Daniel Kirzane
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Parashat Vayeitzei

God is in this Place

This sermon is meant for delivery in sections throughout the Shabbat service and is accompanied by song.

It opens as a meditation before the singing of Lecha Dodi.

וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּאֵר שָׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חָרָנָה׃
And Jacob went out from Beer Sheva,
and he went toward Haran (Gen. 28:10).

The Torah portion this week begins with a journey.

Jacob has fled his home, literally running for his life from a brother who would see him dead. He seeks Haran, the land of his mother's birth, and he doesn't know if he'll ever return. He travels with nothing but the shirt on his back and the wits in his head and the blessing he'd won by beguiling the father who preferred his twin.

But as we shall see, Jacob is not alone.

And as night falls and angels herald the coming of Shabbat, we recall that we, too, are not alone. Jacob's journey is our journey—a journey of comfort and accompaniment and trust.

[*Lecha Dodi*]

Before Hashkiveinu:

The Torah portion continues as night falls.

> Gen. 28:11 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 And he dreamed. *Look*—a ladder set on the ground and its top reaching to the sky. And *look*—angels of God going up and going down on it. 13 And *look*—the Eternal is standing beside him saying, "I am the Eternal, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I am giving to you and to your descendants. 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 And *look*—אָנֹכִי עִמָּךְ, I am with you. I will protect you

wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. כִּי לֹא אֶעֶזָבְךָ, For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."[1]

We can only imagine Jacob's uncertainty and fear as he traverses the unknown. He has defrauded his brother, deceived his father, and departed from the mother who loves him as she loves herself. The cold comfort of the stony ground offers little support and less to hope for. And yet, as darkness falls, he beholds—and we alongside him—visions of angels and God. The God who dared Abraham to sacrifice his son, and the God who spared him the knife; the God whose promises of stars and dust have led so far only to a bed of rocks—this God of the sky and the earth and the wind and the sea offers a promise: "I am with you. I will not leave you. You shall be a blessing, and I will be there to see it happen."

And we, heirs to the covenant of Jacob and bearers of his name—this is a promise made to us as well. It's hard to receive and harder to believe; like Jacob, our paths are hard and the long-ago tales of miraculous salvation seem impossibly far away. But also like Jacob, when we shed the sharp edges of the day and slip into the inky possibility of the night, when we open ourselves to visions and dreams, we might—for a moment at least—allow ourselves a glimpse of what it would be like to *look* and see: "I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go."

And what of the angels? Is God's own standing presence not enough? According to one tradition, the angels are themselves the manifestation of Shechinah, of the indwelling of God on earth. The 17th-century sage, Kli Yakar [Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz, 1550-1619] teaches that the figures going up and down the ladder are Uriel, Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel.[2] The Bedtime Shema, which includes a version of the Hashkiveinu prayer, says these four angels accompany every one us through the nights of our lives. וּמִשָּׁם יַעֲלֶה לְהַשִּׂיג בְּמְצִיאוּת הָאֵל יִתְבָּרַךְ, "And from this," the Kli Yakar writes, "one ascends to grasp the reality of the Blessed God."

Do I really believe in angels? Not usually, especially in the light of day. But I do believe in messengers, in connectors, in symbols that point beyond. I think Maimonides has it right when he says כָּל מְבַצֵּעַ צִיווּי הוּא מַלְאָךְ, "Everyone who performs a certain binding imperative is an angel."[3] Those don't need to be heavenly beings—you or I or

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[1] I have adapted this translation from the 1985 JPS translation.

[2] See his commentary on Gen. 28:12

וְהִזְכִּיר עוֹלִים וְיוֹרְדִים כִּי הֵם אַרְבַּע מַחֲנוֹת שְׁכִינָה, כִּדְמַסְיק בָּרָקָנָטִי פָּרָשַׁת בָּלָק: אוּרִיאֵל שַׂר אֲוִיר, מִיכָאֵל שַׂר מַיִם, רָפָאֵל שַׂר עָפָר, גַּבְרִיאֵל שַׂר אֵשׁ. וְיָדוּעַ שֶׁבְּטֶבַע הַמַּיִם וְהֶעָפָר לֵירֵד, וְטֶבַע הָאֲוִיר וְהָאֵשׁ לַעֲלוֹת, עַל כֵּן הִזְכִּיר עוֹלִים שְׁנַיִם וְיוֹרְדִים שְׁנַיִם. וּמִשָּׁם יַעֲלֶה לְהַשִּׂיג בְּמְצִיאוּת הָאֵל יִתְבָּרַךְ, זֶהוּ שֶׁאָמַר "וְהִנֵּה ה' נִצָּב עָלָיו" (בראשית כח:יג).

