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"The Untaming of a Jew"

Parashat Vayishlach
Hebrew Union College--Los Angeles

A little over a year ago, my partner, Tracy Moore, began experiencing some pain in one of her legs--like a sore muscle or tendon on the inside of her thigh. Although she had no memory of injuring it, she just assumed she had strained it somehow and that it would get better in a few days. But the pain continued, and she became more and more uncomfortable. Then, while studying parashat Vayishlach last year, she read of Jacob's wrestling match and leg injury. Suddenly she was struck with the cause of her discomfort: the pain in her leg had begun, she remembered, at about the same time she had decided to become a Jew. Had her own struggles with Judaism, with God, with the implications that my career choice continued to have on her, really resulted in a physical injury, the way Jacob's wrestling match had? Eventually Tracy ended up at a chiropractor, and after several sessions, the pain abated and her leg healed. [If only there'd been chiropractors in Jacob's day, the more Kosher carnivores among us would perhaps be allowed sirloin steaks today!] Tracy's recovery improved her aerobics workouts, but they did not signal an end to her emotional and intellectual struggle with Judaism. Following in the long tradition of the people Israel, she continues to be a Godwrestler.

I, too, have at times identified with the Jacob who strove with the mysterious"eesh" on the shore of the Jabbok. Certain that it was God who challenged Jacob that night, I felt that the story gave me permission to question, to wrestle, to argue with the Jewish tradition and the God of Judaism with whom I longed to become intimate. In the past, I'd been delighted by the idea that calling Jacob “Yisrael”--meaning “one who struggles with God”--and calling us the children of Yisrael, obligated us to be like Jacob, to struggle with God, and perhaps, if we're lucky, to be able to exclaim as Jacob did: "I have seen God face-to-face, and my soul has been saved." [Gen. 32.31]

But in years past, before rabbinic school and before my partner chose Judaism, my struggles and my Judaism were private matters. When they caused problems, they were my problems only. And when I rejoiced in them, I celebrated alone. Today it's different for me--as I try to help Tracy and other Jews find their place in Judaism, my own struggles with our tradition often become public matters.

How do I reconcile the undeniable sexism of Judaism with my own heartfelt connection to Judaism? How do I explain my gut belief that, in its essence, Judaism holds a place for me, when I spend day after day studying the texts that fly in the face of this belief? What do I say to friends and acquaintances who ask what there is in this male-oriented, patriarchal religion that makes me think it's worthwhile even

setting foot within its borders, let alone immersing myself in its culture and teaching? How can I think, even for a moment, that the borders are flexible, that within them there is the potential for new vision, for inclusiveness, the opportunity for new voices to speak and for all hearts and minds to hear?

And what do I say to the friends and acquaintances who say just the opposite? Who say, "the struggle is over"; who say, "you're already included"; who say that egalitarianism in Judaism--equal access for women and men--is the only goal, and that that goal is within our reach, will be here within our lifetime for sure, if it isn't here already?
The voices of both sides--so seemingly opposite in their questions-- ironically deliver to me the same message: they say, "you want too much;" they say, "you can't have it;" they say, "your vision is not valid."

What should--what can--I say to Tracy as she wrestles with a Reform Judaism that, despite its own wrestling with the issues, still either renders our relationship invisible or regards it as a difficult problem? A problem that most people choose to turn away from unless it's forced upon them? And what do I say to her or to myself about the silencing of women in the Torah and Jewish tradition in general? As I struggle--not alone, thank God, but often lonely nonetheless--to piece together, through research and imagination, fuller stories of the women of Torah out of the scraps that have survived, I often find myself in shock not so much at how little does exist but at how long I was complacent about such exclusion, complacent even to the point of obliviousness at times.

