

YOM KIPPUR SERMON

KOL NIDRE 5770

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One of the privileges of my job is hearing the stories of people who have faced struggles and challenges in their lives and then set off in new directions. This happens most commonly with people who have survived the Holocaust. I often hear how they made their way to Australia and then created a new family in this land. This was their way of refusing to accept the inevitability of the past, their way of re-establishing a connection with life, giving their life new meaning.

This is true of others, as well. Yesterday on Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath of Repentance, we heard the story of a member of this community who was celebrating her bat-mitzvah as an adult. Both her parents had fled Vienna for England in 1938. After marrying some years later, they came to this country. They rarely spoke about their Jewish background. It was only much later that their daughter was led to engage with her Judaism. She somehow made her way to our synagogue about three years ago. She described to us how, though everything about the experience – the prayers, the music, the ambience – was strange to her, nonetheless she felt she had come home. She had struggled with her past and set out in a new direction through her engagement with this synagogue. People nowadays often use the crude and rather condescending expression “get a life”. Well, she “got a life” – here at Temple Beth Israel.

The connection between struggle and the *Yamim Noraim*, these High Holydays, was given an added dimension for me by the artist David Wright. David is not Jewish but he is a deeply spiritual man, and I have learned much from him. There are some who would ask, What is the value of interfaith dialogue? At the very least, I can point to the conversations I’ve had with David and the new perspective that these exchanges have given me on my Judaism.

One of the insights came from the design that David came up with for the medallion representing the *aseret yemei teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Repentance that fall between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. David linked this period of introspection and ‘returning’ to the story in Torah of Jacob wrestling with the strange man on the banks of the river Yabbok. He has woven the story of Jacob wrestling with the stranger into the imagery of the window. This is not a traditional association in Judaism; it is David’s ‘modern midrash’, so to speak. In the ‘Ten Days’ window, the gates of heaven are open for our prayers, the ‘scrolls of life’ are unfurled waiting to be inscribed, and on earth below Jacob wrestles with the stranger, usually referred to as an ‘angel’ or messenger. The two figures are so intertwined that it is hard to tell them apart.

What is this struggle about? If we understand that, we understand the very essence of Yom Kippur.

Let’s recall the story: Jacob is returning home after being abroad for 20 years. But he wasn’t simply backpacking around Europe or India. He was in exile, having fled his brother Esau’s anger. Esau hated Jacob because Jacob had used trickery and deception to take Esau’s birthright and then his blessing by their father Isaac, the blessing which was Esau’s by right as the first-born son. Over this time away from his family in Canaan Jacob had earned two wives – Leah and Rachel – two concubines, he’d had 12 sons and a daughter, Dinah, and he’d created much wealth in flocks and herds. Now he was coming home to face his brother. This is when we see him on the banks of the Yabbok, preparing himself for their reunion the next day.

It’s easy to see ourselves in this story. It’s a tale of sibling rivalry, of envy and competitiveness, of greed and also of generosity - an episode of “Neighbours”, in fact, in which the characters live out all the tensions and angst that we’re used to from our own families. And as in “Neighbours”, characters keep disappearing and

then reappearing again after long absence. But do they look the same, or has their appearance changed?

We know who Jacob is. He is the person who has done wrong, who has harmed another – perhaps deliberately, more likely through plain thoughtlessness. He is riddled with guilt, maybe; but even more, he is paralysed with fear. He is afraid of Esau, of what Esau might have become. Has Esau forgotten his *broigus* with Jacob? Or does Esau intend to wreak his revenge on Jacob?

That's Jacob's obvious fear – fear for his physical safety. But there's a psychological anxiety, too. Jacob may be afraid of himself, of what he might still be capable of when put back into the family context that he fled 20 years before. He believes he has changed; he's now got a family of his own, wives, children, wealth; he's a respected man back in Haran. But he's not sure: has he really grown up? Has he really become a responsible adult? Or does the child, devious and yet desperate for love, still lurk within him? And how can he know for certain?

And then, there may also be a spiritual trepidation, a dread deep within him. Has he taken the right direction in his life? Will his coming home show him that he has spent his time in Haran to good purpose, or will he feel that life has passed him by somehow? Will he ever be able to find his true home? Or will he wander aimlessly, without real design, acting out of impure motives like envy and guilt, stumbling from one adventure – or misadventure – to the next, with no real sense of purpose to his life? Will he die a satisfied man, a man who feels that his life has meant something and so will live on in the memories of others – what a Jewish view that is! – or will he die unhappy, unfulfilled, because he feels there is something really important, some life's work, that he has left undone?

It's easy to imagine Jacob faced with all these confusions and doubts as he watches the sun set on the bank of the Yabbok, looking forward to a restless night before reuniting with Esau the next day. This is the 'tipping point' of his life, a moment of challenge when everything within him conspires to present him with a threat which is also an opportunity: to move forward towards his destiny, or to move backwards into preordained and preset roles. This is the moment of wrestling.

