

Today's story would be an easy sermon if sermons didn't have to have constructive, uplifting messages. Jacob is a fascinating character to whom profoundly dramatic things happen, but he's no exemplar of moral virtue, and he doesn't get his comeuppance for his failings. "Don't be like Jacob," would be my message, except that God seems to have rewarded Jacob magnificently despite OR because of his flaws.

As you'll remember, Jacob was born holding onto his twin brother's heel, trying to get out of the womb first and be the eldest son. That attempt failing, he tricks Esau out of his birthright and later out of Isaac's dying blessing. Then, belatedly realizing that's not going to go over well with Esau when he finds out in a moment, Jacob hightails it off to a far country where he marries both daughters of a rich landowner and becomes wealthy himself. As today's story opens, Jacob has decided that he should go back to his country, but he's deathly afraid of Esau. So he says to God, "You did promise to do me good and give me lots of offspring, so please protect me from Esau because he's likely to kill us all off and void your promise."

Jacob loads up the family and a huge caravan of all the livestock he's amassed over the years (by cheating his father-in-law, by the way), and sets off for home. He thinks he'll give some of it to Esau to placate him. At day's end he sends the caravan across the river Jabbok, but he himself stays on the near side to sleep. Whereupon he is attacked savagely by a stranger, whom he wrestles till daybreak, and from whom he exacts a blessing.

That is a boatload of cheating and supplanting ("Jacob" means "supplanter"). Maybe God thought it would scare Jacob [straight] to attack him in the dark, but Jacob gets the last laugh, hanging on to his opponent all night and refusing to let go until he gets a blessing. And yes, God or the angel does leave Jacob with a limp, but it still seems like he has God's tacit

approval, because with the blessing he gets a new name, Israel, which means “he who wrestles with God and prevails.”

There is no question that Jacob is a trickster figure, a literary device to stir things up and upset norms. His most flagrant violation is that of primogeniture, the right of the eldest son to the best of their father’s wealth. You could make a meritocratic argument that Jacob is clearly smarter than Esau and *deserves* to inherit the most, so that his trickster-y-ness is in the service of fairness. But poor Esau, that’s a pretty cold way to treat the guy. Still, I think there’s something there. When you think about why this story survived, it must have to do with the Israelites feeling like perpetual underdogs, and enjoying stories in which power structures are overturned, however rudely. As Audre Lorde said, “You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools.” That is, in an unjust society you have to break the rules to get justice.

I think it goes deeper than just the underdog’s appreciation for a cunning survivor, though. Because the climax of the story is when Jacob asks for a blessing, refusing to let go of his opponent, and receives a name that celebrates what he’s just done: He who wrestles with God. It’s like a sanctification of who he’s been his entire life. And Israel, his new name and the descendants who go by his name, are now by definition those who wrestle with God. Maybe God wants us to care enough to push back on God impolitely.

At Passover, when a family sits down to the Seder meal, there is a “telling,” a Haggadah, taking the family members back through the story of Exodus and God’s deliverance of the Hebrew slaves. As they eat the symbolic foods, they hear the story of the exodus as if it had happened to them.

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the L-rd, our G-d, took us out from there with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm. If the Holy One, blessed

be He, had not taken our fathers out of Egypt, then we, our children and our children's children would have remained enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. Even if all of us were wise, all of us understanding, all of us knowing the Torah, we would still be obligated to discuss the exodus from Egypt; and everyone who discusses the exodus from Egypt at length is praiseworthy.

Toward the end, they recount the merciful acts of God individually, saying that if God had done just one of these, it would have been enough:

If He had brought us out from Egypt, and had not carried out judgments against them Dayenu, it would have sufficed us! If He had carried out judgments against them, and not against their idols Dayenu, it would have sufficed us! If He had destroyed their idols, and had not smitten their first-born Dayenu, it would have sufficed us!

And so forth. "Dayenu" means "it would have been enough." It's a way of magnifying the generosity of God.

In 1946 a "Survivors' Haggadah" was created and recited by displaced persons in Munich after the end of the Third Reich. These celebrants were no longer in bondage to Hitler, yet neither were they free. They could not or would not go home to the wreckage of their former lives. Those who fervently wished to go to Palestine faced the British blockade. America was then closed to them. And, of course, their families had been murdered. How were they to "celebrate" Passover? <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/13/garden/close-to-home-munich-1946-words-from-a-seder-unlike-any-other.html>

This Haggadah is bitterly sarcastic toward the God who had watched the Holocaust take place. Where other Haggadot celebrate God's mercy and abundance, this one says, "Had he given us Hitler but not ghettos, dayenu [it would have been enough]. Had he given us ghettos but no gas chambers and crematories, dayenu. Had he given us gas chambers and crematories but our wives and children had not been tortured, dayenu."

This is a bitter, pissed-off seder, and it does not let God off the hook. It does not say that God's ways are mysterious, or that some good must have come out of the holocaust, or that thank God it could have been worse. It grabs God by the shirtfront and names the horrors that God's people endured and died from.

When it came time to ask the Four Questions, traditionally asked by the youngest participant at the table, the seder participants began to weep because there were no children present. Then, one survivor recalls, one man began asking the first question. The rest of the survivors joined in. They told God exactly what they thought *and* they celebrated the Passover. This is wrestling with God, showing up pissed and broken, but showing up. And if we're to believe the story of Jacob, God expects us to show up just as we are, without apologies, ready for an honest struggle.

Here's why I think this matters now: Being brave enough—and sufficiently committed to God—to show up angry and bitter was honest. God wants us and we need to be honest enough to own even the ugly, shadow parts of ourselves. One of Richard Rohr's daily meditations two weeks ago said,

Any repair of our fractured world must start with individuals who have the insight and courage to own their own shadow. . . . The tendency to see one's shadow "out there" in one's neighbor or in another race or culture is the most dangerous aspect of the modern psyche. . . . We all decry war but collectively we move toward it. It is not the monsters of the world who make such chaos but the collective shadow to which every one of us has contributed.

There's much that's uncomfortably reminiscent of the 1930s in our country today, especially the antipathy toward strangers and refugees, and the move toward authoritarianism. Violence, even if we had the firepower, will not change this. Only love can conquer hate and

fear, which is why MLK Jr had civil rights protesters take nonviolence trainings—because it's so tempting and easy to respond to attacks with counterattacks. We have to do the inner work of recognizing and owning the stuff we project onto others, so that we can look on them with tenderness and love. Only love can conquer hate. But for me to become truly loving, I have to be honest enough to recognize that what I hate is within me. That's the honesty of showing up to God just the way you are, as Jacob did and as the Holocaust survivors in Munich did, with their whole selves and lots of ugly feelings. It's a whole spiritual project. Clear your calendar.

We may be wrestling for hours.

God,
You have called us into a whole-hearted relationship with You.
Forgive us when we take our relationship with You for granted,
when we let the fire of our early commitment cool, and trust neither you nor ourselves
with the whole truth of who we are.

Give us courage to look within and love our whole selves. Give us compassion to look
at others and love them. Give us tenacity and vision to transform the culture from fear
and disgust to hope and hospitality.

We are Your people, chosen and named by You.
Grant us Your continued blessing
and mark us with Your love,
as we seek to live as Your disciples in the world.

In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen.