

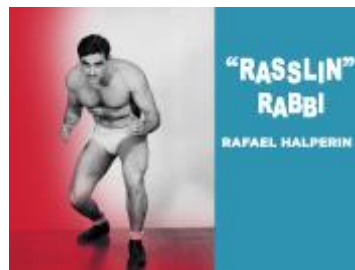
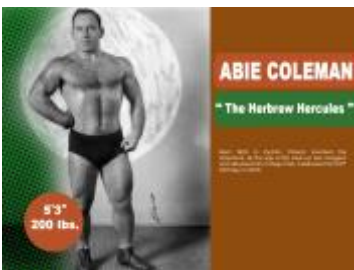


The God-Wrestlers

Rosh Hashanah 5778/2017 – Rabbi Joel Nickerson

Note: This written version served as the basis for the sermon that was delivered on Rosh Hashanah. The sermon was delivered without the text or notes, so this written version is slightly different from what people heard in-person.

Abba Kelmer was born on September 20, 1905 in Poland and made his way to America via Canada in the early 1920s. In 1928, while living in New York, he began an illustrious career when he was discovered working out in a New York gym by a local promoter who offered him \$25 to participate in a fight. Kelmer, who by that time had changed his name to Abe Coleman, won the fight and soon, he was wrestling regularly. Nicknames among wrestlers were popular in that era and Coleman's included "the Hebrew Hercules," "the Jewish Flash," "the Ape Man," and "The Jewish Tarzan." Standing 5'3" and weighing close to 200 pounds, Coleman was never a champion, but he was a well-respected wrestler, best known for his trademark maneuver called the 'kangaroo kick', which he told reporters he developed after watching marsupials fight during a tour of Australia. The 'kangaroo kick' later developed into the 'drop kick', an extremely well-respected and popular wrestling move. Coleman was a tough guy, and even in his 80s, he was able to fend off a couple of muggers who attacked him in the street. He died in 2007 at the age of 101 and he was the oldest wrestler in the world.¹



Abe is part of an often-overlooked group of Jews who took the wrestling world by storm at the turn of the 20th century. These were not wrestlers like you find in the Olympics – these were wrestlers who would now be associated with the WWE² (World Wrestling Entertainment), a combination of sport and theater that has captivated stadium-size crowds for close to a century. While we tend to focus on the stereotype of Jews as the intellectual elite who spend their days huddled over rabbinic texts, there is another side to the American Jewish experience:

¹ <http://www.nysun.com/obituaries/abe-coleman-101-pro-wrestler-known-as-the-jewish/51562/>

² www.wwe.com

There have been instances in the American Jewish experience when Jewish bodies have taken precedence over Jewish brains, when the Jew-as-physical-powerhouse has been ascendant. When Jewish immigrants populated the roiling ethnic ghettos of cities such as New York, Chicago, and Montreal during the first half of the twentieth century, most Jews lived lives that were less than bookish. They worked long hours in sweaty, dreary factories; they sold old junk on city streets and door-to-door; they lived ten to a room; they sucked the marrow out of bones; they were pimps and prostitutes and petty criminals; they were filthy. They liked bad literature and worse theater. And, like the other ethnics who lived in these city ghettos, they boxed, and they wrestled, too...Prior to World War I, wrestling had its home in taverns, back rooms, and traveling circus sideshows. It was not terribly popular and began to gain large numbers of fans only in the 1920s, when promoters introduced high-flying, acrobatic moves into a sport that had previously consisted of two large men trying to hold each other immobile on a mat.³

Those wrestlers, including the Rasslin' Rabbi (Rafael Halperin), the Crusher (Benny Feldman), the Star of David (Sammy Cohen), and Blimp Levy (Martin Levy) are part of a much longer Jewish tradition of wrestling that goes all the way back to the Book of Genesis, when the first wrestling match took place.

Set in the quiet, vast Middle Eastern desert, with no audience, a young man named Jacob is alone, anxiously awaiting a reunion with his estranged brother, Esau. All of the sudden, he starts wrestling with an *eesh*, which is usually translated as 'angel,' but technically means 'man' in Hebrew. They wrestle until the man/angel realizes that he can't beat Jacob, leading the man/angel instead, to injure Jacob by dislocating his hip. As Jacob holds on, the man/angel begs to be released but Jacob refuses, saying he will only let the man/angel go if it blesses him. The man/angel asks, "What is your name?" to which Jacob responds, "Jacob." "Your name shall no longer be Jacob," says the man/angel, "but Israel, for you have struggled with God and humans and have prevailed."⁴

