

## Wrestling – RH Morning 5772 (2011)

On August 29th, I found myself walking into the Los Angeles County Courthouse. It was 7:30 on a Tuesday morning, and rather than heading to prayer class, I was heading to jury duty. I had emailed my professors the night before and received a variety of responses: “Do they KNOW that you are in GRADUATE school?” wrote the director of the rabbinic program.

“Well, I guess it’s Jury Duty or “Jewry” Duty,” wrote another of my more pun-ny professors.

My liturgy teacher’s response, however, got me thinking. He wrote: “There is something wonderfully appropriate about being on a jury during Elul. In light of our discussion in class about God in the courtroom, you might compare the human beings you encounter during jury duty with how you imagine God would fill those roles in the heavenly court. Maybe this interruption in your schedule could end up being insightful in terms of the season! Good luck.”

Courtroom 119 was a plain wooden box of a room. In fact, everything in the room was kind of square and boxed off. The court administrator sat in her own box in the front left corner, and the space reserved for the eventual jury was also a box. The judge had his own box, and sat a good seven feet above the rest of the room. In fact, the only people not enclosed within a protective box were the lawyers and defendants. There was no natural light and there was no speaking out of turn.

Judge Sterling sat in his black robe in his little box with a microphone that he could switch on and off at will, allowing him to choose whether we were able to hear him or not.

The prosecutors and defense attorneys scribbled on individual post-it notes, one designated for each of us potential jurors. They asked us about our ability to judge a witness based solely on the answers he or she provided to the questions asked and remove all extraneous knowledge or opinions about that witness based on his or her dress or job title. They asked if we could be fair and objective about a person's testimony if, say, that person was a gang member, or a police officer. When individual jurors expressed concerns, stated that their family members were in gangs, had been attacked by gang members, the lawyers scribbled harder.

The defendants sat silently through the whole thing, waiting for the rest of those in court to determine which 12 people would decide whether the testimony presented would prove them guilty or innocent.

Earlier this morning, we recited *Un'taneh Tokef*. In the first paragraph of the prayer-poem, God is described as *dayan umokhiakh v'yodea vaed*. Each of these words describes a legal role: a *dayan* is a judge, a *mokhiakh* best translates to “prove-er”... or to use a real word, prosecutor. A *yodea* is a “knower”, or counsel, and an *ed* is a witness. In other words, *Un'taneh Tokef* is describing God as simultaneously filling all the roles in the courtroom!

That would seem difficult enough to comprehend – I mean, how confusing is it to think of God as playing both the objective role of judge AND the

subjective role of the lawyer?! – but to complicate matters further, God is then likened to a shepherd a few lines later in the prayer.

If it was difficult enough to wrap our heads around God playing multiple courtroom roles at the same time, this new description really throws us for a loop – here God acts in a space that is far from the windowless, air-conditioned, law-and-order courtroom, here God is in the great outdoors shepherding a great mass of fuzzy animals. In this image, God does not sit on high like a judge in a courtroom. Instead, God is right in the thick of it, counting all of the sheep and making sure each sheep is accounted for. This God is responsible for a flock, not for upholding truth.

So how do we understand Un'taneh tokef? What can we learn from these many varied and somewhat contrasting descriptions of God?

Perhaps if God is capable of being described using two images which seem at many points to contradict each other, God is also capable of being all of the things in between those images.

Now, let's face it, talking about God is a touchy subject.

God is Unclear,

God is Unknown,

And because of those things, God often makes us uncomfortable.

But discomfort is okay! As many have said in defining everything from journalism to social action, “the job of religion is to comfort the distressed and distress the comfortable.”

Too much stress and a person could feel like dropping out of graduate school (wink wink), but too much comfort is also dangerous – it makes us complacent. When we are complacent, we cease to grow and change.

And while thinking about God may not be comfortable, God, or at least the WORD God, is a little unavoidable in these High Holy Days.

So what do we do? How do we deal with this discomfort?

