

“God is in this place and I did not know it!” Lessons Learned!

In the beginning of this week’s Torah portion, *Vayeitzei* (Genesis 28:10- 32), our ancestor Jacob left home in order to escape his brother Esav’s wrath and to visit relatives in the “old country” with the hope that he might find a suitable bride. So Jacob set off from Beersheva to Haran in Northern Mesopotamia to live with his mother Rebecca’s brother. Leaving home, Jacob was filled with conflicting thoughts and emotions: he felt some trepidation about what he might encounter along the way; he felt both guilt and triumph over the struggle he had with his brother and he felt his heart race at the possibility of meeting his future wife. And then Jacob comes to a place that the Torah simply calls “a certain place.”

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. ¹¹ He came upon a certain place (ba'makom) and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. ¹³ And the Eternal God was standing beside him and He said, "I am Adonai, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. ¹⁵ Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶ Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Eternal God is in this place, and I did not know it!" (Gen 28:10-16).

Some classic commentators understood Jacob’s declaration that “God is in this place and I did not know it” to mean that he regretted falling asleep. They maintain that if he would have known that God was present, he wouldn’t have

fallen asleep (cf. Rashi). Others disagree and point out that if he hadn't fallen asleep, Jacob wouldn't have had such a marvelous and revelatory dream (cf. Or Chadash). Some marvel at the phenomenon that it seems easier to connect with God in certain places, especially places like Jerusalem (cf. Ibn Ezra). But then again, the prophet Isaiah taught that God's presence fills all space and is accessible everywhere (Isaiah 6:3).

My personal take is that Jacob, still young and head strong, was amazed that God truly was present in every place. For the first time he realized that no matter where he went, the values and commitments and concerns and ideals that he held precious went with him. He awoke from his self-referential focus to the big picture of a life filled with sacred possibilities. Indeed, one of the ways we refer to God is *HaMakom*, literally "the Place." Meaning that God can be found in every place.

This will be my last "Weekly Message" until mid-January 2020 since I am beginning my time away for Sabbatical and vacation (Dec 5-Jan 8). It just so happens to be a perfect Torah portion for me to conclude the 2019 version of this series because I, too, am struggling with conflicting thoughts and emotions. I am quite excited and appreciative for the opportunity to engage in serious study (highlighted by my attendance at this year's Association for Jewish Studies conference), tackle the stack of books I've been wanting to read and to renew both body and mind with exercise and reflection. My first days of Sabbatical will be spent visiting my mom and family in Indianapolis and Cincinnati. Like so many other families, this has been a year of both loss and simchah for ours. The time together will be a blessing for both healing and readying ourselves for journey ahead.

But as much as I am looking forward to this time away, I will miss not being fully present for you. Yes, I'll be in contact by means of phone calls and email.

Yes, you'll be in good hands with Rabbi Jordy Callman and our wonderful staff. Still, know that wherever I am, you will be in my thoughts and prayers.

We, the descendants of Jacob/Israel, have awoken at times to find ourselves in different and challenging circumstances. Helping us in every generation is the knowledge that wherever we go, God is there. And wherever we go, the strength, wisdom and compassion of the Jewish community is there for us. This is the foundation of our faith and the sacred bonds that sustain us.

Susan and I pray that God's blessings of good health, happiness and prosperity will shine on you and your loved ones in 2020!

B'vrakhah

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins