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The Struggle

On Erev Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the challenges facing Israel. Not external threats from Iran, Syria, Hezbollah or Hamas, but the internal challenge of defining the nature of the State. As I explained, the vision that Israel's founders had for their country was a Jewish State in the fashion of a Western democracy. And yet, from the very beginning, there was a counter narrative, which saw the re-birth of Israel as a religious event; the manifestation of God's promise to return our people to our land. It is a beautiful, stirring, hopeful idea. But it doesn't come without a cost.

According to our religious brothers and sisters, since God upheld His end of the bargain by bringing the Jewish people back into our land, we must uphold our end by ensuring that Israel's policies follow the dictates of Jewish law, and by enshrining the teachings of the Torah and Talmud as Israel's Constitution.

If this world view were to hold sway, Israel would not be a Western country, it would be a religious country, or perhaps even a theocracy. And thus, some seventy years after the rebirth of the State, the vision of Israel's pioneers, (as well as the majority of her population) is clashing against the world view of Israel's "religious" citizens.

Truthfully, it's a poetic clash, for most Israelis are not antithetical towards religion. The vast majority of Jewish Israelis, even those who are proudly secular, enjoy Shabbat dinner with their family, appreciate the rhythm of the Jewish calendar which is based on the cycle of Israel's seasons, and integrate Jewish tradition into their daily lives. Judaism is alive in their culture: in their art, music and theater, in their schools and civic events. With Hebrew as their mother tongue, Israel as their homeland, and the IDF in which they serve, protecting her population, Israelis of all stripes have an incredibly strong relationship with their Judaism. Thus, the question facing Israelis today is not: Should Israel be a Jewish State? Rather it's: How far should Israel go towards becoming a Halakhic State – a State that operates according to the teachings of the Talmud and Torah?

I'll tell you, from my perspective – for the sake of both the people of Israel, as well as the integrity of Judaism, it is vitally important for there to be a separation between religious authority and political power. For as we have seen throughout history and into modern times, whenever a religion attains the powers of a State, it cannot help itself from using those powers to impose its religious doctrines, not only on their own people, but on outsiders as well. And there is nothing that corrodes the beauty and integrity of religion; nothing that scars the purity of a soul, more than coercion.

Religion is at its best when it speaks to the hearts of its adherents. But when religion has access to power, it forsakes the heart and uses might. This is why Israel's current struggle is so

important, for it could end up defining, not only the nature of Israel's civil society, but also the character of Judaism.

Now I know what some of you are thinking: "Rabbi, you spoke about this topic last week. Why are you bringing it up again?" I know this might sound a little strange, but I'm bringing it up because I'm a bit jealous. After all, not only do Israelis live in the land of our ancestors, speak the language of our people, and are building a 21st century Jewish nation in the middle of a hostile neighborhood, **they're also grappling with what it means to be a Jew.**

For Israelis, Judaism is not an extraneous part of their lives – it's integral to who they are and how they live. It's an important topic at their dinner tables and in the Knesset. It provides the framework for examining some of the most serious questions of the day. It is a living part of their existence. Like oxygen, Judaism is in the air they breathe; sometimes creating confrontation, other times bringing comfort; sometimes causing confusion, other times offering clarity, but none the less, it is always there.

I'm jealous because you and I are blessed to live in a democratic country, where our rights are protected, and discrimination is a crime. We live in a community where the concentration of Jews is large enough to make the fact that we comprise less than 2% of the population feel absurd. And yet, for far too many of us, Judaism is largely absent from our lives. Yes, we attend High Holiday services and belong to congregations, where we support Jewish life and education, and provide resources for the next generation. But you know as well as I, that many

of our Jewish friends and neighbors do not. They've decided that it's too expensive, or it's not a good value, or it's not that high a priority. They need a Bar Mitzvah? They turn to a tutor and private clergy, or perhaps to Chabad, throw themselves a nice party, and check the "raise the kids Jewish box" off on their checklist, as if just reading from the Torah indelibly marks a soul as Jewish.

I know that we're not the first generation in America to treat our Judaism casually. I remember hearing similar sermons when I was growing up. But there was a difference. They had something that we no longer possess. They were living at a time when the Holocaust was recent history, in an America that was nowhere near as tolerant and accepting of us as it is today.

European Jewry understands what I'm talking about. For them, anti-Semitism is once again becoming normalized. It's alive and well in Great Britain, where an anti-Semite leads the Labor party. It's thriving in France, where an elderly Jewish woman was brutally murdered, but the police refused to investigate because they decided that she accidentally fell from her balcony. Meanwhile, in Sweden the courts have refused to punish a man who tried to burn down a temple while 30 young people were celebrating Hanukkah inside. These attacks don't strengthen the Jewish communities of Europe; little by little they're pushing them out. But they have strengthened European's Jewish identities. Their children attend Jewish day schools where they learn to speak Hebrew, observe the Jewish holidays, and practice Jewish ritual. Meanwhile, for far too many of us, Judaism lies dormant.

From what I've seen, our approach to Judaism appears to be fairly similar to our neighbor's approach to Christianity. They might go to church on the holidays, but mostly, Christmas and Easter are celebrated with a festive meal featuring traditional foods eaten around a table filled with extended family. In our world, family dinners don't happen as often as they used to, so this is a special way to mark the holidays. But as my minister friends tell me, it's not Christmas.

What am I after? It's pretty simple really. I want the most fortunate Jews in history, I want us to be more engaged with our religion, take it a little less for granted. I'd like us to struggle more with our Judaism, treat it as if it was important to us, like it mattered.

