

What Would You Do For a Friend: Wrestling the Jewish Sport
Yom Kippur 5779
Rabbi Hal Rudin-Luria
B'nai Jeshurun Congregation

What would you do for a friend?

Let me tell you about two young men who grew up not far from where we are now- from the other side of the tracks or the other side of the river but their story told by Lisa Fenn is incredible and inspiring.

“If you want something you never had, you must be willing to do something you’ve never done,” that was Leroy’s mantra- the quote written in the weight room above his bench. “If you want something you never had, you must be willing to do something you’ve never done.” Leroy did not have it easy, growing up in the Akron projects raised by his older brother, a teen drug dealer trying to make enough money to feed his family. Leroy was a young athlete, fast and strong. In order to get to school every day, Leroy had to cross train tracks.

One morning, his bag got caught in the tracks and he was run over by a long freight train- his body ripped apart- miraculously surviving but losing both his legs as a young boy in the 5th grade. After months in the hospital, Leroy returned home but he was not physically the same. This unimaginable injury never stopped Leroy and he began weightlifting to better push his wheelchair and pull himself over any obstacle. As he would say, “If you want something you never had, you must be willing to do something you’ve never done.” He eventually moved up to Cleveland to live with his grandmother.

Cleveland’s Lincoln-West High School Wrestling Team, from the Hispanic neighborhood on the near west side, is not a powerhouse sports program. A bunch of beat up stinky high school wrestling mats covered the decrepit gym floor. The team was comprised of only David’s and no goliaths-- a boy with one lung, another with no shoes, one with no legs- Leroy- and a hulking physical specimen who was blind named Dartanyon.

Destined for Greatness was Dartanyon’s motto. He wrote it on the top of every single piece of notebook paper he owned. He truly believed he was

Destined for Greatness. Though legally blind, he first tried football but couldn't find the ball or run in the right direction, so wrestling it was.

No one on the team had ever wrestled competitively, so their coach began by teaching them the basics. The first thing their coach taught them was how to escape. The coach didn't stop there, he taught them positioning and posture, how to use their strength and balance, and their perseverance and will to overcome adversity. But could they truly escape poverty and overcome their difficult circumstances? Growing up in abject poverty, nearly homeless and physically disabled, Leroy and Dartanyon had already wrestled more than their share of challenges. And yet, wrestling had brought them together- and they were wrestling partners- meaning they grappled with each other at every single practice.

Wrestling is a solitary sport of self-preservation. It's not like basketball with other teammates who can rebound your misses and put them in for you. These young men were different, though. One day, Dartanyon turned to Leroy and said, "Hop on my back and I'll carry you" and that's just what he did. Leroy raised himself out of his wheelchair, wrapped his arms around his teammate Dartanyon's neck and rode piggyback on him. He carried Leroy into and out of every gym, onto and off of every mat, that season. It was amazing- the one who can't walk being carried by the one who can't see. They became best friends- more like brothers- looking out for each other.

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And so it was, every match at the end of warmups, a buzzer signaled and the PA announcer spoke: "Please rise for the singing of our national anthem." Dartanyon bent down on the ground. Leroy rose on his left knee, wrapping his arms around Dartanyon's neck as he hoisted him. Leroy turned toward the flag so blind Dartanyon could align himself properly. He supported Leroy's knee with his left hand and Leroy's hands were over his brother Dartanyon's heart.

ESPN recorded a segment on their news magazine program- interviewing each of them. Asking Dartanyon- "How did you end up being the one to carry him?" He answered, "I chose to. I can't imagine not carrying him. Really, it wasn't a choice, it was the right thing to do."

And Leroy spoke up, “To know that there is somebody who will actually put me on his back when I could fall down tells me that there are good people out there.”

The special segment entitled *Carry On* began with a simple question, what would you do for a friend? Carry them as far as they needed. If these boys could do it for each other, so can we.

Wrestling is a Jewish sport- from WWE’s Goldberg to Randy “Macho Man” Savage, we have our share of champs but our most famous wrestler is Jacob the Patriarch, Yakov Avinu, from the Torah. Biblical commentator Rashi asks, why do we spend so much time learning the opening stories of the Torah focused on family dynamics, conflict and growth when the Torah is meant to be a book of law? We need the stories of Genesis like Jacob’s wrestling because they teach us the most important values, middot, and show us how to act and behave; how to think and respond; how to live; how to be a mensch; how to be a brother and sister. They help us answer the first question posed by any person in the Torah, “Am I my brother’s keeper? HaShomer Achi Anochi?” Yes, we most certainly are.

Before this wrestling match of Biblical proportions, Jacob was a trickster, cunning and smart but also young and immature- not an athletic physical specimen compared to his brother Esau the huntsman- Jacob was more of a nerd. It was like he only learned the first lesson from Dartanyon and Leroy’s wrestling coach, he only knew how to escape. Jacob was the great escape artist, fleeing from his past and his mistakes- without confronting them and growing from them. Commentators suggest that Jacob didn’t truly know or accept himself and he longed to be someone else- most likely his long lost twin brother Esau. He was born holding on to his brother’s heel and in every stage of life, people were stepping all over him, pinning him to the mat. The night before he was to be reunited with Esau after more than twenty years of separation, the most famous wrestling match began.

Jacob wrestles an unnamed man- called simply “ish”- the commentators suggest a list of different wrestling challengers- perhaps, it was a divine being or G-d, Jacob’s own conscience, his brother Esau’s guardian angel, or the Esau of Jacob’s imagination. We, too, wrestle with the mistakes of our past and the consequences of our actions. Today is the day to face them, own them, fix them and learn to make better choices. The Biblical struggle lasted all night long.

