

## Knowing God

### *Shabbat Vayeitzei 5779*

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The subject matter of the first class of Judaism 101 each year is, “Jewish Views of God.” My decision to begin that way is somewhat ironic, because I start by telling the class that the subject is far from the most important. Judaism is primarily about what we are supposed to do, not what we’re instructed to believe. Examine, for example, the first commandment: “I am Adonai your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage.”<sup>i</sup> We’re not enjoined, “You shall believe in God.” Instead, God is, and God is there for us in our time of need, when we believe and when we do not.

Tonight, we meet Jacob in his hour of need. He has the birthright and his father’s blessing, but his older brother wants to kill him. To save his life, his mother sends him away. His father doesn’t want him to marry a local, but a relative from Rebekah’s home town. And so Jacob goes – alone, and away from home, for the first time in his life. He lies down to sleep, with nothing but a rock on which to lay his head. And there, he meets God. Awakening from revelation in a dream, Jacob exclaims, “Surely, God is in this place, and I, I did not know.”<sup>ii</sup>

The sages struggle with Jacob’s words. Doesn’t our patriarch know that God is everywhere, omnipresent?

Over a quarter century ago, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner wrote an entire book about this one sentence from the Torah. I took the opportunity of this week’s portion to return to Kushner’s words. Perhaps we, too, may come to know God when we least expect.

Kushner begins by pointing to Rashi’s comment that Jacob is embarrassed that he has engaged in such a mundane activity, going to sleep, in a holy place.<sup>iii</sup> Kushner elaborates: “The beginning of knowing about God ... is paying attention, being fully present where you are, or as Rashi suggests, waking up.”<sup>iv</sup>

To illustrate, Kushner points us elsewhere in Torah, to Moses, turning aside to look at a humble bush, aflame but not consumed. “The ‘burning bush,’” Kushner writes, “was not a miracle. It was a test.” Kushner explains that you have to watch a fire for a while before you would notice that that the wood is on fire but not actually burning.<sup>v</sup> The moment of revelation, when God’s presence

makes a difference, only happens because Moses stops to notice God's presence, much like Jacob, awakening from slumber.

We, too, are offered evidence of God's existence in every waking moment: In the miracles of our own lives, the wonders of nature, and the inscrutable mysteries of existence. We experience God when we perform *mitzvot*, bringing God's presence alive on Earth, and when we observe the righteous pursuit of justice. Like Jacob and Moses, we would do well to turn aside, to notice, and to "wake up." Then, we, too, might realize that we know a God whom we often see but rarely notice.

To make his next argument about why Jacob is surprised by God's presence, Rabbi Kushner points to a hyper-literal translation of the verse: "God is in this place, and I, I did not know." The repetition of the word "I" can be explained by Hebrew grammar, but it seems to be redundant. Kushner argues that ego may be the problem. Jacob is saying, "'God was here all along, and the reason I didn't know it is because I was too busy paying attention to myself.'"<sup>vi</sup>

The Jacob we have come to know does indeed put himself first. Rather than offer his brother a bowl of lentil stew when Esau comes in from hunting, Jacob proposes that his famished older brother exchange that simple meal for his birthright. Then, he conspires with his mother to deceive his father and steal the blessing that Isaac has intended for Esau. Sure, he's lonely and sleeping on a rock, but Kushner isn't off when he imagines saying to Jacob: "In your heart of hearts, you hope this will only be a necessary setback on the way to even greater glory."<sup>vii</sup>

We, too, let our egos get in the way of knowing God. When we imagine that our accomplishments are the results of our own drive, we ignore that God has granted us faith that hard work may lead to success. When we exult in our talents, we disregard their source.

Isaiah accuses the Israelites of idolatry with these words: "They bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have wrought."<sup>viii</sup> Isaiah may be referring to statues of false gods. More likely, though, he is referring to an idolatry that is more familiar to us. We idolize our own achievements. Like Jacob, we can only know the one true God when we get over ourselves and acknowledge the Source of our blessings.

Perhaps, though, the problem is exactly the opposite. What if we read the repeated first person pronoun differently? Jacob may be saying, "God was in this

place, but I didn't know myself."<sup>ix</sup> Up to this point in this life, Jacob demonstrates little self-awareness. He emerges from the womb, grabbing his brother's heel, a primal but unconscious desire to come first which persists through his trade with Esau, food for the birthright. Then, Rebekah is the one who acts; Jacob merely follows her instructions to deceive Isaac and steal Esau's blessing. Even his escape is directed by his parents.

Now, not only is he alone for the first time; he also has to think and act for himself. Yes, he goes where his parents have sent him, but once he is there, it's will all be up to him. He will fall in love. He will strike a deal to work for the privilege of marrying Rachel. Then, when the trickster is tricked, and Jacob ends up with Leah as his bride instead of his beloved, Jacob, trapped, will be gracious, not embarrassing Leah but working out a deal to marry both sisters.

But we're not there yet when Jacob lies down on that rock-for-a-pillow. Up to now, he has never apparently thought or acted for himself. And he has never experienced God. He does not yet know himself well enough to fashion a meaningful relationship with another person, let alone God.

Now, suddenly alone, Jacob must take control of his own life. He must struggle with God and prevail. He will become Israel. Before he can become a God-wrestler, though, Jacob must encounter God, and he must understand that meeting to be authentic. When Jacob awakens in the morning, he is surprised – no, he is awe-struck – to have met the Holy One of blessing. He realizes what has gotten in his way up to now: Not knowing himself. And he still has a way to go before he will be ready to wrestle.

Too often, we judge ourselves unworthy of God's attention. We let events carry us through life, failing to align our lives with God's purpose or even our own. Only when we embrace our own self-worth, only when we know that we are worthy of love, can we reach out to touch another, to know God. Jacob, now ready to love another person, can experience the love of God. And so may we.

Let us learn from our spiritual forbear and walk in his ways. Let us awaken to the possibility that God is with us. Let us overcome the ego that prevents us from believing in a Power greater than ourselves. And let us all know that we are worthy of God's love.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Exodus 20:2.

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<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 28:16.

<sup>iii</sup> Rashi to Genesis 28:16.

<sup>iv</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *God was in this Place and I, i did not know*, Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1991.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Isaiah 2:8.

<sup>ix</sup> I would have said that this idea came from having read Kushner's book years ago, but I do not find it in the book!