Parashat Vayishlach provides perfect examples of some of my dilemmas. When I first began my preparation for this sermon, I thought, "How wonderful, there are so many women in this portion!" And indeed, this parasha is a veritable goldmine of women's names. In the various stories and genealogies of this parasha, we find fourteen different women mentioned by name and several others referred to, though not named. By name we read of: Rachel . . . Leah . . . Dinah . . . D'vorah . . . Rivkah . . . Bilhah, Zilpah . . . Adah . . . O-ha-li-va-ma . . . Anah . . . Bos-mat . . . Timna, M'hay-tav-el . . . Mat-raid--I may have missed some--and then an unnamed midwife and the unnamed--and unnumbered--"daughters of the land." I wouldn't attempt to count the numbers in each parashah, but I'd be willing to bet this one is near the top of the list when it comes to mentioning women. My initial excitement about the numbers of women did not last long. For Vayishlach, in offering the presence of so many women, also provides a prooftext for the silencing of women in the world of Torah, and traditional Judaism in general:

Out of all of these women, only two of them speak, each has one line only. Rachel is in labor with her youngest son Benjamin. She is in fact, moments away from death due to his birth. We are told that her labor is hard, and that at the most difficult point in this hard labor, Rachel's midwife--one of the unnamed women--says to her: "Don't be afraid, for this is another son for you!" [Gen. 35.17] In the next verse, Rachel breathes her last, and names her son Ben-oni: "son of my sorrow," or perhaps,

"son of my strength." Rachel does not live to explain the name, and Jacob nearly erases her last words by immediately changing the baby's name to Benjamin. How ironic that the once barren Rachel, having not so long ago cried out to Jacob: "Give me children, or I shall die" [Gen. 30.1], should in fact die, not from having been denied children, but literally from having been given children. And how painful for us, if not for Rachel, to hear the midwife, who must have known that Rachel was near death, attempt to comfort her with the "reward" of another son.

Rachel is the second woman to die and be buried in this parashah. The first was Rebecca's nurse, Dvorah, a woman we have not heard of by name before her death, but who most likely was that unnamed nurse who accompanied Rebecca when she left her father's house so long ago to go marry Isaac [Gen. 29.59]. She is mentioned in only two places in Genesis, but the inclusion of her name here at her death, and the fact that they name her burial place "tree of weeping"--A-lone ba-choot--suggests her importance to Rebecca at least, if not to the whole family.

And in this parashah we also have perhaps the most notorious example of the silencing of a woman. Dinah, daughter of Leah, the 10th child of Jacob, the only daughter, the one for whom no tribe is named, goes off to visit "the daughters of the land," and is raped by Sh'chem, son of the Hivite ruler. From this event proceeds a grim tale of Israelite trickery and revenge that has long made Jews uncomfortable, even queasy. But the amazing part --what feminists have pointed to--is that in all of this 33 verse story--a relatively long story for Genesis-- of Dinah's rape and its gory consequences, not one mention is made of what Dinah said or thought or felt or wanted nor of what ever became of her--she is never mentioned again. The story of her rape becomes a story strictly about men: about the man who raped her, the men of his nation, and Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi-- the men who supposedly "avenged" her with a mass slaughter. And if the silence of Dinah in Genesis doesn't wound us enough, the Plaut edition of Torah twists the knife. In its "gleanings" on this story, this often enlightened work offers only three comments about Dinah. Despite the fact that the Genesis text contains only the seemingly neutral observation that "Dinah went out to visit the daughters of the land," [Gen. 34.1] each of the remarks presented by Plaut criticizes Dinah's behavior. Thus Plaut offers only a standard and sexist response to rape: blame the victim.

And so I find myself reeling from this parashah, for even as it gives me a model for being a wrestler with tradition, it also hands me a wealth of material with which to wrestle. And even as it hands me a model for reconciliation with my people--through its story of Jacob and Esau's reunion--it offers me stunning examples of the ways in which my "people" have excluded the likes of me, offering no sign of their desire for reconciliation.

So what do I do now? It may surprise you to know, though I hope those of you who know me even a little aren't too surprised, that I'm not full of anger and despair and hopelessness even when I face a Vayishlach, because in truth--call me a cockeyed optimist--I am seldom in doubt about the rightness of my place in Jewish tradition and

in this institution.

When Jacob strove with the ish, we are not told that it was a fierce or angry battle. Frustrating, perhaps: for the ish because Jacob didn't know when to quit; and for Jacob because he didn't know who the hell he was wrestling with! Nonetheless, they parted peacefully enough. Despite his physical injury, Jacob seemed better off spiritually and he received a blessing and a new name.

