

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD

SHABBAT EVENING, 16 DECEMBER 2016

T-Bone Steaks Can Be Kosher, But...

I know it will seem strange to you that I would entitle my *d'var torah*, "T-Bone Steaks Can Be Kosher, But..." First, I don't eat red meat and, except for eating goat once in a kosher restaurant in Israel just to see what it tastes like, I haven't eaten red meat in thirty years (I'm strictly a fins-and-feathers guy). And then you won't see any T-Bone steaks at Crown Market in Hartford (or at the Butcherie in Brookline or at Larry Levine's in Peabody) or in the kosher meat section of Stop & Shop in East Longmeadow or of Trader Joe's in Hadley. So, to use a Chicago expression, how come T-Bone steaks end up in my *d'var torah*? And how can T-Bone steaks possibly be kosher anyway?

Well, before I tell you, I want to take a look for a moment at a piece of this week's *parashah*, *Vayishlach*. Let me read the key section. I know the story is familiar to you, but perhaps you haven't ever looked at it in the original. The setting? Jacob has heard Esau is coming toward him, probably to get him, and with him are with four hundred men. Payback time!

First, the setting of the story:

23 He (i. e., Jacob) arose that night, took his two wives, two maidservants, and eleven children and crossed the ford of the Yabbok. 24 After taking them across the stream, he sent his possessions across.

"Now," to quote Paul Harvey, *alav hashalom*, "For the rest of the story":

25 Jacob was left alone. A man wrestled in the dust with him until the crack of dawn. 26 When he realized he could not beat him, he touched him on the hollow of his thigh, wrenching Jacob's thigh muscle as he wrestled with him in the dust. (For those of you who are fans of WWF, this is definitely dirty fighting) 27 Then he said, "Let me go because dawn is breaking."

He replied, "I won't let you go unless you bless me."

28 So he said, "What's your name?"

He replied, "Jacob."

29 Said he, "Your name shall not be called Jacob anymore but Israel, meaning, 'You have striven with divine beings and with men, and you have prevailed.'¹

30 Then Jacob asked and said, "Tell me, please, *your* name."

Then he said, "How is it that you have to ask my name?" He blessed him on the spot.

¹ This passage can also be translated as, 'You have striven with God and with men, and you have prevailed.'

31 Jacob called the name of the place, Peni'el, meaning, 'I have seen God face to face, and my life has been spared.'

32 The sun rose over him as he passed Penu'el, and he was limping on his thigh. 33 Therefore the Children of Israel do not eat the sciatic nerve on the hollow of the thigh [even] to this day because he wrenched the hollow of Jacob's thigh at the sciatic nerve. (Genesis 13:23-33²)

Now, about why we theoretically *can* eat T-Bone steaks, there is a key element of an aspect of *kashrut* that derives from this *parashah*. It's the part about not eating sciatic nerve, called in Hebrew, *gid hanasheh*. Just as the Torah tells us, that really does continue to this day. In an animal on the hoof, it is found in back part of an animal or what, typically, is known as the hind quarter. And, practically speaking, it is the reason why all of the kosher meat you will find here comes from the fore-quarter of the animal.

But first, here is a term you need to know: *trabering*. *Trebering*, *nikkur* in Hebrew, refers to the removal of certain nerves we Jews don't eat. In the fore-quarter, the only forbidden nerve is found in the inside of the rib cage. For a butcher, it is relatively simple to remove. And that is why you will find kosher cuts of beef coming from the fore-quarter of the cow.

However, to remove the *gid hanasheh*, that's something quite different. It is extremely tricky and difficult to do. It is very time consuming, and it is beyond the capability of most butchers in this country. Consequently, years ago, the rabbis here in the States simply put a ban on using the hind quarter of a cow, which, for those people who are meat eaters, that meant the end of eating any of the choice cuts that come off of a cow: T-bone, Porterhouse, Sirloin, NY strip, tenderloin, and the like (If you want to know how I know about such things, I once worked in a grocery store that had a meat market).

