

# Vayetzey 5771

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By Rabbi Maurice Harris

This week's Torah portion is called *Vayetzey*, and it is found in the book of *Breishet*, or Genesis in English. Our story begins with a young Jacob fleeing the wrath of his brother, Esau. As you may recall from last week's Torah reading, Jacob deceived his dying father, Isaac, by pretending to be his twin brother, Esau, and by means of this deception Jacob made off with the special blessing Isaac had intended to give his first born son, Esau. Having been stripped of first-born privileges twice by Jacob at this point, Esau began muttering to himself that he would murder his brother once he got the chance. And having overheard Esau's plotting, Rebecca sent Jacob away to her brother, Laban's, household in the town of Haran.

This week's parashah begins with young Jacob on the road to Haran. He stops for the night at a certain place. He takes a stone to use for a pillow, drifts off to sleep, and has a life-changing dream. Angels, or divine messengers, are ascending and descending a ladder connecting heaven and earth. God appears standing above the scene and blesses Jacob, saying: "the land upon which you are lying I will give to you and to your descendants. And your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west and the east and the north and the south. Through you and your descendants all the families of the earth shall find blessing. And here I am, with you: I will watch over you, and I will bring you back to this soil. I will not let go of you as long as I have yet to do what I have promised you."

Jacob awakens from his dream, astonished and alert. "Truly, God is in this place, and I did not know it!" he says aloud. And he adds, "*mah norah ha-makom ha-zeh*: how awesome is this place! This is none other than a house of God, and this is a gate of heaven!"

Jacob's dream of the angels traveling up and down a ladder to heaven is famous. Something I find interesting is that the entire story up to the point that Jacob awakens and realizes that God was in this place takes the Torah only 7 verses to tell. But the element of this famous story that I'd like to focus on tonight is a single word that dominates the story – the Hebrew word *makom*, which means place. The Torah's storytelling style is sparse on words and fast on action. So when a single word is repeated several times in the course of a story, you can bet that there's special symbolic significance to it. In this case, the word *makom* appears 5 times in the 7 verses that tell the story of his dream and his awakening, and 3 of those occurrences take place in one of those verses alone. The narrating voice tells us that Jacob arrived at a certain *makom*, took one of the stones of the *makom* to use as a make-shift pillow, and that he lay down in that *makom*. When Jacob wakes up, startled by his amazing dream, he says that God is in this *makom* and that this *makom* is awe-inspiring.

The Torah wants us to ask questions about what the connection is between place and spiritual awakening. What exactly happened in this story? Was it the particular place that Jacob came to

that was holy? Was it holy before he got there – a place of great spiritual power waiting to be discovered? Maybe he followed some inner pull or was guided by a divine hand to a place of great spiritual connectedness to divine realms. Is it this particular piece of earth that is remarkable, that has God’s presence within it, or is this a story about a person discovering God at the moment he was ready for the encounter?

Could it be that there was something about Jacob’s story besides the particular geography of that place that made that *makom* so important? Was it something in time, not in space, like a turning point in Jacob’s life that created the opening between his consciousness and God’s, and that resulted in him having the amazing dream? Maybe this dream would have happened wherever he had stopped to rest that night.

Let’s consider the place Jacob was in the timeline of his life for a moment, rather than his geographical place on the map of ancient Canaan. He has just fled his childhood home, and now he is in between two major chapters of his life. He is on his way to the Mesopotamian city of Haran, to seek refuge with his uncle, Laban. His vision of the ladder with the angels, and his hearing of God’s words of blessing, happen at an in-between place in his life. It’s in that liminal no-man’s-land in time that Jacob utters the words, “God is in this place, and I did not know it.”

The ancient rabbis complicate our exploration of the word *makom*. As many of you may know, one of the names for God that the Talmudic sages use is “The Place,” *ha-makom*. In Rabbi Lawrence Kushner’s wonderful book, God Was In This Place, and I, I Did Not Know, he draws our attention to a midrash in which the sages ask, “Why do we change the name of the Holy One, and call God *makom*, the Place?” They answer: “Because God is the place of the world and not the other way around.” So from the rabbinic imagination we get an understanding of God that is very cosmic indeed: God is the Place of the world. The world, by which the rabbis mean the entire universe, exists within a larger place, and that larger place containing the universe is what God is. When Jacob says, “God is in *this* place,” it seems to me like he may be getting things backwards, at least from the perspective of the ancient rabbis. Hmmmm... let’s keep exploring a little further with Rabbi Kushner.

