

# Becoming Brothers

Howard Waskow and Arthur Waskow

## ARTHUR

Watching our mother die, struggling with the hospital to let her die, had brought us brothers into the closest relationship we had ever had. Her funeral posed the danger of an intense explosion.

How to shape a funeral that would honor her truth? That she would want it to be Jewish was clear; that she had no institutional connections—not even to a friendly rabbi or a once-a-year synagogue—was equally clear. I alone had focused my life around Judaism; did that make me the maven, the expert, even the “rabbi,” for this moment? What would that do to my father, my brother?

We agreed that I would call a rabbi who was a friend of mine, a man of unusual learning, openness, and wisdom. He agreed to lead the service. But he had a suggestion: Perhaps Howard and I should each speak about Honey’s life, what she had meant to us and in the world. Better us than someone who barely knew her.

To me that seemed perfect. I went back to Howard to propose it. “No,” he said. “To you it’s perfect because you know how to take what’s intimate and make it public. That’s how you write, that’s how you speak. I can’t do that. I would break down, just stand there weeping. It’s too close, too intimate, for me to do.”

“My closeness to her was different from yours,” he went on. “Maybe you are more like her than I am. But I could talk with her—you couldn’t. And she could talk with me. She did talk with me. I can’t tell all that, and I can’t talk without telling all that. So I can’t talk.”

For one murderous moment, a flash of hatred ran through me. “He’s saying Honey loved him more than me!” I thought.

And then I thought, “So what?”—“But if he says that, I ought to kill him.”—“Really?”—“Well, at least I ought to hate him.”—“Really?”—“Well, I do hate him!”—“Really?”

So I looked for the murderous flash, to prove I hated him. But it was gone. The days of loving wrestle were still there. With a shiver of regret, almost nostalgia—“Where are you, Murder, now that I really need you?”—I turned

back to my brother.

“All right, I understand. If you can’t do it, you can’t. But I can, and it’s what I know to do to give her honor. You said it, it’s true that I can take what’s intimate and say it in the world. Is that okay?”

A long pause. “Well, I would feel terrible, I would feel diminished. It would look as if you were speaking for us all—as if your version were the truth. My truth of her would get left out. I know I’m choosing to leave it out, but I don’t want yours there and mine not. So I wish you wouldn’t speak.”

“But that’s not fair! That’s not legitimate! You decide you won’t speak, and then because you won’t speak I shouldn’t speak. Come on!”

“I know it’s not ‘legitimate.’ But if you talk, I’ll feel diminished.”

I walked away in total pain. Pain for me, pain for him. A double bind.

To be who I fully am—in the moment out of my whole life when I most want to be my fullest self—means to speak aloud my love, my honor, my truth about my mother. But what honor would it be to my mother to make my brother feel terrible? What fulfillment of my self would it be to make my brother feel diminished? Back and forth, back and forth—

Would it be my responsibility if he made himself feel terrible? No! And for a moment I felt released. I could do what was mine to do, he would be responsible for feeling bad.

But it didn’t matter. Did I want him to feel diminished? No! Did I want him to feel fully himself? Yes! Then must I take the positive steps to make that possible? Not for his sake but because I wanted it that way?—Yes, yes!—But what about my own fulfillment? Back and forth, back and forth.

I went to Phyllis. She listened. She suggested: “Ask Max [our rabbi friend] to meet with both of you and all of us, to hear our stories of Honey and retell them—as our stories, not as his. It won’t pretend to be a polished eulogy, it won’t shimmer and flow. It will be real, it will have in it what you want to say and whatever Howard is able to say and whatever the rest of us say.”

I went back to Howard. He listened, nodded. “That’s

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fine, that's what I'd want." —Me again: "But not what I want!" —And for a few minutes we go through the whole thing again.

My heart is hammering, knocking with a silent voice of its own: "You know what you're supposed to do. You're the older brother. You've been first, you wrote about it even—all that stuff about Ishmael and Isaac, and Esau and Jacob, you know what you're supposed to do. Give it up, give it up, give it up!" —And me, in silence answering back, a voice not from my head or heart or lungs but even deeper, "I can't do it, all right I know but I can't do it. Why should I do it? No, don't tell me why—it doesn't matter; I can't do it. I can't."

And then an outburst, yelling at Howard. "It's not a compromise, it's not half-way, you understand? I don't want it, it's not what fits me. It fits you and not me, you understand? I don't want it, you understand?"

He looks at me quietly: "I understand."

And then the barrier between my two silent voices collapses. My vocal voice says aloud: "OK. Let's do it. Let's ask Max to collect our stories. I'll call him."

And I feel solid. Not joy, not love, not sadness, not anger, not relief, not resignation. Not...anything "peculiar." Solid. There's work to do; let's do it.

I went off to call the rabbi, ask the family to think of the stories they wanted to tell, jot down some of my own. The rabbi said all right. The work was under way.

An hour later, my brother came to talk: "Would you do it? Do it the way we said to have Max do it? Would you collect the stories and then tell them—not in your own voice but in all our voices? I'd like for you to do that."

And then I cried. Then I remembered: Surrender, and space opens up. Maybe your brother will surrender back to you. (Maybe not.) Surrender, and the universe might surrender back. Surrender what you wanted: it might use the new open space to open up some new path, some new possibility. It might turn out you want the new path even more.

So that is what we did. I gathered stories, and I told them. I began with a story about Honey's love of pistachio ice cream, and I went on with stories of her passionate, curious love of all of us and all of life, and I ended with the story of her passionate love of Dad. Howard hugged me and said he felt his voice well spoken.

