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Steve Kurzman

The first time I can remember wrestling with G-d was shortly after my 20th birthday. I had been involved in a car versus motorcycle accident and found myself sitting in the middle of the street, looking down at my crumpled left leg, feeling alone in the world and engulfed by the realization that something very bad had just happened to me. A few days later, I lay in a hospital bed trying to process everything, and I asked the question that we ask at times of painful transition: Why me? Why had I been injured? Why would G-d do this to me?

The more I thought about it, the idea of an omnipotent micro-manager just didn't make sense to me. After all, even a Being hypothetically responsible for all human joy and suffering in the world must have better things to do on a Saturday night than stage a traffic accident. And though I had made some poor choices as a young adult—who hasn't?—I had done nothing to deserve this. I eventually grew to believe that G-d had had little to do with my accident. The world does not revolve around me, nor does G-d. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

My next story of struggling with G-d was much easier. After years of watching me wring my hands over how to give our daughters a Jewish upbringing, Kim read [The Blessing of a Skinned Knee](#) and said she wanted to start lighting candles on Friday nights as an expression of gratitude. We slowly incorporated more Jewish practice into our lives. I got an illustrated children's bible and started reading *Torah* stories to the kids on *Shabbat*. As we read the amazing and often fantastical stories of our ancestors in Genesis and Exodus, Lila and Audrey asked me, "Dad, is it true? Did it really happen?"

I hemmed and hawed, and I punted that one as long as I could. Did these stories really happen? Did G-d actually give *Torah* to Moses on Mount Sinai? In my mind, not so much. But that's not the point. I'm reminded of a scene toward the end of the last book in the Harry Potter series. Harry is having a surreal conversation with Dumbledore in

what appears to be Kings Cross station and asks, “Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?” Dumbledore replies, “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”

So my answer to their question was that every people in the world has folklore: origin myths to explain creation, allegorical stories about larger-than-life ancestors to teach cultural values, and guidelines and rules for how to live together as a community. Our tribe has *Torah*, and we’ve been reading those stories in *minyans* every week for the past 2,500 years, and probably telling and retelling some of them around the fire for much longer than that. We continue—*l’dor vador* (from generation to generation)—to turn these stories over and over to glean some understanding of who we are, and of our relationship with the ineffability of Creation and the world around us. To paraphrase Dumbledore, of course these stories are folklore, but why on earth should that mean that they are not real—and an important part of who we are?

My most recent, and ongoing, struggle with G-d began over there, on the aisle of the middle section, about 3 or 4 rows in from the back. One of the things that first attracted me to Beth El was the sanctuary. I think it’s supposed to symbolize the *mishkan*, the tent of meeting, but sometimes, by the time Saturday rolls around, I look up and feel more like I’m in the cargo hold of Noah’s ark, seeking shelter from the *shavuah*, the rest of the week. I’m thinking of the original, not the crazy remake with Russell Crowe.

I was also impressed by the prominent Hebrew lettering across the top of the sanctuary, though I could not read it at first. It says, “*D’u lif’nei mi atem omdim,*” or “Know before whom you all stand.” At first, it sounded admonishing, as in, “Don’t forget that you are standing before G-d.” After all, Steve, you are in a House of Worship. G-d is watching.

Then it occurred to me that it doesn’t actually specify whom we are standing before. And the first word is from the verb *la’da’at*, which means to know in the sense of to understand, to be familiar with, to be aware of. I recently learned that, even in modern Hebrew, it’s also the word for knowing someone in the Biblical sense, if you catch my

drift. I think it asks us to try to have a deep, perhaps even intimate, moment of understanding and connection during prayer. But before whom?

One day, I sat over there, on the aisle, about 3 or 4 rows in from the back and I noticed that as I read the sentence from right to left, it was punctuated by a tree perfectly framed in a vertical window. "Know before whom you stand. Tree!" Were the congregation and the tree standing together before G-d? Was the tree a symbol of Creation? After all, G-d appeared in a burning bush in the desert, so why not a tree in Berkeley?

I'm still not sure before whom I stand during the *Amidah*, or with whom I continue to wrestle. Our origin stories tell us that Jacob remained alone, yet wrestled with an angel until dawn and was renamed *Yisrael*. We are *Am Yisrael*, the people who struggle with G-d and prevail. Perhaps, like Jacob, I wrestle with myself as much as with the Divine.

What I do know is that I often feel most Jewish when I am, well, wrestling with G-d and being Jewish. In the moments when I choose to place my faith in the random chaos of the world rather than an omnipotent micro-manager; when I must reconcile my modern, rationalist sensibilities with my desire to teach my children *Torah*; when I gaze out the window today to find relevance in ancient words written in an ancient language; it is in these unlikely moments that I experience my Jewish identity most strongly.

*Ketiva V'Khatima Tova*

May you be written and sealed for a good year