

Parshat Vayetzei:
A Thanksgiving Journey
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Class of 2019

This week, in Parshat Vayetzei, we watch as Jacob sets off on a difficult journey. Afraid for his life at the hands of his murderously angry brother Esau, Jacob heads for the land of Haran. Facing a long journey to a place he has never been, not knowing what awaits him, he lays down to sleep. In his famous dream with the ladder ascending to heaven, God comes to Jacob and promises to protect him. Jacob wakes up shaken and says:

<p>And Jacob 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, and if I return safe to my father's house—the LORD shall be my God. (Bereishit 28: 20-21)</p>	<p>וַיִּדַר יַעֲקֹב בְּדַר לֵאמֹר אִם־יְהִי אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי וְשָׁמְרֵנִי בַדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי הוֹלֵךְ וְנִתְּנֵלִי לֶחֶם לֶאֱכֹל וְבִגְד לְלַבֵּשׁ: וְשָׁבְתִי בְשָׁלוֹם אֶל־בֵּית אָבִי וְהָיָה יְהוָה לִי לֵאלֹהִים: (בראשית כח: כ-כא)</p>
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There is something odd about Jacob's vow. God has just shown him a miraculous vision, has promised in no uncertain terms to protect him and remain with him. Jacob responds to God's promise of protection with...a demand for protection. This ultimately telegraphs a distinct lack of trust and a misunderstanding of where the power truly lies. Jacob somehow thinks that he can (and needs to) strongarm God into protecting him. He does not yet understand how this relationship works.

If we flash forward to next week's parasha, we see Jacob get a second chance in a similar situation. This time he is leaving Haran and returning home, back to where his angry brother is waiting for him. Jacob is once again afraid of what might happen to him during this encounter and so he prays to God. Yet this time his prayer takes on a distinctly different tone:

<p>Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you'! I am small compared to all the loving kindnesses and the truth with which you have dealt with your servant. With my staff I crossed this Jordan and now I have become two camps. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. (Bereishit 32:10-12)</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֱלֹהִי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי אָבִי יְצַחָק יְהוָה הָאֵלֹהִים אֲלֵי שׁוֹב לְאֶרֶץְךָ וְלִמְוֹלָדְתֶךָ וְאִיטִיבָה עִמָּךְ: קִטְנִיתִי מִכָּל הַחַסְדִּים וּמִכָּל־הַאֱמֻנֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֵת־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי בַמַּקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה וְעַתָּה הֵייתִי לְשֵׁנֵי מַחֲנוֹת: הֲצִילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו כִּי־יָרָא אֹנֶכִי אֹתוֹ פֶּן־יָבֹא וְהִכָּנִי אִם־עַל־בָּנָיִם: (בראשית לב: י-יב)</p>
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Rashi interprets Jacob as saying he is unworthy of the kindnesses that God has bestowed upon him. Unlike when fleeing to Haran, there is no sense of entitlement here. He is not setting conditions for their relationship. Rather, Jacob begins by outlining the strength that is already there in his relationship with God. This is who You are, he says, and this is who I am. We know each other. We trust each other. This is a relationship that will continue regardless of the outcome.

Jacob then goes on to describe what in his life is most important to him: he gathers in the people who are important to him, and all the evidence of his hard work over the past two decades, and he recognizes that none of it would have been possible without God's grace and protection. Jacob begins his request this time, essentially, with gratitude. Only then does he turn to God and ask for God's mercy once again.

This week, many of us in the United States will participate in the traditional holiday of Thanksgiving. The passengers aboard the Mayflower were no strangers to harrowing journeys. William Bradford, one of the passengers who eventually became the governor of Plymouth Colony, described the initial landing of the Mayflower in November of 1620 in his book *Of Plymouth Plantation*. He speaks about how, upon arriving on the shores of the New World, the weary travelers dropped to their knees and began to recite tehillim:

“Being thus arived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees & blessed ye God of heaven, who had brought them over ye vast & furious ocean, and delivered them from all ye periles & miseries therof, againe to set their feete on ye firme and stable earth...**Let them therefore praise the Lord, because He is good, and His mercies endure forever. Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord, shew how He hath delivered them from the hand of the oppressor. When they wandered in the; desert wilderness out of the way, and found no city to dwell in, both hungry, and thirsty, their soul was overwhelmed in them. Let them confess before the Lord His loving kindness, and His wonderful works before the sons of men.**”

It is not an accident that William Bradford chose to quote from Psalm 107 (in bold above). An edition of the bible that Bradford brought with him to America still exists, and written in this bible is a note on verse 32 of Psalm 107. The note is a quote from the Rambam, a citation from his halakhot of Birkat haGomel (the prayer of thanksgiving that a Jew recites when he or she has survived a life threatening situation). Says the Rambam:

“Four categories of individuals are required to offer thanksgiving: A person who had been sick and has recovered, a prisoner who has been released from prison, **voyagers when they have landed**, and travellers in the desert when they reach settled territory.

אֲרֻבָּעָה צְרִיכִין לְהוֹדוֹת. חוֹלָה
 שְׁנֵתְרַפָּא. וְחַבּוּשׁ שֶׁיֵּצֵא מִבֵּית
 הָאֲסוּרִים. וְיוֹרְדֵי הַיָּם כְּשֶׁעָלוּ. וְהוֹלְכֵי
 דְרָכִים כְּשֶׁיִּגְעוּ לְיִשׁוּב.

Bradford and his fellow travelers knew that, according to Jewish tradition, this psalm was connected to a practice of giving thanks to God at the end of a journey. Incredibly, upon arriving in America the early settlers of this country recited their own version of Birkat haGomel. **הַנְדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם תְּהִלָּתוֹ. Thank the Lord for He is good. His loving kindness is forever.** *This* was the first Thanksgiving.

The process of giving thanks does not come only at the end of a journey. Sometimes, it can mark the beginning of a new one. Jacob speaks of God’s *chesed* as he prepares to return home after two decades in exile. The pilgrims speak of God’s *chesed* as they prepare to build a new home in a land far from everything they’ve ever known. Their troubles were not over when they landed in Plymouth. They had arrived in New England in the middle of winter, without shelter or food, or any knowledge of the area. There was so much to be afraid of, so much still uncertain. But in that moment, these worn and tired travelers were overcome with the desire to thank God for everything that had sustained and protected them up until that point.

Perhaps this is the essence of what we are doing each November when, as the nights grow long and the weather turns cold, we gather with our families to share a delicious, abundant meal. Harrowing journeys show us just how vulnerable we are. Whether it is a difficult year we had personally, an illness, or fear of the many very real threats and injustices in our world; these moments make us realize how uncertain our future is. Jacob and the pilgrims of the Mayflower teach us that it is precisely in this moment of vulnerability that we ought to seek to cultivate gratitude. We cannot know if our prayers will succeed in carrying us safely through the next journey, yet we know that either way we need to find a way to be thankful for what we have been given so far. We need to set aside time to take stock of our lives. What are our core values? Who are the people that form the center of our world? What are we proud of? What are we grateful for? We must challenge ourselves to answer these questions, because it is this gratitude for what is good that, when lovingly and intentionally cultivated, will keep us warm and sustain us through the cold winter to come.



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