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On a regular basis rabbis are asked to help new parents come up with Hebrew names for their children. Often, parents speak about a deceased, but beloved relative whose name they want for their newborn. But there are times when the requests put even the most seasoned of rabbis to the test. “We’re naming our daughter Tiffany Crimson, rabbi, but she’s being named after my great-uncle Shmelke. Any idea what her Hebrew name would be?”

I was named for my Uncle Irwin Sterzelbach, a lover of books, a young man devoted to his friends and a soldier killed at 23 years of age in the World War II. Time and again when I was growing up I was told how much I was like him, so much so that sometimes it was hard to know whether my traits and interests were my own, or, at least in part, my personality was created through the hopes and desires expressed by my family. My situation is far from unique. “You look just like your Grandpa Max ... ah, what a *mentsch*.” “Aunt Ruthie was such an outgoing person ... you remind me so much of her.” Is it you, then, who wants to be a *mentsch* or who is outgoing, or is it the dreams of your family which create those qualities in you? It’s hard to know. What we can say is that a name is more than just a way of indicating who one is. A name is a shorthand form of telling where we are from and what gives meaning to our lives.

We Jews, as a People, also have a name - and there is something a bit strange about it. You see, in Hebrew Abraham is called *Avraham avinu*, “Abraham our father”, but strangely enough we are not his children. Many other religious groups derive their name from the founder of their faith. We, however, do not call ourselves nor do others call us *b’nei Avraham*, “the children of Abraham”. Instead, we are *b’nei Yisrael* “the children of Israel.”

I believe that the reason for this is that Abraham failed the test of the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac that is the core story we read in Torah on Rosh Hashanah. Abraham does not fail completely, perhaps, but certainly enough to rob him of his descendants being known as his children.

“Take your son, your only son, the one you love ...” And like an obedient puppy Abraham does what is asked! What kind of father does such a thing without protest or question? What husband acts on such a request without consulting his wife? What

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kind of man can be asked such a thing and not cry out, “*Dayenu!* Enough God, I cannot do what you expect of me!”

Abraham’s acquiescence is even more striking when compared with the Biblical ancestor who does give us our name - his grandson, Jacob. As you may remember, Jacob runs away from home and two decades later returns to face his destiny. Alone at night he wrestles with a mysterious being. In the struggle Jacob’s leg is wrenched from his hip, and his opponent changes his name: “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but *Yisrael* (Israel), for you strive with beings divine and human.” [Gen. 32:28-29] His is the name which we carry to this day - *Yisrael*, “one who struggles.”

In the Tate Modern in London there is a massive statue of this Biblical scene by the artist Jacob Epstein. So controversial was this sculpture that it was hidden for years. Later, it toured Britain and South Africa as an ‘adults only’ exhibit, with a money-back guarantee if it wasn’t “the most shocking thing you’ve ever seen.” Even now its graphic imagery borders on the scandalous. Jacob and the angelic figure do not seem to be fighting at all. Rather, they appear to be in an embrace. It is almost as if they are ... lovers. This depiction is an artistic stroke of insight, for it suggests that Jacob’s challenge is what God sought, but did not find, in Abraham. Abraham is blessed, but God’s embrace of love is reserved for Jacob.

In short, Abraham may be our physical father, but it is his grandson, Jacob, who is our spiritual father.

Over the course of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I will speak about what it means that we share this name. This evening I will reflect on what it implies about what we believe. Tomorrow morning the focus will be on what our name teaches about how we ought to act. And on Yom Kippur I will turn to what our shared ancestry teaches about the blessings and responsibilities that grow out of our being family. This, then, will be a three-part reflection - on Believing, Behaving and Belonging.

To be *b’nei Yisrael*, the children of the one who struggled, teaches three key lessons about what we believe as Jews. First, this story implies that God loves us most not when we are submissive, but challenging. Second, the blessing given to *Yisrael* suggests that we Jews are, by nature, to battle against the most crass and

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base within humanity. Finally, to be a child of Jacob, who was disabled at the moment of his re-naming, is to be part of a faith that says true understanding in life comes only when we suffer.

Challenging God

I recently met someone who told me she no longer believes in God. “Nothing has gone my way. I have no reason to believe.” It is easy to understand the source of her doubt. The older I get, the more I find that the ordeals of life move people in one of two directions - some, like this woman, despair and become more cynical.

