



The Parsha of Vayeitze is dedicated by Menachem Ely, in honor of his family.

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.Parshat Vayeitze
Ya'akov and Going Out
By Avi Neuman

In *Parshat Vayeitze*, Ya'akov goes out into the world in a way that neither Yitzchak nor Avraham ever could. His departure is one of situating himself within broken spaces: the places in which G-d seems most hidden, yet paradoxically, within which true meanings of wholeness are revealed. His story is our story.

Ya'akov knows that social reality is often one of exploitation and fracture; he will experience both in his life with Lavan and beyond. His spiritual labor in this parsha, and our labor too, is that of becoming a force for positive change in the midst of the frustrations and machinations of a material world. Ya'akov is the first person we see actually work for a living in the Torah, and it is in the struggle to balance material endeavor with G-d consciousness, truth, and awareness that Ya'akov comes fully into his power.

Our parsha opens with Ya'akov leaving for Be'ersheva. He is fulfilling his father's last wishes and seeking a wife for himself in Haran. On the way he lies down in a particular place that he will come to name Beit-El. Ya'akov dreams there of a ladder set upon the earth with its top reaching towards the heavens. Angels are ascending and descending before him, as G-d appears to Ya'akov and promises that the land upon which he is lying will be for him and for his offspring; that He will be with him and guard him wherever he goes.¹

In coming to this vision we are told that Ya'akov "encountered the place."² Rashi relates that the physical space that would one day hold the Holy Temple actually moved towards Ya'akov at Beit-El.³ Furthermore, Rashi⁴ brings from the Midrash that the sun set early that day so that Ya'akov would be drawn to lie down on that spot. These signs seem to signify a mutable and temporary physical world; one that is but a garment for deeper spiritual truth and oneness.

Yet the point is *not* that the material world and its concerns are for nothing. Directly following his exhilarating vision, Ya'akov makes a vow binding his relationship to G-d to



the provision of simple, even mundane needs: “If G-d will be with me and guard me on this path that I travel, and give me bread to eat and clothing to wear; and I return in peace to my father’s house, then G-d will be a G-d to me.”⁵ This seems a strange vow made at a perplexing time.

Especially since Ramban⁶ tells us that Ya’akov’s dream is one of ultimate security. It reveals that nothing happens on earth in the absence of a decree from above, and even within that truth Ya’akov will not come under the auspices of the angels – forces of perpetual determination, bereft of free will or choice. Hashem promises: “I am with you, and will guard you wherever you go.”⁷ Ya’akov will be “G-d’s portion.”⁸ He is connected and communicates directly.

Yet he is afraid.

The Midrash tells us that G-d asks Ya’akov: “Why don’t you go up the ladder?” Ya’akov becomes faint and answers: “Because all of these who ascended are descending; so will I go down.” G-d assures him: “If you go up, you will not go down.” But Ya’akov could not believe it and did not go up.⁹

What is Ya’akov scared of?

I believe that in the instant of his engagement with “place” and vision at Beit-El, Ya’akov saw the narrow bridge stretching out before him as he moved towards an abyss that would do its utmost to draw him in. To help us understand his experience, the *Beit Ya’akov*¹⁰ brings the *Midrash Rabbah* asking why we sometimes refer to G-d as *Makom*, the same word used here to denote “place.” The answer: It is because G-d *is* the place of the world; it is *not* that the world is His place.

As Rebbe Nachman reminds us: “The world and all that fills it is potential...only G-d alone is necessity.”¹¹ Bringing that understanding into day to day living is a spiritual labor of situating the spectrum of material possibility within the reality of a wholeness that precedes and contains it. It requires living every moment in intimate relationship with G-d.

Ya’akov fully encounters *Makom* in its aspect of “place,” at exactly this moment, as he stands on the edge of radical transformation. That is where we engage G-d in the deepest sense of growing and knowing. The Beit Ya’akov likens this to morning light. Until it comes in, the world is a liminal mix of light, dark and shadow; a place in which meaning is difficult to ascertain. Then comes that moment when light begins to illuminate the day.