Finally at sunrise, Jacob prevails against his opponent, transformed and carrying himself differently. Jacob is given a new name- Israel- the one who strives with G-d and prevails. Israel is our name- today, we are the ones who wrestle and can overcome adversity and our mistakes. Rebbe Nachman taught the internal struggles we go through are as intense as a wrestling match between our better and not so better selves. Yom Kippur is about us finding and reclaiming our better selves. Bearing the new name, Israel- our name, Jacob is ready now to meet his long lost brother and ask for forgiveness and reconciliation.

The actress Lilly Tomlin once said, “I always knew I wanted to be someone, I just never knew I had to be specific.” This is our task on this holy day of Yom Kippur, we are all Destined for Greatness but have to get specific about who we are going to be this new year. Jacob found his true self in the wrestling match, just as Dartanyon and Leroy did in the gym. Jacob’s wrestling opened his eyes to the reality of his life choices and circumstances, his achievements and losses. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “It can take a lifetime of wrestling before we know who we are and relinquish the desire to be who we aren’t. The only answer is to “Know thyself” to wrestle with yourself as Jacob did.”

“It is true, we do not create our circumstances in this world, but we do fashion our response. Each individual crafts the moral story of his or her life. The clay is given; the shape of the sculpture is ours.” Rabbi David Wolpe writes, “We are born and we will die. But the tale told within those brackets is not fated. Ability is inherited, but a self is formed from choice, from effort and faith.” (*Why Be Jewish?*) Yom Kippur is the day we focus on the tale of the tape, the story of our lives, the name by which we will be remembered.

Have you ever wondered why this most individual and intimate moment takes place in the largest annual community gathering? We may each be wrestling alone- like Jacob- but we are doing it shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters- our family, our neighbors, our friends and congregants. Together, we can lift each other higher because we have a shared responsibility for every single person in our community. When someone slips up or falls down, we are obligated to raise them back up and return them to the path; to share each other’s burden and to be responsible for each

other's actions. Our prayers in our Machzor are written in the plural for a reason. We are not the only one committing to better ourselves, we do it together so we can carry each other.

What would you do for a friend? Would you lift them onto your back and carry them? How far? For how long? Carrying is a commitment, a relationship created from one act of kindness.

The Biblical story does not simply end with Jacob wrestling and transformed with a new name. What follows is an even greater lesson. We learn how best to approach repentance on this Day of Atonement. Benno Jacob writes that after the wrestling match Jacob was hurt and had a limp, he approached Esau a little hunched over, appearing contrite and soft. Esau expected the arrogant Jacob from childhood but that is not what he saw. Rashbam focuses on how Jacob slowly and reverently approaches Esau different than how as a child Jacob who would always run away from consequences. Here, Jacob approaches directly with the courage to look the person he wronged in the eyes. Jacob is our model of teshuvah. In order to repent, we should be like Jacob: strong and courageous approaching directly those we have wronged and also soft and contrite showing the recognition of the wrong that we have done.

Esau is also a model for us- of acceptance and forgiveness. Perhaps, Esau wrestled that same night with his past and his conscience. In the morning, Esau welcomed his brother with arms open wide and embraced him with a kiss. Esau changed his perspective, looked past the hurts and recognized that Jacob was not the same Jacob- he had changed- and Esau was ready to make amends, forgive and begin again. This is how can we make ourselves better today through repentance and forgiveness.

I recently read in Warren Berger's *A More Beautiful Question* that our lives in the end are remembered by one sentence. It happened in 1962 that Ambassador Clare Boothe Luce, one of the first women to serve in the U.S. Congress in the 1940's, offered advice to President John F. Kennedy. He was still young and growing into his role. She advised him, 'A great man is one sentence.' Abraham Lincoln's one sentence was: 'He preserved the union and freed the slaves.' FDR's was: 'He lifted us out of a great depression and helped us win a world war.' Daniel Pink, a business advisor, suggests a valuable way to focus our life toward greater purpose is to think about our one sentence. What is your one sentence for the New Year?

For Dantanyon and Leroy, their sentences could be: without sight, he could see the good in every person; without legs, he could climb the highest mountain. Dartanyon and Leroy- wrestled and prevailed- by carrying each other, they found who they truly were meant to be. Truly destined for greatness, Dartanyon joined the US Para-Olympic team winning two bronze medals in judo in London and Rio. Leroy was there by his side to carry his brother to victory. Leroy found his passion designing video games using his imagination and creativity to carry others into his virtual world.

We are each charged with the task to wrestle with who we are meant to be, to find our better selves and to craft our one sentence- perhaps it's, she gave selflessly to help others; he raised a loving family; he made amends and changed his life for good; she built a business to support her family and help her community. What is your one sentence for this year?

May this Yom Kippur be a time for wrestling and searching- for finding and reclaiming- for overcoming and transforming. May we remember the lessons of Dartanyon and Leroy- regardless of disability or adversity- that we are each Destined for Greatness and that if we want something we never had, we must be willing to do something we've never done. From them, we learn the power of friendship: how one act of kindness can carry us for the rest of our lives.

What would you do for a friend? What will you do for yourself? What's your one sentence? I aspire that mine will be: he appreciated all the good in his life and looked for ways to share his blessings with others. Let your neighbor know your sentence, share it with your family at break fast tonight- email it to me or write it on Facebook- so it can help us all carry on together for an even better year.

G'mar Chatima Tova- May we all be inscribed and sealed for a year of hope and health, of happiness and inspiration- to overcome and carry on- together.