

Drash for Shabbat Vayetzei

by Elissa Schirmer Erly

As in many Torah readings, Vayetzei is full of memorable images. Ladders, angels, a beautiful girl fetching water at a well...but the one image that stood out for me during my preparation for this drash is the recurring image of stones.

Jacob used a stone for a pillow while he dreamt of a ladder to heaven. When he awoke, Jacob anointed the stone with oil and declared it an altar. The next stone that Jacob encountered was a stone covering a well, a stone so heavy that it usually took a whole village of shepherds to move it. Divine intervention, or possibly the sight of Rachel, gave Jacob superhuman strength and he was able to roll the stone off the well by himself.

The third incarnation of stones in Vayetzei served to settle the grievances between Jacob and his father in law, Laban. Together they set up a pillar and heaped up a pile of stones, creating a boundary between them and a representation of their covenant of tolerance, if not peace.

Stones figure prominently in other Torah readings, of course. Abraham offered his son Issac as a sacrifice on a stone. Moses received stone tablets inscribed with the ten commandments and also stuck a stone with his staff, bringing forth water in the desert.

Why so many stones? In the Torah, stones are a metaphor for God-strong and ever present. In modern times, we recognize this meaning when we recite Psalm 19: "Oh Lord, my Rock." We acknowledge the presence of God in the stones of the Kotel, a wall of stones that is the holiest site for Jews all over the world. And we place stones, not flowers, on the graves of our ancestors as a symbol of permanence and memory.

Such a simple image...a stone.

Shabbat Shalom!