

December 1, 2022

Rabbi Wexler - *Vayeitzei*

This week's Torah portion, *Vayeitzei* begins with Jacob on the run from his home in Beersheva. As the sun sets, he stops for the evening and lies down to sleep. He dreams of a ladder with its base on the ground, its top in heaven, and angels of God going up and coming down it. For the first time in Jacob's life, God appears to him, and they establish a *brit* (covenant).

The rabbi's note that the Hebrew word *sulam* (ladder) has the same numerical value in gematria as *Sinai*. This was Jacob's Sinai moment, encountering God as Moses would do later at Mount Sinai. Awaking from his dream, Jacob exclaims: "Surely, God is in this place, and I did not know it."

Why does God choose this moment to speak with Jacob? Why is it that Jacob encounters God while lying down? It seems noteworthy that only in a horizontal position can he experience the vertical dimension of the Divine.

Examining the entire scope of the Jacob narrative, Rabbi Bernard Och wrote: "Structurally . . . it moves along two distinct, dramatic lines: a horizontal one of human-profane activity and a vertical one of Divine-human encounter. In contrast to the Abraham cycle, where the profane and sacred are so closely intertwined as to be inseparable, there, with Jacob, they are experienced as two separate dimensions" ("Jacob at Bethel and Peniel: The Polarity of Divine Encounter," in *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, 42, no. 2, 1993).

Jacob lives a life bifurcation. There is a stark contrast between the horizontal and the vertical encounters of his life. The horizontal conflicts with his brother Esau and later with Laban, are notably devoid of any explicit reference to God. Meanwhile, he has two major vertical encounters with God. The dream of the ladder and a second evening encounter of a Divine wrestling match. His encounters with God are few, but dramatic. He appears to want to live his day-to-day life without any sense of God, without the awareness that how we live our lives matters to God. He separates out his earthly relationships and his relationship with the Divine.

It can be tempting for us to separate the holy and the every-day, to limit religion and God to Shabbat, holidays, and other times we are in the synagogue. But this is not what our tradition teaches. Rather, Judaism insists that we can encounter God at any time and in any place. We can find God in both the vertical and the horizontal. The Jacob narrative enforces this lesson through physical positioning. It turns out that Jacob is most able to encounter God when he is in a horizontal position, either asleep or locked in a wrestling grip.

The lesson becomes clear: it is up to us to not only connect the horizontal and the vertical but to find God in both. When we do, like Jacob, we will learn that experiencing God is possible in any place, experience, or relationship if we but stop and notice.

Shabbat Shalom