

In this *d'var torah*, I want to talk to you about the possibility of meaning and gratitude and love in our complex and sometimes frightening world. As we reflect on the story of Jacob and his choices, and Leah her choices, I want to take muscular hold of our twin legacies as God wrestlers and God praisers and explore how we can live them out most fully in community.

*Vayetzey* begins with Jacob fleeing home after stealing his brother's birthright and tricking their father into giving him Esau's blessing. He is on the run, worried about murderous revenge, unmoored from family and tribe, unsafe. The action begins at night, which is also a liminal time. Our ancestors experienced nighttime as full of danger, which is why our *ma'ariv* service has an extra prayer, the *hashkivenu*, a prayer for safety.

Jacob is heading through the desert toward his mother's land when night falls. He makes a pillow for himself out of stone, falls asleep and has powerful dream. There is a ladder set in the ground and reaching to the heavens. Angels are going up and down it. And God, God is standing beside Jacob giving him a blessing—of land and progeny and protection.

וְהָיָה אֲנֹכִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֵּלֵךְ...כִּי לֹא אֶעֱזֹבְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר אֶם-עָשִׂיתִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר-  
דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ:

*Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go...I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. (Genesis 28:15)*

What a blessing. Isolated and vulnerable, one small man alone in the desert under an immense canopy of stars, Jacob dreams a vision of a multi-directional connection between the everyday affairs of humans and the mysterious realm of the ultimate. Alone, without connection or protection or wealth, he receives a blessing of continuity and safety.

*Vayishlach*, our next *parashah*, builds on this. By the following *parashah*, parts of the blessing have been fulfilled. Jacob has a large family and has amassed extensive wealth. He is again on the road, once again because of his dubious actions, this time in acquiring his large flock. He is returning home and fearing a confrontation with Esau. Will there be payback for his earlier duplicity? Once again he has a nighttime encounter, where he wrestles with someone—perhaps a man, perhaps an angel—and wrests a blessing from him.

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאמָר עוֹד נִשְׁמָךְ כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעַם-אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּגְבַּל:

*Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."*

From this wrestling, in this blessing, we, the Jewish people, receive one of our names, Israel. Rabbi Arthur Waskow dubs us God wrestlers.

In between these two intense night time encounters is the story of Jacob falling in love with Rachel, Lavan tricking him into marrying Leah first, the birth of most of Jacob's many children through Leah and her concubine Zilpah, through Rachel's concubine Bilhah and finally Rachel herself. Ultimately Jacob bears 12 sons, plus one daughter. As Leah names her first three sons, she gives them names that express her bitterness and loneliness at her family situation. But with her fourth son, she chooses a different path.

וַתֵּהֶר עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר הִפְעַם אֹנֶה אֶת־יְהוָה עַל־כֵּן קָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה

*She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This time I will praise Adonay."  
Therefore she named him Yehudah (Judah).  
(Genesis 29:35)*

Here is the source of another of our names. We are Yehudim, or Jews. We are God wrestlers and we are God praisers.

In *Vayatzay*, we have complexity and paradox. We encounter the dual nature of life, in both metaphor and narrative. The ladder in Jacob's dream enables travel up and down, and we see this trajectory in Jacob's story: he moves from the lows of loneliness and liminality to the exaltation of abundant wealth and family gathered round. Some scholars suggest that those God-inspired writers of the Tanakh included these devices point to the nature of history, both Jewish collective history and individual history. Life never moves in a straight line. We know this from our biblical ancestors and from our more recent forebears. A Yiddish proverb teaches: *Der mentsh trakht un got lakht*. We plan, God laughs.

Our *parashah* is also complex because our patriarch Jacob is a tremendously complex character. We remember him in every *Amidah* (*Avot ve'imot*). The rabbis teach that our patriarchs and matriarchs are the source of our merit and our blessing, and we see that he is the source of one of our names. Yet Jacob is morally complicated, even compromised—this is true for us, and was manifest to our ancestors. While there is some pride in Jacob's trickster nature, the rabbis are also clear that there is payback for his misdeeds.