Within that transition we experience a powerful sense, an echo of the creative will that underlies it all. We understand that the vessel contains infinitely more than its simple structure suggests. It is this appreciation that dawned on Ya'akov at Beit-El. The responsibility inherent in that knowing awed him.

Ya'akov connects to an inner point of G-d awareness through which he must face the world to bring the material issues he encounters to a conscious place. His vow is now not so strange. He asks for the strength, protection and sustenance to bring this labor of spirit and body to fruition.¹² He realizes that even the simplest things are not really his to acquire.

Such understanding is a crucial foundation for any environmental work striving for real change. It was necessary for Ya'akov to leave the comforts of home and society in order to gestate, transform and become. It is now necessary for him to reenter society and bring that which is holy into all that is profane. That is a labor that can only be accomplished through bringing awareness to action. Ya'akov is perhaps the first spiritual social activist.

Ya'akov teaches us that environmental — or any other social action — is at root the recognition that our lives can manifest the world as it should be, rather than accepting what it is or appears to be. A truly “Jewish” ecology must recognize spiritual orientation, or reorientation, as the starting point for meaningful practical action.

Following his encounter, Ya'akov doesn't withdraw into meditative prayer and ecstatic communion with the Divine. Alive with new purpose he “lifted his feet,”¹³ and stepped forward to struggle with the realities of sustenance, family, social living and justice. *Sforno*¹⁴ tells us that when a person travels *to* a place with purpose, that drives him to lift his feet.

Ya'akov arrives on the outskirts of Haran, engages the shepherds, lifts the stone from the well, recognizes and embraces Rachel, bursts into tears. He is a whirlwind of action and interaction; inflamed by the overwhelming passion to forge a life based in wholeness and truth. He is on fire with the beauty of potential, even as he understands all too well, that the world is *only* potential. With that realization, the work of integrating what is necessary begins.

Suggested Action Items:



Reorienting ourselves towards meaningful action in the world is hard, and removing ourselves from the patterns and habits of daily living to redefine relationships to material things is a struggle. Leaving it all behind for a while as Ya'akov did may not always feel like a practical reality, but fresh perspective *is* a necessary piece of the process. Here are some simple ways I try to create that space in my life:

1. Take up to one hour every day away from all the things competing for your time and energy. Reflect inwards and make decisions concerning who you are, how you want to grow, and the impact you have on the social, spiritual, and physical environments you inhabit. Ask G-d to open you to the possibilities.
2. Make conscious decisions about your patterns of consumption and begin taking specific actions to shift the balance. For example, every time you buy something actually stop for a second and ask yourself: “Is this something I want, or something that I need?” Try to get to the root of what the difference between those two impulses is for you. For one week buy only those things that you “need.” See what that feels like.
3. Teach your children healthy patterns of giving and try to infuse them with a relationship to material things based in sharing. For example, every morning give your child the “honor” of distributing coins to their siblings and other members of the household to give as *tzedakah* (charity). At birthday parties, have your child serve his or her guests their cake before being served a piece her or himself — not as a chore, but as an honor.

¹ Breishit 28:10-15

² Bereishit 28:11

³ Rashi, Breishit 28:11, s.v. *vayifga bamakom*

⁴ Rashi, Bereishit 28:11, s.v. *ki va hashemesh*

⁵ Bereishit 28:20-21



⁶ Ramban, Bereishit 28:12, s.v. *vihinei sulam*

⁷ Bereishit 28:15

⁸ Devarim 32:9

⁹ Midrash Tanchumah, Vayeitze 2, s.v. *vayachalom vihinei sulam*

¹⁰ Sefer Beit Ya'akov on the Torah Bereishit, Vayeitze, 15

¹¹ Likutey Moharan, Part I:52a

¹² See Nechama Liebowitz, *Studies in Bereishit*, pp. 306-307

¹³ Bereishit 29:1

¹⁴ Sforno, Bereishit 29:1