

This week's parasha, Vayetse, begins with a journey. It opens, Genesis 28:10, וַיֵּצֵא
וַיֵּצֵא מִבְּעֵר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חָרָנָה

Yaakov set out from Be'er sheva and walked towards Haran.

Recall that in last week's parasha, first Yaakov extorted Esav's birthright from him, then, with his mother's encouragement, impersonated Esav to get his father, Yitzhak's blessing. Towards the end of the parasha, Esav vowed to kill Yaakov, so Rivka and Yitzhak instructed him to go to Haran, ostensibly to find a wife from his mother's family, but also to shield him from Esav's rage.

And the parasha opens with Yaakov's leap into the unknown. In the second verse, he encounters a place, when he lies down to sleep, and he dreams a strange dream of angels ascending and descending ladders. A vision of Hashem appears to him and offers him the Abrahamic promise: inheritance of the land, descendants like the dust of the earth, and being a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. The vision closes with the promise, in verse 15 "Behold, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Imagine Ya'akov in the moment of this vision. He has just fled for his life. His father preferred Esav, and the result of his maneuverings is that, though he theoretically has the birthright and the blessing, he has banished himself from home, from the tents that are safe and familiar, from the mother who was his champion. All his life, he has been the younger brother. Now, he is all alone.

As Dena Weiss writes on this moment: “Ya’akov meets God at a time of profound difficulty and fear. When Ya’akov prays to God it is described as *va-yifga*, a chance encounter. Ya’akov stumbles, and is forced to stumble upon divinity. . . When Ya’akov is feeling weak and helpless, God simply listens to him and promises to be with him.”

But Yaakov does not seem to find this reassuring: The following verses state:

Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely *Hashem* is present in this place, and I did not know it!” *Vayeera*, He was awestruck – or terrified, and he said, “How *nora* – how terrible or how awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.”

The Hebrew root א-ר-י, which is the root of Jacob’s feeling *vayeera*, and what he proclaims about the place, that it is, *nora* – can be translated as both awe, and fear. It is not a *comfortable* feeling.

And indeed, the traditional commentators understand Jacob to feel deeply disturbed by this experience, and to tie it to the geographical location. Rashi and Kimchi both say that when Ya’akov explains, Surely Hashem is present and I did not know it!” He means, “if I had known what a holy place this was, I would not have dared to sleep here!” And Sforno understands Yaakov to be saying, “If I’d known I was sleeping in a holy place, I would have prepared myself to receive prophecy.

God confronts Yaakov, with the great gift, “I see you. I am with you.” But Yaakov is the less favored second child. His not used to being *seen*. Yaakov is so accustomed to going *unseen* that he has become somewhat sneaky, somewhat

underhanded about how he operates in the world, as we saw too well in last week's parasha. So of course, Hashem's presence is terrifying. Of course *Yaakov* seeks to explain it away as a feature of the geography. It's about the place. It's not about me.

The place and the person cannot be so easily disentangled, though. Yaakov could never have received such a vision had he remained the younger brother skulking around the family compound in Be'er Sheva. By leaving home, Yaakov becomes a character in his own right. Still weighted by his relationships with his parents, with his older brother, he is no longer living their shadows. This will be his first opportunity to define himself as himself, and not just in relation to Esav. Perhaps it is only when he can begin to see himself that he can receive a vision of Hashem's presence with him. Perhaps he is so uncomfortable because he does not like what he sees, when he looks at himself. And yet, Hashem still promises presence. The promise is humbling; it's terrifying, and in the long run, it is transformative. It will be many years before Yaakov is ready to travel towards the home of his youth, to wrestle with an angel, to face his brother. But the evolution of his spiritual capacities begins with this moment, when he is out of his comfort zone, shaken up by the intimacy of a divine encounter. Before he can even look deeply at himself, he must be willing to consider his surroundings in a new light: I thought I was just on my way from home to my destination. Now I understand that this land in which I travel is holy.

When I worked as a Jewish environmental educator with the Teva Learning Alliance, we used to invite our students to pray the Amidah outside. And we'd tell a Chassidic story of a child who used to run off into the woods to pray, because,

as she told her exasperated parents, she could communicate better with Hashem out in the woods. The parent said, “Don’t you know that God is everywhere, and God is the same everywhere?”

“Of course God is the same everywhere!” answered the child. “But I pray better in the woods because *I* am different there.”

In American culture, there is no such thing as holy ground. Barely anything is sacred. Hand in hand with that, there is not a great value on vulnerability – on being seen, or looking closely at the Other.

But this parashah reminds us that there is such a thing as holy ground – in the liminal spaces that are neither home, nor destination, but wherever we let ourselves catch our breath, be seen and notice in response. As Rabbi Shefa Gold writes, this parasha teaches, “the most awesome and transformative truth. God was here all along and I didn’t know it. THIS is none other than the House of God. THIS is the Gate of Heaven. This very moment and this place here where I stand is at once God’s home and the doorway to all realms.”

That divine promise of presence exists in all places. The question is not whether or not any place on earth is sacred, but whether we will walk with humility and awareness – with *yirah*. On this Shabbat of Thanksgiving, I want to encourage all of us to see ourselves as sojourners on sacred ground – as uncomfortable as that might be. What messages, what truths, might be available to us if we were to let see and be seen? How might that transform who we are becoming?

It is not a rhetorical question.

Shabbat shalom.