

A Shabbat message from Rabbi Rheins
Shabbat Vayeitzei 5781

Upon this Rock

If not typically, then at least stereotypically, on Thanksgiving we gather with friends and loved ones to enjoy a festive meal and share toasts of gratitude for all that we have. It's a splendid day of good food and too much of it, laughter and hugs, and four-part choir of overlapping conversations competing with football game blaring on the television. But this year is not typical or stereotypical. Like so many of our other special days, COVID has stolen from us that which we crave the most: a chance to get together. This year, in order to keep safe we are mostly alone. If we are lucky we have a few of our closest loved ones with us, but even then we will be acutely aware of those who are missing. Coincidentally, this week's Torah portion, *Vayeitzei* (Genesis 28:10- 32:3) also touches on the theme of finding ourselves isolated, all alone and heading into the unknown.

Our ancestor Jacob left home in haste. He was escaping his brother's wrath. He was running away to hide from the shame of fooling his father Isaac. And he was on a quest to find love and a new start with relatives in the old country. But on that first, fateful night, Jacob simply found himself all alone and he dreamed a dream:

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 Adonai was standing beside him and 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 Adonai is in this place, and I did not know it!" ¹⁷ Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven."

¹⁸ Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He named that site Beit El; but previously the name of the city had been Luz. ²⁰ Jacob then made a vow, saying, "If God remains with me, if God protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ and if I return safe to my father's house -- Adonai shall be my God. ²² And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You."

Let's look closer at the role of that stone in Jacob's story. First, while there are anthropological parallels of large, shaped rocks used as a headrest, we

also find stones used in mourning rituals. We are familiar with the tradition of placing stones on gravesites. And in the *Shulchan Arukh*, Joseph Karo (Spain 1488-1575 Israel) relates another old mourner's custom of resting on a hard stone. Karo relates that *minhag* to Jacob's stone (Orach Chayim 555:2). Yes, Jacob, too was as if in mourning. From a loving family he now found himself alone. But note again what he did upon waking; Jacob took that rock and set it up as a monument:

וְהָאֶבֶן הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר־שָׂמְתִי מִצְבָּה יְהִיָּה בַיִת אֱלֹהִים
And this rock that I have set up as a monument will become a House of God

Four hundred years ago, another rock was designated as a foundation stone. On November 11, 1620, pilgrims fleeing religious persecution in England landed in America and their story became the foundation myth for creation of this nation. 102 passengers were on a ship named Mayflower and they were at sea for some 66 days before they landed. They came to anchor in a place that is now known as Provincetown on Cape Cod. After a bit of exploration, those pilgrims finally found a place where they could build their homes, plant their crops and begin developing their dream. Their scouting party docked by a large rock in a natural port on December 11, 1690. This was Plymouth Rock.

To tell the truth, the Plymouth Rock is rather underwhelming. It is the size of an automobile with rounded edges and a large crack that cuts through it. The crack was caused when the town wanted to move the rock to higher ground to better profit from its tourist and historical value in 1774. To do so, they had to split the rock into halves. One half was relocated to the town's meeting-house. The rock was not re-attached to its original on the wharf until 1880. It was then that the date "1620" was carved into the rock.

The survival of those pilgrims during that rough and grim first winter and their subsequent Thanksgiving with their Indian neighbors is a story savored by many of us on Thanksgiving. This year, it has even greater meaning. Brave families endured a long and often brutal journey. They did not know what the future held for them but they believed, that with God's help, they would persevere. They saw in their trip the hand of providence and upon a rock they saw the first signs of promise.

Just as Jacob awoke from his dream and took the rock upon which he had slept and set up a monument, the pilgrims chose hope over despair, thanksgiving over disappointment. On this Thanksgiving and Shabbat *Vayeitzei*, let us note that we, too, have a solid foundation upon which to build our dreams and our lives. Yes, we have lost so much over these many months of the pandemic. Yes, we also find ourselves in a strange

circumstances without a clear vision of when we will be through these challenges. But Jacob awoke and realized that even in a strange and lonely place God was with him. He took that rock of mourning and set it up as a foundation stone for the future he would build. And so shall we. We'll build on what we have learned, we'll grow from our experiences, and we'll create a better world.

Let us take time this Thanksgiving and this Shabbat to reconsider the foundations of our lives. Susan joins me in wishing you and your loved ones a very Happy Thanksgiving!

Shabbat Shalom!

Rick

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