In this *parashah*, we can read Jacob as liminal character, on the edge morally, on the frontier physically. Yet in this liminal space, Jacob is, to borrow a phrase from Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg "surprised by God." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks does a close reading of the dream sequence to show the surprise. וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם (Genesis 28:11), "And he came upon a place," this verb can also mean unexpected

encounter. And *Makom*, in rabbinic imagination, is one of God's name. And the dream sequence includes a fourfold repetition of *vehinay*, which, in the terse poetry of the Torah indicates surprise.

Critically, Jacob is open to this transformative encounter, and recognizes it for what it is.

וַיִּקְוֹץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן יְיָ הִנֵּה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי:

*Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely Adonay is present in this place, and I did not know it!"*

וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר מִה־נִּזְרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה...

*Full of wonder, he said, "How awesome is this place!"  
(Genesis 28:16-17)*

There is a rabbinic teaching that out of this encounter Jacob established the practice of *ma'ariv*. So from this encounter, we have spontaneous as well as fixed practice, we have both *kavannah* and *keva* as means to connect with the divine.

From a narrative perspective, with that transformation, what unfolds is love, which is infrequently mentioned in the Torah and always worth noting. We see the creation of new family and new community. We see the possibility of abundance and, in next week's *parashah*, the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. We know it's not perfect. There is the clear favoritism of Rachel over Leah and the pain this causes; there is the mutual duplicity between Lavan and Jacob. Life is not perfect.

But I want to raise up Leah as a model for responding to pain and imperfection. In naming her sons, Leah moves from bitterness to praise. Rabbi Shai Held writes:

"A Jew is, ideally, a human being who, like Leah, can find her way to gratitude without having everything she wants or even needs...Disappointment need not preclude gratitude, nor need gratitude crowd out the very real possibility of disappointment. Judaism does not ask us to choose one feeling or the other but rather makes space—indeed seeks to teach us to make space—for the sheer complexity and contradictoriness of human experience. Who better than Leah to teach us that a broken heart can also have moments of profound fullness."

Rabbi Deborah Waxman  
Rooted and Relevant *D'var Torah—Parashat Vayetzey*  
November 2018

This is the core of my teaching today: We can choose wonder and gratitude and love, in so doing, we can cultivate resilience as we live out our values. We do this most powerfully in community. It is in community that we are celebrated and supported, educated and challenged, embraced and, at times, corrected. It is in community that we learn to think and act beyond our individual desires and needs. It is in community that we willingly submerge our individual interests to join ourselves to something larger.

We Reconstructionists are part of a movement that was founded on a commitment to diversity, we are building communities that honor difference and make space for it. This is profoundly Jewish and at the same time profoundly countercultural to the American commitment to individualism, which, in the digital era, is growing ever more radical and ever more isolating.

To remember our interconnectedness, to be open to awe, to choose love and praise—this is essential to our humanity. Jewish living, Jewish practice, Jewish teachings, Jewish community are all pathways toward deepening our humanity, deepening our connection to the divine and to each other.

Reconstructing Judaism is here to help you do this, to mirror it back to you, to amplify your experiments, your hopes, your successes. All of us who have been working on this gathering hope that you have been and will continue to be filled up over convention, and that you will work with us to extend this sense of connection and fullness beyond these four days.

I am not a big fan of proclamations of fearlessness. In my experience, I and most other people are full of fear, some of it in our minds, some of it all too real. We are vulnerable and full of pain, disappointment. I am, however, a huge admirer of people who acknowledge their fear and act in spite of it. Like our patriarch Jacob in our *parashah*, on the run and fearing death, we can walk with the fear and open ourselves to a larger vision and the possibility of transformation. Like our matriarch Leah, we can set aside pain and orient ourselves toward gratitude.

We are God wrestlers and God praisers. We are heirs to a liturgy that proclaims every morning “*b’khol yom tamid mekhadesh ma’aseh berashit*,” which Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg interprets as “every day creation is renewed.”

Let us open ourselves to the possibility of awe at this blessed reality.

Let us know how small we are in a way that cultivates our humility and our sense of interconnection.

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Let us act on the immense power we do have and rise up to praise, as did Leah, and to wrestle and pray and build, as did Jacob.

Let us choose—with full awareness of our fears and the precarious randomness of the universe and yes, even the hate-filled actions of some—let us choose courage and love and connection. Let us know awareness of the divine, let us make it manifest, in our actions, in community.

(singing)

מה־נֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה

*“How awesome is this place...”*  
(Genesis 28:17)