

Parshat Vayetzei: The Epiphany of Prayer Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler

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The opening of *parshat VaYetze*, midrashically understood, contains within it an intriguing paradox. Yaacov both encounters God and is surprised by God's presence. He both knows and does not know the divine, it seems. First:

10. And Jacob left Beer Sheba, and he went to Haran.

11. And he arrived at the place and lodged there because the sun had set, and he took some of the stones of the place and placed [them] at his head, and he lay down in that place. (Bereishit 28:10-11)

י וַיָּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעַר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חֲרָנָה׃
 יא וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיֵּלֶן שָׁם כִּי-בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲבָנֵי
 הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשֶׂם מִרְאֵשׁוֹ וַיִּשְׁכַּב בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא׃
 (בראשית כח: יא-יב)

Rashi, following tractate Berakhot, understands Yaacov's arrival at "the place" (*hamakom*) to be an encounter with God, *HaMakom*. As darkness falls around him, Yaacov is moved to pray, and *tefillat Arvit* is born in this mixture of divinity and nighttime mystery.

Yaacov instituted the evening prayer, as it says "And he arrived at the place and lodged there," and there is no arrival but prayer. (BT Berakhot 26b)

יעקב תקן תפלת ערבית שנאמר (בראשית כ"ח)
 ויפגע במקום וילן שם, ואין פגיעה אלא תפלה.
 (ברכות כו:)

And yet, having invited God in, so to speak, Yaacov is nevertheless jolted to discover that God has actually joined him. Dreaming of ladders and angels, and a God who speaks and makes great promises, stirs him to his core.

Yaacov awakened from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it." (Bereishit 28:11)

וַיִּיקָץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יָשׁ יְהוָה-הַ בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנִכִּי
 לֹא יָדַעְתִּי׃ (בראשית כח:יא)

What a stunning (and confusing) admission of spiritual humility by a spiritual giant! He had no idea that God was in his midst. He had no awareness that the Presence he presumably knew in Beer Sheba could be omnipresent. This same character who, moments earlier, composed prayers to address God is terribly shocked to discover a God who addresses him. How can we make sense of this self-contradicting consciousness? What of God does Yaacov know and what does he now discover? What is the relationship between prayers, dreams, exits, and awakenings?

The *Maor VeShemesh*, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Epstein of Cracow, offers a beautiful, provocative response. It bears quoting at length.

There is a midrash [in Genesis Rabbah 69:7] that says that Jacob awoke not from his sleep (*mishnato*) but from his *Mishnayot* (*mimishnato*). From this we learn that the essence of a person's worship is to come to perfect service of God and to grasp the meaning of God through both Torah and tefilla. There cannot be one without the other, because an ignoramus does not become a pious Hasid; and conversely, one who says, "there is nothing in the world for me except Torah" does not have even Torah. It is true that by studying Torah for the sake of heaven and cleaving one's soul and one's very being to the letters of the Torah, a person can achieve great holiness; but a person can only truly fear and love and yearn for God through prayer, and through the surrendering of the self that prayer entails, as we know from all our holy books. Our sages of blessed

ויחלום והנה וגו' ויקץ יעקב משנתו ויאמר אכן יש ה' במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי וגו' אין זה כי אם בית אלקים וזה שער השמים. איתא במדרש [בראשית רבה טז:] ויקץ יעקב ממשנתו, והוא תמוה. ונראה לבאר דהנה ידוע שיעקר עבודת האדם לבא לתכלית השלימות בעבודתו יתברך שמו להשיג אלוקותו יתברך שמו הוא על ידי התורה והתפלה. ולא יוכל להיות אחד בלא שני כי לא עם הארץ חסיד, וגם בתורה לחוד לא ישלים נפשו כמאמר חכמינו ז"ל כל האומר אין אלא תורה אין לו תורה, כי בודאי על ידי עסק התורה לשמה יכול לבא לקדושה גדולה כשלומד לשמה ומדבק עצמו בנפשו רוחו ונשמתו באותיות התורה, אמנם אף על פי כן לא יוכל לבא לעיקר היראה והאהבה וההשתוקקות לעבודתו יתברך שמו ולהשיג אלוקותו רק על ידי התפלה במסירות נפש ובהתלהבות כידוע מכל ספרי הקדושים. והנה ידוע מאמר חכמינו ז"ל ויפגע במקום שתיקן תפלת

memory taught that when Jacob had his dream at Beit El, he established the evening prayer, Arvit. Until this point, Jacob had not known the secret of prayer. God did not reveal Himself to him until he became aware of its tremendous power.

