

Vayyetze

In this week's parsha, Jacob starts out on a journey. This is not just a geographic journey, but one that begins his transformation from deceitful young man to revered patriarch of the Children of Israel.

Before I share with you what I have learned during this journey with Jacob, let me first review the action that takes place between Jacob's departure from Beer Sheba and his leave taking of Laban many years later.

Jacob, who has just fled his home, at his mother's insistence, is escaping his brother Esau's wrath for having swindled him out of his birthright and later having stolen their father's blessing. He is off to find a wife from among his mother's people.

He stops for the night, takes a stone for a pillow, and proceeds to dream about a ladder and angels. In the dream God offers him and his seed the land of Canaan, blesses Jacob, and promises him protection, and safe return.

Upon awakening Jacob realizes "Surely the Lord has been in this place, and I knew it not." He then vows that if God keeps his end of the bargain, Jacob will return and make the spot into God's house.

Jacob then continues on his journey, meets Rachel at the well, falls in love, and gets swindled himself by Laban, Leah and Rachel's father, who, after seven years of Jacob's labor, switches brides, and requires Jacob to work another seven for Rachel. In the words of one storyteller on GodCast, a website with 55 animated biblical stories, what follows is the pregnancy wars or the baby/mama drama. Out of this sisterly competition 11 sons and one daughter are born, the sons destined to be 11 of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. There's more years of labor and some further swindling on Laban's part having to do with livestock, before Jacob is able to leave to return to Canaan with his 4 wives, 12 children, and various herds of goats and sheep.

This parsha is rich in potential points for discussion and interpretation. We know from God's words to Rebecca in the previous parsha, that Jacob has a destiny to fulfill. I suggest that we might look at Jacob's journey to Haran, not just as a quest for a wife, but as a journey of transformation from a young, dishonest, self promoter to the more mature husband and father who will later prevail in his wrestling with the stranger or angel and will be named Israel.

What processes must Jacob go through in his development and what is his relationship to God along the way? I would like to briefly look at three aspects of connection to God that I think are relevant in Jacob's story.

Let us read the opening lines of the parsha to familiarize ourselves with the text.

Waking up/awareness

So we have Jacob, both on the run from Esau and running toward his own destiny, and he stops for the evening. The Talmud suggests that he prayed – might he have prayed to be protected from Esau, might he have prayed to find a good wife, might he have prayed to make it through the night in a dark and unfamiliar place? Or (wishful thinking on our part) might he have been reflecting on his deceitful behavior? This evening prayer or ma'ariv, which is credited to him, seems to be the first time we hear of Jacob's effort to connect with God.

Jacob then falls asleep with his head on a stone (ouch) and has a dream about a ladder to heaven on which angels are ascending and descending. In the rabbinic literature, much is made of the fact that the angels are ascending and then descending, rather than the other way around. We may see in this some support for the idea that the connection to God is a conversation. It goes both ways, and, in fact, can start with the human reach towards the heavens, which then generates a response that returns to earth from above. In his dream, God speaks to Jacob and promises much. Jacob awakens and makes the often quoted statement "Surely God is in this place; and I, I did not know it." Here we have a statement that could be understood by contemporary seekers of spiritual connection to mean that we must awaken out of our sleep, out of our unaware state, to be fully present and open to the divine. Jacob, awakening from his sleep, has an authentic experience of spiritual awe and marks the spot as the gate to heaven.

We might ask ourselves - how are we asleep and unaware? What might we encounter if we open ourselves to the divine – however we might define it? Where might we encounter a gate to heaven?

Overcoming the ego

Now Jacob's response to God strikes me as somewhat arrogant. He makes a promise to God that is conditional on God keeping his promises to Jacob. Is this just more of his elaborate deal making that got him into trouble with his brother and cast him in a less than wholesome light to us Torah readers of today. Doesn't he have to give that up if he's going to rise to the stature of revered patriarch?

In Lawrence Kushner's book "God Was In This Place and I, I Did Not Know," Kushner imagines a conversation between Reb Menachem Mendl of Kotzk and Jacob. The Kotzker Rebbe believed that "the true worship of God is not in finding truth, but, rather in total abandonment of the self." Similar ideas are found in many mystical and meditative traditions. The conversation goes something like this: Kotzker tells Jacob "The beginning of true piety is not so easy.... You must subdue your ego and

call yourself a liar... “ Jacob answers “Yes, I think so. God was here all along, and the reason I didn’t know it is because I was too busy paying attention to myself.”

So it may be, as some commentators have pointed out, that the extra “I” in the phrase “God was in this place, and I, I did not know” suggests that Jacob was so caught up in his own drama, his own ego, his own self promotion, that his knowledge of God was obscured.

Again, we might ask ourselves – where do we focus too much on our own pursuits and feelings, to the exclusion of others and the exclusion of a larger spiritual perspective?

Recognizing God as the source of possibility

Now if Jacob had been sitting in on Rabbi Toba’s Thursday morning class on Process Theology he would understand that one can think of God as that which is the source of possibility. Within that framework, we can think of every living thing as being in the process of becoming, including Jacob. As we encounter him in this parsha, much of his life still lies ahead and many personal challenges await him. What choices will he make along the way? Who or what will guide him?

In Rabbi Toba’s article “The Blessing of Uncertainty: Kaplan, God and Process,” she refers to Kaplan talking about a human drive for “salvation,” which he defines as “the maximum harmonious functioning of a person’s physical, mental, social, moral and spiritual powers.” He calls the force in the universe that supports that drive God.

So while the interventionist God, according to Dr. Raphael Jardi, is a much less active participant in Jacob’s life than he was in the lives of Abraham and Isaac, we can still think of God as a force for new possibilities and for good in Jacob’s life as he chooses and manages his own responses to Laban’s deceitful treatment of him. Here we see a Jacob who is willing to wait and work for what he wants, a Jacob who is honest and responsible. We see a man who is becoming, through his own actions, more of whom he is meant to be.

Finally, we might ask ourselves – what guides us in our process of becoming?

To conclude, I would say that thinking about Jacob has been an interesting journey for me. I came to know him in a deeper way and to appreciate his personal and spiritual growth. As he goes on his way at the end of the parsha and he meets the angels of God, this time he is fully aware of God’s presence.

