

Parshat Vayeitzei
Is This Too a Godly Place?
Luz Toff - Class of 2025

What does it mean for a place to be Godly and/ or for God to be in a space? Have you ever been in a space or out in nature and felt God's presence there?

At the beginning of this week's *parsha*, Jacob sets out towards Haran from Beer Sheva and stops for the night when the sun sets. He puts some stones around his head and has a dream of a ladder reaching upward with angels ascending and descending.

His awakening is described thus:

וַיִּקְוֹץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנֵתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן יֵשׁ ה' בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי: וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר מִה־נִּזְרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה
אֵין זֶה כִּי אִם־בַּיִת אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם:

Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely God is present in this place, and I did not know it!" Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven." (Bereishit 28:16-17)

On the words "I did not know it," Rashi suggests that had Jacob known about the presence of God, he would not have slept in such a holy place.

Over the course of the *parsha*, Jacob, in Haran for 20 years, grows his family with wives and children and goes on quite the journey. It culminates here:

וַיַּעֲקֹב הֵלֵךְ לְדִרְכּוֹ וַיִּפְגְּעוּ־בּוֹ מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים: וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאָם מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים זֶה וַיִּקְרָא
שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא מַחְנֵיִם:

Jacob went on his way, and messengers of God encountered him. When he saw them, Jacob said, "This is God's camp." So he named that place Mahanaim. (Bereishit 32:2-3)

On this being "God's camp" (translated elsewhere as "a Godly camp"), Sforno (Ovadiah ben Jacob, 1475-1550) adds that Jacob is saying that now that the angels have seen fit to join him, there can be no doubt that his is a Godly camp. Sforno reminds us that Jacob had earlier in the *parsha* renamed the place where he had the dream Beit-El (House of God) and so he now referred to his camp as *machaneh elokim* (God's camp). In both cases, the reason was, Sforno adds, that Jacob had been found worthy of divine revelation.

What might this Sforno have to do with our lives today and also the question posed at the beginning of this piece? Perhaps a reminder of Jacob's birth and how he got his name might help us to understand this better.

If we go back to last week's *parsha*, Toldot, when Jacob is born and gets his name, we have the following verse:

וַיֵּצֵא אֱחָיו וַיְדַוּ אֶחְזֵל בְּעֵקֶב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב

Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob. (Bereishit 25:26)

Jacob/ Yaakov is a play on the hebrew עֵקֶב meaning heel. On his name, Sforno elucidates that the word means he will remain at the heel, or the tail-end. This is based on the future mode of the word יַעֲקֹב.

So Jacob was born on the heels of another and was perhaps pre-destined to always be at the heel. But in this week's *parsha*, he seems to get ahead. Twice we see Jacob being worthy of being in a Godly place and having the insight that it is so.

Names are important and I think if we look at the bookends or arc of this week's *parsha*, we can perhaps find a couple of things to think about for us in our lives today.

Jacob harnesses his 'ekev-ness', his initial status at the heel, to go from being second-in-command to being a pursuer of justice. Digging our heels in, as a metaphor, means refusing to do something such as change one's opinions or plans, especially when someone is trying very hard to make you do so. Injustices can be turned around by those in pursuit of justice. Jacob was able to change his and others' destinies on a few occasions in this week's *parsha* and elsewhere by "digging in his heels."

To return to our opening question, what does it mean for a place to be Godly and/ or for God to be in a space? At the beginning of this week's *parsha*, Jacob noted that God was in the place and at the end of the *parsha* he notes that a different place is a Godly one. Perhaps herein lies a lesson for us today. That is, let us increase our consciousness of God around us and let us bring God into our spaces and our lives more. Through this, we might then be able to say that the places we dwell in are Godly and that God is indeed here with us.

Shabbat shalom.



Luz Toff grew up in Oxford, England and has been involved in Limmud UK from a young age. Luz moved to Israel and then London and then back to Israel before pursuing her undergraduate degree in Brighton, England. For the last 6 years, Luz has been sharing a thought on the weekly parsha and how it can be relevant to us in our lives today. Luz cares deeply about making Jewish text and practice meaningful, relevant and accessible for as many people as possible. Luz has worked as an informal educator in a Jewish day school in the UK and was blessed to learn in a variety of Jewish learning institutions around the world, including Midreshet Emunah v'Omanut, Drisha, Pardes, the Susi Bradfield Educational Leadership program and Maharat's Beit Midrash program.