I, too, have gleaned a lot from their wrestling match: especially from the ish's insistence that Jacob does not need to know his name. I've learned that without naming names, strong arguments can be made for the ish being God or the piece of God within Jacob, or an angel of God, or Esau, or Jacob himself--another side of him, or his former self perhaps. And maybe during the night Jacob actually did struggle with all those beings--"divine and human," as the ish says--and prevailed...endured.

So I'm hopeful, and even relatively cheerful most of the time, because I believe in the value of the struggle, and in the variety of the wrestling partners. For me those partners may be even more varied than for Jacob. In a very timely article in Tikkun, Judith Plaskow considers non-Orthodox Judaism "Beyond Egalitarianism." [Tikkun Nov./Dec. 1990] She posits the following, which so resonates for me that I cried to see in print what I've been feeling:

Ironically, it is only in gaining equal access that women discover we have gained equal access to a male religion. As women read from the Torah, lead services, function as rabbis and cantors, we become full participants in a tradition that women had only a secondary role in shaping and creating. And if we accept egalitarianism as our final stopping place, we leave intact the structures, texts, history, and images that testify against and exclude us.
. . . Beyond egalitarianism, the way is uncharted. The next step is not nearly so obvious as fighting for aliyot or ordination. Beyond egalitarianism, Judaism must be transformed so that it is truly the Judaism of women and men. It must become . . . not a women's Judaism or a Judaism focused on women's issues, but a Judaism that all Jews have participated in shaping." [p.79]

And so I continue to wrestle: Sometimes I wrestle with a tradition that excludes me; with a God I don't always understand; with egalitarianism, and therefore with some of you, even though I'm sometimes a strong supporter of egalitarianism and of many of you. I struggle with traditionalists who would impose their traditions on me; and a system and culture that pressures certain people to convert.

As Plaskow furthers her case, she furthers mine also. She writes: "Through midrash, storytelling, and historiography, women are creating women's Torah. But women's Torah will be accepted and taught as Torah only as Jews acknowledge that at least half of Torah is missing." She asks: "Will Hebrew Union College or the Jewish Theological Seminary confront the contradiction of educating women in institutions in

which Torah is still defined entirely on male terms? That depends on whether they hear the silence built into their curricula." [p.81]

Sometimes I wrestle with this institution. And sometimes I wrestle with Tracy, who asks for reason when I am all emotion. And sometimes I wrestle with the temptation of silence: should I tell you all, or any of you, what I think, what I feel? What's at risk if I do? What's at risk if I don't?

Jacob models for me another role besides that of a wrestler. He is someone who lets his relationship with God grow and develop. He's someone who keeps finding God in unexpected places, and being delighted by such finds. After the ladder dream, he exclaims "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it." [Gen. 28.16] After the wrestling match he names the place: "Peniel"--the face of God--"for I have seen God face-to-face and my soul was saved." [32.31] And after arriving safely in the city of S'chem, Jacob, now Israel, builds an altar there and calls it "God of Israel": El-elohe-yisrael. [Gen. 33.19] In so doing, Jacob's relationship with God evolves to a new high, for this is the first time that Jacob identifies God as his God--God of Israel--rather than, for example, the "God of Abraham and Isaac" as he had often done before that momentous night of wrestling.

I, too, often find myself surprised by the presence of God. Sometimes particularly after, or during, a wrestling match. Such experiences often put delight back in me--the delight of studying texts that, for all my issues with them, still engage and often empower me; the delight of studying at this school with these teachers and these classmates; the delight of doing what I want to be doing; and of living with a lover who is helping me see Judaism through a different lens.

Jacob's ish both hurts him and blesses him. I expect my wrestling partners will sometimes hurt me. I want them also to bless me.

In the same article I mentioned earlier, Judith Plaskow writes that one way to step beyond the silence, to move toward a Judaism that all Jews can participate in shaping, is for us to take courage to speak. To compose, for example, new blessings and liturgies. I'd like to offer such a blessing now:

Brucha At, Ha-Sh'kina, m'kor ha-shalom, sheh-a-saat-ni i-sha b'Yisrael, sheh-a-saat-ni i-sha b'Yisrael baz-maan ha-zeh oo-va-ma-kom ha-zeh.

Blessed are You, Shekinah, Source of Peace, who has made me a woman and a Jew, who has made me a woman and a Jew in this time and in this place. Amen