

Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison
Congregation Beth Am
November 12, 2021

I want to thank you all for coming, for overcoming any hesitations about entering this sanctuary tonight. We've been through a lot together during the past year and a half and it means a great deal that you would come to celebrate what has been, for me, a long-anticipated gathering.
THANK YOU.

When I saw that this shabbat of my Installation coincided with our reading of the story of Jacob, I was excited, and perhaps for one central reason: Like Jacob, I am a younger brother. This might be why, deep in my lizard brain and early on in my life, I formed an unconscious connection to the intergenerational, familial epic told in Genesis, across the Torah, and throughout the Bible, that often focuses on younger brothers as the heroes of our mythic stories.

Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Solomon, David: all younger brothers.

Consistently, they start with little; societally, in the Ancient Near East, the cards were stacked against younger brothers. And yet, in the origin stories of Judaism, the younger brother gains authority and prestige.

And then, when I learned that my *older* brother Robert had sweetly decided to join us for this weekend, I was even more excited! For my older brother to sit and watch as I, his younger, slightly shorter brother, was installed as Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills?!! That was going to be a dream come true! Sadly, in the end, Robert couldn't be with us this weekend; but he, in a particular way, played an important role in my becoming a rabbi. More on that in a moment.

Of all of the younger brothers that are biblical heroes, only one dreams in a temple: Jacob. In this week's Torah portion, Jacob dreams while in a temple, Beit El.

You know the story.

Running from his brother, Jacob comes upon a certain place and stops there for the night because the sun has set. He takes a stone, puts it under his head, and lies down to sleep.

Taking note of this unusual choice for a pillow, Robert Alter wrote that Jacob never met a stone that he didn't want to wrestle.

He rolls stones off of the mouths of wells.

He sleeps on stones and makes pacts with stones.

Stones are a powerful metaphor for Jacob's lifelong predilection to contend with difficult, and seemingly unyielding obstacles and challenges.

So there in a temple, with a rock as a pillow, Jacob dreams. He dreams of a ramp, a *sulam*, stretching from the ground to the sky; divine messengers ascending and descending upon it. In the dream God stands next to Jacob and makes pretty much the same promise to him that God had made to Abraham and Isaac: I will be with you wherever you go; I will not leave you; I will fulfill my promise to you.

And then Jacob woke up.

I spoke of this scene in February of 2020 on the day when we formally entered into a relationship with one another, as a congregation and a new Senior Rabbi:

מַה־נּוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה... וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי

These are two of Jacob's expressions of wonderment, of discovery, when he awoke from his slumber at Beth El. I echoed his words when I stood on this Bimah, on one of the last Sundays in the Before Times:

“How awesome is this place! And I? I did not know.”

Now I know.

Twenty months later, I now know just how awesome is this place, Beth Am. How awe inspiring our synagogue truly is. During these past 20 months, I have experienced repeatedly, a sense of discovery and wonderment when I have encountered Beth Am's commitment to learning; our community's profound capacity to care for each other; and its willingness to innovate, to contend with unforeseen challenges...such as an ongoing, seemingly unyielding, worldwide pandemic.

As a child of the seventies and eighties, growing up in Brookline, Massachusetts, calling something “awesome,” or even better “wicked awesome” was high praise.

Mah norah hamaqom hazeh; v'achshav ani yodeia. I now know you Beth Am, and you're *wicked awesome*.

During the past 20 months, through working together to overcome so many challenges, we have been able to discover more of each other's facets as we continue to build trust with one another. and here we now are, Beth Am.

Alive.

Grateful to be together.

Celebrating this joyful Shabbat.

Celebrating our relationship.

This is a night for us to be like Jacob and to dream in *our* temple.

I grew up in a synagogue where I could dream; Temple Israel of Boston was a place for dreaming. My elders—Rabbi Bernard Mehlman, Rabbi Ronne Friedman, Irene Friedman, Cantor Roy Einhorn, my mother and father, my brother—they engaged in a never-ending, transformative process of repurposing the stones of the synagogue that they had inherited,

into a sanctuary where a new generation could dream.
And I don't mean dreams of unicorns.
or a dream of how,
maybe,
one day,
what would become a five-foot, eight-inch tall, white Jewish man could dunk a basketball.
Not those kinds of dreams.

In the synagogue, I learned of reality-based dreaming, of envisioning what a Jewish community, and the world at large could become, and the efforts needed to fulfill those dreams. And *I* first became engaged in this ongoing process of innovation, of transformation, through watching my older brother, Robert, when he was our youth group's president. It was watching him that I first saw, close up, the level of commitment—the detailed handiwork—that it takes to get a Jewish community built right.

