

**Rabbi Lisa Edwards**  
**Parashat Vayishlach**  
**12/15/2000 as Bush becomes "President-Elect"**  
**BCC, LA**

I know some of you received an important e-mail earlier today. I know because several of you sent it to me! Here are some excerpts from it in case you missed it:

**BREAKING NEWS: GOD OVERRULES SUPREME COURT VERDICT**

In a stunning development this morning, God invoked the "one nation, under God" clause of the Pledge of Allegiance to overrule the Supreme Court decision that handed the White House to George Bush. "I'm not sure where the Supreme Court gets off," God said this morning on a rare Today Show appearance: "I've watched analysts argue for weeks now that the exact vote count in Florida 'will never be known.' Well, I'm God and I DO know exactly who voted for whom. Let's cut to the chase: Gore won Florida!"

Shocking political analysts and pundits, God's unexpected verdict overrules the official Electoral College tally and awards Florida to Al Gore, giving him a 289-246 victory.

The Bush campaign is analyzing God's Word for possible grounds for appeal. "God's ruling is a classic over-reach," argued Bush campaign strategist Jim Baker. "Clearly, a divine intervention in a U.S. Presidential Election is unprecedented, unjust, and goes against the constitution of the state of Florida."

A funny bit, isn't it, and we sort of long for it to be true, even as we dread such a scenario.

My brother likes to tell a story about my father, zikrono livracha. It's a story about baseball, really, so listen up, baseball fans. It seems that once upon a time, in the years before instant replay was commonplace, my father and brother were watching a baseball game on TV. The camera angle was perfect, says my brother, "and I could see that the runner was safe at second."

"Out!" said the umpire.

"But he was safe!" yelled my brother, "It was absolutely clear! (and not," says my brother, "relevant in the least that the runner was from my team)."

"No, he was out," our father patiently explained. "The game of baseball includes the umpires, who are usually right, but who are also fallible human beings and don't always have the perfect angle. But if the umpire says out, he's out. That's it. That's baseball reality. That is how the game is constructed. If it doesn't include the possibility that once in a while an umpire will make a mistake, then it isn't baseball. It's some other game closely resembling baseball, but it's not baseball." [from Yom Kippur sermon 5759 by Rabbi Laurence Edwards]

I kept thinking about that story this week after the Supreme Court handed down its game-stopping ruling. I thought about the 5-4 decision and the many wise words from the dissenting judges. I thought about how 5 people, plus a few more who helped them, seemed to have changed the rules of the game of U.S. elections - the rules that say,

"everyone gets one vote and every vote gets counted." And then I realized of course what we all knew all along - that the game with the rule that says every vote gets counted is a game that closely resembles the game of U.S. Presidential elections, but it isn't the actual game of U.S. Presidential elections.

We've all been doing a lot of wrestling lately - infuriated and frustrated by the politics both in this country and in Israel. And the outcome has not much been to our liking - no matter our political leaning. I'm sure that even George W. and his supporters are not very happy really with the way this has all gone. No one likes to win like this - without really winning. It seems to me that both candidates - Bush and Gore - are trying to make the best of a bad situation. I hope they really can be bridge builders and peacemakers as they claim to want to be. And I'm willing now, despite my profound disillusionment with our election system and with our Supreme Court, I'm willing to keep watching -- even playing -- the game, and accept it for what it is - a game with rules different from the ones we would have created if anyone had appointed us rule-makers or even umpires.

In Rabbi Lappe's class last night, with texts that - amazingly - were chosen before all this Supreme Court battling happened, we learned that my father's view of the game of baseball is much like the Rabbis' view of life in general. We learned that even disputes that seem to have a moral truth to them can finally only be decided by human beings, by humans declaring what will serve as truth in any particular instance no matter what God thinks (the late breaking e-mail from this morning notwithstanding). "It is not in heaven," says Torah, and the rabbis use that verse to spin a tale in which even when a voice from heaven calls out to all of them telling them the truth, they choose to ignore the heavenly voice and go with their own assessment. What has happened on the political front here since the day we voted in November, and what is happening in Israel now, surely is not occurring because we're following any voice from heaven. And yet the whole world is being governed by these very human actions.

But isn't that what we prefer, what we choose? Think how outraged we would be if any of the politicians in Israel or here really claimed that it was God's hand in this guiding us to one outcome or another? (Think how outraged we are when politicians here or in Israel occasionally do claim such a thing.) Or worse yet, that the e-mail of this morning were true - that God really did care to intervene in such mundane matters? Ick.

In this week's Torah portion, Vayishlach, Jacob wrestles all night with the mysterious stranger, who visits him the night before he is to see his brother Esau for the first time in twenty years; the brother who had wanted to kill Jacob last time he saw him. The mysterious visitor both hurts Jacob - twisting his leg and causing him to limp - and blesses him, giving him a new name, Israel, meaning, say linguists, "one who struggles with God." We never know who that ish is - that wrestler who Jacob encounters that dark night: was it a messenger of God, God Godself, Esau, Jacob wrestling his own inner spirits? Somehow I think it ought to be easier for Jewish Americans than for others to accept the odd decision-making process of this presidential election, for we come from a long line of people who know that we seldom know the truth of any given situation, and yet we somehow agree to govern ourselves by decisions, not of the majority, but of whomever we have given authority.

Allowing ourselves to be governed by decision-makers who are not us, however, doesn't mean that we don't keep wrestling with the results, searching for answers, trying to make things better. Sometimes we even wrestle with God when God seems to be the decision-maker, especially when we feel like a victim of those decisions. And we Jews have learned from Jacob, the wrestler, and from the Rabbis of the Talmud, that a wrestling match must come to an end. Sometimes, as with Jacob, it comes to an end with no clear winner, and yet we go on with our lives, taking with us whatever lessons the wrestling has taught us.

I don't always think that being a Jew and being an American are compatible. I sometimes think Jewish values are very different from American values. For example, the way Jews stress community and the way Americans stress independence. But this week I think otherwise. This week I see that Jews and Americans alike are insisting that we need take responsibility for our own stuff and not try to look to God to give us answers or claim that God is on our side and not on the side of the one who loses. This week I see that Jews and Americans know that umpires are part of the game, that reality is often of our own - very human - construction and we must make the best of it. So we won't have a Jewish vice-president of the United States. Sigh. Not yet anyway. I'm finding comfort, nonetheless, in discovering that Jews and Americans understand that this very human world we live in relies on us to repair it. The election is over, the repairs are just beginning. Repairing the world, tikkun olam, that's something Jews know something about. Shall we get started? We have a lot to do.

Shabbat Shalom