We are God-wrestlers – a people who, throughout history, have thrust ourselves into situations and conversations that others have ignored or disqualified. We face the harsh realities of the world head on, knowing that the only way to survive as long as we have, has been the result of our steadfast devotion to discomfort, guilt, passion, drive, and resilience. We inherit this tradition and apply it to our lives; to circumstances that emerge in every generation; a doggedness that says, 'I will not be passive. I will not stand idly by. I will not surrender.' We are the people who built a country from nothing in the Middle East and fight every day to maintain its democratic nature while simultaneously working to protect a homeland for the Jewish people. We are the people who know that leaving the vulnerable, the weak, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow to fend for themselves is cruel, shameful, and intolerable.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes:

To be a Jew means not to be fully at home in the world. To be a Jew means to live within the tension between heaven and earth, creation and revelation, the world that is and the world we are called on to make; between exile and home, and between the universality of the human condition and the particularity of Jewish identity. Jews don't stand still except when standing before God. The universe, from galaxies to subatomic particles, is in constant motion, and so is the Jewish soul.

We are, we believe, an unstable combination of dust of the earth and breath of God, and this calls on us constantly to make decisions, choices, that will make us grow to be as big as our

³ Portnoy, Eddy. "Jewish Wrestling All-Stars" *Guilt & Pleasure Quarterly*, Vol. 2, Spring 2006. pg. 12-15.

⁴ Summary of Gen. 32:23-33

ideals, or, if we choose wrongly, make us shrivel into small, petulant creatures obsessed by trivia. Life as a journey means striving each day to be greater than we were the day before, individually and collectively.⁵

We need to be reminded how to wrestle the Jewish way – to relearn, reinforce, and reinvigorate ourselves so that we can face a world that seems precarious at best and destructive, at worst. The anxiety, fear, and pessimism that we sense all around us as we get pummeled with one negative news cycle after the next is slowly eating us up and spitting us out. It's making it harder and harder for us to find the good and it's making it much easier for us to see the worst, attack the 'other', and ignore our own roles.

British psychologist Dr. Graham Davey, who specializes in the psychological effects of media violence, suggests that violent media exposure can exacerbate or contribute to the development of stress, anxiety, depression and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). "In particular... negative news can affect your own personal worries. Viewing negative news means that you're likely to see your own personal worries as more threatening and severe, and when you do start worrying about them, you're more likely to find your worry difficult to control and more distressing than it would normally be."⁶

I know there a lot of people who feel a sense of helplessness at addressing the challenges that are mounting all around us and there have been times when personally, I've just wanted to go hide in a cave and pretend like everything is just fine. But even when we can find those few moments of tranquility, we are faced with a deluge of stresses and challenges that we can't ignore; challenges that are personal, communal, and global. We don't feel prepared for what's happening around us and to us. It's almost like we're in some delusional state, caught between expecting the other shoe to drop while also praying that somehow, we're going to turn on the news or receive a notification on our phone that declares, "The world has reached a state of peace and equilibrium." We don't know what to expect and we don't even know how to prepare for what could happen next.

On Yom Kippur afternoon, we read the story of Jonah, who sought to escape from his mission of going to Nineveh to warn the people that the city was to be destroyed if they did not repent. But no matter what Jonah did to try and escape his mission, he realized that escape was impossible. He could not ignore his mission. And try as we may, there is no escaping what's going on around us. We must face our fears and anxieties head on.

Rabbi Sacks writes, "Be not afraid of greatness: that is why God wrestled with Jacob, Moses, and Jonah and would not let them escape. We may not be born great, but by being born (or converting to become) a Jew, we have greatness thrust upon us. And as Marianne Williamson rightly said, 'by liberating ourselves from fear, we help liberate others.' That is what we as Jews are meant to do: to have the courage to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, to be true to our faith while seeking to be a blessing to others regardless of their faith."⁷

None of us have been able to escape the images of the devastating impact of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma over the past several weeks and I recently heard a quote that was both brutally honest and equally difficult to accept – "when you live in a floodplain, expect a flood." The reality and probability of danger are not to be ignored and as much as we'd like to pray and wish that we are exempt, the last year has reminded us that on a political, personal, and natural level, the floods do come.

⁵ <http://rabbisacks.org/jewish-journey-vayishlach-5777/>

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/19/violent-media-anxiety_n_6671732.html

⁷ <http://rabbisacks.org/feeling-the-fear-vayishlach-5776/>

There's an old teaching from the Talmud that states that one of the most important skills to teach our children is the ability to swim.⁸ We need to be ready to swim to safety in the next metaphorical flood. We need to have our earthquake supplies in place. We need to be ready to wrestle with the issues that come our way. We need to be prepared.