The synagogue in which I was raised was a sanctuary for dreaming, for innovation and, perhaps most powerfully, it was a place of blessing. Through an ever-expanding web of human relationships anchored in the synagogue, and that grew to encompass Cantor Jodi Sufrin, and Rabbis Bethie Miller and Matt Soffer, I have experienced what I perceive as God's grace.

Our honored guests who are here tonight, personify for me what God promised to Jacob when he was dreaming in Beit El. These are the individuals who, over the course of my life, have been with me wherever I go: they have never left me.
On this night, to have these beloved friends and family here, together with all of you, Beth Am, it is truly a dream come true.

Here's a remarkable midrash about Jacob and his stonework, a midrash in which God blesses innovation. It goes like this:

When he arrived at Beit El, Jacob took twelve stones from the altar where his father Isaac had been bound by Abraham, and he placed them under his head and fell asleep. In the morning, Jacob awoke and went to gather up the stones that he had used as a pillow in order to put them back in the altar. To his surprise, he found that all of the stones had become one stone. So he set the stone up as a pillar to commemorate his dream. What did God then do? God sank the stone deep into the earth, as one inserts a keystone into an arch. Therefore, this pillar is called *Even Sh'tiya*—the Foundation Stone from which emerged the entire world.¹

The midrash connects Jacob's temple of Beit El, to the site where Abraham offered up Isaac, the place, as our tradition teaches, the Temple, *Beit Hamiqdash*, was built. But the midrash also offers this, more powerful teaching:

In a temple, the next generation of a family, Jacob, reworks the elements of his father's and his grandfather's temple, and it is with *his* pillar, with Jacob's innovation, that God creates the world.

¹ *Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer* 35

From the repurposed stones of a temple, the world was created.

Beit El

Beit Hamiqdash

The world

All were formed from the same stones.

In 1958 a group of reality-based dreamers, descendants of Jacob, you know many of them by name, the founders of our congregation, chose to purchase these 9 acres in Los Alto Hills. Here they laid the foundation stone for the building in which many of us have gathered on this evening. And I do not know if they could have foreseen what has now unfolded in *this* valley, during the past decades. But every day, when I arrive on our campus, I am grateful that the founders of Beth Am possessed the confidence to invest in an uncertain future. As a result of *their* risk taking and of our location here in Silicon Valley, Beth Am stands at the epicenter of a New World. A world of bold promise, great challenge, and Incredible Uncertainty. Helpfully, remarkably, our congregants, many of you, are the builders of this New World. Many of us possess the knowledge of the largely unseen infrastructure and algorithms that increasingly order our lives. And it is this confluence of people and place, of where we are and of who *we* are, that signals an onramp to a new, leadership role for our congregation. We hold the responsibility to envision what it means to be a Reform community in this New World.

What is the Torah that we should teach to our children so that they may thrive?

How might we evolve our pursuit of *Tzedek* to respond to the Justice issues of this time?

How might we innovate new rituals that both harness technology's benefits and heal technology's harm?

More than any other Reform synagogue in America, we, Beth Am, possess the capacity to meet these challenges. What we next need to do is dream.

As I shared with you at the congregational meeting on that Sunday in the Before Times:

To build the sanctuary of which *I* dream, requires sweat equity.

It requires the welding of an infrastructure of cross-generational relationships.

Mutual trust between participants and professionals.

And, when necessary, the willingness of a congregation to repurpose the stones of a beloved synagogue into a sanctuary of blessing for this next era. But perhaps the greatest challenge, the overarching challenge to this construction project, is the task of articulation, or re-articulation, of the risks and rewards, the blessings that emerge from committing to our covenant in this age of unparalleled choice.

This is not a new challenge: it is as old as Jacob.

When Jacob dreamed in *his* temple, He dreamed of a *sulam*. A *sulam* is not a ladder; it is more likely a ramp. The base of Jacob's ramp was

מְצִבֵּי אֶרֶץ - Firmly established on the ground,

וְרֵאשׁוֹ מִגֵּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה - With its top reaching towards the sky.

I call the synagogue that we are innovating together a Sanctuary for Imperfect Practice, but we may conceive of it as a *sulam*, an upward spiral of existence, a ramp that we construct as we a climb. The foundation for the *sulam* that we will build together, are our values. What we call here at Beth Am, “pillars”:

worship and spiritual living;

lifelong learning;

acting as a caring and welcoming community;

and the pursuit of tzedek (acts of justice and service).

We have labeled these values as our pillars; I consider them bedrock, our *even sh'tiya*.

So let us dream; and let us build.

And may we create,

together,

A sacred space for risk and innovation,

A sanctuary of profound blessing

for a new generation

of dreamers.