

Genesis 32:28

An Interfaith Bible Study Model with a Jew and a Christian

APCE Annual Event

Workshop A105

Leaders

Rabbi Shawn B. Zell

and

Julia A. Boyce

Leader Biographies

Rabbi Shawn B. Zell

Rabbi Zell is an experienced pulpit Rabbi, having served congregations in Iowa, New Jersey and Texas. He currently serves as a Chaplain at an assisted living center in New Jersey.

Rabbi Zell holds certification and ordination as both a Conservative and Orthodox Rabbi. He also is a certified counselor. For over five years he has periodically led adult Sunday School classes, in person or by Zoom, at First Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas.

He is the author of *The Right Word – A Practical Guide for Visiting a Mourner*, *Passover Points to Ponder – A Unique Perspective on the Passover Seder*, *For Those Who Grieve – A Prayer Book for a Shivah House*, and most recently published, *Meaningful Mourning – Reflecting on the Life and Death of a Loved One*.

He is a native of Winnipeg, Canada. He and his wife, Shirah are the parents of a daughter, son and daughter-in-law and the grandparents to three grandsons. They reside in New Jersey near their family.

Julia A. Boyce

Julia Boyce is a Certified Christian Educator through the Presbyterian Church USA and an elder at First Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas. She has a Master of Religious Education from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.

For fifteen years, Julia served Grace Presbytery as the Director of Christian Education and the Resource Center. She has also participated on curriculum writing teams for the PCUSA.

Julia served on an APCE ministry team for at least ten years. She had the honor and privilege of presiding as APCE President during COVID when APCE held its first ever totally “on-line” event.

Currently, Julia Boyce regularly teaches adult Sunday School and Presbyterian Women groups at First Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas where she lives with her husband, Richard G. Boyce.

Julia and Richard are the parents of a daughter, son and daughter-in-law.

PART 1

Interfaith Dialogue Points

What do we mean by interfaith? The word points toward activities or relationship between people with different beliefs or faith identities.

From the book *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith* by Mackenzie, Falcon and Rahman:

Stages of interfaith dialogue include...

- Identify the universals between you and the other person which transcend the difference in faith practices or beliefs such as love, peace, compassion, and justice
- Move beyond separation and suspicion
- Inquire more deeply
- Share both the easy and the difficult parts
- Move beyond safe territory
- Explore one another's spiritual practices

Our stories are often the first and best way to begin building interfaith bridges.

Key actions to remember when moving into an interfaith relationship...

Listen - Learn - Discover - Appreciate - Celebrate

Words of wisdom about Interfaith come from Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *Holy Envy*

"...I believe this has become my Christian duty. I believe it is the neighborly thing to do, the Christ-like thing to do...to find the bridges between my faith and the faiths of other people, so that those of us who draw water from wells on different sides of the river can still get together from time to time, making the whole area safer for our children."

"It is a great thing to see something familiar from an unfamiliar angle...This is especially important for monotheists...whose focus on one God can so easily lead us to believe we are the only apple of God's eye."

"...when my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor."

"There is no such thing as religion. There are only religious people, who embody the scripts of their faiths as differently as dancers embody the steps of their dances."

Interfaith Scripture Study – a Jew and a Christian

Notes from *The Bible with and without Jesus* by Amy Jill Levine

“Jews have the Tanakh, and although the Old Testament and Tanakh share books, the communities interpret the shared verses differently... Christians read their Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament, and Jews read the Tanakh through the lens of postbiblical Jewish commentaries...we hope that people with different interpretations with and without Jesus – will talk to each other and understand each other better.”

“When read through Christian lenses, what the church calls the “Old Testament” points to Jesus. When read through Jewish lenses, what the synagogue calls the “Tanakh” speaks to Jewish experience, without Jesus. When read through the eyes of historians, these original texts yield meanings often lost to both church and synagogue...”

“The Bible itself is less important in Judaism than the Bible *interpreted*.”

“Interpretation in Jewish tradition is an ongoing process, a partnership where humans interpret a divine text.”

The Bible is *torah*, “instruction.”

“Yet we must constantly reassess how we teach and live this instruction, for what is appropriate in one period or for one person may not be in another setting or for a different audience.”

