

Balancing Priorities: Wrestling or Singing Harmony?

On Sunday, Oct. 14th, Talmud Torah parents and I studied “The Fourfold Song” by 20th century sage Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. In this text, he discusses how different people feel drawn to sing different “songs:” of themselves, of their tribe, of humanity, or the song of all of creation. No one song is better or higher than the other; all are necessary. In fact, he writes, “each one lends vitality and life to the other.” When we seek to sing all the songs together, “this full comprehensiveness rises to become the song of holiness, the song of God, the song of Israel, in its full strength and beauty, in its full authenticity and greatness.”

Rav Kook points out that the name of the Jewish people, Yisrael, (ישראל) is an anagram of “song of God,” (שיר אל). Of course, there is another source for that name. In Genesis 32 (which will be read the Shabbat of Nov. 24th this year), Jacob wrestles all night with an angel. After the wrestling, he receives the name ישראל, one who “wrestles with God.” One parent pointed out to me that trying to balance our responsibilities and visions for ourselves, our tribe, humanity and the world often feels like an impossible tension, a wrestling. How do we experience it as a song, a harmony?

I want to suggest one strategy that feels increasingly important in these tense times: Shabbat. Shabbat is supposed to be a taste of harmony, a break from our usual routine. I’m not referring to the usual practices of services or big meals – though I think those practices are quite valuable. Rather, I suggest that we practice Shabbat as a time when we sing different “Songs,” so to speak. For those who feel caught up in the song of all humanity, perhaps Shabbat can be a chance to reconnect with the song of the self. For those who feel overwhelmed by the “song” of our own family’s needs, Shabbat can be an opportunity to sing the “song” of the wider community. So may we bring more harmony to our wrestling.