

What our Patriarch Jacob & My College-Age Daughter Taught Me About 'Home'

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December 5, 2020

Vayishlach 5781

Earlier this fall, like so many thousands of parents across the country, Sari and I dropped off our eldest child on her college campus not really knowing what would happen. In fact, we were so convinced that the school would shut down and send everyone home that we let her take a car with her to campus, which was *not* part of the original plan! She was contract-traced earlier in the semester and actually did decide to come home to quarantine rather than move to the university's "quarantine dorms," which are just one step up from a minimum security prison. But then she turned around and went right back...and she was able to complete the semester through Thanksgiving on campus. Now, part of the experience of being the parent of a college student in the 21st century is that there are all these parent discussion groups: Listserves, WhatsApp groups, Facebook forums. And these parents, they banter about everything from the quality of food in the dining halls to sharing information about summer internships. But lately the parents group has lit-up with conversations about pushing the school to refund residence hall fees. Apparently many kids, fearing that spring semester will be a completely virtual experience, just want to stay home and take classes remotely rather than come back to campus.

One parent wrote:

My son wants to stay home in the spring...It was not a great experience overall due to the pandemic socially and academically all on line. Eating in [his] room, little to do but roam the campus, etc.

Another parent posted:

[The University] needs to know that it is unacceptable to expect us to continue paying full tuition for all online learning, no interaction with professors or other students, no activities, and basically having our kids stuck in their dorm rooms.

I could sense the anguish in the concerns these parents were raising. I could feel their heartache that their kids were not getting the college experience they expected; that they were feeling confined and secluded, both socially and academically. I know that these are very real, very serious concerns that many parents of college students have right now.

Somehow, though, our daughter is having a very different college experience than some of these kids at the very same school. She even tried to convince us to allow her to go back to campus after Thanksgiving, to complete the last few weeks of on-line classes and take her finals there. When we explained that the dorms are closed from Thanksgiving through the beginning of Spring semester, she said "No problem, I'll just stay with some upper-class friends off-campus." Well, we put the kibosh on that because of Covid, but it was clear that she wanted to get back to school as soon as possible. If anyone asks her how her college experience has been, she typically surprises them with her positive response! Most people expect a muted response; a sigh, an expression of longing for hopes that were dashed by the pandemic. But when she talks about her college experience you would hardly know that anything was amiss. Why is she having such a different experience than so many of her peers?

I think a hint of the answer is found in the midst of our parasha. After Jacob and Esau experience their great reconciliation near the Yavok River, Esau proposes that they travel and eventually settle down together. Jacob, still wary of his older brother, declines the offer, and they go their separate ways. In the very next breath the Torah tells us *v'Ya'kov nasa Sukkotah, vayiven lo bayit*...Jacob traveled to a place called "Sukkot," and he built a home there. (Gen. 33:17) Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch comments that this is the first real home that Jacob had ever built for himself...prior to this he lived in his parents' home, in Lavan's home...but this was really the first home that was truly his own. It made me think of my daughter...notwithstanding her gap year in Israel, this sojourn to college is the first home that she has built for herself, the first community she has had to cultivate on her own, the first time she has had to create a life and schedule based on her priorities, rather than her parents'. And the home that our daughter built is infused with Jewish life. She goes to services regularly, attends a Torah study class, helps organize Jewish life programs, bakes challah and desserts each week along with other kids who celebrate Shabbat together. Undoubtedly the highlight of her week is going to [Friday night](#) services, having a festive Shabbat dinner afterwards, and then davening and Shabbes lunch the next day. She has not only built a home away from home, she has built a Jewish home away from home...and with that comes a dynamic community, deep friendships, wonderful role models on campus, events and gatherings on a regular basis that nourish her body, her mind, and her soul...and a true support system that has bolstered her in these very unusual times. Yeah, most of her classes are on-line, and certain aspects of campus life have been curtailed, but the kid still loves college!

Ya'akov Avinu, our Patriarch Jacob who builds this first home and starts a brand new life, is described by the Torah as being *shalem*. (Gen. 33:18) *Shalem*, means whole, complete, content...happy! Interestingly, the commentary of the Hasidic master Rabbi Elimelech of Dinov suggests that *Shalem* is an acronym for **Shofar**, **Lulav**, and **Megillah** (*Agra d'Kalla, Vayishlach*44); the happiness of Ya'akov is that he was finally in a place where he could celebrate the full palate of Jewish life and practice. He was spiritually *shalem*...fulfilled. That's not to say that his life was perfect. There would be disappointments and losses: His beloved wife Rachel soon passes away; there are challenges and struggles with his children. But our pains and our burdens are lightened when we bare them surrounded by community. I am convinced that this is the key to my daughter's contentment on campus. She has a vibrant community, and a rich Jewish environment that keeps her from feeling lonely or isolated. She is essentially "*shalem*," because of the lifeline that Jewish organizations on campus have provided, and that she has made so integral to her life.

Disillusionment and depression are very real concerns for all of us, not only college students. As the winter sets-in with shorter hours of daylight, and colder temperatures force us to spend more time inside, it is critical that we be aware of the mental health of our family members and friends. As we seek encouragement and relief from the effects of the pandemic, I hope and pray that you look to your Jewish community, your synagogue community for opportunities to connect, to see others (even if only on a screen), to learn, pray, and volunteer. If you or someone you know is in need of either material or emotional support, please let us know. Our clergy, staff, and very dedicated Hesed Committee are here to help in ways both large and small. We want to be a part of your *bayit*, an extension of your home, and more than anything, we want you to feel *shalem*...a sense of fullness and purpose in your heart and in your life. Remember, a

synagogue in Hebrew is a "*beit Knesset*," which does not mean a house of prayer or a house of learning, though those activities certainly are housed here. But "*beit kneset*" means a home for the community. And in Judaism, "community" is not just another synonym for "society" or "the public." Community is family...your Jewish family. And in these times, we need all the family we can get.

Shabbat Shalom