“We are stronger when we wrestle, and when we read together. And we can, in agreeing to disagree with one another, still ask, “Give me another interpretation,” for that supply is inexhaustible.”



PART 2

Prayer of Illumination

Ever-living Hashem, our ever-loving G-d, give us humility of mind and hospitality of heart to receive your gracious Word in the ancient stories of your faithfulness. Amen

Reading of the Text – Genesis 32:22-32

Exegetical Notes from Rabbi Zell

1. What does “wrestle” mean? How does it differ from “struggle?”
2. The root of the Hebrew word “wrestle” Va’Yay’Ah’VayK” is **AVK**
AVAK means dust. What does this suggest?
3. What is dust? How does dust differ from earth?
“Then the Lord God made man from the dust of the earth.” Is this true?
Why then was the first man called “Adam?” (land, earth, soil)
4. Two bits of unnecessary information are included in verse 25. Explain
5. With whom did Jacob struggle?
6. What are Jacob’s conditions for granting safe passage?
Were these conditions met?
7. The root of the Hebrew word “Yisra’el” is **SAR**
SAR means prince/lord/minister.
Is it true then that Jacob struggled with God?
8. Based on this information, what is Jacob told by the mystery man?
But you will be able to...
9. “Kicking up dust” is mentioned twice
“Break of dawn” is mentioned twice
Solitude is mentioned unnecessarily.
What are we to make of this?
10. With whom is Jacob wrestling?

Two Hebrew Words for “wrestle”
and neither mean wrestle!

וַיֹּאבֶק

va'ye'aveyk

“they kicked us out”

שָׂרִיתָ

sahreetah

“you ruled over”



Image by Sefira Lightstone a Jewish illustrator who lives in Jerusalem

Exegetical Notes from Julia A. Boyce

“I do not at all understand the mystery of grace - only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.” Anne Lamott

In appreciation to Rev. Dr. John C. Holbert author of a Patheos article –
The Surprise of Grace: Reflections on Genesis 32:22-31

1. The Hebrew text says that “Jacob wrestles with a man” and this fact alone calls us into a deeper examination of this text.
2. Considering the identity of the wrestler that accosted Jacob - was it an unknown man, an angel or God or some thief in the night? What if Jacob was wrestling with himself?
3. Jacob shows his true “colors” when he demands a blessing from his opponent. Yes, this is the Jacob we all know and love – the one who clawed and scratched his way through life to the top rung of the ladder stepping on others as he did so.
4. The wrestling opponent asks Jacob his name and declares him the victor in the struggle while changing his name to Israel. Always the bargainer, Jacob demands his opponent’s name.
5. After naming the place of the struggle Peniel (*face of God* in Hebrew), Jacob tells his wrestling tale with all the panache he can muster (vs. 30) by claiming “I have seen God face-to-face, yet my life is secure.”

6. Why should we trust Jacob's version of events? He is the only one that says he met God face-to-face. The only one to do that and live was Moses on Mt. Sinai (and even Moses had to turn his back to God).
7. Who else but Jacob would crow about having never lost at anything; about demanding a blessing and who else but Jacob would brag about seeing God's face?
8. This story from a Christian perspective may be about Jacob seeing the face of God alright but not in a wrestling match. Rather Jacob sees the face of God in Esau's face. Esau extends the hand of grace and love to a brother who had treated him abominably and in doing so shows Jacob the real character of God – forgiveness and grace.
9. The question we may take away from this lesson is this: *Do we not often find God in very unexpected places, mirrored in very unexpected people?*

If we can open our hearts and minds to that possibility then we may truly encounter the living God, rather than a god made somehow in our own image.



Closing Responsive Reading

For the encounters with G-d/Hashem today, in stranger and friend...

we are grateful.

For the love shared...

we are grateful.

For kindness and hospitality given...

we are grateful.

We pray for those who struggle day or night...

wrestling with G-d/Hashem, themselves, or unnamed fears.

Give them peace.

Give peace to all in their trials and tribulations.

Go now, confident in the knowledge that G-d/Hashem is with you.

Amen

Bibliography

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