

WRESTLING WITH ISRAEL
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob was alone by the river that night; and a stranger wrestled with him. When the stranger saw that he could not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip and put it out of joint. "Let me go," said the stranger, "for the day is about to break."

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

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This past June the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church stuck a knife in the back of Jews. At least that's how many perceived the vote by our national church, a vote to divest from three American companies that make products used by Israel to enforce its illegal occupation of the West Bank. That story landed on the front page of the New York Times.

The divestment is actually a small amount of money, but a huge humiliation for Israel. It was not unlike our divestment in South Africa during the apartheid era. The Presbyterian Church, once a trusted ally, had delivered a slap to the Jewish people. At least that's how some people took it.

That vote turned out to be even more controversial and divisive than the approval of same-gender marriage the day before. As it turns out, many Christians and Jews have very, very, very strong feelings about Israel.

I have several Jewish friends. One excoriated me and the Presbyterian Church over this; another applauded me and our church for its courage in standing up for justice. After all, when "little David" becomes a nuclear Goliath with whom do you stand?

The American Jewish community sent its most prominent leaders to lobby the Presbyterian General Assembly commissioners meeting in Detroit. Some of them implied – from the platform – that any criticism of Israel is a form of anti-Semitism – you know, hatred and bigotry against all Jewish people, the kind of hatred that fueled the Holocaust and seems to be on the rise again in Europe. Divestment would imply that Israel is a racist state on the par with the old South Africa. Or so some argued.

But there were other Jewish voices at the General Assembly urging passage of the resolution, hoping that a powerful message would be sent to the Israeli government. The vote was 310 to 303. Two years previously the same resolution lost by two votes.

The Presbyterian Church has been wrestling with Israel for a long time, in more ways than one. Wrestling with Israel is not fun. It's a tangled mess and often hurtful. For starters, it's hard to get a grip on what "Israel" we are talking about – the *people* of Israel in the Bible or the *state* of Israel in the Middle East? Or both?

Most of us grew up on biblical stories of ancient Israel and on the notion that it was the favored nation in God's eyes – the so-called chosen people, chosen by God over all other

peoples and nations (just like the USA!). Many of us have deep attachments to the very word "Israel." We can't imagine Christmas without "O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel." We can't imagine Christmas or Easter without Handel's *Messiah*. "Comfort, comfort ye, my people. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem." Most of us were weaned on profound affection for Israel. And first impressions are lasting impressions.

For the first 2000 years of Christianity, the story of Israel made for great poetry, great hymns and great metaphors. Israel was an icon of a longing people, a people longing for communion with God and community with all people, of dreaming with the prophet Isaiah for the day when lion and lamb would lie down together. For 2000 years Israel was an icon, a metaphor for Christians.

And then something happened.

In 1948 a political state was created by British and American fiat and planted in the heart of Palestine and the Palestinian people. The new state had a choice of several names. It took the name "Israel." And just like that "Israel" was now a nation-state where in the wake of the Holocaust Jews could (theoretically!) feel safe the way Muslims feel safe in Saudi Arabia.

So, does the state of Israel get a "free pass" because of the Holocaust or because the Bible says Israel is special, chosen and therefore exceptional?

According to millions of Christians in America, the answer is "yes." According to these particular Christians, whatever Israel wants Israel should get, including \$5 billion a year from the USA, in part, because Israel is the favored of God.

According to a certain reading of biblical prophecy by evangelical Christians, once the Jews in Israel rebuild the Holy Temple and restart bloody animal sacrifices, Jesus will return from heaven to destroy all infidels, including (surprise, surprise) Jews who refuse to convert. "And he shall reign forever and ever" with *true* Christians finally in complete charge of the world – which is about as comforting as the Taliban running the United Nations.

Christian evangelicals are – for the moment – Israel's best friend, but a friend with a deep dark secret (seldom admitted in public): *convert or be damned*. But from what I've heard lately, *some* evangelicals are now wrestling with themselves over their unconditional support of Israel.

And we too wrestle with Israel, even as Israel wrestles with itself, even as America wrestles with its better angels, as does Russia, Ukraine, Iraq, Uganda, Nigeria and Honduras. We wrestle as nations, as communities, as churches and as persons trying to overcome our inner fears, deep grudges and hatreds and find a way to reconcile with those we've wounded and with those who have wounded us.

Once upon a time Jacob wrestled through the night with a stranger that legend says was God or an angel of God. It was the night before Jacob would meet his brother Esau, after 40 some years of festering estrangement. Surely Esau would kill him out of revenge for all that Jacob had stolen from him long ago.

Jacob was alone by the river that night; and a stranger wrestled with him. When the stranger saw that he could not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip and put it out of joint. "Let me go," said the stranger, "for the day is about to break."

"I will not let you go," said Jacob, "unless you bless me. I need protection."

"What is your name," asked the stranger?"

"Jacob."

Then the stranger said, "No longer will you be called Jacob. You shall now be called Israel, for you have wrestled with God and humans and you have prevailed."

And there in that place the stranger blessed Jacob.

And Jacob said: "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." So Jacob called that place Peniel, which means "face of God."

And then day broke, the sun rose and Jacob walked forward, limping.

In the light of a new day, Jacob limped forward step by painful step, limping – no longer striding or strutting but limping – toward his brother Esau waiting in the distance. Jacob limped right up to Esau and looked into his brother's face.

For all we know, it might have been the face of God. Esau reached out for Jacob's neck. Jacob expected a knife. But he got a kiss instead.

Something broken had been healed.

And that takes time. It takes grace. And it takes humility in our walk.