Kushner goes on to bring two much later rabbinic texts – from Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, a Hasidic master whose life spanned much of the 1700s, and from Rabbi Aryeh Lieb of Ger, who lived in the late 1800s. Reb Nachum taught, “All being itself is derived from God, and the presence of the Creator is in each created thing.” And the Gerrer rebbe taught, “A person is able to awaken to the holiness of God in any place.”

The Hasidic movement embraced a theology that is panentheistic, which basically means the belief that everything in existence is part of God, but that God is also greater than everything in existence. So you and me and the tree and the chair are all actually part of God, and God includes more than all this created stuff.

So maybe what happened with Jacob along the path was that one night he discovered that God was in the same place he was, and his first reaction was to make a note of how special that

place was. In fact, the Torah tells us that after he awoke the next morning, he set up a monument at the site of his dream and named the place Beit El, meaning House of God. But maybe this story is only the beginning of Jacob's process of discovering the reality of God. Maybe, in time, Jacob will discover that God is in every place, and within him as well.

The arc of Jacob's life is long, and he is one of the characters in Torah that we get to watch mature. He starts out as a juvenile trickster with a seemingly insensitive demeanor towards his brother. Then a sudden turn of events leads him to lose everything he's ever known and become a fugitive from his own home. He leaves home in a hurry to avoid being murdered, and on the way to his uncle's encampment he begins the spiritual journey. His first responses are authentic but still immature. We can see just how immature if we read a few verses past the point in the story when he wakes up in amazement from the dream. He makes a solemn vow to God, saying: "If God is with me and watches over me on this path that I am taking and gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and if I return safely to my father's house, then the Eternal One will be my God." Not exactly the words of someone ready to "let go and let God." Jacob is still young, still self-centered, and understandably frightened in this situation. Despite all these things, he is still powerfully transformed by the dream. He really is, spiritually speaking, on the path now.

In the next chapter of his life, he discovers love, and he experiences a kind of karmic playing out of his earlier deceptions against his brother, Esau. His uncle Laban deceives him repeatedly and manages to get 20 years of hard, back-breaking labor out of Jacob before Jacob finally gets a chance to break free of Laban's cunning manipulation. When Jacob finally does get the chance to set out on his own and free himself from Laban's dominance, he speaks about God with greater trust and maturity. And as we'll read in the weeks ahead, Jacob's parting of ways with Laban 20 years down the timeline will confront him with the need to face his estranged brother, Esau on the road back home to Canaan. An older and more humbled Jacob handles the reunion with courage and true grace, and reconciliation results.

There's still more to Jacob's story after that, but the hour is growing later and I think I've made the point well enough. I'd like to close with one last thought, also courtesy of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner's book, which is widely available new and used online and is a valuable addition to anyone's Jewish home library. Rabbi Kushner tells the story of a teaching offered by the Israeli Torah commentator, Eliyahu KiTov. The early rabbis taught that "each and every day the Divine voice issues from Mount Sinai." In other words, God didn't only speak once to the ancient Israelites at Sinai, but God's voice is like a never-ending radio beacon constantly broadcasting from Sinai with a signal powerful enough to cover the whole world. KiTov asked the question, "If Torah is being spoken all the time, why can't we hear it?" Kushner goes on to write the following explaining KiTov's response:

The reason Sinai is so special and the reason why we are unable to hear Torah all the time, [KiTov] suggests, is because the noise, static, and muzak of this world drown out the sound of God's voice. Only at the time of the "giving of the Torah" did God "silence the roar." In the language of modern sound-recording

technology, God, you might say, switched on the “Dolby” noise reduction system. At Sinai we could hear what had been there (and continues to be here) all along.

God is the One who enables us to hear what is being spoken at the most primary levels of reality. Each act of conscious focus is a miniature Sinai that now can be in every place. (p. 30)

Perhaps what happened to Jacob after he woke up from his life-changing dream was that he finally shut off the background noise and the Muzak of his selfish and youthful distractions. Suddenly, a clear channel could be heard. May each of us be blessed with opportunities to find those moments when noise and clutter can give way to the opportunity to listen deeply to the voice within, the loving Source of Life who created us all and who animates our world.

Shabbat shalom.