

Wrestling With God (and Towels)

Topic

Torah

Challenge and Response

Mitzvot, Middot, and Sacred Moments

Grade Level(s)

3rd – 12th

Big Ideas

Wrestling with God is an important part of one's personal and religious growth.

Relevant Vocabulary

מַלְאָךְ (<i>Malach</i>)	A Messenger of God (sometimes referred to as an angel)
בְּרֵאשִׁית (<i>Beresheet</i>)	The Book of Genesis
בְּרָכָה / בְּרָכוֹת (<i>Berachah/ Berachot</i>)	Blessing(s)

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Experience how it feels to engage in a physical wrestling match
2. Consider what Jacob experienced when he wrestled with the *malach*
3. Reflect on what it means to wrestle with God

Materials / Technology Needed

- Towels

Background for Teachers

Twin brothers Esau and Jacob had a fraught relationship from the beginning ([Beresheet 25:20–34](#)). They wrestled *in utero*; and, though Esau was born first, Jacob emerged clutching Esau's heel*. Esau was a hunter who was favored by Isaac his father. Jacob was more inclined to the ways of the shepherd and striving to follow in the ways of God (see for example [Sforno on Beresheet 25:27](#)) was favored by Rebecca his mother**. As the older brother, Esau's birthright was to receive the greater inheritance from his father; but Jacob purchased that inheritance for a pot of lentil stew when Esau returned tired from the hunt.

All of that was prelude to the ultimate deception, when Jacob (at Rebecca's urging) dressed up as Esau in order to get Isaac's *berachah* ([Beresheet 27](#))***. This deception served to cause Esau to want to kill Jacob and Jacob to flee to Haran, where he built a family over many years.

*The Hebrew name Ya'akov comes from the same root as *ekev*—heel.

**It is worth mentioning that God told Rebecca that the older would serve the younger ([Beresheet 25:23](#))

***There are various opinions about whether Jacob really deceived Isaac and whom Isaac truly intended to give each of the three *berachot*. While this is certainly a topic worthy of discussion, it is beyond the scope of this activity.

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Finally, God told Jacob to return to the land of his birth. On the journey there, Jacob sent messengers ahead to Esau in an effort to make peace with him. Then, on the night before he was to meet up with Esau, Jacob was left alone, and a figure came along and wrestled with him until the break of dawn ([Beresheet 32:25](#)). When the figure realized that he had not defeated Jacob, he wrenched Jacob's hip from the socket. When the figure asked to be released, Jacob agreed to do so only after the figure blessed him. After learning Jacob's name, the figure told Jacob that Jacob would now be known as Israel—meaning one who fight's with God.

Commentators discuss whether Jacob's struggle was an external one or an internal one (wrestling with his own demon's before meeting up with his brother). Based on the text in Beresheet, Jacob believed that he had wrestled a divine being, possibly God ([Beresheet 32:31](#)). According to the prophet Hosea, Jacob wrestled with a *malach* ([Hosea 12:4 – 5](#)). Some commentators saw this figure as Esau's guardian angel (e.g. [Rashi 32:25](#)). Others see this event as Jacob wrestling with himself (e.g. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:42; Grumet, *Genesis*, pp. 358 – 360). These various opinions of the struggle show the confusion over whether Jacob was in true physical danger or whether he was experiencing an existential crisis ahead of his meeting with his estranged brother.

This activity will ask learners to consider what it means to wrestle with God. To get a sense of what wrestling feels like physically, it begins with learners engaging in towel wrestling. Make sure to emphasize that learners remain respectful of their opponents and stay safe.

Towel Wrestling Rules:

- Wrestling is done in pairs (i.e. 1 vs. 1).
- Each participant has a towel and holds it on one end.
- There are two options for engaging in the towel wrestling match. Choose the option that is more appropriate for the participants:
 - Participants may move around at will as long as they stay in a designated towel wrestling area (usually a circle). Participants try to take each other's towel. Whoever takes their opponent's towel first gets a point.
 - Towel wrestlers stand facing each other. Participants try to pull their opponents off balance by pulling on their towels. Whoever successfully pulls their opponent off balance or causes their opponent to lose their towel gets a point.
- Matches can be single efforts, best 2 out of 3, etc. The more points in a match, the more that participants will need to think about strategy and be able to reflect on the activity later.

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Prepare in Advance

Review the text of the narrative of Jacob wrestling with the unnamed figure ([Beresheet 32:23 – 33](#)).

Make sure to have a space with a soft surface large enough for learners to towel wrestle (see above for rules). If necessary, reserve a space.

Mark the floor with tape for boundaries for towel wrestling.

Consider participating in the towel wrestling against another grownup.

If you have *madrichim* or other assistants, let them know that they can participate against each other as well.

Description of Activities

1. Tell learners that they will be towel wrestling and explain the rules to them.
2. Divide learners into pairs of similar athletic ability.
3. Pairs face off in towel wrestling matches. Those who are not wrestling in the current match should watch and cheer on the current participants.
4. After all matches are completed discuss:
 - a. What was easy about towel wrestling? What was difficult?
 - b. What did you need to do in order to take your opponent's towel? What did you need to do to protect your own?
 - c. How difficult was it physical y?
 - d. How did you strategize both your attack and your defense? How did your strategy change over the course of the match?
 - e. What other ways do you wrestle? [Note that this question might elicit answers about wrestling with academic questions, moral dilemmas, spiritual issues, etc.]
5. Briefly tell the narrative of Jacob and Esau and of Jacob wrestling with the figure before he reunites with Esau.
6. Discuss:
 - a. What might it mean to wrestle with God?
 - b. When might it be OK to wrestle with God? When might it be problematic to wrestle with God?
 - c. When do you wrestle with God?
 - d. When do you wrestle with yourself? What does it look like to wrestle with yourself? How does it feel to wrestle with yourself?

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7. Learners create a wrestling journal.
 - a. This can either be a physical journal or online.
 - b. Explain to learners that the journal is a place to write down their thoughts when they struggle with God. They can include questions, ideas, answers, etc. Some prompts that they can use are:
 - i. Tell about a time when you felt like you were “wrestling” with a problem or decision. How did that struggle change you, similar to how Jacob was changed?
 - ii. Jacob’s name was changed to Israel after his struggle. What kinds of challenges in life can help you grow or see yourself in a new way?
 - iii. What do you think it means to wrestle with “God”? Is it okay to question, struggle, or argue with your religion? Why or why not?
 - c. They do not need to share what they write, but it gives them an opportunity to put down their thoughts.
 - d. Offer a place where learners can bring up what they are wrestling with, so the community can discuss the issues. Make sure that there is a way to do this anonymously.

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Learners try to pull a towel out of the teacher’s or another adult’s hand.
- Learners draw a picture of something they find hard about being Jewish.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Learners explore more commentaries about what happened between Jacob and the figure he wrestled with.