

SHABBAT SERMON
Parashat Vayishlach
5778

I generally don't read the Torah metaphorically, but I like the metaphoric interpretation of Jacob wrestling with the angel, the story we find in Parashat Vayishlach. That interpretation is that Jacob was wrestling with his inner demons, of which he had plenty, and that, in coming out victorious, he both limped and was stronger. The Torah implies that this wrestling match was a necessary precursor to Jacob becoming Israel and the father of the Jewish people. I think this interpretation accurately describes the process of serious inner struggle and growth.

I have a relative who is battling addiction and perhaps mental illness. Treatment has been urged time and again but this relative has always said that he's fine; that he wanted to do things his own way. Just now, he is saying, "I think I need some help." Another relative is on the front line of this discussion and told him, "This isn't going to be easy. You'll have to do some hard work: – and he said, "okay." If my relative goes

through with this, and that's never assured, he could come out a very different person – humbled and stronger at the same time.

I've known Jews in 12-Step programs and their story sounds similar.

Whatever they were addicted to, they came to the decision – “I don't want to live this way any more” – and then they went through a difficult time of recovery and re-entry into healthy society.

It may not always be a crisis that motivates serious personal change, but I do think it always requires hard personal work. If Jacob's wrestling match with the angel teaches us anything, it is that that painful struggle – however terrifying it is – is worth it: it can leave us deeply transformed, and ready to make peace with ourselves and others.