

## VAYETZEI 5769 SPIRITUALITY

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Shabbat Shalom.

Last Thursday, I took a break from our Thanksgiving festivities to go on a bike ride. I biked around the area, onto Trapelo Road, and then to the De Cordova Museum. I found myself surrounded by trees and sculptures, winding paths and water.

While some of the more vibrant colors had left the trees, the air was filled with leaves drifting down like gentle colored snowflakes. I got off my bike and tried to take it all in. I was alone with myself and with nature. Everything was still. I closed my eyes. I took in a deep breath. I felt God's Presence. It was as if God was trying to communicate with me. I tried to listen. A bird chirped a soft melody, and the leaves rustled their tapping beat. I listened to God's song.

The opening scene in this week's parashah finds our ancestor, Ya'acov – Jacob, alone. Suddenly, he has an experience with God. In a dream, he sees angels ascending and descending a ladder. Then he hears God's voice, and God blesses him. When Ya'acov awakens, he exclaims: "*Akhen yesh Adonai bamakom hazeh v'anokhi lo yadati.*" "Surely, Adonai was in this place, and I was unaware of it."

Ya'acov has a spiritual experience with the Divine - a moment of transcendence - a moment when the normal manner in which Ya'acov encounters the world is replaced with something out of this world.

Ya'acov is the most spiritual of our three forefathers. He is the one who dreams of the Divine. After this moment with God, he is shaken and says: "*Mah nora hamakom hazeh – ein zeh ki im bet-Elohim v'zeh shaar hashamayim.*" "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and this is the gateway to heaven."

It is early morning, the first light is rising in the East, and Ya'acov builds an altar to God by taking the stone he used as a pillow during the night and placing it as a pillar and pouring oil over it. Then he names the place *Beit El* – the house of God.

Ya'acov has other extraordinary moments. In next week's parashah, he wrestles with a mysterious assailant and forces this being to bless him so that his name is changed from Ya'acov to Yisrael. His descendants are to be called B'nai Yisrael – the children of Israel.

Ya'acov has been a sneaky brother who, as we read last week, pressured Esav to relinquish the birthright to him and who deceived his father in order to receive his special blessing; now Ya'acov begins to develop and mature. He changes from one who is deceitful to the ancestor of our people. This is not a simple process.

But, it begins with a journey. Ya'acov is sent away from his homeland to another place.

In a sense, all of us, in order to grow and to reach our full potential, need to move away on a journey both literal and figurative to gain perspective on ourselves and help us see who we really are and who we can become. Taking

this trip gave Ya'acov the opportunity to better understand himself – perhaps he did not like what he found and set out to change himself.

Ya'acov spends 20 years as Lavan's servant, and he himself is deceived. The deceiver becomes the deceived. Is this a punishment for his earlier sins? He makes significant changes in his life, and it all begins with a spiritual moment in a place called Beit El.

When this moment begins, the text reads – *vayifga bamakom* – Ya'acov came upon a certain place. The word for “a certain place” is *makom*, which becomes one of the names for God.

(In fact, when we comfort a mourner, we recite – *Hamakom yena<sup>h</sup>em etkhem* – literally, “May the place comfort you” – meaning, “May God – who is in every place – comfort you.”)

The word “*vayifga*” - “came upon” is a strange choice here. The root of this verb can mean “attack.” In other words, that Ya'acov was attacked. The place or God attacked Ya'acov. Because of this strange word, the rabbis felt that some additional activity was taking place here. They suggest that it was prayer - specifically, the evening service.

Ya'acov is credited with the creation of Maariv, the evening service. Ya'acov settled upon a certain, holy place. Later, this place is associated with the *Beit Mikdash* – the Holy Temple in Jerusalem – and there, Ya'acov davened Maariv.

This makes sense to me. Maariv, the evening service, is associated with Ya'acov because it is our most spiritual service. Within it, we find the beautiful

“*Hashkiveinu*” prayer that asks God to spread the heavenly shelter of peace over us, protecting us through the night to come. And the most spiritual and intense service of the week is the special addition to the Maariv service: *Kabbalat Shabbat* – the service that welcomes Shabbat each Friday night.

This is my favorite service of the week. The mad rush of the six workdays is over and, all at once, I can sit in shul, close my eyes, and sing with deep *kavanah* – with fervor and feeling. The soaring melodies transport me to another realm where all the mundane matters of the week have been replaced with spiritual delight. The singing is unique. We all join together to allow our voices in *niggunim* – melodies without words – that transform our Large Chapel into the “*shaar hashamayim*,” the gate of heaven that Ya’acov mentioned. When we sing *Lekhah Dodi* and greet the Shabbat Queen, the *Shekhinah* - the Divine Presence - descends upon us, and we really feel elevated on a spiritual, if not a physical level.