And I had been the best myself I could be—even better than my best own self, because the wrestle had forced me to hear the other selves as well and speak them.

"Two brothers," I said in my talk. "Two brothers from the same womb; so different. From the same womb, two different intertwining stories."

Up to that moment, Howard and I had wrestled many wrestles. Some were simply for the joy of it; some for

power and advantage; some, a higher, more subtle interplay of love and struggle. This had been the highest of our wrestles so far, because we were most conscious of each other's pain as well as his own.

The highest, but probably not the last, for now we know it goes in spirals. One wrestle may lead to reconciliation, and then the new relationship may somehow spark again that flash of murder. And we will find ourselves in still a different wrestle.

**W**hat is growing on these spirals? What makes them go somewhere, instead of just around in circles?

It comes to me that the spiral is about the teaching, and the knowing, between us. For years I tried to teach him, and for years he refused to learn from me. I know he imitated what I did. But face to face—from me—he wouldn't learn.

And then it changed. I began to learn from him.

When I think about the years of his divorce, the years when he was asking, probing, digging in the half-forgotten tales of Cottage Avenue in order to uncover his own story, the few years just after our long talk in the snowed-in cabin when I was learning to wrestle with him and with Torah, the years when I was learning to discover my own story in the "family history" of the Bible—when I think of what was changing in those years, it was that I had begun to learn from Howard.

What was I learning? Not just that divorce could be survived. I was learning to look more closely at the people close around me. All my life I had been "far-sighted," looking beyond the family and the neighborhood toward the larger world. After all, if the family locked me out and left me wailing there, what could I finally do but turn my back on them and look outward toward all those shimmering distances?

In those years when I began to learn from Howard, I began to look more closely at the close-in people in my life. Not just to look at them, but to see the work of those relationships as part of the work of my life. I didn't give up politics, trying to heal the broken relationships in the "big" world. But I began to see what it might mean to try to heal the broken relationships much closer to home.

When I wrote a book, *Godwrestling*, about what was emerging from my wrestle with the Torah and my intimate Jewish community, the family was in it too. Howard was in it, my marriage and divorce were in it, intertwined with the "big world" of Israelis and Palestinians, the powerless and the powerful, men and women. Howard was in it not only in the content, but in the process. For my very willingness to think and write like this I had learned from my new connection with Howard, and from Howard's exploration of the close-in world around



him. It was in the conversations with him that I had learned how to think this way, and it was partly from a book of his that I learned to write this way—a book he had written about fathering his kids, a book in which his own childhood and theirs had become intertwined as ways to learn about each other.

But now I see that even then, in the first wave of my learning, I was looking at the people of my close-in world more in memory than in actuality. I was looking at them in the past, in history, learning the ancient tangled family tales from Howard. I was untangling what had made me Ishmael. But I was not yet ready to stop being Ishmael.

In the present, in my relationships with my wife, my kids, with Honey and Dad, with the “band of brothers” at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington where I shared a politics in a time of utter intensity in politics, even with the fellowship of Jews with whom I prayed and studied Torah—with all these close-in people I still kept my distance.

In the spiral of relationship with Howard, that was where things stayed for about ten years. I was clear enough about having learned from him that in the dedication of my book *Godwrestling* I could say it—that it was from Howard that I had learned how to wrestle and how to write in this new way.

It's true that it did not occur to me to dedicate *Godwrestling* to him. Howard asked me, and at once I saw

how truthful it would be. But even his willingness to ask—his voice trembled when he took the chance of being refused—even his willingness to ask, and mine to agree, signalled that we were a great deal closer to each other.

**T**he next curve upward on the spiral came with Honey's dying. I spent that week looking at the people closest to me. At

Honey, over and over to see whether she was dying, how she was dying. At Howard and Dad, to see what they were thinking and feeling. At my kids, and Phyllis, and Irene, and Betty. Even at the doctors. There was no one else to look at—no bigger world. And no wall between me and the family. No one had the strength to put one up.

During our wrestle just before the funeral, Howard had said, and I had agreed, that I knew how to take the intimate and make it public. But we were mistaken. Until the funeral itself, what I knew how to do was take what had been intimate and make it public. I knew how to take an ancient hurtful past, in which I had not even been fully conscious of what hurts I was suffering; learn what it had meant; and then make that intimate knowledge public.

But to expose my present suffering? That I really did for the first time at the funeral itself, when I spoke about Honey. For the first time I was not uncovering an ancient past but sharing present consciousness. “This is not the past walking into the future, the walk is painful, into the present,” says Muriel Rukeyser in a wonderful poem on the great Rabbi Akiba. Painful indeed. Now comes the test of whether I can continue to make the intimate public.

The first round of wrestling with Howard was when we were children. The wrestle was on its lowest level—only about power and control. It ended with the polite, invisible wall.

The second round began in the snow-bound cabin and continued along the Oregon coast; it was about our pasts and about our willingness in the present to explore our pasts together, even when there were overtones of murder in our memories.

The third was the week of Honey's dying. The wrestle then was wholly in the present, the kind of wrestle that was much more making love than making war. Intense, and short—because it was focused so intensely on Honey's life and death.

And then, a year later, began a fourth round of wrestling, in which the thinking and writing of this book is the arena. A strange kind of wrestle, since each of us was groping toward ending the very split between us that made for wrestling in the first place. Howard reached beyond that split when he asked me to write a book with him about the two of us. I reached beyond it when, in telling the story of Honey's life and death, I realized that I needed him to join with me in telling it—and asked him.

In the midst of this wrestle, I have come to see that it is my job to end the split within me. To end the stereotype I have been frozen in.

The split between us can end only if the split within each of us is ended. □

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