

## Home

### *Shabbat Vayeitzei 5782*

November 12, 2021

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Throughout the last year and a half, many of us have spent considerably more time at home than we did in the past.

For some, those homes have been prisons. Loneliness has plagued many who live alone and others who live in facilities that could not permit visitors for long stretches of time. Too many Americans inhabit homes that are unsafe, physically or emotionally, so the harms of abuse, neglect, and dangerous conditions multiplied when people could not get out and visitors were unwelcome.

Others have enjoyed the time at home. Comfortable in their own surroundings, perhaps introverts anyway, they were happy for an excuse to avoid gatherings they preferred to skip even in ordinary times. Millions of Americans have embraced home improvement projects or honed their cooking, baking, or gardening skills. And plenty of people enjoyed working from home, finding themselves more efficient without the commute or office bureaucracy.

At the same time, tens of millions of Americans, particularly but not only at lower income levels, were unable to stay home. To continue earning a living—providing food, education, and health care, for example, to their families and communities—people had little choice but to continue or quickly resume going out to work. And, sadly, millions of our fellow citizens, the most vulnerable, have no place to call home at all.

For school-aged children and their parents, home has been complicated. Particularly in the last school year, home became a schoolhouse, while still being home, a complex and trying arrangement for all involved.

Meanwhile, as a Temple family, we have been exiled from our synagogue home. Zoom became our increasingly familiar “house” of worship. At other times, we have brought worshipers into this Sanctuary or our Chapel via livestream or Zoom, even if I have been the only person physically in the sacred space.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, scores of Temple members found meaning in worship here in our Sanctuary, while others preferred to join us online. And now, for the second time, we have returned for Shabbat at the Temple. Still, not everybody is ready to come back home. Some continue to limit their exposure, mindful that the pandemic is not yet behind us. Others have become used to

Shabbat observance that doesn't include the sojourn to the Temple. A new habit developed and is hard to break.

Our Torah portion this week, *Parashat Vayeitzei*, may be read as a meditation on the meaning of "home."

Jacob has tricked his father Isaac into bestowing upon him a blessing intended for Jacob's older brother, Esau. Now, Esau wants to kill him. Moreover, Isaac and Rebekah want their son Jacob to find a wife from among their own kin. They send him forth from the only home he has ever known to their ancestral home, albeit one that Isaac has never visited.

Imagine Jacob on that first night. Alone, he stops to sleep, with only stones to place under his head as a makeshift pillow. And there he dreams. Angels ascend and descend on a ladder.<sup>i</sup> The order is curious. The angels don't seem to start in the heavens, but on Earth; they go up first, then come down. Rashi, our preeminent medieval Torah commentator, insists that they are different angels: "Those angels who accompanied [Jacob] in the land of Israel were not permitted to leave the Land; they ascended to Heaven and the angels which were to minister outside the Land descended to accompany him."<sup>ii</sup>

I have always loved the image of angels who start here on Earth. The implication is that angels, though viewed by the sages as immortal celestial beings, may really be the people who accompany us on our lives' journeys. One reality—often sad, but hopefully also meaningful—is that each of us is accompanied by different angels at different times in our lives.

To cite a personal example, my paternal grandmother was an extraordinary presence in my life, from birth through early adulthood. She was, if you will, an angel—by which I do not mean that she was "angelic" or perfect—who guided me and enfolded me in love. Looking back, I see that she began to "ascend the ladder," to suffer infirmities of old age that limited the extent to which she could be active as my "angel," and then she died, at the era when Robert and Daniel were born. To extend the analogy, she was the angel who accompanied me in the land of my childhood, right up through giving me advice about being a father to newborns; but then she was "not permitted" to accompany me beyond that part of my life.

My "home" with my grandmother would be no more, but Robert and Daniel descended the ladder to accompany me—no less as angels, however unangelic—in a completely different way than my grandmother did before them. Like Jacob outside the land, my needs became different.

In 2020 and 2021, each of us might have needed, and many of us have been blessed by, different angels than those who accompanied us pre-pandemic. In many cases, thankfully, the people have not changed—the same spouse, the same parents, the same children. Even so, our needs of our angels and theirs of us have been unique. Many parents of young children needed to become teachers. Some parents who worked outside the home adapted their work to be home, changed jobs to accommodate pandemic parenting, or even left the workforce. A parent might have ascended the ladder and then come back to earth—that is, stopped being the angel who accompanied their children in one way while becoming a parent who is present in an entirely new way. These parents have created new homes for their families without moving houses.

When Jacob awakens from his dream, he exclaims, “Truly, Adonai is in this place, and I did not know it! ... How awe-inspiring is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”<sup>iii</sup> A commentator named Chizkuni wonders what has signaled Jacob that the place is so special. For the sages, when Jacob says it’s “the house of God,” he means that the place where he has spent the night it is the site of the Jerusalem Temple, only to be built centuries later. Chizkuni answers his own question: Jacob understood that the angels dwelt where God lived, or at least where God would be met, and needed to ascend from there to get their instructions to take Jacob to his next destination.<sup>iv</sup>

The sad reality is that too many have not been blessed with angels in their homes—in childhood or during the pandemic. Many more of us have experienced the grace of faithful companions in life, particularly in these long months of isolation at home. Sometimes, we live with the pain of losing that angel who must ascend, leaving us to others who will be with us in the next phase of life’s journey. Often, we don’t recognize our angels as God’s messengers until we awaken, like Jacob, to realize that we are in God’s house, whether in this sacred place or in our own homes.

I pray that we may always open our homes and our hearts to the possibility of angels among us, bringing God’s blessing. Then, with joy, let us return to God’s house, to this Sanctuary, in the presence of the angels we meet here. And let us experience the sanctity we find here, the gift of a spiritual home, wherever we are.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 28:10-12.

<sup>ii</sup> Rashi to Genesis 28:12, based on Genesis Rabbah 68:12.

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 28:16-17.

<sup>iv</sup> Chizkuni to Genesis 28:12.