It mentions *ascending and descending* because these represent the four camps of the Divine Presence, as explained in Recanati's commentary on Parshat Balak: Uriel is minister of air, Michael is minister of water, Raphael is minister of earth, and Gabriel is minister of fire. It is known that water and earth naturally descend, while air and fire naturally ascend. Therefore, it mentions two ascending and two descending. From there, one ascends to grasp the existence of the blessed God — this is what it means when it says *behold, God was standing over him*.

[3] Guide to the Perplexed 2:6.

anything else we encounter can point us to a dreamy truth lying behind the vicissitudes of day.

When the light fades and we lose grip on the reassurances of sunlight, can we open ourselves to the possibility of Jacob's vision? Can we strain our ears to hear, even in a dream, the promise of a God who never leaves us: וְהִנֵּה אָנֹכִי עִמָּךְ, "*Look*—I am with you."

Sukkat Shalom ["a shelter of peace"] **by Eliana Light**

The stars above me blinking
They must know just what I'm thinking
"It's so empty and so cold alone at night"
The wind whips up around me
And I'm kinda glad it's found me
'Cause when it blows, I know I'll be alright

A kiss from God with each little leaf that drops upon my head
Oh how small we all must feel
when the sky becomes our blanket
And the ground below becomes our bed

But in this Sukkat Shalom
Your love surrounds me
Sukkat Shalom and it's all around me
I know I'm safe and protected
in this world that is Your home
Your Sukkat Shalom

The sky is getting dimmer
but I still can see a glimmer
of a sliver of the moon to light my way
There is no one beside me
And I have no map to guide me
But even so I know I'll be okay

The world seems scary and confused
each time it drifts into the dark
But I know that You are there
Your light can fill the air and
All it takes is just one spark

'Cause in this Sukkat Shalom
Your love surrounds me
Sukkat Shalom and it's all around me
I know I'm safe and protected

in this world that is Your home
Your Sukkat Shalom

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ הַפּוֹרֵס סֻכַּת שָׁלוֹם.
Blessed are you, Eternal One, who spreads over us a shelter of peace.

After silent prayer and Shalom Rav:

> Gen. 28:16 Jacob awoke from his sleep, and he said, "Surely the Eternal is in this place, and I—I did not know it!"[4] 17 And he was afraid. And he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this is the heaven's gate." 18 And Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had placed under his head, and he placed it as a standing-stone, and he poured oil on its head. 19 And he called the name of that place Beth-El ["the House of God"].[5]

וַיִּיקַץ—He awoke.
וַיִּירָא—And he was afraid.
וַיַּשְׁכֵּם יַעֲקֹב בַּבֹּקֶר—And early in the morning, Jacob arose.

וַיִּיקַץ—He awoke, though his head lay still upon the stones. His eyes, we might imagine, faced the rays of the rising sun, and from his unsheltered patch of grass he beheld the vastness of what lay beyond him. The insight that God is here even when God cannot be seen washes over him and reminds him how utterly small he is.

וַיִּירָא—And he was afraid. Confronting the enormity of the world and its perplexing relation to the God who stands behind it bathed Jacob in awe. Who is he—and who are we—when standing at Heaven's Gate, in the House of God?

וַיַּשְׁכֵּם יַעֲקֹב בַּבֹּקֶר—And [<u>then</u>,] early in the morning, Jacob arose.

There is a pause, perhaps a very long one, between waking and getting up. The ladder came in a dream at night, and in the morning, Jacob will anoint a monument to remember it by. And the twilight in-between is a time of connection and contemplation, of the collapsing of the infinite possibilities of the night into the precision and clarity of the day. In waking twilight, we are not subject to the wild excursions of our dreams; nor are we beholden to the occluding definitions of our egos. Day and night are connected, and we, too, are connected—and if we can conjure a blessing in this unique moment of perception, perhaps we, too, might say "God is in this place, and I—I did not know it!"

