robbed Esau of many privileges including the top spot in the family. Understandably, Jacob is afraid to face Esau and his anger. Jacob sends ahead a messenger to Esau to let him know of his return and learns that Esau is coming to meet him, along with 400 men. This exacerbates Jacob's fear. He divides his family into two camps, with the hope that one will survive should Esau and the men attack. Bravely, Jacob plans to stand in front of his camp to lead them forward, but he doesn't want to take it on the chin unless he absolutely has to. Before the brothers will meet, Jacob arranges for several messengers to greet Esau and appease him with many generous gifts. Jacob's planning done for the big reunion ahead, he settles down to sleep for the night.

In that sleep, what dreams may come. All night and near into the dawn, Jacob wrestles with a man who may just be an angel. During this struggle, we know that Jacob receives an injury to his right hip that may have left him limping for life. From this, we may gather that Jacob did not always have the upper hand in the fight. Nonetheless, he won't give up and he won't let go. Human or divine, the mysterious stranger blesses Jacob for wrestling with both G-d and man and prevailing. Jacob will now be known as Israel, the G-d wrestler.

In his *d'var Torah* on *Vayishlach* titled “The Question is the Blessing,” Rabbi Neal J. Loevinger offers a new look at and interpretation of the angel’s blessing of Jacob. “While most commentators,” he writes, “focus on the homiletical meaning of Jacob’s change of name, they tend to gloss over the passage before it, presumably assuming that it’s just a rhetorical setup for the announcing of the name Yisrael.” Loevinger analyzes one such commentator, Rabbi David Kimchi, a 12th century French commentator known by the moniker Radak. Radak cites three places in Torah where a rhetorical question seems to be a formality, to solicit further conversation between an individual and G-d. Radak’s first example comes from the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. After they have eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve hide, newly aware of their nakedness, and G-d asks them (knowing full well the answer): “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9) In Radak’s second example, Moses stands before the burning bush, already in conversation with G-d, he doubts whether anyone will believe that G-d has sent him to free the people. Before unveiling the miracle with which G-d will equip Moses to help him convince both Pharaoh and the people, G-d asks Moses “what’s in your hand?” (Exodus 4:2) Certainly, G-d knew it was a staff and was drawing Moses’ attention to it just an instant before transforming it into a snake. This phenomenon of drawing attention just prior to a shift is similar, Radak argues, to the angel’s question for Jacob in the passage from our *parashah* this week. “What’s your name?” the angel asks, even though he knows the answer, presumably having been sent by G-d to wrestle specifically with Jacob. Jacob answers only to be provided with a new name. Loevinger notes that these rhetorical questions come at pivotal moments of change in the lives of each of the three biblical characters who receive them. For Adam and Eve,

they are on the eve of expulsion from the Garden. Moses is about to become G-d's representative both to the people and to confront Pharaoh, and Jacob is about to meet his estranged brother, Esau.

G-d's rhetorical questions in these examples may help to signal the significant shifts that are to come in the lives of all these characters. For Loevinger, the case of Jacob, who literally demands a blessing and receives a question in response invites us to consider "the question itself [a]s the blessing." What is the nature of this question-blessing? According to Loevinger, this is the blessing of increased self-awareness. The angel is asking whether Jacob has "wrestled sufficiently with his own identity." Loevinger writes: "When G-d asks a question, it's not for the sake of an answer, but for the sake of an inner response, a change in the person." In this way, the question is rhetorical but it isn't a set up. It's more an invitation into a greater state of awareness.

When I decided to change my name to Jacob almost 8 years ago, I had never heard of Loevinger, let alone read his *d'var* nor heard mentioned of his thesis that the "question is the blessing." Like many commentators before me, I think I actually may not have even noticed the question. Rather than receiving the question, I was literally asking it of my friends: What should my new name be?

