

Taking the Extra Steps to Return to Shul

Parashat Vayetzei

November 13, 2021; 9 Kislev 5782

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Every Wednesday afternoon I have a chavruta, a dedicated time to study Torah with another rabbi in the community. We have been studying a 19th century code of Jewish law written by the great posek, the great legal mind Rabbi Avraham Danzig, who lived in Poland and Lithuania 1748-1820. This week we came across a topic that just grabbed hold of me because of its relevance. The text was discussing the concept of *s'char pesiot*, which means the reward one gets for putting in extra effort to do a mitzvah. *Pesiot* literally means steps, so you might say the lengths one goes or the additional steps one takes to do a mitzvah. The text referenced an episode in the Talmud,¹ which is about a widow who has a synagogue right in her neighborhood. However, she passes by that synagogue to pray instead at *Bei midr're'shei d'Rabbi Yochanan*, in the academy, the study hall of the great 3rd Century sage Rabbi Yochanan in Tiberias, where apparently there was also a daily minyan. Now that seems problematic. Shouldn't you support the shul that is closest to you? Why go further when you can roll out of bed and go right around the corner. Rabbi Yochanan asks the widow: *Lo beit ha'kneset be'shivavutich?* Don't you have a shul in *your* neighborhood? To which she responds to him: *Lo s'char p'siot yesh li?* Don't I get extra merit, a heavenly reward for going to the shul that's further away?

The rabbis learn from this short conversation between the widow and Rabbi Yochanan that exerting yourself to go to shul, literally taking extra steps to get there, is profoundly meritorious. Now most of us don't live in neighborhoods like this widow or Rabbi Yochanan, where there are countless shuls on every block and in every neighborhood. Next Shabbat, God-willing, I will be in Israel with our daughter Nessa, and the big question is where should we davven on Shabbat, because there are literally so many options, one after another, block after neighborhood block. But I couldn't help thinking, when we were studying this concept of *s'char p'siot*--the value of exerting yourself a little more to get to shul, of how this applies to our world, here in the suburbs, as we are hopefully emerging from two hard years of Covid fears and isolation. Perhaps the *s'char pesiot* of today is the merit one gets by coming back to shul, even when it might be easier, or more convenient to open your lap top, connect to Zoom or livestream and "do shul" from home.

Now before people get upset and write me angry emails, I understand that as things stand right now, some people are still at risk...young children who are not yet vaccinated, older adults who may have other health considerations, people who are immunocompromised, folks who can't comfortably stay masked for a couple hours. I am not trying to convince you to put your health at risk by coming to shul. But I am talking to a segment of our population that has grown very comfortable on Zoom because it is so easy and so convenient, as well as a segment of our population that has just gotten out of the habit of coming to shul over the past two years and haven't yet found their way back. It's not that they don't feel safe or that they perceive more of a risk here than they do, for example, at the Kennedy Center Opera House, the Strathmore Music Center, or for that matter, at the grocery store or Westfield Montgomery Mall. It's just that it's been so long, they've just stopped coming.

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 22a

One of the most exquisite scenes in this week's parasha is when Jacob awakens from a dream and explains *Achen, yesh Hashem ba'Makom hazeh, ve'anochi lo yadati!* Behold, God is in this place, and I did not know it!² Where was that place where Jacob laid down for the night? It was none other *than Har Ha'Moriah!* The very mountain where the Akeida took place; the location where the holy Temples would someday stand. This is a place that is already steeped in holiness. How did Jacob not realize that? Why did it take a vivid dream of a ladder with angels ascending and descending to jolt him into the realization that he was in a very sacred place? The most sacred place! Perhaps it was because when Jacob happened upon that place, it was already very dark. Daylight savings time was over, the clocks were turned back an hour, and it was dark outside. The beginning of the parasha goes out of its way to inform us that this whole episode happened in the dark of night: *ki va ha'shemesh*, the sun had set; Jacob stopped for the night, *vayishkav ba'makom ha'hu*, and he laid down to go to sleep there.³ Aviva Zornberg writes that the "darkness looms suddenly, unexpectedly, barring [Jacob's] passage."⁴ He is, so to speak, stuck there for the night. But when the sun comes up, the lights are turned on, a new day arrives, Jacob exclaims, *Mah norah ha'makom ha'zeh*, how awesome is this place, *ein zeh ki im beit Elohim*, this is none other than God's house. *V'zeh sha'ar ha'shamayim*, this is the gateway to heaven.

We have been through a lot of darkness and proverbial nights. For months, in fact, we didn't even turn on the lights; the building was dark; the halls were quiet and empty. But dawn is gradually emerging. The light is returning. The question though is will we reawaken as Jacob did, and say, *Mah nora ha'makom ha'zeh!* How awesome is this place! This shul! This community! *Ein zeh ki im beit Elohim*, this is none of other than the abode of God. And because of that, I need to be here, I want to be here. I am determined to take the extra steps to get there on Shabbat because I want the *s'char p'siyot*, I want the merit, the benefit, the joy, the enrichment that comes with joining with other Jews in prayer, hearing and reading from the sefer Torah, participating together *k'am echad be'makom echad*, as one people in one place, sharing in this beautiful day of Shabbat together. If you have no overarching health considerations, then it's time to come back. It's time to recreate this community in-person, because as convenient, as easy, as seamless as Zoom and Livestream truly are, there is just no substitute for a community that comes together in person.

There's an inspiring halacha in the Shulchan Aruch, the 16th century code of Jewish Law authored by Rabbi Yosef Karo in the city of Tzfat in northern Israel. He wrote: *Mitzvah la'rutz k'she-holech l'veit ha'knesset ve'chein le'chol davar mitzvah*...It is a mitzvah to run, to hurry when going to the synagogue, indeed with respect to all mitzvot.⁵ The idea is that when a mitzvah presents itself to us, we don't delay in fulfilling it. That's why a bris is often in the morning of the eighth day versus later in the afternoon. As soon as that mitzvah becomes "available," we do it. That's the unique religious mentality of Judaism: Don't tarry when it comes to our religious lives. Be eager and energetic to perform mitzvot. And, *k'she-holech le'veit ha'knesset*, when you're on your way to shul specifically, *mitzvah la'rutz*. It's a mitzvah to run. Dear friends, let's not let Covid rob us of the flourishing Shabbat morning community we used to have here. Let's take it back, and rebuild it. My *neschama* has been suffering from not seeing more of you, and I hope by returning to shul, you will be reminded of all the gifts of

² Genesis 28:16

³ Genesis 28:11

⁴ Zornberg, Aviva Gottlieb. *The Beginning of Desire, Reflections on Genesis*, 1995. Page 187.

⁵ SA Hilchot Tefillah, 90:12

being here together. May you each get *s'char pesiot*, the special merit that comes with the effort to be at shul, and may we all merit from being together very soon.

Shabbat Shalom