Others defend God at all costs. I once heard a rabbi explain that the one and a half million children who died in the Holocaust did so because, in an earlier incarnation, they committed sin. I was appalled. But pious theological apologetics are common. “Yes, he was young, but perhaps God wanted you to learn how to be strong.” “I know you are in pain because of the death of your child, but maybe God needed her more than you.”

While I understand the need to find something to say in the face of tragedy, I wonder whether such attempts to deflect responsibility from God are simply ways of avoiding the difficult questions. Let’s be honest, there are times that life just plain stinks ... and to paper over the pain with excuses for God not only rings hollow, but may actually turn people away from a spiritual life.

The choices are not, however, either abandonment of God or acquiescence to the Divine will. The kind of faith suggested by our name *b’nei Yisrael*, “children of the God-wrestler” offers a different path.

One of the most challenging of Biblical books is the book of Job. Job, a man of faith, is unfairly tested by God to see if he will maintain his conviction. In the face of the intense suffering he endures, Job’s wife utters words of the cynic that echo through the ages, “curse God and die.” His friends blame him, asking him to examine his life, for surely a just God would only punish one who has committed wrong. Job, however, refuses both alternatives. He denies, on the one hand, the pious obsequiousness to God proffered by his neighbors. He cries out, “I have been wronged. I demand justice.” On the other hand, Job is committed to engaging God,

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and thus challenges the Creator to give him an answer that will make sense of the unfair fate he suffers. Near the end of the book God finally does answer Job.

Who is this who darkens counsel,
 Speaking without knowledge ...
 Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?
 Speak if you have understanding.
 Do you know who fixed its dimensions? ...
 Have you ever commanded the day to break ...
 Have you surveyed the expanses of the earth?
 Do you know the laws of heaven,
 Or impose its authority on earth?

God's response is brutally stark. We human beings - limited in understanding - cannot understand all the workings of the universe. In short, God seems to say to Job (and, thus, to us), "I am God. You're not. That's just the way it is."

Such a belief is hard for some to accept, but the answer the book of Job provides may be the most unambiguously honest theological response in Jewish history. It allows for doubt and questioning, but in the framework that there is a God who must be just. When God answers Job what proof offered? Only the reality of life itself, its infinite variety and marvelous inner workings.

Can we believe with little more proof than that? Many are like the disabled youngster Simon Birch in the movie of the same name, who, convinced God has a plan for him, says, "I *have* faith," but then adds, "What I want is *proof*." More Jews, though, probably think more like Woody Allen, who quipped, "if only God would give me some clear sign ... like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank."

But is any evidence ever enough? Torah speaks of our ancestors in Egypt, who lived through the plagues and crossed the Sea, but who still turned to a Golden Calf when Moses was not present to lead them. Whether you accept the story as historical or not, the point is clear - even the most obvious signs of God's Presence will never be enough if you close your heart and refuse to wrestle with the possibility that God may be there.

To be a child of the God-wrestler is to accept faith as an ongoing process, marked by periods of acceptance of God and times of uncertainty. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg explains, "The difference between the skeptic and the believer is [simply] the frequency of faith, and not certitude of faith". To be a Jew is to reject a position of

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absolute certainty - to have faith in God, for the alternative is too dismal to contemplate, but to know that there are moments of doubt and spiritual struggle.

To challenge God, then, is not an act of defiance. Rather, it is to accept that there is an inherent purpose to our lives. To believe in such meaning, however, means to be forever asking, “why?”

The Hasidic rabbi Simcha Bunem of Pshischa once went for a walk with his disciples. Along the way he and his entourage encountered a group of Jews engaged in everyday conversation. Bunem asked, “Do you see those Jews over there? They are dead.” When the students asked him what he meant he replied, “they are dead because they have stopped asking questions and searching for the right answers.” The Hasidim walked on, each thinking about what their teacher said. Finally, one of the bolder disciples approached the teacher and asked him, “Rebbe, how do I know that I am not dead?” The Rebbe turned to him, smiled and said: “Because you asked.”

Challenging Humanity

A former student of mine is now studying human rights law at Harvard. This past summer she traveled to Africa to work with the United Nations tribunal examining the atrocities committed in Rwanda. In one of her letters she wrote of the irony that in the very place people sought refuge - a church - most found their death:

One church had been left exactly as it was found at the end of the genocide. Bones covered the floor, and evidence of the people waiting to be murdered lay between the pews: a plate, a high-heeled shoe, an elderly man's walking stick, a sweater, a children's book of games for passing the time. There were significantly more bones the further you walked into the church, indicating how people fled from the attackers who entered the main doors, and were killed as they huddled in the corners. 5000 people were killed at that church; the guide survived only because corpses fell on top of him and the attackers thought that he was dead.

