

Vayeitzei (Genesis 28:10-22)

(Jacob's dream sequence is 10-16, 6 of the 22 verses of this parsha)

The Dream:

Jacob, having deceived his father and angered his brother by stealing Esau's birthright, flees his home in Beersheba and journeys to live with his uncle Laban in Charan. On the way, he comes upon a certain place and since it's late he decides to spend the night there. He finds a stone, puts it under his head as a pillow, lays down, and has the very famous dream in which he sees a ladder reaching from Heaven to earth with messengers of God going up and down on it. *And behold: God is standing on it and says "I am Adonai, the god of Abraham, your father, and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie, I will give to you and your descendents. I am with you and will take care of you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land."*

Jacob awakens and says, *"Surely God was in this place and I, I did not know."* In the morning, Jacob raises the stone on which he slept and anoints it with oil as a monument, pledging that this place will be made into the house of God.

Many years ago, when I was in my early to mid 20's, I had the opportunity to participate in free therapy. It was offered at a teaching hospital in my area and you could take advantage of the services for free if you were willing to have your sessions monitored by students and be part of their training program. I decided to do it. And I remember exactly why I went.

I remember telling my interviewer that I was there because I knew there must be something more to life than I was experiencing...that I wanted to understand who I really was and why I was really here, "here" meaning alive and on this earth. Kind of a "What's it all about Alfie?" My life was fine, but I felt I was just missing something; there was something critical that I didn't get.

After analyzing my case, the team informed me that what I needed was intense psychoanalysis 5 days a week for a long, long time. I'm sure in a very polite way I responded, "Thanks anyway. Don't call me, I'll call you". Since then I *have* gone to therapy from time to time to work on various issues, but it wasn't until I prepared for this D'Var Torah that I actually got the answer I had been looking for when I visited that clinic all those years ago. At that time, a therapist was not what I needed. The answer was not to be found in Freud. I now realize what I was in need of then was a rabbi. The answer was to be found in God. For me, "What's it all about Alfie?" was not an analytical conversation, it was a spiritual one....

In 1991, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, wrote a book about Jacob's dream called *God was in this place and I, i did not know*. The cover tells you the book is about "finding self, spirituality, and ultimate meaning". Kushner creates a scenario where seven actual scholars who lived from the 3rd to the late 18th centuries, become the messengers on the ladder. Each speaks to Jacob and helps him to understand what he meant when he awoke and uttered that phrase. This dream has been given 100's of interpretations. Here we find seven different ways of reading the same biblical verse, and, collectively, they lead to an understanding of the relationship between God and self.

In Kushner's book, one messenger teaches Jacob that in order to be more aware of the presence of God, which is always with us, we must be less aware of ourselves. He explains that just as a shofar can make no sound unless breath is blown through it, so too people can only say prayers because God moves within them. It is when we become completely absorbed in God's presence as Jacob did in his dream or we might in worship, study, or a loving relationship, that we are no longer aware of our *individual* selves. Hasidic commentary tells us that Jacob meant was he was unable to realize the presence of God until his sense of self-awareness, self intention, and ego were eliminated by the awesome experience of his dream.

Being in the presence of G-d, by definition, requires all of our awareness, including that part of our awareness that sits on our shoulder thinking about our awareness! The reason Jacob didn't know God was in this place before was that he, like us, was too aware of himself.

A second messenger in Kushner's book teaches Jacob about spirituality and self. Rabbi Kushner explains that spirituality is always in reference to two "I"s, two types of selves. He uses a lower case "i" to refer to the individual self and an uppercase "I" to refer to the self of the Universe, or God. *Spirituality is the presence of God.* It is personal and immediate. It is here and now. And only rarely is the presence of God accompanied by a heavenly chorus, a burning bush, a ladder of angels...Most of the time God's presence is very quiet, so quiet it can be drowned out by the slightest noise or lost to the slightest distraction.

Our self is our individual consciousness, holding everything together...integrating and unifying our body, thoughts, and actions. But God is our *Great self*, our innermost essence, encountered throughout all of creation. God is to all of Being as self is to Ellen or ___ or ___(congregant names). Our Great selves are made of God's Self. This doesn't mean we *are* God. It means that this awareness, this sense of uniqueness we feel does not come just from ourselves. It is bigger than we are, and so it must be in everyone else too...in all living things. This sense of self (this *Anochi*) is so holy, we correctly intuit that it has created us.