Now in Europe, especially in Poland I've been told, butchers *did* know how to *traber* the *gid hanasheh*. Before the war, consequently, you could find all of the choice cuts of meat in kosher markets, though, because of the labor involved, I'm guessing, they were expensive. But they were there. And that means that, theoretically, if someone knows how to *traber* the hind quarter of a cow and remove the *gid hanasheh*, the sciatic nerve, there is absolutely no reason why a t-bone steak is *trayf*. But practically speaking, if you keep kosher, you won't ever find kosher T-bone steak. That's why I titled this *d'var torah*, *T-Bone Steaks Can Be Kosher, But...* ...But they don't exist here.

But a lesson in *kashrut* law is not the main thought behind my remarks tonight. It's about wrestling, as in Jacob wrestling with... I don't know *who/what* Jacob was wres-

² Biblical passage translated by Rabbi Howard Kosovske.

ting with. Was it, as one midrash suggests, Esau's guardian angel? Or was it, in Jacob's mind, a rehearsal for the fight with his brother that he believes he is going to have to fight the next morning? Or was it with.....himself, that is, coming from his past, as in stealing his brother's share of his father's estate (and that's about money in the amount of the extra share his father's estate the elder brother is entitled to)? Or, more, was it with the trials and tribulations simply of growing up and assuming the life role that will fall to him? We don't know, of course. We only know that he wrestles. In the dust, as the text says. Down and dirty. And while he wins, and while who he is goes from his being Jacob (and that means, a heel) to Yisra'el (best understood as Champion of God [World champ?]), he doesn't just get up and move on. He limps away. In pain from the experience.

And that's the big lesson here. We can't just walk through life. There are major issues in life that, to get through them, take heavy-duty wrestling within us. Perhaps one is a divorce. Or the loss of a loved one. Or the loss of a job. Or coming to the realization that what one dreamed of for his/her life's dream simply isn't going to be because we all can't, no matter how hard we try and how long we practice, necessarily win that Olympic Gold,, or whatever the Olympic God represents in our lives. And when we wrestle and come to new realizations and acceptances, it doesn't mean that we won't carry the pain of wrestling with us, the scars if you will, for our lives always.

But then, so what? Do we grow from it all?

I learned something from my Grandmother, *aleha hashalom*. She didn't learn this from a book. She learned it from her own life experiences. She used to say – and I'll give this to you in translation, not in the Yiddish as she said it, "If you don't learn from the negative experiences, then the experiences are vain, wasted."

And when we do learn, we do end up growing. And maybe it's the growing part that can turn us from being the heel to being the champion...

One last point here. The wrestling match in this week's *sidra* (That's the other word for a *parashah*) takes place at a place known as the Ford of the Yabbok. The Yabbok is a river, one that ran right through the kibbutz, Ma'agan Mikhael, that was my home and where I studied Hebrew intensely for six months between the time I finished university and entered HUC. But what I want to point out is that the Hebrew of "Ford of the Yabbok" is *Ma'avor Yabbok*. And what is significant about that is that *Ma'avor Yabbok* is the name of a book, specifically, the how-to manual used to guide a *chevra kaddisha* (the holy burial society) through a *taharah*, the ritual purification of a body before burial. *Ma'avor Yabbok* is the guide-book for the *ultimate* journey, the journey from this world to the next.

But even that suggests something. Who we are, what we are, what we will become – and I am speaking now about during our lifetimes – only comes through our wrestling with the trying issues and questions of our lives. To succeed in that is to work our way through the challenges the issues present. And no matter how it all ends, it is the wrestling that transforms us, and that, more than anything, is the key to finding happiness and ultimate success in our lives.

May we, when those challenging moments arise in our lives, be up to confronting them and wrestling our way through them. And in that, after we have done so, may we too, as Jacob, end up on the path to being victorious in *our* quest for a meaningful and fulfilling life.