If we did not care to admit it before 9/11, we know it now - evil is real and hate is powerful.

When Jacob is given a new name he is told that he “strives with beings divine and human.” His new name - κτραη - is actually punned with the Hebrew for fighting (,ηρα). But it is a play on words with a serious implication - namely, that to be a Jew is to challenge not only God, but humanity. The American government, with its

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checks and balances, has no “loyal opposition”, as do governments with Parliamentary systems, but we Jews understand what it is to be the voice of opposition and conscience in society.

Jacob/*Yisrael* sets a tone for wrestling against the norm. By dint of name alone, then, we extol the value of challenging those with power. To be a Jew is to believe that those who are disadvantaged are to be protected, and that we must be wary of the abuse of power by those with authority over others.

Our history - often under the foot of the oppressor - has honed our sense of injustice. When societies begin to show signs of moral rot, Jews start thinking about moving. The sad reality of our past is that we know that a refusal to speak out against intolerance can soon lead acceptance of racism, anti-Semitism and suppression of minorities.

Yet these Days of Awe teach that while we human beings may stumble, we can redeem ourselves. If that is true for individuals, it is no less so for nations. In recent years our People, returning to the Land of Promise, has been engaged in an ongoing struggle with the people who also live in that land. Can Palestinians and Israelis live together? It is possible, but not without facing some basic truths. Palestinians must understand the just claims we make to and for a Jewish state. Though they portray themselves as victims, we must challenge them to take responsibility to speak out against violence as a means of achieving political goals.

At the same time, we must resist the desire to defend Israeli policy at all costs. To be the “loyal opposition” also means to reject those in our midst who would de-legitimize Palestinian claims to a sovereign and secure nation of their own. There is fervent debate in Israel about the building of a security fence, assassinating terrorist leaders and ways of supporting moderates in the Palestinian world. The same vibrant debate ought to be happening here in the Diaspora. As a community we must foster this debate - and The Community Synagogue ought to be a leader not only in engaging Jews in dialogue with one another about what we believe is the best way forward for Israel, but must lead by reaching out to engage Palestinians in dialogue.

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Let us not go forward naively. Conversations about these issues will not be easy, but only if we, like Jacob, face the pain straight on will we ever be able to live with what it truly means to have a nation worthy of the name *Yisrael*.

Getting Life “Straight”

No one knows what the Hebrew name κτραη actually means. A decent guess is that it is related to the phrase κτ ραη, meaning “straight with God.” If so, the tale of Jacob’s struggle presents us with a fascinating paradox, for in his younger days, Jacob is a twisted man. He connives and deceives, cheating his brother out of a birthright and his father into giving him a blessing. Little wonder that his name (χεγη) is connected with the Hebrew word χεγ, meaning “heel”, for he is a lowly character.

The blessing our patriarch receives in his struggle would seem to be an additional reward, but it carries with it a price. As a result of the violent confrontation Jacob limps the rest of his days. In essence, then, Jacob gets it “straight”, he finally understands something of God and reality only at that moment when he is disabled.

The implications of this are manifold, but in this context our name teaches us that in the struggle to understand God and comprehend human weakness, we must not be worn down by the suffering. Life is often filled with pain and loss. But we believe that it is through the sorrows of life that we learn how precious is the joy, how thin is the veil between decency and decadence.

Rabbi Alfred Gottschalk, chancellor of the Reform movement’s rabbinic and cantorial schools, grew up in Germany when the Nazis came to power. On the morning after *Kristallnacht*, the anti-Jewish explosion unleashed by the Nazis in November 1938, the young Gottschalk recalls his grandfather going to pick up pieces of the Torah that had been ripped apart by Nazi thugs. “Papa,” Gottschalk asked, “what will we do with all these torn pieces?” “We will keep them,” he was answered, “Keep them until a time comes when we can sew them together and read the Torah again.”

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These, then, are the legacy of being the descendents of Israel, the wrestler. We believe in God, even when challenging what God does. We believe in a world that ought to be better, and struggle against human heartlessness, that serves as obstacle to that decent society. And we believe that not only despite the suffering is there joy, but that it may well be that only through the sorrows life brings that we learn how to bring meaning and purpose to our days.

B'nai Yisrael, fellow children of Israel, let us mend the broken, challenge the accepted and bind together those wounded by life. A new year is upon us. It's time to remember our name.