We do what our patriarch Jacob did when he was awakened in the middle of the night by someone, something, some angel or person, some unknown being.

Jacob falls asleep one night and wakes up fighting for his life. He wrestles from dusk until dawn, he is permanently wounded, and as the morning comes closer and closer, his opponent asks to be released but Jacob says

No.

Not until you bless me.

And this is when we learn that Jacob’s assailant is no ordinary man, for the blessing that the stranger bestows upon Jacob is the name that becomes the name of the people we belong to – Israel – because he wrestled with that which is both Godly and human.

We are Israelites. We are, by our very names, wrestlers.

The Jewish people are known for having more opinions than congregants – we have all heard the story about the man deserted on a lonely little island for many years who is eventually rescued. As he is boarding the boat to return to the mainland, the rescue team notices two shacks standing near each other. “How could you possibly have needed two buildings?” they ask. “You were the only person on the island!”

“Oh!” he responded, “That one on the right is my synagogue and the one on the left is the synagogue I’d never go to.”

This joke always made me cringe in the past, ashamed at the seeming inability of the Jewish people to agree, to compromise, to unify. But there is another way to see the “two Jews, three opinions” cliché – for if there is no one to question your beliefs, how do you know you have them? Or, as the Infiniti car commercial puts it: “If no one ever challenged the status quo, we would still think the earth was flat.”

The importance of questioning, of challenging, of searching for God in between all of the descriptions we are given throughout the prayer book is not to find some elusive ultimate definition of God. Rather, it is to open up the possibility of new understandings and definitions.

Every week during Shabbat services, we call God all sorts of names. God is the “bringer of the evening”, God is “Abraham’s shield” and “Sarah’s protector”. God is a “Rock” and a “Redeemer”.

During Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, God takes on even more names. God is The Merciful One, God is Our Father, Our King.

God is the Judge.

God is the Shepherd.

We mere mortals also have multiple names and as such play multiple and sometimes contradictory roles. In my work with teens, I have found that this is a huge struggle – teens are asked to be kids and adults at the same time, not to mention students, artists, musicians, role models to their siblings. And it's not only teens!

We are all simultaneously playing any number of roles. We may be the earner AND the caregiver, the cook AND the housekeeper,

and every person with children is simultaneously someone's parent AND someone's child.

Each of these roles comes with contradictions. The earner's time must be spent on financial support, while the caregiver needs time to spend with his or her charges. The cook (at least in my apartment ;-)) trashes a kitchen all for the end goal of a tasty meal, while the housekeeper is responsible to keeping that same kitchen clean enough to, at minimum, avoid attracting unsavory critters.

We all find ourselves stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place at times, trying to be both honest and compassionate. Do you comfort your son who is upset about the terrible grade he received or do you chastise him,

reminding him that the reason for his poor performance is because he chose to spend the night before the test playing video games rather than studying? Do you forgive your obviously exhausted and overworked wife for leaving the lights on all night and causing the car battery to die or do you get frustrated and tell her to call the tow truck herself since she's the one that caused the problem in the first place?

Most likely, the answers are somewhere in the middle – you chastise but also comfort, you get frustrated and, hopefully, forgive.

By nature of being human, we process our very lives through words and definitions. Without descriptions and images to work with, we would have no place to even begin to grapple with our understandings of ourselves or of God.

But sometimes even words, humanity's most defining characteristic, are not enough. Instead, somewhere in between all of these images, somewhere between Judge and Shepherd, there just may be another 'something'. If we 'pick' Judge as our image of God, we allow the earth to remain flat. If we 'pick' Shepherd, we allow the earth to remain flat. And if we decide not to bother with it at all, simply decide not to wrestle, we allow the earth to remain flat.

Rosh Hashana is a great time to grapple – after all, we in the middle of grappling with a whole past year's worth of life.

As we pray for a new year filled with joy and success, a year of peace and prosperity, may we each have the strength to wrestle: with ourselves, with our decisions, and with the spaces in between the words.