

There are many different themes I'd like to touch on as this is our first Shabbat since the Gate of Discovery returned from our civil rights journey to the South, and it is also getting close to both Chanukah and Thanksgiving. And let's not forget the weekly Torah portion of Vayishlach. In a feat of rabbinic homiletics, I will attempt to weave together these seemingly disparate themes into a few coherent, and I hope inspiring, words of Torah.

At Shabbat services tonight we'll hear stories about our trip from several travelers, but I want to describe a scene from this week's parashah that paints a picture to which many of us who revisited the iconic events and sites of the struggle for racial equality in this country and met people who lived through them, could deeply relate.

In anticipating his encounter with his estranged brother Esav, the brother he betrayed by stealing the birthright and whose wrath he fled years ago, Jacob is described by the Torah as afraid and worried: "***Vayirah Yaakov me'od vayitzer lo***" "***Jacob was greatly frightened and anxious***" (Gen. 32:8). Why, wonders Rashi, does the Torah use both these words to express how Jacob was feeling? Jacob's *fear*, Rashi explains, was that Esav would kill him. Jacob's *worry* was that if engaged in a battle, he would kill others.

In the darkness of the night, hours before Jacob was to confront Esav, a stranger comes and wrestles with him. Jacob prevails in the struggle, though he emerges with a limp from the stranger grabbing his thigh, and with a new name, Yisrael, which means 'he who struggles with God', which the stranger bestowed upon Jacob as a blessing before fleeing. Jacob then rises to meet Esav and the two reunite with heartfelt emotion, kisses and tears.

Many commentators have offered ideas about who exactly this stranger was, whether Esav's guardian angel or some divine messenger. I prefer to follow the Malbim's (19th century) notion that the stranger represented Jacob wrestling with himself, specifically with the destructive forces he recognized in himself. How does wrestling with himself address both Jacob's *fear* and his *worry* such as to have led to the peaceful reunion with Esav?

Maybe contemplating seeing Esav again after all this time, Jacob's *fear* was that he would be destroyed by his past, by his history of hurting Esav; that the encounter would prove useless at best, tragic at worst, and that he'd remain estranged from his family and from himself. His *worry*, maybe, was that he would once again succumb to his human capacity to cause pain to others, and that he would again be selfish and cruel.

Many of us who travelled to the South had similar fears and worries about confronting such a painful part of our nation's past. We wondered about people's ability to heal from anger and loss, and about whether as individuals and as a society we've truly mended our hate-filled brokenness and moved beyond the clashes of color that so violently marred and divided our nation.

At the same time, while many of us knew and restated with pride the overwhelming presence of Jews in the struggle for integration – famous rabbis as well as unknown but tireless Jewish activists on the ground, some of our own travellers even -- we also encountered the depth of racism that gripped others in the Jewish community, and the moral conflicts that many Jews had about segregation, making the Jewish part of the civil rights story much more complex than we realized. It also forced us to look deeply within ourselves and how it is we are responding to the major civil rights issues of our times; how it is we are balancing the many and sometimes clashing values that we embrace as Jews and as Americans; how we truly feel about those who are so different from us. Like Jacob, we struggled deeply with ourselves over those four days in Atlanta, Montgomery, Selma and Birmingham.

Rather than deny his failures, Jacob had the courage to look within himself, at his past and his flawed character, and learned two critical lessons, ones we also ought to take seriously on our own journeys through life; lessons that also comforted and inspired us on our trip.

First, Jacob learned that none of us should fear being consumed by our past. Through introspection and teshuvah, we all have the power to recover from failure. Though we may make mistakes, our tradition empowers us to work through them and move forward as more whole and centred people.

Second, Jacob learns that we need not worry about becoming enslaved to patterns of selfishness or unkindness. Though we may have exhibited such traits at some point in our lives, again, with reflection and resolve, we can and will break those patterns to infuse our lives and relationships with greater integrity and compassion.