To me, *Kabbalat Shabbat* is a time when we can have a transcendent moment – a moment with God – a moment where we sense the world on another plane. In Judaism, that type of spiritual focus and intensity is called *kavanah* – intent or meaning. Throughout Jewish law, we are instructed to pray with *kavanah*, with intense feeling. Many mystics believe that by doing *mitzvot*, by doing God’s commandments, with *kavanah*, with the proper intentionality, we will bring about the perfection of the universe.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to have *kavanah*. Few people experience this feeling. Real moments of *kavanah* are hard to come by. In addition, Judaism

stresses something else in prayer: *keva* – regimented, set prayer services – three times a day!

*Keva* teaches us to daven, to pray, every day at set times, and *keva* even determines the words we will recite! The quintessential Jewish prayer, the Amidah, even sets all the blessings. Since these are already determined for us, how can we have any *kavanah*, any truly spiritual moments?

There is a great tension here between these two competing notions of Jewish prayer – between *keva*, set prayer and *kavanah*, spontaneous, deeply felt spiritual moments. There is, however, a synthesis. If one simply does not pray, does not know how to pray the standard *tefillot*, then it becomes much more difficult to have a spiritual moment. The spiritual side of a human being is like the physical, it needs to be exercised, in order to work properly. Just as we cannot simply wake up tomorrow and run a marathon, we cannot simply expect to have spiritual moments. We need training and discipline. *Keva* is the daily three-mile run. The set prayers and the fixed services are the training ground that opens up our spiritual sides and allows us to be receptive to God, to have developed our *neshamah*, our soul, so that it can have an encounter with the Divine. By reciting the fixed forms of the prayers, we learn how to pray, and that allows us to go beyond the words on the page of our siddur and truly experience *kavanah*.

Coming to synagogue is not enough. One cannot always have spiritual moments simply by attending these Shabbat morning services and listening to the *davening* or reciting the words in the siddur. Spirituality takes a great deal of work. The first step is making the commitment to experience life on a different

level. The second step is *iyyun tefillah* – studying the prayers. To have *kavanah*, we need to understand the *tefillot*, the prayers in our siddur. That means we need to learn what the Hebrew words mean. During the service, look at the siddur and choose a *tefillah*, read the translation and contemplate it – get into the meaning. What is this prayer all about? What theological or spiritual need is it trying to fill? Use the *Or Hadash Siddur* to help.

Once you know something about its meaning and its history, learn about its development. How did it find its way into the siddur? What mood does it create? How does it fit into the service? What are the other *halakhot*, Jewish legal notions and customs, associated with it? The answers to these questions enhance our appreciation of *tefillah*.

These questions can be answered in a number of books we have in our library or by studying with members of our shul, our rabbinic intern Lisa Baret, Rabbi Jacobs or myself on Shabbat afternoons or at our Wednesday-morning breakfast class or at our learner's services. We can also personalize the prayers and take notes in our siddur that remind us of moments in our lives.

When I allow myself to soar in prayer, I speak to God. For some, spiritual moments will occur in *tefillot* – the set prayers. For others, the prayers will inspire them to create their own words to express their feelings. Ultimately, prayer is deeply personal, and each time we pray, even if we recite the same words, it should be a different experience. Even in the rote words of the *Sh'ma*, our central statement of faith that many of us have recited hundreds of times, we must spark spontaneous fervor. Each time, try to relate to God in a different way

– God as creator, God who is the unity behind everything, God who reminds us of the interconnectedness of the entire universe, God encountered within nature, God Whose love for us is so strong that we were given the Torah, God Who can be found in a the place between you and another person.

In a few minutes we will recite the Silent Amidah for the Musaf service. We will each be given a few minutes to recite pages 158 – 161, and at the end of the Amidah, the siddur contains two different concluding prayers. In our old siddur, it stated: “At the conclusion of the Amidah, personal prayers may be added.” That is not really true. I think we MUST add personal, spontaneous prayers to our Amidah, for that is what the Amidah is all about. Throughout the Amidah, the words should trigger different emotions and different spiritual feelings. Our siddur offers us two endings, but those should simply be springboards that lead us to compose our own thoughts.

Ya’acov went out on a trek, a long hike, and had a transformative, religious experience and connected it with God. We should do the same.

The next time you are out mountain biking, hiking, or simply walking in nature, take a moment to appreciate it and then recite a *brakhah*, a blessing appropriate to the moment.

For example, when seeing a sunrise or sunset, recite “*oseh maaseh bereishit* – the One who renews the act of Creation.”

Or, recite the Amidah if you can or another traditional prayer or a spontaneous one. In that way, we can nurture our spiritual sides and find God in moments of transcendence.

For me, it happened at the De Cordova - the *keva* and structure of the *Minḥah*, the afternoon service, which I davened among the trees that day, mixed with spontaneous *kavanah*.

But it can happen anywhere and any time – at home before you go to sleep or right now during the *Musaf* service here at Emunah.

Shabbat Shalom.