

Godwrestler: Person, Tribe, & State?
By Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Ph.D.

“Yisrael” Means “Godwrestler.”
What Does “Godwrestler” Mean?

Dear chevra, Who could imagine a not-very decent human being -- a liar, a thief, a heel -- wrestling with God's Own Self?

Who could imagine God – *Elohim* -- the Ultimate Creative Force of the universe – taking the trouble to climax that stupendous Wrestle by renaming the single human being and then his whole tribe and -- much much later still -- a modern state “Yisrael, Godwrestler”?

It was the God-inspired authors of a passage in this week's Torah portion (Gen. 32: 23 to 33: 10) who imagined exactly that --- and burdened our People Israel with a question: What does it mean, to be a Godwrestling folk? What must we do, to honor the name and the God Who bestowed it? Can we honestly claim the attributes of a Godwrestler for a modern state?

To explore this question, I will be moving back and forth from the ancient Torah story of the twin brothers Jakob (renamed Yisrael) and Esau and my own sense of the People of Israel and the State of Israel in modern times. Midrash.

To begin, what was Jakob like and why was “Godwrestler” such an important renaming? In the womb he tried to dominate and subdue his older twin, grasping his heel as if to slow his birth so that Jakob could be born first.

Twice more, as he grew older, he tricked, lied, and stole to grab the firstborn's blessing. (His two parents acted so as to set the two sons against each other — as the British colonial overlords did with their subjects — Hindus and Muslims in India, Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, Boers/Afrikaners and Blacks in South Africa, Jews and Palestinians in Mandatory Palestine.)

The third attempt at stealing Esau's birthrights succeeded — except that Esau threatened to kill his brother. So Jakob fled for a 20-year stay with his Uncle Laban, where he grew rich in wives, children, flocks, and herds. He decided to return home and was overwhelmed by fear and guilt when he heard that Esau was coming to meet him, accompanied by 400 men — probably armed.

He sent his whole retinue across the River Jabok, whose name was his own name turned inside-out. He spent the night alone, yet found himself “wrestling with God and men.” As dawn was breaking his fellow-Wrestler named him “Godwrestler,” told him he had “coped,” twisted his sciatic nerve so that Jakob/Yisrael limped the rest of his life, and disappeared.

As the sun rose, Esau and his men rode up. Esau kissed Jakob, who embraced him and offered him all his flocks as a blessing/gift, and said, “Seeing your face is like seeing the Face of God.” Esau said his own wealth was great enough; he needed no more.

Of course, the Torah, a teaching of the People Yisrael, followed Jakob’s transformation most closely. But we should pay attention to the part of the story in which Esau was also transformed by the time he met the newly named Yisrael. The Esau who had threatened to kill his brother for stealing his birthright became the Esau who kissed his brother. Perhaps Esau had his own night of Godwrestle. Today we might call this the success of a loving nonviolent movement among the Palestinian people.

Both communities need to change. Or perhaps the peoples are already ready, and it is both their violent leaderships that the peoples need to change.

So the crucial question is, “What did it mean to wrestle God so that the two brothers could kiss and live in peace?”

I think it ran like this, at least for Jakob: “You, God, set up our rivalry. You told my mother that I would rule over my older brother, and she did her best or worst to bring it about. I knew deeply within that I was intended for greatness, but I reject the teaching that this means I must lie and steal to achieve it.

“I will wrestle You all night, even if it wounds me, to insist you teach a better, kinder, world. I may not always live by this intention— sometimes you may have to remind me that I am still named Jakob, ‘Sneaky Heel-Grabber’ — but I will try to live as the Godwrestler.”

Has the People Israel lived mostly by this intention for two millennia in “exile”? For the most part, I would say “Yes!” Even Sinai, the Rabbis taught, came on land that was *hefker*, ownerless, so as to remind us it was a teaching for all peoples and all generations. And the teachings of *rachmanut*, motherly compassion; of *tikkun*, repair of an always broken world; of *tshuvah*, turning away from idolatries and toward the sacred path of the Breath of life, became the living Torah of the Godwrestling folk.

Has the State named Israel lived up to its Godwrestling name? Not very well. It began with a brilliant Declaration of “Atzma’ut,” standing on Its own bones, its own Essence (avoiding the negative path of “independence” --- *not depending* on others. Its Declaration guaranteed equal rights to women and men, all religions, both Hebrew and Arabic languages. It treated the kibbutz as a fact and a flag of social justice that Buber called an ‘an experiment that did not fail.” All of it seemed to be a wrestle with the God who seemed to endorse this challenge to the normal power-obsessed nation-state.

But now we know that at the same time, thousands of Palestinians were driven from their homes, many thousands more subjected to military law (Buber protested). In 1956 the government of the state that claimed Godwrestling as its heritage joined with two colonial empires to try to halt Egypt’s nationalization of the Suez Canal. And from 1967 to the present, it carried on a military occupation that denied life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to Palestine. Of course it faced terrorism; but its power was paramount.

Now is the moment when Esau’s 400 armed men and more in numbers, more atrociously, appeared within its gates. Now is the moment when the State named Yisrael demonstrated with a blitz that showed in blood its overwhelming power.

So now is the moment for its people to oust its present “Jakob” Heel-Grabby government and turn itself truly to Yisrael, challenging the norm of God’s official stately subjugation system to take up the banner of its name: Godwrestler. And now is the moment for Palestinians, with the world to help, to reach out to the Esau who had threatened and acted to kill, to hearten and sustain an Esau of the heart, the embrace -- an Esau of nonviolence.

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Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Ph. D., founded (1983) and directs The Shalom Center, a prophetic voice in Jewish, multireligious, and American life.

He has lived into two careers. One was marked with 15 years (1962-1977) as one of the Founding Fellows of the Institute for Policy Studies, working against racial injustice, the nuclear arms race, and major leadership in opposing the US War against Vietnam. That life-path included writing *From Race Riot to Sit-in*, and co-authoring with Marc Raskin *The Limits of Defense* and “A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority.”

His second life-path has been as a leader of the movement for Jewish spiritual and political renewal. He wrote the original and transformative *Freedom Seder* in 1969.

taught for the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (1982-1989) and founded The Shalom Center in 1983.

He was also a co-founder of the National Havurah Committee, Rabbis for Human Rights/ North America (now Truah) and ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. His 28 books have included *Seasons of Our Joy*, *Godwrestling – Round 2*, *The Tent of Abraham*, *Torah of the Earth*, and *Dancing in God's Earthquake*.

In the two life-paths together he was arrested 27 times in nonviolent resistance to various forms of oppression, war, and refusal to defuse the climate crisis.