We too, as Jews and as Americans, mustn't be paralyzed by our pasts or by our roles as either perpetrators or victims, or those muddled roles in between. Taking the time to learn about our history and to examine ourselves, we become better trained to disassemble frameworks of discrimination and reassemble our intentions and actions into frameworks of respect, justice and equality.

We can turn our past into a usable past from which to learn and grow, while cycles of prejudice are indeed broken and more compassionate behaviour is cultivated. But you have to first become aware, open your eyes and your heart and bear witness to the past. For some, that work is so much harder than actually building a better future.

Like Jacob, from our inner wrestling we returned from our trip stronger, though changed. Jacob's limp was a constant reminder to him of his struggles with his past. But the fact that he prevailed and kept on walking was a sign of his ability to overcome his past and subdue his concerns for his future.

None of us came back limping, thankfully, but we did come back transformed: humbled and even shamed by the pain and suffering we recalled, and no less humbled by the powerful role of faith in God and in love that sustained and motivated the Black community, and in many ways still does today. We couldn't help but consider that against the backdrop of all the data showing that Jews are becoming increasingly irreligious and distanced from notions of the saving presence of God, even as we continue to seek meaning from and connection to our Jewish tradition. Indeed, the way we use music at Sha'ar and the joy and depth we try to bring to prayer is our attempt to draw inspiration from our tradition whatever our theological convictions.

Like Jacob's limp, we hope our broken hearts serve as constant reminders to work for our own healing and that of others.

We've all seen the hype about Thanksgivukkah, the arrival of Thanksgiving and Chanukah at the same time this year. On one level, Thanksgiving relates to Chanukah because while traditionally Sukkot is more like the Jewish Thanksgiving, Sukkot being our Fall harvest festival devoted to expressing gratitude for the bounty of the land and of our lives, during the persecution-filled reign of Antiochus, the Jews were prevented from celebrating Sukkot and so Chanukah came to make up for the earlier Jewish thanksgiving festival that we missed.

But on a deeper level, the confluence of these holidays on our calendar weaves together all of our themes so far. Thanksgiving is a holiday whose origins relating to Native American populations and the eventual bloody clashes between them and the Pilgrims remind us of the need to remain vigilant when it comes to honouring the many different racial and ethnic groups that make up our nation. But there's more.

This week I had the good fortune to participate in a Webinar broadcast from Jerusalem with Noam Zion of the Shalom Hartman Institute who shared the teachings of the late, great Rabbi David Hartman, z"l, about Chanukah.

Briefly, Rabbi Hartman taught that the essence of Chanukah is not about a cruse of oil lasting for 8 days. It's not just about Jewish military victory over the ancient Syrian-Greeks or even of Judaism over the forces of assimilation.

To Rabbi Hartman, the essence of Chanukah can be distilled from the tradition of *Pirsuma Denisa*, of placing our Chanukah candles in full public view as we do by putting them in our windows and doorways. (30-foot Chabad menorahs on the lawns of city hall are another thing to discuss another time).

How is this the essence of Chanukah?

Because by confidently and courageously declaring our particular Jewish values and telling our particular Jewish stories we take our place in the global square in which people, ideas, beliefs and communities meet and assert their right and responsibility to be active participants in the process of healing and perfecting our world. This is

where we belong – as Jews and as the Jewish community – and this is where every racial, ethnic and religious community filled with the spirit of respect and collaboration belongs. It is our Jewish obligation both to be there in the fullness of our Jewish identities, and to ensure the ability of others to take their rightful places as well.

It is precisely this sacred balancing of the particular with the universal that animates the heart of Zionism and that animates the Jewish commitment to Tikkun Olam. It is what brings our menorahs to our windows, and it is the spirit that filled us as we made our way home from the South and back into the ongoing search for peace and justice here in the US, in Israel and around the world.

For this wrestling-filled journey of self-discovery, pride, and dignity, we express profound thanks as Jews, as Americans, and as human being.