

## Perceiving God's Presence

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When I seek to interpret the Torah, I first turn to our traditional Jewish commentators. This time, though, they got it wrong.

Jacob is running for his life. Conspiring with his mother Rebekah, Jacob has tricked his father Isaac into giving him a blessing that Isaac had intended for Jacob's older twin brother Esau. Esau, understandably, wants revenge. And that's why Jacob is running. For his life.

He lays down to go to sleep. He has a dream—you know the one, angels are ascending and descending a ladder that reaches the heavens. God speaks to Jacob, reassuring him. God will protect him on his journey, never leaving his side. When Jacob awakens, he exclaims, “Truly, Adonai is in this place, and I did not know it!”<sup>i</sup>

What could Jacob mean? Our classical commentators are apparently unanimous: He is referring to the specific spot where he had lain down to sleep, which they understand to be the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Rashi explains that, had Jacob known what a holy place that is, he would not have chosen it as the location for such a mundane activity as a night's sleep.<sup>ii</sup>

Rashi and others, though, are limiting the meaning of the word *makom*, translated as “place.” That word, though, has a much broader meaning. *Makom* is even a name for God. It certainly can refer to a place in time—in this case, a moment in Jacob's life.

When I read Jacob's exclamation, I take him to mean: “I did not imagine that God could possibly dwell with me, a person who has deceived his father to rob his brother. I am unworthy of God's presence, at least at this moment in my life.”

Jacob is not alone. His crisis of faith could afflict any of us. In fact, we have it worse than Jacob. If any of us were to experience God's speaking directly to us the way that God speaks to Jacob in that dream, we would likely conclude that we were hallucinating or suffering psychosis. Our sages back us up, teaching us that prophecy—that is, direct revelation from God—ended with the prophet Malachi.<sup>iii</sup>

However, the same Talmudic source that tells us that God stopped speaking directly to humans with the death of that fifth century B.C.E. prophet also teaches that “an echo of prophecy” is available to us.<sup>iv</sup> That is, we do have the opportunity to experience God.

Judaism's daily worship service includes a litany, which we chant in our own Shabbat morning service each week, suggesting that we can experience God's blessings, that "echo of prophecy," each day.

It begins: "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who grants the rooster wisdom to differentiate between day and night." Our liturgy suggests that God presence is revealed in the instinctive behavior of nonhuman animals. How much more can God be present in our lives.

The litany continues: "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who strengthens our steps." This affirmation speaks more directly to situations like Jacob's, at a moment when we lack strength but sorely need it.

I have been that person. When I lost my job a decade ago, I was shattered. I imagined I would serve that congregation for my entire career, retire as rabbi emeritus there, and one day be buried in Temple cemetery in San Antonio. Suddenly, almost without warning, all that was gone. I felt responsible for a disruptive, even traumatic upheaval in the life of my family. Robert and Daniel had known no other home. The congregation plunged into chaotic conflict. Another rabbi there was charged with an ethical violation. In retaliation, others lodged ethics complaints against me. Even though I was quickly and publicly cleared, I was devastated and humiliated. Nobody was in the role of Esau, literally trying to kill me, but our sages taught that shaming a person is equivalent to murder.<sup>v</sup>

I could say that I nevertheless picked myself up, dusted myself off—pulled myself up by the bootstraps, as it were—and found myself a new pulpit. I would be lying. At the very least, seeking to be honest, I would need to acknowledge family, friends, and experts—an executive coach, rabbinic mentors, and mental health professionals—who saw me through that difficult time and helped me move in a positive direction.

Looking back, though, I would have to affirm, "God was in that place." No, "that place" was not San Antonio or any geographic location. "That place" was me, at that moment in my life. God "strengthened my steps." Those family, friends, and professionals? They were God's instruments in bringing me toward healing. And the appearance of Congregation B'nai Israel as a congregation in need of a rabbi at that hour? While there's a prosaic explanation of the coincidence, one may awaken, like Jacob, to see God's presence in happenstance that leads to healing. Most to the point, I had to be ready to move forward. I needed to regain my confidence. I needed "stronger steps." I did not fully heal from that trauma for a few years, and I still bear the scars. Nevertheless, even as I was "running away from Esau," as it were, God strengthened my steps. I can say that "God was in that

place” in my life, even though I, like Jacob before me, did not realize it at that time.

A common claim in our own day is that each of us is solely responsible for our accomplishments. Even those who acknowledge God’s role often imagine their successes to be proof of God’s special love for them, which perhaps they deserve. Prosperity gospel, the teaching that God showers riches on the righteous, is as popular as it is vacuous. We all need help, human and divine, to achieve what we seek.

Jacob knows better. He awakens from a dream of angels ascending and descending on a ladder, and of God’s promise to accompany him on his journey. He also wakes from the nightmare of his own deception and its result: Esau’s pursuit to kill him. Now, he recognizes that God is with him to strengthen his steps. He can continue his journey to his mother’s hometown. There, he will meet Rachel at the well. His story will take twists and turns. He will be tricked by his uncle, much as he deceived his own father. Still, he will move forward. He will father a magnificent family. He will amass great wealth. And one day, he will even reconcile with his brother. And now Jacob knows: God is there, every step of the way.

Amen.

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

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

<sup>iii</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 11a.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 58b.