

Struggles

and the value of persevering through them

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It is critical to know that some struggles of life are not meant to be *conquered*. They must simply be *withstood*.

A friend of mine recently lost his mother. As we were speaking, he shared with me how he hopes to be able to “overcome the challenge” soon. I shared with him that from my own experience of losing my mom nearly six years ago — mourning is not something one is meant to overcome *per se*. In fact, when we try to overcome death and mourning, and bury the pain, it ends up surfacing later in unexpected and much more damaging ways like guilt, remorse, and despair.

Loss is part of life. Precisely what makes death so hard is that there’s nothing we can do to shield ourselves from it, and no way to undo it once it’s arrived.

Fascinatingly, when I asked this friend what were some of his mom’s major strengths and messages to the world, he said: **her ability to remain regal and composed even under the most difficult of circumstances.**

The irony was that this was precisely the spiritual idea I wanted to convey to him. And it came from his own mother.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, whom we’ve learned from over the [last two weeks in XL](#), breaks down a meaningful Jewish life into [three dimensions](#):

1. Fulfilling God’s explicit commandments (the [mitzvot](#))
2. Aligning our inner selves to fulfill our purpose “with all of our heart and soul”
3. **Staying the course while the storms of life try to knock us down**

Most people associate Judaism’s vision of life as keeping the mitzvot. This is what most people think of when they think of the term “being religious.” Some people realize that true religiosity requires a person to also be sincere and connected mentally and emotionally to what they’re doing, and not just “going through the motions.”

But although everyone goes through challenges in life, almost no one realizes that this is a whole $\frac{1}{3}$ of what life is all about.

And this is a problem. Here's why:

When we're going through hard times, our knee-jerk reaction is to fix the situation. But some difficult situations can't be fixed, they must simply be endured. We just have to make sure we keep our heads above water.

Just this knowledge can help us make it to the other side in one piece.

My dear friend [Rabbi Moshe Gersht](#) recently gave the metaphor of getting stuck in quicksand. A person thinking they have to somehow "defeat" the quicksand is precisely what leads them to panic and tunnel vision, which in turn lead to flailing arms and legs, which accelerates their process of sinking into the quicksand.

Instead, if the person accepts, "OK, I guess I stepped into quicksand," he or she can maintain the calm necessary to keep their eyes and ears open to possible solutions.

So too, when we go through a rough patch in our relationships or jobs or physical/emotional health, although we should of course do everything in our power to improve our situations, the first thing to do is recognize and accept that we're going through a rough patch. This acceptance prevents us from tensing up and making rash decisions, and also reminds us that it's temporary and not forever.

The notion that "success" can only mean defeating others is a Western idea that the Talmud attributes to our great uncle Esav. Esav was Jacob's twin brother who [beat him out of the womb by a matter of seconds](#). Esav sold his right to be the spiritual heir to his father Yitzhak [on his way back from his grandfather Avraham's funeral](#). He said to himself, "If after an entire life of service, you just die, and get put in the ground, I'm out." He chose instead a life of victory and glory, and became a warlord, [founder and King of Edom](#), which the Sages see as the spiritual roots of the Roman empire and our Western admiration of Top 10 lists, gold medals, and 50 under 50.

Battling the worldview of Esav on his terms is a losing proposition because we don't look at success the same way.

Jacob was forced to flee from the wrath of his brother Esav for decades. On his way back, he gets seized by an inner conflict with everything his brother represented — otherwise known as "Esav's angel". [They wrestled until the break of dawn](#).

Every external physical battle in life has a corresponding internal spiritual battle. Yaakov had to come to terms psychologically with the differences between him and his older twin brother before he encountered him physically.

What's amazing about this fight is that Yaakov doesn't win — not in the conventional sense as see “winning” as Americans.

What Yaakov does is that he holds his ground.

The angel [“couldn't beat him.”](#)

Since the angel couldn't tolerate not winning, he sucker-punched him “where the sun don't shine.”

Yaakov “wins” by asking for a blessing of acknowledgement that this is true success. Here's what the angel says to him in response:

[וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אָנָשִׁים וַתִּגְדֹּל:](#)

[He said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have grappled with divine and human beings, and have been able \[to hold your own\].”](#)

This is the meaning of our name “Israel.” It is about holding our own — retaining our integrity against the forces that try to knock us down.

Even when we don't win on their terms, we have to see ourselves as successful on our own terms.

This is true for all of us as individuals, and it's true for Jews living through history as a nation. The brutal attacks of October 7th came on the backdrop of already high anti-semitism around the world, and the relentless challenges of assimilation. They were followed by anti-Israel, and frankly, openly anti-Jewish protests in every major city on the planet. Not only did Israel have to enter a war it didn't start, and then deal with the devil to get back as many of our brothers and sisters as we can, we have to constantly fend off accusations that turn it all against us.

Are we winning?

You better believe it.