

Yamim Noraim 2018/5779

Yamim Noraim: How Awesome is our Destination!

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I always had trouble with the term “Yamim Noraim”, the Days of Awe, the term generally used to refer to the holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. As a native Hebrew speaker, the term is particularly troubling, as the word *nora* is generally used in contemporary Hebrew to describe something really awful.

In biblical Hebrew though, the word *nora* has a different connotation. The first use of the word *nora* in Tanach occurs in the story of Yaakov fleeing from the murderous intentions of his brother Esav. Yaakov stops to rest along his journey, has a vivid celestial dream, and exclaims upon his waking:

How awesome is this place! This is nothing but the house of God, and this, the gate of Heaven! (Bereishit 28:17)

מה נורא המקום הזה: אין זה כי אם בית אלקים וזה שער השמים. (בראשית כח: יז)

Yaakov is shaken up, afraid. But what preceded this statement?

(11) He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. (12) He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. (13) And the LORD was standing beside him and He said, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. (14) Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. (15) Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (Bereishit 28:11-15)

יא ויפגע במקום וילן שם, כי בא השמש, ויקח מאבני המקום, וישם מראשיתו; וישכב, במקום ההוא. יב ויחלם, והנה סלם מצב ארצה, וראשו, מגיע השמימה; והנה מלאכי אלקים, עלים וירדים בו. יג והנה ה' נצב עליו, ויאמר, אני ה' אלקי אברהם אביך, ואלקי יצחק; הארץ, אשר אתה שכב עליה לך אתננה, ולזרעך. יד והיה זרעך כעפר הארץ, ופרצת ימה וקדמה וצפנה ונגבה; ונברכו בך כל משפחות האדמה, וברזעך. טו והנה אנכי עמך, ושמרתך בכל אשר תלך, והשבתיך, אל האדמה הזאת: כי לא אעזבך, עד אשר אם עשיתי, את אשר דברתי לך. (בראשית כח: יא-טו)

Four things happen before Yaakov makes his exclamation. Yaakov lodges out in the open, with the ground under him as his bed. He dreams of a ladder upon which angels ascend and descend. God addresses Yaakov in his dream, promising him that in some seemingly far-off future his offspring will be internationally recognized for their great gifts. God also promises Yaakov that He will protect him through it all.



It is significant that this dream narrative takes place when Yaakov is most vulnerable. Indeed, I think it's a prerequisite for Yaakov's ability to perceive and receive the message of God that he be at his humblest -- hated by his brother, misunderstood by his father, and on his way to a foreign land to place himself at the mercy of a relative he has yet to meet. The imagery of celestial angels, and their up and down movements, reflects the comforting eternal truth that things are always changing, that fortune and misfortune have no permanent address, that one who has everything could at once lose everything, and one who has nothing but the shirt on his back (just like Yaakov at this moment) may at a moment's notice be a proud patriarch of his own growing internationally recognized tribe.

This vulnerability is a recurring theme in the liturgy of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We are compared to "clay in the hand of (the potter," etc. And we are reminded that at this time of year our fate is decided. No one can escape the day of judgment. Furthermore, on Yom Kippur we are required to practice self-denial, as a prerequisite for atonement. Humility is a prerequisite for divine revelation.

What is Yaakov's reaction to his incredible revelation?

(16) Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!" (17) 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)

טז וַיִּקְוֶץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנָתוֹ, וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲכַן יֵשׁ ה' בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה; וְאֲנֹכִי, לֹא יָדַעְתִּי. יז וַיִּירָא, וַיֹּאמֶר, מַה נִּוְרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה: אֵין זֶה, כִּי אִם בַּיִת אֱלֹקִים, וְזֶה, שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם. (בראשית כח: טז-יז)

First, Yaakov wakes up! He acknowledges his lack of awareness. He now identifies the place that he is in as an awesome dwelling place of God. This theme of waking up from our hazy lack of consciousness is reflected in the Rambam's discussion of the shofar blown on Rosh Hashana, whose purpose is to arouse us to reflect on our habits and return to our purest forms:

Wake up from your slumber, those who are asleep...and examine your actions and return! (Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva 3:4)

עורו ישנים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה (רמב"ם, הלכות תשובה ג:ד)

Now that Yaakov has acknowledged his newfound awareness, he ritualizes his moment of revelation, grounding this celestial moment, much like the stepladder in his dream. He makes a verbal commitment of generosity towards God, in return for God's protection.

(18) Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it... (20) Jacob then made a vow, saying, "If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, (21) and if I return safe to my father's house—the LORD shall be my God. (22) And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and

יח וַיִּשְׁכֵּם יַעֲקֹב בַּבֹּקֶר, וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר שָׁם מִרְאֵשְׁתּוֹ, וַיִּשָּׂם אֹתָהּ, מִצֵּבָה; וַיִּצְקֶה שָׁמֶן, עַל-רֹאשָׁהּ... כ וַיִּדַר יַעֲקֹב, נֶדֶר לֵאמֹר: אִם ה' אֱלֹקִים עִמָּדִי, וַיִּשְׁמְרֵנִי בַדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ, וַנִּתֵּן לִי לֶחֶם לֵאכֹל, וּבְגָד לְלַבֵּשׁ. כא וּשְׁבֵתִי בְשָׁלוֹם, אֶל בַּיִת אָבִי; וְהָיָה ה' לִי, לֵאלֹקִים. כב וְהָאֶבֶן הַזֹּאת, אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַתִּי מִצֵּבָה יְהִיָּה, בַּיִת אֱלֹקִים; וְכָל אֲשֶׁר תִּתֵּן לִי, עֲשֶׂה אֶעֱשְׂרֶנּוּ לָךְ. (בראשית כח: יח-כב)



of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You. (יח, כ-כב)
”(Bereishit 28:18, 20-22)

It is not enough for Yaakov to have his mind-bending experience. He takes the time in the midst of his harried journey to recognize his newfound awareness of God’s presence, to make a temporary memorial as a way of concretizing this moment, and he makes a verbal commitment to give back to God in return for God's kindness towards him.

Yaakov's experience informs our approach to the Yamim Noraim. We declare in our tefillot:

Repentance, Prayer, and Charitable Giving ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזירה
remove the evil decree.

Repentance: newfound spiritual awareness. Prayer: recognizing God's protection, and speaking openly with God.

Charitable Giving: putting one's money where one's mouth is. This combination of self-work, prayer, and plain *doing* -- devoting ourselves with our whole hearts (tefilla), souls (teshuva), and means (tzedaka), echo the words of the Shma:

[You shall love Hashem your God] with all your heart, בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאודך
and with all your being, and with all your means

This is what shifts our realities. And when we shift our inner worlds, then naturally our destinies change as well.

This is the ultimate destination of the “awesome place” -- not a destination in time or place, but a state of being. We begin with our humility, our brokenness, our vulnerability. We open ourselves up to seeing what we did not see before. Then we let that new awareness fuel our next steps. We concretize our goals, speak our minds to God, and enlist all of our resources to our newly articulated purpose.

It's up to us. Let's get started.



Rabbanit Yael Smoocha came to Maharat after nearly two decades of teaching in both Jewish Day Schools and NYC public schools, and receiving an MA in Childhood Education from Teachers College, Columbia University. Rabbanit Yael's passion for deepening Jewish spirituality drives her to facilitate meaningful connections among her students through personal reflection, discussion, and artistic expression, as Director of the Jspace Family Hebrew School program at the Bayit, as intern at the Mt. Freedom Jewish Center in Randolph, NJ, and currently as a middle school educator at Kinneret Day School in Riverdale, NY.

