

This week's parashah, "Vayeshev," begins with the first verse of Genesis, Chapter 37, *Vayeshev Ya'akov b'ereetz migurei aviv, eretz Canaan.* – "Yaakov settled down in the land of his fathers' sojourning, the land of Canaan". Many commentators note the juxtaposition in this verse between Yaakov's relationship to the land and his fathers', Avraham and Yitzchak. Avraham and Yitzchak are described as sojourners, with a word that has the same root as "ger," strangers; whereas Yaakov sees himself as settled. This could be a good thing; that Yaakov is fulfilling the divine promise given to his grandfather, of inheriting the land, and many commentators think it is.

But things go wrong, quickly. Yaakov plays favorites with his children, and in the course of this parashah, his sons turn on the favorite, Yosef and sell him into slavery in Egypt, tricking Yaakov into thinking that Yosef has died.

Midrash Tanhuma ties that, interestingly, with the name and first word of the parashah, saying, "Whenever Scripture uses the expression and he sat (also translated "and he dwelt"), it connotes misfortune." It offers examples: when the people worship the Golden Calf in Exodus 32, it says, "*And the people sat down - vayashvu - to eat and drink, and rose up to make merry.*" And even later within this parasha, when the brothers throw Yosef into a pit, it says, "*and they sat down to eat bread;*"

The midrash, tantalizingly asserts that "sitting," dwelling, is connected to misfortune, but it doesn't say *why*. So on this midwinter Shabbat, I want to suggest not just a correlation, but a causation.

There have been many articles in the past couple of years on how, “sitting is the new smoking,” or “Sitting is the new cancer.” But I’m not talking about literally sitting. Ya’akov’s father and grandfather rested in the land, but did not think of themselves as settled. Ya’akov invited misfortune when he thought he was settled, which is to say, when he thought there was no more work to be done.

Rabbi Yael Levy, a contemporary mindfulness teacher, writes often of the idea of “God in motion;” that the one thing we can count on in this world is dynamism. Things change, and it is idolatry to try to “freeze god in motion.” So too, it is a mistake to think that we have ever settled, ever completed the work that we are called to do. In social justice language, we say, “you have to earn the “ally’ badge every day, and it expires at midnight. “

Now, we *do get to* sojourn, and Shabbat is the time for that: for rest, for knowing that we get a break. But both the rest and the work are mitzvot. So as we face the dark of the year, which this year will coincide with Hanukkah, let us remember that we are called: not to sit, but to embrace the work. There will be ups and downs, there will be, thank God, rest, but we should never make the mistake of thinking that it is time to settle down.