This – **tonight, Kol Nidre** – is **our** moment of wrestling. There is no way to avoid it. We stand, like Jacob, on the banks of our Yabbok, the river of our life. We are faced tonight with decisions. These decisions are focused through the prism of our Judaism. We can of course decide to do nothing; to treat Yom Kippur like any other day of our lives except that we've come to shul rather than stayed at home sitting in front of the TV. Or, over the course of this day, we can decide to modify the direction of our life. At this moment Judaism stands out as a real option for us, a guide to more intense living, more generous living, more purposeful living. At this moment we, like yesterday's adult bat-mitzvah, like Jacob at the Yabbok, can see ourselves as 'coming home'.

I want to acknowledge that this is an intensely difficult decision. I know what it feels like to want to be left alone and not be hassled with religion. That's a common feeling, especially here in Australia, a country not noted for taking religion seriously. On the other hand, I'm also aware that there is the occasional niggle: with Jacob we say, Maybe there is something to this Jewish shtick after all. Maybe it deserves another look. But what I want to know is, will it get in the way of my life? Will something be expected of me?

I recognise this challenge because, though I am a rabbi and I stand here before you as a rabbi, I am first and foremost a Jew, just like every other Jew here. I experience the same world, the same anxieties, the same resistance to change in myself, the same spiritual inertia.

Sue and I did not come into our life as rabbinic couple from an unbroken religious yichus, an inerrant grounding in Jewish practice. Though I had a strong community-minded background from my Reform Temple in the United States, like Jacob I had left my home and spent several years abroad – in both the geographi-

cal and spiritual senses. We were living in Bristol, England, a city with a tiny Jewish population. Sue and I made a conscious choice to return to Jewish observance. We began with lighting Shabbat candles. I often tell this story to our 'Jews by Choice', so they will not feel disheartened at the enormity of what they are taking on. At first, as we lit the candles each Friday evening and recited the *brachah*, we felt as though we were play-acting. There were many occasions that we questioned what we were doing. It was only gradually, as the weeks stretched into months and years, that the Shabbat candles came to have the meaning for us that they do today – a religious meaning, a spiritual meaning: they became so much a part of our lives that without them life would not have the same meaning; it would lose much of its colour and, I must say, its design and purpose.

It may be that Jews who have lit Shabbat candles their entire lives cannot really grasp the power of this kind of experience. There's the possibility it's simply what you do, a matter of habit. If that's the case for you, I would ask that you consider not Shabbat candles, but some other feature of Jewish observance that may be foreign to your current lifestyle, and imagine taking it on in earnest: perhaps increasing your level of *kashrut*, or attending shul services regularly, or giving more *tzedakah* than you are at the moment, or visiting people who are ill in hospital (the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim*), or engaging in social action on behalf of the homeless or refugees, or studying Torah at TBI's "*limmud* on Sundays", or increasing your knowledge of Hebrew in order to feel more at home with Jewish prayers and worship. Each of us has our element of challenge. None of these examples are improbable. Each of them is a serious possibility for us. But each of them represents Jacob wrestling with the stranger. This day, Yom Kippur, is the most opportune moment to wrestle.

There's a famous and much-loved Chasidic story that is relevant to this theme: Rabbi Zusya used to say, When I die and appear before the throne of judgment, if they ask me, Why were you not Moses, I will know how to answer; but if they ask me, Why were you not Zusya, I will have no excuses. What does this mean? I take it to mean that we should ask ourselves this question – we can think of it as Jacob's question: How can I live my life to its fullest, in the best possible way, free from false starts and attitudes that are harmful and values that lead me nowhere? The aim is not to be someone I'm not, not even Moses, but to use my distinct gifts, that which makes me 'me', to be the best Jew I can, the best human being I can. Judaism exists to give life direction and meaning. We resist Judaism like mad, we don't want to view life differently, to take on patterns of behaviour that might seem like play-acting, that seem *not* to express who we are. That's only natural; but it's not inevitable. It's not inevitable as long as we're not at the end of the story – as long as we're still standing on the banks of the Yabbok, the river of our life.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks makes an important observation in this context. He points out that *the things we value most are the things that are most demanding*. He argues, That's true of study; it's true at work; it's true in sport; and it's true in matters of the spirit. Think of Jacob. It would have been far easier for him to stay in Haran, not to bother with seeing his brother again and putting himself in a position in which he had to face up to his fears and anxieties. Had he stayed away, he wouldn't have had to wrestle with the stranger. But it was important to him to face Esau, to complete this particular circle in his journey through life.

As with Jacob, so with us. If we disengage this Yom Kippur and decide not to wrestle with its truths, then nothing will happen. Our lives will go on unchanged – for better and for worse. On the other hand, if, like Jacob, we decide to engage in the struggle, we may discover something new about ourselves and experience that moment of awakening that can change our lives forever. As with Jacob, so with us – as always, the choice is ours.