Now Jacob does arise, and he names his altar The House of God. I like to think that Jacob is trying to capture in the physical world the prophetic visions that befell him overnight. We, too, in our waking hours seek to recover the awesomeness of night and

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[4] This translation ("I—I did not know it") is inspired by Lawrence Kushner's treatment of this verse in *Honey from the Rock*. It draws on the grammatically unnecessary inclusion of אָנֹכִי alongside יָדָעְתִּי.
[5] Again, I have adapted the 1985 JPS translation.

the connections found in the twilight. The altar is a symbol of the attempt to hold on to the promise of accompaniment, a promise so much easier to accept in the vulnerability of nighttime sleep.

We each have our own altars, our own standing-stones erected to remind us of rare spiritual insights. We surround ourselves with monuments, which strive to express the numinous truth our souls perceive behind our eyes. Such monuments include the prayers woven into our liturgy, poetry flowing from creative minds, stories of our families and of our people, and songs that blend music and words into a powerful language of connection. These bring us back, again and again, to the welcoming embrace of God.

Fading Light by Coleen Dieker with Neil Michaels and Maya Grinboim

Lift me up, lift me up from the dark of night.
Keep me warm, keep me warm in the fading light.
Calm the storm, calm the storm I feel inside.
Be the place, be the place my heart can hide.

Wrap me safe, wrap me safe in a song of peace.
Still my soul, still my soul, let me feel release.
Hold me close, hold me close through all my pain.
Soothe my wounds, soothe my wounds I can't explain.

Walk with me through the dark,
Set me free, show me light.
Ani, ani botachat bachem. [I have faith in you.][6]

I let go, I release, I believe in my peace.
Ani, ani botachat bach. [I have faith in you.]

Ah, ana el na refa na la. [Please, God, please heal her.]
Ah, ana el na refa na la.

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[6] See Isaiah 50:10:

מִי בָכֶם יְרֵא יְהוָה שֹׁמֵעַ בְּקוֹל עַבְדּוֹ אֲשֶׁר הָלַךְ חֲשֵׁכִים וְאֵין נֹגַהּ לוֹ יִבְטַח בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה וְיִשָּׁעֵן בֵּאלֹהָיו׃

Who among you reveres the Eternal
And heeds the voice of His servant?—
Though he walk in darkness
And have no light,
Let him trust in the name of the Eternal
And rely upon his God (1985 JPS translation, slightly altered).

And see Jeremiah 17:7:

בָּרוּךְ הַגֶּבֶר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בַּיהוָה וְהָיָה יְהוָה מִבְטַחוֹ׃

Blessed is one who trusts in the Eternal, whose trust is the Eternal alone (1985 JPS translation, slightly altered).

Walk with me through the dark,
Set me free, show me light.
Ani, ani botachat bachem.

I let go, I release, I believe in my peace.
Ani, ani botachat bach.

Lift me up, lift me up from the dark of night.
Keep me warm, keep me warm in the fading light.

Before Mourner's Kaddish:

Our *parashah* ends with Jacob returning to his homeland, wives and children and flocks in tow. And once again, וַיִּפְגְּעוּ־בוֹ מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים, "Angels of God encountered him" (Gen. 32:2). We are reminded, alongside Jacob himself, that God has remained with him all this time, through thick and thin. This last scene concludes the *parashah* on a note of comfort. Even if we do lose sight of the dreams of the night and the musings of the twilight hours, if we forget the words of promise and the visions of angels: God is always with us.

We may see God in dreams or—more likely—in the people we love and those we meet along the journeys of our lives. In their honor we build our monuments of prayer, poems, stories, and songs. With them by our sides and in our hearts, we might say with fulness of faith: God is in this place and I—I did not know it.

From Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1867),[7] reprinted in *Mishkan T'filah*

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four,
and each moment then;
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my
own face in the glass;
I find letters from God drop't in the street—and every
one is sign'd by God's name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that
wheresoe'er I go,
Others will punctually come forever and ever.

[7] https://whitmanarchive.org/item/ppp.00473