And this is the meaning of the midrash that says that Jacob awoke from his Mishnayot – that is, he awoke from his study of Torah, for he had been studying for fourteen years in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever [between his exit from Beer Sheba and his journey to Haran]. Upon awakening, he realized that Torah alone would not bring him to a full awareness of God. Jacob said, “Surely the Lord is present” – meaning that through prayer, he was able to better understand God than he ever could through Torah alone. “And I did not know it” – meaning that I did not know the tremendous power of prayer, which enables us to come to know God in full fervor, and brings us, therefore, to the gates of heaven. (Maor VeShemesh, Vayetze, “And he dreamt”)

ערבית, הנה לא ידע עד עתה סוד התפלה איך היא גדולה. ומצינו שנטמן יעקב בבית מדרשו של שם ועבר ולמד תורה, נמצא ידע סוד התורה. אמנם לא בא להתגלות אלוקותו יתברך שמו עד עתה שנתגלה עליו אחר שעמד על סוד התפלה.

וזה פירוש המדרש ויקץ יעקב משנתו ממשנתו, רצה לומר מתורתו, שנתעורר על ידי התפלה הזאת והבין שלא בא לתכלית ההשגה על ידי התורה לחוד. ואמר אכן יש ה' במקום הזה, רצה לומר על ידי התפלה הזאת יוכל להבין יותר התגלות אלוקות ממה שהשיג עד עתה על ידי התורה לחוד, ואנכי לא ידעתי סוד זה אין זה כי אם בית אלוקים, רצה לומר כי על ידי התפלה בהתעוררות והתלהבות יכול האדם לבא ליראת הרוממות. (מאור ושמש, ויצא, "ויחלום")

Yaacov's great awakening--"vayikatz mishnato"--alas, was not from sleep alone, but from the dulled consciousness born of "Mishnato," his intensive study of Mishna, or Torah more broadly. Fourteen years of learning in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever had grounded him in the word of God and it had even availed him to knowledge of holiness. But it had failed to give him God and it had failed to give him direct experience of holiness. He was steeped in Torah, but *tefilla*--prayerful, passionate, palpable contact with the divine--was unknown to him. Love, fear, and yearning had all been quieted by the search for understanding. This gaping hole in his religious experience, this paradoxical eclipse of God by virtue of his exclusive focus on the God-idea, was what Yaacov came to understand in our *parsha*. "Vayetze Yaacov," Yaacov left the comfortable yet constraining walls of his beit midrash, and only then "vayifgah bamakom," only then could he actually, directly encounter the divine. The surprise of

Surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it אכן יש יהוה במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי

is the shock of someone who thought he knew God intimately, only to discover that he is actually meeting Him for the first time.

What emerges from this new, heightened spiritual awareness, argues the Maor V'Shemesh, is *tefillat Arvit*, that prayer of the night, chosen by the heart (*reshut*) not legislated by the books; that prayer that embraces mystery and uncertainty and surprise. It is the prayer one of who meets God in unexpected places and declares, with awe, "מה הזה הנורא המקום הזה"--"How wondrous is this place, this Makom, this God!" (Gen. 28:17).

This interpretation of Yaacov's spiritual awakening issues both a deep challenge and an invitation. It forces us to contend with the paradoxical truth that sometimes thinking too much about God can get in the way of having a relationship with God; that Torah can actually be an obstacle to *tefilla*. And it charges us to find a way to pray, to render God intensely real. Awakening to the divine, it turns out, sometimes requires going to sleep a bit, quieting our vigilant minds so that our hearts might open to a new, surprising dream.



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