

Dear Chavraya,

My Bobi had many sayings in Yiddish. She had only one in English, as far as I can remember, that she would say in times of sorrow, when nothing seemed to make sense. Whether for herself, or for us, in such times she would say, "Y" is a crooked letter." I never really understood what she meant or where the saying came from, but in the way of her saying it there was something that seemed more profound than the simple words would suggest. I wondered if she really meant the letter "Y" itself. In its printed capital form, the letter suggests uncertainty, its bifurcated arms reaching in different directions as they separate from their common stem. There is a suggestion of uncertainty, which way will life go, where will our journey take us? I doubt that Bobi gave such thought to the meaning of her words, even as they compelled me to probe what she meant. She felt something more intuitively, a deeper truth that she had gained from a hard life. While she spoke of the letter "Y," it was clearly the word that she meant, whether asked plaintively or accusingly, "Why?"

In earlier years, I heard sad resignation in Bobi's sigh as she offered her simple wisdom. Over time, whether speaking out of her own sorrow, or responding to that of others, I came to hear not so much resignation as determination. Even now, as I hear her voice, I find that I draw encouragement from her words. For all of the temptation to seek answers, to want to know a reason, I think she was really saying, that in the face of the unexplainable such is not helpful. It does not mean that we don't cry out, that we don't rail, but in the end it is to take that energy with all of its pain and open our broken hearts to God's comforting embrace, to take the hand and the shoulder offered by those who love us, of those who know our pain, because they too have been there.

To be a Jew is to be one who wrestles, one who is invited, through our very name, to wrestle with God. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayishlach*, we find the well-known account of Ya'akov's night wrestling. It is not clear with whom he wrestles, many thoughts offered by commentators, many questions and possibilities rising within ourselves. Some say it was an angel, or the spirit of his brother Esau, whom he was about to encounter for the first time since fleeing Esau's anger after having stolen his birthright and blessing twenty years earlier. Perhaps he wrestled with himself. The name he is given after the night wrestling is *Yisra'el/one who wrestles with God*. It is the name given to each of us.

After crying out, feeling depleted of spirit, tears drying upon our face, having demanded to know why, another possibility opens. We want to know what happened when tragedy or illness strikes, when there may be information to be gained, but in the end it is not a theological answer we seek. It is not an answer from God that we really want. To ask why, expecting an answer beyond the obvious of illness or accident, would suggest a reason, a just purpose to the sorrow that death and pain has brought. In the frailty of life is also its miracle, that we can love, and create, and accomplish so much in spite of our frailty.

One of the most comforting images of God for me is that of God crying. The rabbis speak of God shedding tears each night for our sorrows. If there was really an answer on God's part to our crying out and asking "why," it would be

cruel and capricious, pushing us away from God when we need God's comfort the most. Though she would not have expressed it this way, I think it is what Bobi meant in her simple saying, "Y is a crooked letter." Even as we wrestle with God as Jacob did, God cries with us. In times of sorrow, may we find comfort in God's embrace and in the embrace that we offer to each other.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor