

Some of you have been in a class with me for the past month or so exploring theological alternatives to the “God in charge up in the sky.” We’ve been going, chapter by chapter, through Rabbi Toba Spitzer’s remarkable new book, *God is here: Reimagining the Divine*. Each week we explore a different ancient metaphor used for the divine in our scriptures: Water, Place, Rock, Cloud, Fire, et cetera.

This week happened to be the week that we were exploring the imagery of stone. So I was particularly drawn to the images of rocks throughout this parashah.

Yaakov rests his head on a stone at the beginning of the parashah, and dreams of a ladder, with angels ascending and descending. This rock holds him in his vulnerability, and allows him to be receptive to receive revelation.

In chapter 29, Yaakov, arriving in, Haran, finds a well in a field. And, as verse 2 tells us, “The stone at the mouth of the well was large.” It takes several people gathered to roll the stone away, so that the flocks can be watered, and even with three flocks (and presumably their shepherds) already gathered, the shepherds say that cannot roll the stone away. Which makes it all the more remarkable that when Yaakov sees his cousin, Rachel, coming with her father’s flock, he single-handedly rolls the stone away himself, to help her water the flock.

In the case, the stone is something that is both protecting and blocking access to a resource of great value; Yaakov needs to push against it.

Finally, at the end of the parashah, Yaakov erects a *matseivah*, an altar of stones as witness to mark the boundary between himself and his manipulative father-in-law, Lavan.

Rabbi Aaron Panken writes, “If one were to search for a subtle underlying theme in *Parashat Vayeitzei* and its interpretive trajectory, it might be found in the way that Yaakov takes the ordinary stones he finds around him during his travels, and uses them to create lasting meaning.”

I also think that these three ordinary instances of stone indicate not only the diversity of how we use stone itself, but also the diversity of our spiritual needs, and how we access divine experience.

Sometimes, we need a rock, something that will safely cradle us as the stone cradled Yaakov's head at the beginning of the parashah, allowing him to feel safe enough for his heart and mind to open. As Rabbi Spitzer writes in her book, "A true 'Rock of refuge' . . . is something deep, strong and trustworthy. Ideally, it doesn't cost any money, and is accessible whenever we need it. This quality is captured in the book of Isaiah, when the prophet says, 'Be secure in YHVH always, for Yah YHVH is the Eternal Rock.' Achieving this sense of steadiness and trust is one of the central goals of spiritual practice. Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg describes true refuge as that which takes us out of the narrow place – of constricted hear and mind, of fear and aversion – into an expansive space, where we can act with clarity, wisdom and compassion."¹

Sometimes, we need something to push against, to test our strength. The rock that covers the well in Chapter 29 is not a bad thing. On a practical, literal level, it makes a great deal of sense that a communal source of water, a precious resource in a dry land, would be covered by something that takes many people to move – the rock protects the water inside from evaporating out or becoming contaminated, and it also ensures that no individual can take more than their fair share.

For all its protective value, though, the rock sometimes has to be moved, so that the water can flow to those who need it.

¹ Spitzer, *God is Here: Reimagining the Divine* p. 146-7

This is even more true on the metaphorical level – and there is a strong commentary tradition of reading the well, the flock, the rock, and the rolling away of the rock allegorically. We had a great time discussing the traditional allegories and making up our in Torah study yesterday: According to ancient midrash, the well could be Jerusalem², or Mt. Sinai³, or Miriam’s well⁴ that sustained the Israelites through the wilderness, or Torah, or even the source of all life.⁵

Whether water is just water or an allegory for some powerful, mystical experience, we need to be able to access it – sometimes. And we need structures that contain it, channel it and block it off in the moments that are not appropriate for accessing it. It is important that we know how to roll the Stone off the well – and back on – whether we have moments, like Yaakov, that we find the strength to do it ourselves, or we are more like the ordinary shepherds of Haran, needing to work collaboratively both to access the water and to cover it again.

It's easy to see how the well, the water itself might be a metaphor for the divine, but I am also interested in the Rock itself – that which covers and protects and holds – and sometimes needs to be pushed against, pushed away, and then pulled back. It is not an accustomed way of thinking about God, to be sure. But how many of us have similar experiences: of having some idea about the Divine that sometimes feels comfortable, but sometimes feels constricting, that we then need to push against, move around, readjust. Perhaps we get frustrated with ourselves for not believing consistently or coherently. Perhaps we get frustrated with the whole God idea. Perhaps it’s not actually a problem: what if we let God be a Rock, sometimes there to hold and contain, sometimes to be pushed against or even pushed away?

² Bereshit Rabbah 70:8

³ Bereshit Rabbah 70:9

⁴ Bereshit Rabbah 70:8

⁵ Sefas Emet

Finally, there is the witness stone – the pillar that Yaakov makes at the end of the parashah. The witness stone can be a testament to our intentions long after we are gone. There is a very human desire to create these. Whenever I'm walking on one of the footbridges over the Willamette River, or walking along the coast at Yachats, I really enjoy finding the cairns that people – or groups of people – have painstakingly built – for what? As a testament that they could? As a testament that they were there?

In any case, that is another function of the Divine Rock, to silently connect past and present; that we may remember our own past as well as others who came before us.

May the Rock hold you, witness you, or let you push against it in whatever way you need. Shabbat Shalom.