Wrestling is part of the Jewish mission. Today, we start our training so we can spend the year honing our skills and addressing the anxieties, fears, and challenges that we face. I asked one of our teens, Daniel Heller, who is a wrestler at Beverly Hills High, to share some insights with me about his training process:

"The most important aspects of wrestling training are pushing yourself and your teammates to perform at a higher level than you were the practice before. The way the guys on my team push each other is by drilling harder and beating the heck out of each other. The more your partners are beating you, the less you want to be beat. The most obvious important part of wrestling is mastery of technique. The more technique you are able to master and the more positions that you are comfortable in will give you more options in a match."⁹

We have to be drilling, constantly working on the art of Jewish wrestling. The training needs to take place at three levels – Emotional, Spiritual and Intellectual, and Physical.

Let's begin with the emotional component of wrestling. Wrestling is all about a partnership – a relationship between you and your opponent. There is no such thing as wrestling alone. We are living in a time when we seem to be more and more isolated; more and more independent; more confident in our ability to handle things on our own. But I think we're all well aware that while it's valiant to think we can pull it off, we're kidding ourselves if we think we have the power to control and maintain the world around us.

According to Ecclesiastes, "Two are better off than one...For if [one] should fall, the one will raise up the other, as opposed to if one falls when there is no one to raise him."¹⁰ There's a concept in our tradition called *chevruta*, which means 'fellowship' or 'partnership' and it serves as the primary form of Jewish study practices. It comes from the root word *chaver*, which means 'friend'. The purpose of *chevruta* study is to gain a perspective or understanding of a concept, or literary passage, that you wouldn't otherwise discover on your own. By relying on the interpretations of your *chevruta* partner, both of you start to see and understand the thing you're studying in new and profound ways. You're supposed to argue with your partner, challenge him/her, and question his/her reasons for the interpretations they offer. Your *chevruta* partner helps you to go beyond what you think you can bear on your own. He/she offers more than just understanding, this person offers encouragement, rooted in the word 'courage'. This partnership is about the mutual offering and support of courage. As one of the famous phrases from the Talmud states, "o *chevruta o mituta*" - "Give me *chevruta* or give me death."¹¹

Each of us needs to be asking ourselves, 'Who is my *chevruta*? Who is the person I can rely on to challenge me, question me, push me, and at the same time, support me?' Sometimes that's our life partner, but sometimes, we need someone who doesn't live under our roof to serve in the role. It's not easy to find a good *chevruta* partner – and from what I've seen, women tend to do a better job at finding this type of partnership in their lives than men do. The key is not to assume that the best person for this role is your best friend. Here's a good test - next time you're out with someone whom

⁸ BT Kiddushin 29a

⁹ E-mail from Daniel Heller

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 4:10-11

¹¹ BT Ta'anit 23a

you think could serve as your *chevruta*, try talking about something you don't usually talk about together – maybe it's politics, maybe it's an issue at work, maybe it's about another friendship. Notice how they respond and if they push you to think about the issue in a new or different way. You have to do this intentionally. If they 'pass the test', great. And if not, it doesn't mean they're not a good friend; it just means they may not be a good *chevruta* partner to help you wrestle with the world around us. Finding the right partner takes hard work but I believe it's a key component to being able to truly wrestle and address the deep challenges we face in our lives and in the world around us.

In addition to the emotional training we must undergo, we also need to understand how we must wrestle spiritually and intellectually. This type of wrestling addresses how we understand and experience the world around us. The key component to this element of our training is learning the essential art of asking questions. Nobel-prize Jewish physicist, Isidore Rabi, learned to be a scientist from his mother, who instead of asking him, "What did you learn today?" when he got home from school, would instead ask, "Did you ask a good question today?" And Albert Einstein famously stated, "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes." Before we can figure out the best solutions to the issues we're facing in our own lives and in the world around us, we need to ask a lot of questions. We seem to be living in an age of assumption, rumor, hearsay, and speculation, driven in many ways by the fast-paced nature of the news cycles and social media posts, which tend to focus on speed of delivery over accuracy of reporting.

I believe the two most important questions we can be asking are two questions that call out to us from our Biblical texts. The first question is, 'Where are you?' In Hebrew, it's *ayekah*, and it's a question asked by God while searching for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It's not a question about our physical position – *ayekah* is about our mental and spiritual position. Where are you in your life right now? What is driving you bonkers and what is bringing you inspiration? Where are you now in comparison to where you want to be, and are you making sure you're on the right path to reach your intended destination? *Ayekah* calls out to us from the depths of our souls and it is a question we cannot ignore. Where are you?