This season of my asking friends to help me choose a new name for myself would have been spring of 2004, if I recall correctly. In the preceding two years, I had grown increasingly uncomfortable with my old name. Outside of work, friends and acquaintances called me "J," by my first initial. Using my first initial was a good intermediate step to help me move away from a name that no longer fit who I was becoming. Although I was born female, I no longer identified as a woman. I was looking

for a new name that would suit the man I was becoming. Somehow, the new name needed to honor the connection to the good soul that I was named after, my great grandmother Jenny, *zichrona livracha*, and it needed to speak to the person I was and was becoming. Although some transgender people know easily and quickly what their new names will be, I did not. Hence, I was asking friends for some help finding my name.

I remember sitting on the couch in my apartment with a friend when she suggested the name Jacob for me. Immediately, at my friend's suggestion, I began to think about our ancestor Jacob. I could not miss the remarkable fact that Jacob had two names, obviously, first Jacob, and as we learned earlier, Israel, which he earns through his struggle with the angel, with G-d. Jacob's perseverance, his refusal to stop wrestling with the Divine angel, even though injured, until the angel blesses him, was a model for living a transgender life that I could grow into. Moreover, the very physicality of the fight between Jacob and the angel felt a lot like my struggle with being transgender. In my life, the mismatch between the unfolding obviousness of my gender and the seemingly static nature of my createdness felt like a struggle with G-d. It was difficult to discern whether I was supposed to accept the painful conflict between my body and spirit or to be an activist to change it, to seek wholeness. Becoming Jacob was an intentional deepening of my investment in the belief that struggle could be affirming. When I took the name, I was taking on the courage to fight and not let go until I could make my life a blessing. At that time, I did not know what that would mean.

Loevinger's *d'var Torah* helps me to understand a piece of my identification with the biblical story of Jacob that previously I had not understood. If Yisrael is the new name that Jacob receives from G-d in honor of his struggle, why would I want to take the

name Jacob and not Yisrael? Why take Jacob's old name as my new one? Loevinger's *d'var* directs our attention to the angel's question, which we are to understand anew as the blessing question of self-awareness, asking Jacob in effect if he had "wrestled sufficiently with his identity." This is G-d's invitation to consider, in the words of Loevinger: "Who am I? What is the name that I have made for myself, and what is the name I am capable of achieving?"

While Loevinger's *d'var* directs our attention to the angel's question, he does not investigate or pay heed to Jacob's answer. We, however, can take Loevinger's insight a few steps farther. G-d, through the angel, asks Jacob the blessing question: "have you wrestled sufficiently with your identity?" Jacob responds, without hesitation or equivocation: "Yes, I know who I am and who I have been." Then, and only then, Jacob merits an additional blessing from the angel that predicts that G-d wrestler is the name Jacob is capable of achieving.

Situated as he was on the cusp of a significant life event, but not yet in it and certainly not yet over it, Jacob might have been able to answer the questions "who am I?" and "what is the name that I have made for myself?" He was probably unprepared, however, to answer the question "what is the name I am capable of achieving?" and even less so when woken up in the middle of the night by a strange man wrestling him. Despite the fact that he was wrestling, in that very moment a being perhaps divine, perhaps human, Jacob does not yet see himself this way. A new insight takes time to be integrated into our sense of selves. Throughout the remainder of his life, the Torah refers to Jacob sometimes as Israel and sometimes as Jacob. Some new insights take a lifetime to integrate.

As for me, I learned that my perseverance in the struggle it often is to be transgender does ultimately result in the blessing of self-awareness. When I deeply acknowledge and accept myself for who I am and who I have been, and I share this awareness with others, as I do with all of you tonight, then I merit an additional blessing for the strength and courage I have shown in my struggles with G-d and with men to be myself as a transgender person. This additional and final blessing is available to all who achieve great self-awareness and answer honestly the questions of who we are and who we have been, in all of our glories and in all of our failings: the ability to discover what we are truly capable of achieving. This is similar to the teaching of Rabbi Zusya, an early Hassidic rabbi, who said: "When I reach the next world, G-d will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' Instead, G-d will ask 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

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