

## Still Wrestling After All These Years

by Donne Hayden

Several thousand years ago in the Middle East, a small, insignificant tribe of people struggled for existence. Constantly threatened by more powerful tribes around them, at one point captured and held *en masse* by an Egyptian pharaoh, eventually escaping Egypt, and then living a nomadic, wandering existence for a while (“40 years” in their stories), the tribe finally settled in an area between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. Here they became known as “Israelites” and the land they occupied, “Israel.” The significance of this name is lost in our familiarity with it; in Hebrew, “*Yisrael*” means “one who struggles with God.”

Their story of how they received that name occurs in Genesis, the first book of their collected history/literature/poetry which they call the *Tanakh* and we call the Old Testament. What is striking, of course, is that they embraced the name—“one who struggles with God”—and have kept it through the centuries. Because the story functions on many levels, reading it gives us an interesting insight into contemporary Israel, but perhaps more importantly, after centuries, it still provides us insight into ourselves.

As it is told in Genesis, the story of Jacob, who became Yisrael is a long involved story with lots of action. First, it is important to know that Jacob is the son of Isaac, and the grandson of Abraham, the great patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

As a hero, Jacob is not very admirable; among other things, he tricks his twin brother Esau out of his inheritance and years later, he tricks his father-in-law by taking the best animals

from their joint flock. Jacob spends a good deal of his life on the run from someone—specifically his brother, Esau, and father-in-law, Laban. After Jacob acquires the wherewithal by cheating Esau out of his inheritance, he runs away and settles in Haran where he marries a couple of sisters and works for his father-in-law, Laban.

Oddly enough, throughout his life and in spite of his less-than-perfect behavior, Jacob receives protection from God. For instance, if someone is a threat to him, Jacob receives warnings in dreams; warnings also come to those who would harm him. In fact, Laban believes that because of Jacob's presence, God has blessed *him*; Jacob is like a good-luck charm. Eventually, after several incidents of mutual trickery involving flocks of speckled or striped sheep and goats, Jacob negotiates with Laban, thus acquiring large flocks of his own, and grows wealthy in his own right.

After Jacob has been living in Haran for many years, God speaks to him, saying, "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you." The land of Jacob's ancestors is, of course, where his brother Esau still lives. Still, when the LORD appears and tells you to go somewhere, it is wise to go, so without informing Laban, Jacob takes his wives, children and the best livestock and slips away during the night. A furious Laban pursues and overtakes Jacob "in the hill country of Gilead." Eventually, after much discussion, but without violence or bloodshed, the two men reach an agreement and Laban permits Jacob to depart with his wives and children.

Having dealt with Laban, Jacob now must prepare to go to his ancestral homeland where the brother he wronged all those years ago still lives. Some scouts return to report that Esau is on his way to meet Jacob with an army of 400 men. As the writer of Genesis phrases it,

“Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed.” He knows, after all, what he did to his brother; he knows he betrayed him. So Jacob prays for God to deliver him from the hand of Esau his brother, and then remembers the Divine assurance he received previously when God said, “I will be with you.” Being a wily manipulator, our Jacob decides to announce his arrival to Esau by sending servants, each one driving flocks of several hundred sheep and goats, and each instructed to say to Esau that the livestock is ‘a present to my lord Esau from thy servant Jacob.’

While he waits to know what will happen when the brother he betrayed arrives, Jacob takes a few precautions. And finally, here is the “wrestling with God” part of the story from Genesis 32:22-32.

*<sup>22</sup> The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup> Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’ <sup>27</sup> So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ <sup>28</sup> Then the man\* said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.’*

When Jacob demands a blessing, the mysterious being gives him a new name which is also a new identity; Jacob is now “Israel” (Hebrew ישראל Yisra'el or Yiśrā'ēl) meaning "one who has struggled with God." He has prevailed; he did not let go. His new name means he is no longer the man who has taken something he wasn't supposed to have (i.e., cheating Esau out of his inheritance). He now has a new identity: *Yisra-el*, one who struggles with God *and* with

humans (because Jacob has been in conflict with Esau and Laban, too). This ancestral perception the Israelites have of themselves is of people descended from a *God-wrestler*; a group that successfully strives with God and with humans.<sup>1</sup> Built into the Israeli identity, then, is the notion that “We strive; we struggle with both God and humans, but we don’t let go; we prevail.”

In other places in the *Tanakh* (the Old Testament), we find examples of people “striving with God.” One thing the Hebrews did that was unique for their time, and which has made their influence extend so far into the future so that it affects us today, is their sense of being in close and intimate relationship with Divinity. Not the kind of relationship one supposedly had with the Greek and Roman divinities, in which a god would descend to earth, use a person for something and then return to Olympus. The Hebrew people gave us the concept of a *long-term, intimate, interactive, often difficult* relationship with God. They talk honestly to the Divine; they say straight out things like, “How long, O Lord, wilt Thou forget me for ever? / How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?” or “God whom I praise, break your silence.” (Psalm 109:1)

Where **are** you, God? Come here. I want to talk with you.