The second question we need to be asking ourselves and others is *Eicha* – How? This is the first Hebrew word in the Book of Lamentations, which we read on the only other 24-hour fast day besides Yom Kippur. Lamentations is read on Tisha B'Av, a day on which we commemorate the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, but on a larger scale, a day on which we commemorate those moments in our history that have drastically changed our collective trajectory; moments of significant, uncomfortable, and many times, destructive transitions. *Eicha*, or 'how' is a question that many of us have been asking lately. How has this happened? How has our world reached a state of such fear, pain, heartbreak, divisiveness, and discomfort? How can we begin to seek out a new direction for our community, our country, and our world? Asking *Eicha* is not accompanied by an easy, one sentence answer. Asking *Eicha* requires us to spend significant time understanding and reflecting on what leads us and our community to our current state. It requires patience and the willingness to engage in debate with those who have different explanations than our own. As the 19th century French politician Pierre Marc Gaston de Levis famously said, "Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers." I think we'd benefit greatly if we adopted this approach more widely.

The final element of our wrestling regimen is the physical training. If the emotional training is about how we feel in the world, while the spiritual and intellectual wrestling addresses how we understand and experience the world, then the physical wrestling focuses how we act in the world – the actions we take to speak up, to engage in the work of improving our own lives and the lives of others. It's about how we physically engage with the challenges around us. You can't read a book on swimming when a flood is coming. If you haven't actually learned how to swim, you won't make it. Now is the time to be prepared to wrestle and that means we can't just think about it or read about the issues that

impact us; we actually have to be prepared to act. It makes me think about the plane ride I took with my family last month – the instruction to put on your own oxygen mask before helping your children always stands out to me. I know we want to set examples for our children – we want to protect them; we want to teach them to protect themselves from the bullies of the world and from the pain and fear that can grip us. If we're going to do that, then we need to be prepared ourselves – we need to get out there and do something; to physically train ourselves to wrestle - joining a protest, calling our representatives, building something, giving out supplies and food to those in need, getting out of the comfort of our own homes to get our hands dirty. But some of us may need to work up the courage to do some of those things.

Knowing how to defend oneself, both physically and emotionally, is one of the most valuable skills in life. I went back to Krav Maga training recently for the first time in over a year and while I've gone to bed VERY sore, I'm also reinvigorated. Imi Lichtenfeld grew up in Bratislava (in Slovakia) in the early 1900s and learned self-defense to protect himself and his Jewish neighbors from local fascist thugs. He moved to Israel during WWII and began training Jewish soldiers in his self-defense technique, which later became known as Krav Maga (translated as 'contact combat' or 'close combat'). It became the official combat system of the Israeli Defense Force and is also used by numerous US law enforcement agencies. I've found a way to combine my love of my tradition with a physical activity that teaches me self-defense, self-control, and has real-life application (though I hope I never need to use the techniques I am learning). In a way, practicing the techniques makes me feel like I'm both protecting myself and the Jewish people. It's more than just a workout, a martial art, or another link to Jewish history – it's helping me to get back in touch with the Jewish wrestler inside me. I've been thinking about what it would be like to have a Krav Maga class at Isaiah – if you're interested and would want to participate in a one-time event, let me know at www.templeisayah.com/wrestle.

When Abe Coleman and others came to this country at the turn of the 20th century, many of them arrived by way of New York, with the newly erected Statue of Liberty welcoming them to their new home. Even if their lives were far from idyllic when they settled here, they were comforted by the words of the Jewish woman who wrote "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free," – words found inscribed on Lady Liberty. Earlier this summer, a White House advisor was asked about whether President Trump's immigration policy aligned with Emma Lazarus's poem. The advisor said that the poem was not part of the original statue and therefore, implied that it doesn't represent the values of this country in respect to immigrants. We continue to wrestle with those who have different values and understandings about our country and our world. So the question is, "How are we going to respond?" Are you ready to wrestle for what you believe? What is fair to you and how can you strive for that in your life and in our world? Are you ready to really wrestle or are you just going to tweet about it?

I want you to imagine that me and the other clergy are like your personal trainers. In what area do you think you need to learn how to wrestle more effectively. Is it emotional, spiritual and intellectual, or physical? Let us help you determine who is best qualified to support and train you. Come and talk with me and let me help guide you to the best form of training possible. All you have to do is go to www.templeisayah.com/wrestle and let me know your name and contact info and I'll be in touch so we can find a time to sit down and figure out the best plan of action.

We are the people of Israel – the descendants of that young man, who in the middle of the desert, wrestled with a man/angel and not only survived, but triumphed. At this time of uncertainty and apprehension, we must rely on the strength and resilience of our ancestors and our deeply embedded willingness to wrestle with the forces that attempt to pin us down. Emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and physically, we must embody the God-wrestler mentality. By doing so we will come out on top.