

Board Meeting *D'var Torah*

Parshat *Vayishlach* – December 14, 2016

Rabbi Jaclyn Cohen

This afternoon found me at Starbucks, ordering my usual afternoon drink – a tall soy no water chai – to give me the little “perk” I needed to get into the 3-6pm B’nai Mitzvah tutoring block *spirit*.

Our group ordered three drinks among us – and each drink came in a differently designed red cup. You know the red cup – Starbucks’ annual contribution to the “War on Christmas.” Each year they bear a whimsical design honoring some element of the holiday season. Last year their cups lacked any type of design and the Internets went bananas. This year I think they might have overcompensated.

And then came the moment when they asked for my name – and I thought about the humanity of that gesture. I could give them any word in the entire English language, and they would write it – hopefully within reason! I could be anyone I wanted to be ... or perhaps no one at all. It is simultaneously a recognition of identity and opportunity for anonymity.

And what an appropriate time of year to extend us that choice.

In this week’s Torah portion, *Vayishlach*, Jacob wrestles with an unnamed being, referenced in the text as “*ish*,” meaning *man*. Jacob emerges victorious, renamed “*Yisrael*” – ‘one who struggles with God.’ It is a moment of profound blessing for him, and it comes in anticipation of a grand reunion with his brother Esau and his family. It will be their first encounter since their father Isaac bestowed a blessing on Jacob and not Esau, thus leading Jacob to flee for the wilderness.

And so we find ourselves at a junction in the Torah – a fork in the road, as it were – where Jacob, racked with anxiety over family fractures, struggling with a connection to his ancestral roots and working on a very long, extended gift list for nieces, nephews and sisters-in-law – emerges from his night encounter with increased confidence, inner strength, and a motivation to embrace his brother, rather than fight him. His wrestling with the angel leads Jacob toward empowerment - and it is significant – dare I say, prophetic – that their skirmish involves an unnamed, anonymous man ... one who actually serves to push Jacob toward his destiny.

It is a message many of us can take to heart; we who celebrate a wide variety of occasions this December – from Hanukkah to Christmas, work parties to Seahawks victories. We reunite with those we maybe have not seen in ages – family and friends coming together to share an experience. December often means togetherness, but togetherness isn’t always easy. And whether our agenda is a holiday party with stressed-out coworkers or a football game with rabid LA Rams fans, whether we be discussing the success of our High Holiday Campaign or the challenges of our children’s futures, may we, like Jacob, wrestle with sincerity, authenticity, and a shared desire to emerge stronger together.

And finally, in these dark, cold days of winter - let us also remember the unnamed, anonymous individuals with whom we engage. Let us remember to pause and pay attention to those whose faces grace our paths each and every day. For who knows? It may be one of them that lead us toward *our* destiny.

Erev Tov.