

## Finding God in all places...Vayeitze Genesis 28:10-32:3

Vayetze tells a story with which many of us have familiarity. It might even feel personal to us. It's not *only* that we know the cast of characters or we identify with the sibling rivalry or with the fear that Jacob felt leaving home and going out on his own. On a deep level, consciously or otherwise, we identify with the life changing drama the story holds. It is the tale of Jacob's coming of age. It includes powerful visual images that are engrained in our memories: a ladder reaching up to the sky with angels ascending and descending. Although a wrestling match between Jacob and perhaps his brother, Esau, or a divine messenger, or God, Godself, happens in next week's parsha, the parshiyot, the chapters, are conflated and essential to the whole of Jacob's journey. Jacob, finding himself in the vastness of the larger world, has a spiritual awakening. We recall his profoundly poetic language when he awoke from his dream: "*God is in this place,*" he said, "*and I, I did not know it.*"(28:16)

When I'm asked whether I believe in God, I answer honestly: "I don't understand the question. What does it mean to 'believe in God'?" But I can tell you for sure, I have *experienced* God. I know the wind is real because, although I cannot see it, I see the *effect* it has on the leaves of a tree or a kite in the sky. My experiences of God are similar. I see the relief and smile of a patient in the hospital whom I visit and with whom I have found just the right words to share. I feel embraced by holiness when our 2 year old grandson covers his eyes and says "Amen" when we light Shabbat candles together. Jacob's experience and in particular, his words, "*God is in this place, and I, I did not know it*", might evoke a tangible feeling for us, because, although the particulars belong to Jacob, his spiritual journey is ours, as well.

For better and for worse, our Torah stories *do* resemble our own lives in significant ways. They are the journeys of flesh and blood creatures, who are fully human with faults and

natural inclinations that are not always admirable. Dysfunctional is an accurate adjective to describe our ancestral families in the book of Genesis. Deceit and mistrust, favoritism and jealousy were passed down, particularly among male siblings, virtually as birthrights, from one generation to the next. And yet, we look to our biblical ancestors for lessons to guide us in our own lives. It seems natural to ask: What has Parshat Vayetze come to teach us?

Jacob's life story is about crossing boundaries and moving from one stage of life to another. It is about leaving his childhood home, finding a wife, creating a family and forming his own relationship with God. That is why, when he finds himself feeling vulnerable and unprotected in the wide-open wilderness, his realization that "*God is in this [huge, endless physical] place, and I, I did not know it,*" (28:16) is such an extraordinary statement.

God was central in the lives of our ancestors. *Vayetze* asks us to consider whether we are open to the presence of God in *our* lives, as Jacob was? My teacher Rabbi Dr. Michael Shire has done significant research into the spiritual lives of children. There is considerable evidence, he writes, that children naturally have a sense of spirituality, a sense of the presence of God, that is qualitatively different from that of adults; and one which, as adults, we often lose! Allow me to share a snapshot of our family adventure at the Joshua Tree National Park near Palm Springs, California, over Thanksgiving. (Has any of you been there?) It was a cold but gorgeous day, with a massive blue sky and sandy paths between boulders of all sizes and shapes. I wanted to push the limits of our grandchildren's imaginations, so I asked what stories they saw in the rock formations. In about 5 seconds, 9 year old Mikah, with his big blue eyes wide and full of wonder, turned my body toward a huge rock formation and told me about a baby frog with his Mama. Recalling parts of the Passover story, I think, Mikah told me God was helping them escape from a river in which the water was turning to blood! He enlisted

his entire body to describe the scene the rock formation was telling him-including showing me where the baby frog was holding tight to his Mama's back. And I thought "God *is* in this place; and I, I thank you Mikah, for reminding me of that!"

In this week's parsha, we witness Jacob's passage into adulthood-not unlike becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. We have seen him, literally and metaphorically, caught between a rock and a hard place. His mother, Rebecca, was what we might call today, a helicopter Mom; hovering over him, pushing God's agenda. Because Isaac, his aged and sickly father, is governed by his appetite for meat, he favors Jacob's older twin brother, Esau, the hunter. We watch Jacob push through, get around them or break down, the obstacles with which life presents him. We encounter similar physical and emotional struggles, in our lives, no matter what our age or stage of life. And if we are open to it and we take the time to reflect on events in our so called ordinary lives, we may recognize ourselves coming face to face with our own spark of the divine or that of another. As was the case for Jacob, our spiritual encounters may happen in liminal space- the space between where we've left and where we *think* we are going. Jacob didn't have a "trip tik" when he left his parents' home in Be'ersheva. The text says: **וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב, מִבְּאֵר שֶׁבַע; וַיֵּלֶךְ, חָרָנָה**. "And Jacob left Be'ersheva and went *toward*, [not to] Haran". The implication is clear: he went on a journey. He would encounter uncertainty, mystery and danger, enroute. We too, may be in the midst of an ordinary day when we have an unexpected encounter. Perhaps we trip and a stranger comes to help us up, or we are blessed to be able to reach out to help another who has lost his balance, physically or otherwise. When the moment passes and we reflect on what happened, we may be surprised to feel the overwhelming presence of God in those moments.

