

Drasha Vayishlah 5774
Place

I once read a pop-psychology book that suggested that people either privileged sight or hearing as metaphors for comprehension. Someone who privileges vision might say things like, “I see what you’re saying” or “Is this clear to you?” Someone who privileges hearing would say, “I hear what you’re saying?” or “Does this sound right to you?” The book then made the dubious suggestion that communication failures ensue when people use different comprehension metaphors and it suggested mirroring the metaphor that is being used by the person you are speaking to.

Interestingly, in the Babylonian Talmud, the phrase “Ta-Shma” meaning “come and listen” is used to introduce a possible solution to a question that has been posed. In the Palestinian Talmud the phrase “Ta Hazi” meaning “come and see” is used. Perhaps there is significance to the uses of these different sense metaphors in the Babylonian and Palestinian rabbinic cultures.

Our patriarchs, the avot, privileged different metaphors for describing their relationship with God. The Talmud, in Tractate Pesachim tell us:

R. Elazar also said: What is meant by the verse (Isaiah 2:3): "And many people shall go and say: "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, To the house of the God of Jacob"? But not the God of Abraham and Isaac?! Rather: Not like Abraham, in connection with whom ‘mountain’ is written, as it is said, "As it is said to this day, in the mountain where the Lord is seen.’ And not like Isaac, about whom it is said "field," as it is said: "And Isaac when out to meditate in the field." But rather, like Isaac, who called him "home," as it is said, ‘And he called the name of that place Beit El.

Each of the avot used a different metaphor to describe God and to explain their spiritual approach:

Mountain climbing is lonely. As you climb the mountain, you rise above everyone else, you gain a perspective from your heightened elevation that nobody else has and you have vision. That was Avraham. He was first to discover God. For most of his life, he and Sarah were the only people on Earth with the elevated perspective to comprehend the true spiritual reality.

Yitzchak’s spiritual quest was exemplified by a field – indeed, took place in a field. Agriculture is repetitive; you cultivate a piece of earth each year, using the same methods and growing the same crops. Yitzchak was the only farmer among our Biblical ancestors and his spiritual path was exemplified by his work as a farmer. He achieved success, both spiritually and physically as a farmer, as someone rooted in the field.

Yaakov’s spiritual metaphor, the way he understood God, is a home.

When he encounters the vision of the angels ascending a ladder to heaven, he wakes up and calls the place, “Beit El.” The Home of God – or perhaps it means, God is my Home, like the old Negro Spiritual “I’ve Got a Home in that Rock.” (Which I won’t sing for you now –but it’s tempting...) When he returns to Eretz Yisrael, when he is safe, at last, from Esav, he builds a house – the first of our *avot* to build a house. Avraham and Sarah, famously, lived in a tent, to make it easier to welcome guests. Yaakov upgraded to a house.

What is special about a house? What type of spiritual image is a house?

A home –unlike a tent – evokes a sense of permanence. You can take a tent with you, but you return to a home. Think of a long and tiring trip. Maybe you were away at college for a semester. Maybe you were traveling on a business trip – maybe you’re simply coming home with four heavy grocery bags. Think of the relief that you feel when you cross the threshold to your home. That sense of familiarity, of relief, of safety, and of comfort, is Yaakov’s spiritual metaphor to describe the experience of God.

Even a brief stay at home can be restorative and can fortify us, reminding us of our values and priorities. And, values and priorities themselves can become core to our identities and serve as a sort of protective home.

There were two stories that went viral on the Internet this week that demonstrate, in a happy and positive way, how this dynamic can work.

Isaac Theill was on the Q train in New York when a fellow-passenger fell asleep on his shoulder. Another passenger asked Isaac, “should I wake him and get him off your shoulder?” Isaac replied, “He had a long day so let him sleep. We’ve all been there.” This is not a profound piece of religious philosophy. This is not a vexing moral conundrum. This is a basic application of Hillel’s statement, “That which is hateful to you, do not do unto others.” But because that value was a true home for Isaac Theil, because it was an automatic and internalized part of his identity, he was able to apply that rule under somewhat unusual circumstances. A photograph of the young Black man sleeping on the shoulder of an older white man was shared by nearly 200,000 people on Facebook and “liked” by 1.3 million people.

And there was the story of Rabbi Noah Muroff. He bought a desk on Craigslist for \$200 dollars. He had to dismantle it to get it through a narrow entryway, and discovered \$98,000 in cash hidden inside the desk. Within half an hour he had called the prior owner of the desk to tell her about the money that she had hidden there and then forgotten about. He took his children with him to return the money the next day so that they too could learn the value of integrity.

Rabbi Muroff is a yeshiva high school teacher. So I assume he knows the story of Shimon ben Shetach. Shimon ben Shetach was the most important Torah scholar of his generation, but was a poor man. His students convinced him to purchase a donkey with the hope that this donkey would be the source of a livelihood. Upon receiving the donkey, it was discovered that a precious stone was hanging from its bridle. The students were elated that their teacher would never have to work again. But Shimon ben Shetach insisted the money be returned. The Talmud explains that while it is always forbidden to steal, the obligation to return lost objects is a particular obligation of Jewish solidarity and not a universal ethical principle. According to strict law, the jewel belonged to Shimon ben Shetach. But Shimon ben Shetach’s response is telling. He says, “Shimon ben Shetach *barbarin Haveh?! - Is Shimon ben Shetach a barbarian?!*”

Shimon ben Shetach doesn’t respond with a legal argument. He rejects the Talmud’s discourse of legal obligations and instead speaks about his own identity. Keeping a precious stone that was obviously not meant to be included in the sale would be a barbaric act and would have profoundly conflicted with Shimon ben Shetach’s image of himself.

A shul can also be a spiritual home. This is a Beit Ha’Knesset. A House for Gathering. We come together, to pray, to study Torah, to schmooze with our friends at Kiddush, but also to cultivate an identity. Each time we come to shul, like each time we return to our home, we are fortified, and encouraged, and we have an opportunity to inculcate a positive self identity, rooted in virtues and values that can enable us to Sanctify the Name of God.

Shabbat Shalom