Last week at our Second Day Rosh Hashanah service, seven courageous men and women walked onto the bimah and read the story of creation from the Torah. It wasn't easy. In fact, I think a few of them were even sweating. But I'll tell you, I felt proud. I was proud that they cared enough to take on a task that made them sweat, that made them work; that they cared enough to be challenged.

You know, the things that matter most to us are the things we struggle over. If it didn't matter, we'd give it up and walk away. Marriage is something that's worth sweating over. Providing for our family is worth sweating over. Caring for friends is worth sweating over. Honoring the sacrifices of our grand and great-grandparents, passing along our heritage, living with good values, being part of something that is larger than ourselves, having a sense of purpose, these are all things that are worth sweating over. They're worth the effort.

When I was growing up I remember people worrying that, even though we survived Hitler, Judaism might not last another hundred years. Our birthrate was too low. The number of elderly Jews far surpassed the number of Jewish children. That it was only a matter of time till Judaism disappeared.

We don't have to worry about this anymore. Honestly, Israel is a vibrant, vital country. And those Israelis are having lots of children. So many, that they passed by America as the most populous Jewish nation in the world. They're strong, smart and committed. They're building something of great value. They take pride in themselves, their accomplishments and their identity. They aren't going anywhere. They're staying where they are and are growing. Friends, I'm not worried about the future of Judaism anymore.

But I am concerned about our future – the future of American Jewry. I'm worried that we have other interests that are higher priorities, or that we simply can't be bothered to dedicate the time, not to mention the money. America is too comfortable, too easy, too filled with distractions for us to focus our attention on things that are vital, things that make us sweat, things that are a struggle.

I want to take us back to a story in the book of Genesis. The story of Jacob, who left home as a boy and returned as a man. He left home because he had been lazy. His mother wanted him to be a success. She watched over him, cared for him, and whenever the opportunity arose, she

made sure that he received every blessing that was available to him, whether he deserved it or not.

Jacob knew better. He knew that not all those blessings belonged to him; that at least one of them should have gone to his brother. But like I said, he was lazy. So, he allowed his father to put his hands on his head and give him a blessing that was intended for someone else. When his brother learned what happened, he was furious.

Like she did throughout his life, Jacob's mother protected her son from his angry brother, and sent him off to live with her family, where he married, had many children, and attained a measure of wealth. After twenty years away, Jacob, no longer a boy, decided to return home. While he and his family traveled, word came to him about his brother, who had turned himself into a mighty man. Jacob learned that Esau was headed in his direction, accompanied by 400 armed men. Jacob worried about what was to come. Indeed, he even sweated.

Jacob divided up his family and their possessions into two camps. He placed one in the north, and the other in the south. He told his wives and children: "If Esau intends to do us harm, when he attacks one camp, the other one must flee." And then he left his family and headed down to a river where he spent the night.

As Jacob sat by that river he watched the moon rise, saw the clouds roll in, cover it up, and blot out its light. In the darkness, a dread fell upon him and he found himself engaged in the battle

of his life. For how long he wrestled with that man in the dark, he never knew. But when dawn finally broke they were still engaged. The man, or was it an angel, was trying to flee, but Jacob clung to him with all his might. “What do you want from me?” the angel cried out. “I want a blessing” said Jacob. “You already have a blessing,” he responded, “the one you stole from your brother.” “I want one of my own,” said Jacob, “one that I sweated for myself.”

The angel said to him: “What’s your name?” He replied: “Jacob.” The angel said: “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed.” (Gen. 32:28) According to the text, Jacob’s struggle is contained within the name Yisrael; that part of what it means to be “Israel” is to struggle.

Friends, I’ve often thought about the fact that Israel, the Promised Land, never really turned out to be flowing with milk and honey. It was a place that required its inhabitants to work. Even in modern times, while many of Israel’s Middle Eastern neighbors had the blessing of oil flowing out of the ground, Israelis didn’t even have water. And yet, where did the blessings of Israel’s neighbors get them? What successes have their countries achieved? And what about Israel, the country that lacked everything, that needed to scrimp, scrape and save to get by; the country that needed to struggle. How has that worked out for them? Pretty well, I’d say.

Friends, I think struggling gets a bad rap. Yes, it’s hard work; it’s not always pleasant, but it’s pretty darn fulfilling. It means a lot to look back and see all that you’ve accomplished. And

those accomplishments become more dear than just about anything else you have, when you've worked so hard to bring them about.

On this night of Yom Kippur, I want to ask for a blessing for the children of Israel – not the blessing that Jacob received from the hand of his mother, but the blessing that Yisrael earned for himself from the sweat of his brow, from a difficult struggle. On that dark and lonely night, Jacob came to know himself, his courage and strength, his achievements and accomplishments. He saw himself, not as a child, but as the father of a nation; a father of children who would work hard to create something of themselves, something that no other family on earth could lay claim to. They would hear a call to be holy, become a community, teach their children values to live by, hold their heads high, and when life became difficult, they would never give up, they would struggle on, because there is dignity in struggle, there is worth in sacrifice, there is honor in righteousness, there is holiness in our heritage, and all of this belongs to us, as long as, like Jacob, we refuse to let it go.

O God, let us feel the spirit that came upon Jacob on that dark and starless night. Let us feel the sense of worth in struggling for something ancient and holy, something enduring and worthy, something the generations bequeathed to us, that was more precious than any other possession. Let us feel the honor, the dignity, the achievement of being the children of Yisrael, and feeling the satisfaction that comes from struggling for something that is worthy. Amen.