Ladders and Threads

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It can be difficult to experience a moment of direct encounter with God in our world today. Besides the ever present challenge of how to experience and communicate with the Divine, our world today is, on the whole, not conducive to spiritual encounter.

We often feel that holiness requires stepping away into pristine, isolated spaces, yet our daily reality offers no such escape. Between getting through the slog of day-to-day living—think overflowing inboxes, incessant interrupting chimes, and a barrage of competing and pressing to do items—there is also the hardship and suffering in this world. We live in a world that is at once filled with *hesed* and love and also overwrought with suffering and need, war and hatred, corruption and violence. How can one hope to experience the Divine in a world such as this in which we move from tasks both mundane and challenging at breakneck pace?

According to the *midrash*, Jacob also struggled with the challenges inherent in encountering God in this world. In the wake of Jacob's birthright drama and his betrayal of his brother, Parshat VaYeitzei opens with Jacob on the move, setting out from Beersheva to Haran. On the

way, he lies down for a night's rest, only to have a surprise encounter with the Divine through his dreams.

בראשית כח:י-יב

וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּאֵר שָׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חָרָנָה: וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיָּלֶן שָׁם כִּי בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּקַּח מֵאַבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיָּשֶׂם מְרַאֲשֹׁתָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא: וַיַּחֲלֹם וְהִנֵּה סֻלָּם מֻצָּב אַרְצָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמָיְמָה וְהִנֵּה מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹקִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ:

Genesis 28:10-12

Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He encountered a 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. He had a dream; a ladder was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.

However, according to midrashic tradition, Jacob didn't go straight from his parents' home to Haran. Rather he stopped off for fourteen years, studying in the *beit midrash* of Ever.[1] Rashi teaches that for fourteen years, he neither slept nor ate because he was engaged in Torah study night and day.[2] Our tradition imagines that for these years, Jacob was purely immersed in and surrounded by the spiritual and holy work of Torah and service of God.

[1] In Genesis 10:22-25, Ever is listed as a descendent of Noah through his son Shem, who was still alive during Jacob's lifetime. While a minor character in Genesis, there are a number of *midrashim* that speak of his house as a known *beit midrash*; see, e.g., Bereishit Rabbah 68:5. For the origins of Jacob's fourteen-year stay there, see the class by my colleague R. Ethan Tucker, available on the Hadar website: https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/time-move.

[2] Rashi on Genesis 28:11.

Once he set out from the *beit midrash* of Ever toward Haran, the Torah tells us, "*vayifga ba'makom* - he encountered a place." A *midrash* picks up on this phrase:

בראשית רבה סח:י

וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם (בראשית כח, יא), בִּקֵּשׁ לַעֲבֹר נַעֲשָׂה הָעוֹלָם כֻּלּוֹ כְּמִין כּוֹתֶל לְפָנָיו.

Bereishit Rabbah 68:10

"And he encountered the place"—he wished to pass through, but the whole world became like a wall before him.

R. Shalom Noah Berezovsky[3] explains this *midrash* as follows:

נתיבות שלום פרשת ויצא

ועתה בצאתו מבאר שבע חרנה אחרי עבודה כזו וקדושה כזו, עליו להשפיל עצמו לעולם הזה לבנות בית ולהוליד בנים ולעשוק בפרנסה, לכך נעמד לפניו כל העולם כולו ככותל.

Netivot Shalom Parashat VaYeitzei

And now, as he sets out from Beersheba toward Haran after such intense service and such holiness, he must lower himself to this physical world—to build a home, to father children, and to engage in making a living. Therefore, "the entire world stood before him like a wall."

Coming from such a place of purity and holiness, it was as if the world was like a wall before him. According to the Netivot Shalom, Jacob struggled with moving from a place of holiness to a place of such materiality. How could one enter into this most imperfect world that we

[3] Also known by his book as the Netivot Shalom (1911-2000).

know well after living within the holy confines of the *beit midrash* for fourteen years? Or perhaps asked differently: how could he hope to encounter the Divine within our imperfect world?

R. Berezovsky teaches that this is precisely the reason why God showed Jacob the ladder.

> המכוון בזה להראות לו שתכלית רצון ה׳ היא שיהודי יעסוק בעניני עולם הזה ובתוך זה ימצא דרך איך להיות קדוש לה׳.
>
> The purpose of this was to show him that the ultimate desire of God is for a Jew to engage in the matters of this physical world and, within that very reality, find a way to be holy to God.

When Jacob encountered that place, it was as if our imperfect world hit him like a wall: he didn't know how to enter into it. Perhaps, he was scared to leave behind the clarity and purity of the protection of the *beit midrash*. Perhaps, he didn't know how to make sense of the chaos and hardship and messiness of this world.

Lest we think closeness with God requires separation from the world and immersion in purely holy spaces, the Netivot Shalom teaches us that it is quite the opposite. The pathway toward holiness is precisely through engagement with the physical matters of this world, not in spite of it.

In the Netivot Shalom's teaching, the ladder is a physical representation for our relationship with God. We cannot focus exclusively either on this world or on a purely spiritual world.

Rather, we are the ladder, with our feet planted in this world and our hearts and our heads reaching up to touch the heavens. The real work, the work of what it means to be a Jew in this world, is to bridge these worlds together, to draw near to God through our daily actions in this world.

The Netivot Shalom suggests we can understand the ladder to be about our own *avodah*, our spiritual work and attempts to draw near to God. As we remain grounded on earth, the ladder acts as our spiritual framework of holiness through we seek to encounter God. Each rung represents a step toward closeness. On our journey, we may experience setbacks. We may step down the ladder. But, as long as we stay on the ladder, as long as we stay in relationship to this framework of holiness, we stay in relationship to God.

Few of us can wall ourselves off from this world and dedicate ourselves purely to uninterrupted worship. We are not Jacob spending fourteen years in the *beit midrash* of Ever. If we are to build a relationship with God, we must access the Divine through this world—through joy and suffering, cruelty and *hesed*, the grandeur of nature and the clutter of our inboxes.

In her poem "In the Beginning, God created," the Israeli poet Rivka Miriam writes,[4]

In the beginning God created	בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים
threads stretched between them	חוּטִים מְתוּחִים בֵּינֵיהֶם

[4] From Rivka Miriam, *Ha-Kolot Likratam* (Dvir, 1982). Translation by David C. Jacobson, *Creator, Are You Listening?: Israeli Poets on God and Prayer* (Indiana University Press, 2007).

בֵּין הַשָּׁמַיִם שֶׁבְּעֶצֶם אֵינָם
וּבֵין הָאֲדָמָה הַמְּשַׁוַּעַת.
וְאֶת הָאָדָם הוּא יָצַר
שֶׁהָאִישׁ הוּא תְּפִלָּה וְהוּא חוּט
נוֹגֵעַ בְּמַה שֶּׁאֵינֶנּוּ
בְּמַגָּע שֶׁל רַךְ וְדַקּוּת.

between the heavens that actually are not
and the earth that cries for help.
and He created Man,
for a person is a prayer and a thread
touching what is not
with a soft and delicate touch.

Like the ladder that is grounded on the earth with its' head reaching the heavens, Rivka Miriam imagines human beings as threads stretching between the earth and the heavens, trying to touch what is not, what is illusive and seemingly far off in the heavens, with a soft and delicate touch.

May we, too, find the strength to be those delicate threads—firmly rooted in the messy reality of our daily lives, yet always reaching out, through our actions, to gently touch the Divine.