Spirituality is a dimension of living where we are aware of God's presence. We are all instruments of God's presence. We are all part of the Self of the universe. To be aware of this, gives our lives meaning, purpose, empowerment, and fulfillment. Many have written that the essence of spirituality is a return to the self, a redirection of vision. In that way, finding and worshipping God can be a way of finding ourselves

God's presence already permeates all creation. We are told that we name it when we are born with our first cry, and whisper it as we die with our last breath. We are agents of God's presence, making that presence tangible through our actions and deeds. You and I are part of the Self of the Universe. *And this is what gives our lives ultimate meaning and purpose.*

In a way that is hard to define, when we are contributing in life with some sense that we are serving God, I think we *do* feel more empowered and fulfilled. Being aware of God's presence keeps us mindful that what we do affects God and what God does affects us. That is why it is a *sacred thing* to do something for someone you love...the things we all do everyday...making tea to soothe your spouse's sore throat, helping your son with his grad school application when you're too tired because you know he's counting on you, polishing your aging mother's nails even though at that moment she doesn't really remember who you are, saying yes, you will give the D'var torah, even when you're not sure you'll do a good job,

because there is a chance you could say something that will make a difference. If we can feel the sacredness in these acts, by doing them with both a sense of self, lower case “i”, *and* an awareness of our Universal Self, capital “I”, then the acts are more opportunities to be grateful for and less like burdens...they are opportunities to serve, to be in the moment, to connect with others and to connect with God. By consciously creating God’s presence, we can turn an ordinary act into a spiritual one, and a simple gesture into a purposeful and meaningful experience. We can gain some peace and some insight into who we are and why we’re here.

The last messenger to speak with Jacob in Kushner’s book is from 17th century Ukraine. His interpretation of Jacob’s dream is that it is Jacob *himself* who is both at the bottom of the ladder, and also at the top. He points out that the first letter of Jacob’s name (yud) is the fourth and final letter of God’s name. “Jacob”, he says, “You are an indispensable ingredient of God. You are made of the same stuff. Look at your hands. You are looking at the hands of God.” And Jacob gets it: “Wow! God was in this place, *and I did not know it was I.*”

Talk about your out of body experiences! This final interpretation is that Jacob dreamt he *was* God. This explains the sense of looking down at his own sleeping body from the top of the ladder. It also explains why, when he awakens, Jacob has a radical yet effortless change in his perspective, perhaps derived from looking at the world from a higher vantage point. He realizes that *he and God are one and the same*. He no longer feels guilty about his past...about deceiving his father or cheating his brother...he is no longer afraid of his past. He is beyond his past, and re-dedicated to a life of service. Jacob’s awareness of God’s presence is now much stronger than his awareness of himself. He wakes up astonished and says “this place is awesome (in the true meaning of the word...awesome.) It must be the very gateway to Heaven.” He anoints the stone with oil that he had used as a pillow. And he calls that place the Home of God.

Rabbi Kushner suggests it is not Jacob who says “God was in this place and I, i did not know. *It is us*. Like Jacob, our selves are made of God’s self. The Self of the Universe is in us all. Look at my hands and yours. They too are the hands of God.

For most of us, our limitations are self-imposed. Like Jacob, we can get beyond them. Remembering God is everywhere, including within each of us, can give us the strength, humility, courage, patience and wisdom to rise

above any circumstance and be bigger than we ever thought we could be. Our accomplishments can be much greater if we get it that God is always in *this place* (touch heart), and if we make a continual effort to remember that.

...While there is definitely a time and place for therapy, it wasn't intensive psychoanalysis I was seeking those many years ago. That would have been just more self-*refection*. What I was struggling to find was an expanded self *awareness*. What I needed to discover was that within us, there is both a unique identity and a common Universal self that connects us all. I now understand that who I am, my purpose and my possibilities, are directly related to how much I experience the presence of God in my life, in the way that it is comfortable for me to experience that. A dream is just one of many ways to gain a new perspective. Another is service, and still another is study. Because I prepared for this D'var Torah and read Rabbi Kushner's mystical teachings, I have new answers to a question I posed almost 40 years ago. When we get out of our comfort zones, the reward is often new insight, which, I believe, is a very valuable prize .

I recently read a prayer that said, "Let me not be discouraged by my failings. Let me take heart from all that is noble and good in my character".

Remember who you really are. Look for God's presence in your day, in yourself, and in others. Try to quiet the lowercase "i" enough to be consciously aware of the Universal Self that is inside of you. Let it empower you with new joy, new perspective, and new meaning so that in the end you will be able to say "*God was in this place, and, I, i knew it all along. It helped me to be a better person. It helped me to be proud of myself. It gave me strength I didn't know I had. I was never really alone.*"

God is everywhere we are. We are not separate from God. Therefore, God must be in this place. When we take the time to look inside ourselves, and when we remember to look beyond ourselves, we, like our forefather Jacob, will know God's presence.

Shabbat Shalom.