

In this week's parasha, Vayitzei, after his fleeing from his home, and dreaming of angels ascending and descending a ladder, Jacob arrives in the Eastern lands, and comes to a well where flocks of sheep were watered. And the Torah says, the stone was large on the mouth of the well. It takes three shepherds to move a stone, but when Jacob sees Rachel coming, he is able to move the stone from his own power.

The Sefas Emes, a Hasidic commentary, notes an irregularity in the text, which doesn't say, "There was a large stone on the mouth of the well, but instead says, "The stone was large on the mouth of the well." The Sefas Emes writes: This may hint that although the stumbling stone, our evil inclination, is to be found everywhere, "on the mouth of the well," it is at its largest. It does not allow us to open our mouths in prayer, the service of the heart." For the Sefas Emes, the stone is the evil inclination, the *yetzer hara*, while the mouth of the well is our own mouths. Our bodies are the well, and water is words, specifically prayer.

So what does it mean for the evil inclination to stop up our mouths? Prayer isn't just the words on the page. In fact, if I ask each of you when you had a moment of profound prayer, I imagine that many of you would describe experiences that *don't* involve the liturgy.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a mystical Orthodox thinker and civil rights and anti-war activist in the 1960s and 1970s famously said: "Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism and falsehood. The liturgical movement must

become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision.”

In short: True prayer, rocks our souls. It shakes us up and makes us uncomfortable, unable to live with justifications and superficialities. *This* is the kind of prayer that the Sefas Emes is talking about. *This* is the well of living waters; the truth that bubbles up inside each of us, begging to be spoken. And *this* is what sometimes gets blocked.

Think of a time that you saw something that you deeply felt was wrong, but for some reason, you couldn't bring yourself to speak out. Think of a time when you felt something in your own life was wrong, but you couldn't find the words to articulate it. Those are the moments that the Sefas Emes is describing. The well is full of water, the water is life-giving. But the stone is blocking it.

If we are to follow Heschel's model, one of the tasks of prayer is to throw the stone off the well and speak the truths that get stifled in the course of the rest of our lives. To speak the truth to ourselves about our own lives, about our own society.

So when we come together to sing the Hebrew words, whose literal meanings many of us don't understand, we give ourselves an opportunity to feel truth running inside us, that we haven't been able to put to words. To tap deep into the realities of who and how and what we are in a given moment. And maybe, to be able to roll away the stone.

So let's go back to the well, and this time, let's let the well just be a well of water. What gives Jacob the strength to roll away the stone? Well, says, Nechama Leibovich, a contemporary Israeli commentator, it's two things. He just had this divine transcendent vision, with the angels on the ladder. But then, he took that vision and turned it outward.

As she puts it: "Jacob's communion with his Creator, his beholding of the Divine Presence at Bethel did not turn him into a recluse, contemplating the heavenly mysteries. Rather, his experience spurred him to practical action. . ." that is, the action of rolling away the stone to provide water to those who needed it.

Prayer must be revolutionary said Rabbi Heschel. He said that while marching through Selma, he was "praying with his feet." In this troubled world we currently inhabit, prayer can make us feel better. If we're praying with real force, maybe we can loosen the constriction that builds up against the constant onslaught of news of what's wrong with the world!

But we don't feel better for the sake of feeling better. Truth speaking has consequences. Once we articulate a reality, we have to work with it. That's why the first -and hardest - step in the 12 step program is to acknowledge that there is a problem that cannot be dealt with internally, and to join in a community of solidarity to work on the problem. For sociological problems, once we pull the stone off of the well, the important thing is to get the water where it needs to go - to distribute the water so that everyone can drink.

I want to call out two small ways that we might consider “praying with our feet” in honor of this Shabbat. This Sunday, there will be a rally commemorating the year anniversary of the death of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year old African American child shot on a playground by police - who have still not been charged or disciplined. Solidarity rallies will be taking place all over the country. The one in Eugene will be at 12:30 at RiverPlay Discovery Village Playground by Skinner Butte Park in Eugene.

The other that I want to mention is I imagine particularly apropos for this parashah, in which Jacob flees for his life and receives a dubious reception in a foreign land. Since the terror attacks in France and Beirut last week, there is a growing movement to restrict our refugee resettlement program here in the United States. As our ancestor Jacob knew well, as we as a people have known, one of great ancillary evils of genocide is the unwillingness of the world resettled refugees. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society is currently putting out a call for Jews to contact their elected officials and strenuously support the resettlement of these refugees.

If neither of those are your causes, then fine. But I encourage us all to think about how we can take the soul-watering that we receive on Shabbat, and let those living waters flow out from us in the rest of the week. Shabbat is a time of gratitude, a time of appreciating what is right. It is a time of rest and renewal. But it is a two-way commandment: six days you shall work, and the seventh day you can rest. This prayer time should renew us for the work, and the work should renew the world toward Shabbat. It is all connected.