“I am here, calling for your help, praying to you every morning; why do you reject me? Why do you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 88:13-14)

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<sup>1</sup> This idea is found in the Note on page 56 of the *Oxford Study Bible*, NRSV:

Jacob’s new name reflects a new self; no longer was he the supplanter, but *Israel*, which probably originally meant “El rules” [*El* being a name for the head Semitic god in that area]. Here, however, it is interpreted to mean “the one who strives with God.” The phrase which follows, “And with humans,” refers to Jacob’s strife with Esau and Laban. In this way, the community of Israel, as descendants of this god-wrestler, is depicted as a group that successfully strives with God and humans.

In such exchanges, we see that in large part, the struggle is to *have* a relationship with this divinity, to try to force God into interaction with us. We are all familiar with this struggle though we may not use this language about it.

Through the centuries and into contemporary writing, the struggle continues. For instance, contemporary poet Leonard Cohen has written psalms in which he also talks about struggling with God, striving to have relationship, to call God to him. Born to a Jewish family, Cohen has been on a spiritual journey throughout his life, leaving Judaism and becoming a Buddhist monk for years before returning to the Jewish faith of his ancestors. In these Psalms, Cohen gives us glimpses into his own “striving” with God. (By the way, Cohen’s psalms are now sometimes included in traditional Jewish Passover Seder rituals.)

*I stopped to listen, but he did not come. I began again with a sense of loss. As this sense deepened I heard him again. I stopped stopping and I stopped starting, and I allowed myself to be crushed by ignorance. This was a strategy, and didn't work at all. Much time, years were wasted in such a minor mode. I bargain now. I offer buttons for his love. I beg for mercy. Slowly he yields. Haltingly he moves toward his throne. Reluctantly the angels grant to one another permission to sing. In a transition so delicate it cannot be marked, the court is established on beams of golden symmetry, and once again I am a singer in the lower choirs, born fifty years ago to raise my voice this high, and no higher.*

—Leonard Cohen, "Book of Mercy"

and here is another one:

*Holy is your name, holy is your work, holy are the days that return to you. Holy are the years that you uncover. Holy are the hands that are raised to you, and the weeping that is wept to you. Holy is the fire between your will and ours, in which we are refined. Holy is that which is unredeemed, covered with your patience. Holy are the souls lost in your unnamings. Holy, and shining with a great light, is every living thing, established in this world and covered with time, until your name is praised forever.*

—Leonard Cohen *Book of Mercy*

Another contemporary writer, Richard Foster, a Quaker and one of the leading writers and speakers on Christian spirituality, describes struggles with God in various forms of prayer.

In what he calls the “Prayer of Relinquishment,” we struggle to become able to say and mean, “not my will, but thine be done.” Such a prayer is necessary, he says, because “We are not locked into a preset, determinist future. Ours is an open, not a closed universe. We are co-laborers with God . . . working with God to determine the outcome of events. Therefore our prayer efforts are a genuine give and take, a true dialogue with God—and a true struggle.”<sup>2</sup>

In describing a form of intercessory prayer, “The Prayer of Suffering,” Foster says that

*This standing between God and people involves a kind of wrestling with God. That is part of our suffering, a little like arguing with our best friend. . . . Like Jacob of old, who wrestled all night with the angel, we refuse to let go until we receive a blessing, not for us but for others. We argue with God so that his justice may be overcome by his mercy. It is only because of our intimacy with God that we can thus wrestle with him.”<sup>3</sup>*

To my mind, it is a mistake to take the story of Jacob literally, and as Marcus Borg says, an insult to the people of earlier times to assume they were incapable of thinking in and using metaphor. If you try to read it as something that really happened, you limit it to factual truth; and if you can’t accept it as fact, then it has nothing to say to you. But read as metaphor, the story of Jacob, who wrestled with God and became *identified* as one who did so, has great power to speak to us today. I like to believe the ancient Israelites understood the “struggle with God” as something more than a literal, physical wrestling match with a super-human being. The struggle to have faith in the face of suffering, to find goodness in a world often controlled by evil people, the struggle even to trust in the *existence* of God—these are the struggles we find throughout the writings of the Old Testament and in our own experience.

We inheritors of the Judaic tradition still struggle with God. Reconciling the God who personifies Love with a God who allows suffering, both of which (i.e., Love and Suffering) we

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, p. 225.

find in our own experience, is the hardest struggle in the wrestling match between us “descendants of the god-wrestler” and the Great Mystery. Through the centuries, unable to conceive of a *Divine event* fully-interactive with our own lives, some of us have preferred to believe in a god who would flick us aside like a bothersome insect. Even those of us who believe in God find it difficult to accept that divinity may choose to engage so intimately as to *wrestle* with us.