

soul-wrestling
(the insomniac's tale)
for parents of children with a diagnosis
parashat vayishlach
by rabbi shawn fields-meyer

For many long years, the hero has avoided that which he most fears – a confrontation, face-to-face, with a source of great pain, disappointment and regret. Soon – in the morning – the hero will finally confront the one he fears. But right now, it is night. The night is very dark and and very long.

Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." Jacob asked, "Please tell me your name." But he answered, "Why then do you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping on his hip.

Genesis 32:25-32

This is a tale of an insomniac. He cannot sleep at night. He is filled with fear, anticipation, dread. Dawn breaking will mean the real confrontation is near. But who is this "man" who wrestles with him all night? Why does our hero demand a blessing? Why the name change? Who is this text about?

This is a text about you. You too lay awake at night – or whatever time of day your darkness surrounds you – and you wrestle with it. You knock it over – it pins you down – you struggle with all your might – it takes a hit. As dawn breaks – just the first faint glimmers of light – you realize you are injured.

You hurt. This enemy, this wrestler, it has injured you.

You hurt. You want to scream.

But your opponent says to you: I gotta go. I came, I hurt you and made you fight with me – but now I gotta go.

But then you realize, you have to get something out of this. So you demand a blessing. You want this to be a *bracha*. Not a curse. A blessing. And what's the blessing you get? That you will no longer be known as you; rather, you'll be known as The Wrestling You. The One Who is Always Struggling (with humans and with God).

As you stand contemplating your new moniker – is this the blessing you'd demanded? – your opponent denies telling you who *he* is. And he is gone. But his effects are felt forever. You are left limping for the rest of your life.

What keeps you up at night, tossing and turning?

Perhaps it is the diagnosis. You wrestle with it; you prevail but it still retains immense power (the power to dispense blessings and certainly, curses). Your identity is changed – nothing you knew before is reliable anymore – *not even your own name* (you've had an identity change!). You say to the diagnosis: "Who are *you*?" and it refuses to answer. You know who it is, yet it has slipped through your hands. Again. The dawn breaks – but so have you. You are injured, dazed. Squinting at the light and wondering how you ever had the strength for that long, difficult night.

Perhaps it is worry. It keeps you up, and begs to be let go.

Perhaps it is your guilt.

Or maybe what keeps you up at night is your anger.

You have wrestled, all through a long, dark night.

But you have come out with a blessing. And that blessing is your new name. You now are known as the one who wrestles.

And it is true you are limping. But you have made it through that darkness, and you can see the light. Because you have wrestled, you will keep going. Limping, most certainly, and not running so fast as you used to. But you have seen the light of day once more.