

Vayeitzei, 5781
Rabbi Zev Wiener

One morning, Rebbe Nachman of Breslav looked out from the window of his apartment, which was situated above the local marketplace, and noticed one of his students rushing through the marketplace in a frenzied hurry to arrive at work. Rebbe Nachman called out to his panicked student, "Tell me, have you looked up at the sky this morning?" The student responded, "Rebbe, no, I haven't. I'm late to work and have been in too much of a rush." Rebbe Nachman responded, "In fifty years, I will not be here, you will not be here, and your customers will not be here...but the sky will still be here. So tell me...what could be so important that you don't have a moment to look up at the sky?"

Among the multiple powerful lessons embedded in this short exchange, we find the profoundly stabilizing effect that looking at the sky -- symbolic of the simple awareness of the Almighty's presence¹-- can have on our daily life experience. When we forget G-d's involvement throughout our day, we are prone to lose perspective, becoming panicked, frenzied, and overly invested in concerns of relatively little import in the larger scheme of things. By contrast, when we live with a pervasive awareness of G-d's presence, we snap out of the myopic fear of being late for work, and recognize panoramically that we will be OK. We remember that we are constantly supported and guided in this world and beyond, that we are unconditionally important, and that in retrospect, even our mistakes and failures are part of the beautiful Divine tapestry. The challenge, though, is to remain awake to this truth.

Awakening to Divine awareness did not originate with Rebbe Nachman. As Yaakov Avinu embarks alone upon the bitter darkness of exile, forever leaving behind his former life of stability and ease, he falls asleep, and is graced with a profound realization:

"וייקץ יעקב משנתו ויאמר אכן יש ה' במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי"

And Yaakov awoke from his slumber and exclaimed, 'Indeed, Hashem is present (even) in this place, and I did not know it.' (28:16)

¹ See Sotah 17b, Rosh Hashanna 29a

In this timeless observation, we find the salve for our wounds, the empowerment to persevere amidst failure, and one of the ultimate goals of a Jewish life: to live aware of the constant presence of G-d and His love. It is indeed noteworthy that Yaakov refers to G-d specifically by the name “Hashem” (Y-H-V-H) as opposed to any of the other Divine names, as this name is the specific appellation of G-d's merciful love. In this statement, uttered at the most traumatic, lonely, and frightening time of Yaakov's life, Yaakov recognizes that even in this situation, “Y-H-V-H” specifically is present with him. Not just in synagogue. Not just at the celebrations. But everywhere. Even in the middle of the night panic attacks and in line at the GR office for food stamps, this attribute of Hashem is there by our side, encouraging us to keep going.

As humans living in a physical world, every one of us is naturally prone to spiritually fall asleep throughout the day. Mindlessly slipping into what is experienced as a G-dless world dependent solely on our efforts and judged by our own conclusions, we run around like Rebbe Nachman's student, frazzled, frustrated, and anxious. We overvalue the disappointments, missed opportunities, and mistakes of life, as we erroneously see the brief one hundred and twenty year span that we spend on this earth as an end unto itself. The moment that something awakens us from our slumber, looking at the sky, remembering that He is lovingly present with us always, we flip back into the truthful world of G-dly consciousness, feeling grounded, content, and confident. Like a fish that has landed back in the water, we can suddenly breathe again, recognizing that there is far more to the story than the immediate apparent situation of our individual life.

Throughout his life, Yaakov Avinu would continue to experience the truth that he was always accompanied by G-d's love. One need not look further than the very next chapter of the Torah, when Yaakov is duped by Lavan into marrying Leah instead of Rachel. When Yaakov learns of Lavan's chicanery, he is livid and disheartened. Yaakov did not want to marry Leah. This was not the way things were supposed to be, or anywhere close to his preconceived fantasy of marriage. This was a terrible, terrible mistake. In a tragic fashion, Yaakov was faced with the harrowing prospect -- one that unfortunately is not unheard of -- that he was permanently trapped in a wrong marriage that he could not get out of. And yet... it is specifically from this mistaken marriage that Yaakov did not desire at all, from which the Messiah is born.² In fact, the Messiah will trace his lineage not only to this erroneous marriage, but also to the mistaken incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter, and to the inadvertent encounter between Yehudah and Tamar. Apparently, the Torah teaches, G-d's hand is present even in

² The Messiah will descend from the tribe of Yehuda, the son of Yaakov and Leah

situations like these. While mistakes in a G-dless world will often amount to nothing more than futility and regret, to a believer, even the most irreversible of mistakes always contain hope, because G-d is present even in the mistakes. And sometimes, that hope is the only thing that allows a person to keep going.

As we prepare for the holy days of Chanukah, we will increasingly awaken to the awareness of “אכן יש ה' במקום הזה”. The lights of Chanukah are specifically lit at night, during the time of year when the days are shortest and the nights are longest and coldest. When we gaze into the Chanukah lights surrounded by darkness, we are reminded that G-d's light never leaves us, even in the darkest and most hopeless periods of our lives. For many people, the ongoing COVID-19 era constitutes such a time. Despite our habituation to the new norms and routines, and our optimism for an imminent vaccine release, the ongoing darkness remains very real for many people, perhaps even more so than earlier in the pandemic. This Kislev, let us make an extra effort to look a little more at the sky and at the Chanukah lights, to help awaken and enliven ourselves and those around us to keep pushing forward, to a time when the sun will undoubtedly come out again.

Dedicated L'Ilui Nishmat Mrs. Eve Golomb, z'l, Chava bat HaRav Yitzchak, who always reflected G-d's love to me, as well as to every person she met.