Donna Powell tells the story of a mother enroute on a plane to visit her very sick son. "I have not seen him in a month, and in that time, the cancer that is chasing my son's body has paralyzed his entire left side and he is rapidly losing mobility. In a mere four weeks,

Ryan has gone from dancing at his wedding to being confined to a wheelchair, unable to perform the most basic functions unassisted. Our phone conversations have grown very short, very terse as he loses the ability to speak in complete sentences. He is despondent, he is angry, he is frightened. I am on my way to be with him.

On the crowded plane I sit, by chance, behind a man wearing a skullcap. I barely register his presence. I am absorbed in my own thoughts and my own sadness, trying to read a book but not seeing very much. An hour into the flight, annoyed, I must put my book aside and move into the aisle to let my window seat mate, pass. By chance, I glance down and see the man wearing the skullcap is furiously writing on his computer. He is surrounded by several books in Hebrew.

Without thinking or hesitating I sit myself next to him. He looks up at me inquiringly with his deep and ageless brown eyes, and I simply ask: "Are you a rabbi?" When he confirms he is indeed, I ask him if we may speak. "Certainly," he replies and warmly welcomes me to visit with him. Without prelude and suddenly in tears, I tell him of my son's failing body and my journey to him this day. I speak of my deep despair as it is abundantly clear that there is no stopping the relentless cancer that is taking his brain and body. I share my fervent need to find a way to help my son find peace and comfort. Yet, I sob, how can I, a person of undiscovered faith, find a way to bring my son what he most needs now? All the medical alternatives are exhausted, and I do not know how to help my beloved son find peace and comfort on a spiritual level. All my anguish, my agony, my emotional terror building since the recurrence of his cancer last May, spill out to this stranger on a plane. I cry like an abandoned child. I cry like a mother losing her child. On a plane and to a stranger.

Eventually, I have no tears left. Then with infinite kindness, the rabbi I sit next to (by chance) speaks softly. He offers me insights into a world I have not known before: a

world of faith. For the next few hours, he patiently communicates with me. He reminds me of the ancient prayers and of their significance. Together we chant the Shema, the most holy Jewish prayer and I remember it from long ago. I find comfort in the familiar Hebrew words, the rhythmic cadence and the knowledge that I am crying out to God as my people have for millennium. We talk of the meaning of the soul and he tells me that immortality is a fundamental tenet of Judaism. He explains that a child is conceived by the parents who give the body but also by God who gives the body its soul. It takes three to create life, the Rabbi believes, and the One who is always there is always there. He makes note of Ryan's Hebrew name, Reuvain and mine, Devorah. Spent, I thank him for his time. I have much to think about when I return to my seat.

After the plane lands, I bid farewell to the Rabbi. He thanks me for our conversation and leans toward me. He looks at me intently, says something about my name in Hebrew and he presses a note into my hand. Curious, but not surprised, I shove it into the pocket of my jeans. As I deal with the deplaning bustle, I keep patting my pocket, knowing there is something special there. I need a quiet space and sufficient time to read what this man I met by chance on a plane, has written for me.

It is the next morning, before meeting up with Ryan at the hospital, I feel ready to read the Rabbi's note. He writes that after we spoke on the plane, he searched the Torah for a reference to Devorah and Reuvain. He found the one and only reference to Devorah. It was in today's daily Torah reading. Today. This very day when I meet this stranger by chance on a flight to Detroit. He goes on to write: today's reading tells of Devorah, who is instructed by God to travel afar to minister Jacob, whose firstborn son is Reuvain. It is the only time Devorah's name appears in the Torah. It comes on the exact day I, Devorah, am traveling afar to minister to my son, Reuvain. I know then that my meeting the rabbi was not by chance.

The peace I seek on behalf of my son is first given to me. I now go to him knowing we are embraced by a love that perhaps cannot be understood, but is. I am able to speak from my heart to my child before I leave his bedside, as I curl up next to him:

“My son, I loved you long before you were born to me. I knew you in my womb and even before. My love for you is eternal, never-ending and transcends this world. Why this is, I do not know. That this is true, of that I am sure.” I kiss his tears and he kisses mine. Together we say the ancient Jewish prayer, the Shema. I am sheltered in his arms and he in mine and both of us are being sheltered by a power greater than we comprehend.

I approached a stranger on a plane, on a flight to Detroit, desperate to find a way to bring peace and acceptance to my son as he faces an unimaginable ordeal. Because of this chance encounter, now when I leave my son, I leave a man who remembers how to smile again. None of this is easy nor understandable, but with a new faith in the power and transcendence of love, it has become bearable for now. *I am thinking the miracle we pray for comes but comes in small ways and in ways that I may not fully understand. But nonetheless, the miracle comes.* And, not by chance, today is good.”

Although the names and places among our individual stories may differ, as we have and will continue to discover, often some of the circumstances resemble our own. We need not attest to having faith; we need only be open to an experience. We don't often know where our prayers come from or where they go; whether they are heard or if they are received. Does it matter? When we are open to the universe; to loving and feeling loved; to seeing and being seen; there will be times when we can affirm: “God is in this place, though I, I did not know.”