

## ***Vayetze: Encounters with God***

Silent Center of Things

5775 Text Study by Yael Shy

### **Encountering God in the Place**

At the start of this chapter, Jacob is running away from the wrath of his brother Easau. He is alone. He is afraid. And the sun is setting. So Jacob goes to sleep.

The voice of God comes to Jacob in his dream and gives Jacob the same assurance that God gave to Abraham – “behold, I am with you, and I will guard you wherever you go, and I will restore you to this land, for I will not forsake you.” (Chapter 28, Verse 15)

Jacob wakes up filled with fear and awe, and says the words, “Indeed, God is in this place and I didn’t know it.” (Chapter 28, Verse 16) This is a remarkable admission. He says, “I missed the holiness in this situation. I missed the mystery. I missed the God-ness in this place of fear and loneliness, but I recognize it now.”

What’s fascinating about this encounter, however, is that God reaches out *to* Jacob – Jacob doesn’t reach out to God. [Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes](#):

“That is how Jacob found G-d—not by his own efforts, like Abraham; not through continuous dialogue, like Isaac; but in the midst of fear and isolation. Jacob, in flight, trips and falls—and finds he has fallen into the waiting arms of G-d. No one who has had this experience ever forgets it.”

Sylvia Boorstein often teaches that this type of experience – a deep connection with God, or emptiness, or oneness - often happens “by accident.” Echoing Rabbi Sacks’s language, we seem to stumble or fall into that feeling of wholeness or peace. Meditation, she argues, simply makes us more accident-prone. We can’t force revelations like Jacob’s, but meditation and prayer sometimes open us up, helping us to see and experience divine presence in the places we never thought to look.

Additionally, Rabbi Sacks writes that we, the people of Israel, are named after Jacob and not the other patriarchs because Jacob was open to these encounters with God in the darkness, at the times of his greatest difficulties. The opening words of the Parsha are “*Vayetze Yaakov*” – “and Jacob departed.” He is running away, afraid, preoccupied, struggling, and that is where he encounters God. It is wonderful to encounter God like Abraham did – in bright and peaceful light of day. Perhaps it is much more complicated and takes more awareness to encounter God in the darkness of despair and suffering.

## Encountering God as the place

Taking this one step further, what if it wasn't just that we were able to locate God's presence in difficult and painful places, what if these circumstances *were* a manifestation of God itself? The word that Jacob uses for "place," as in "God was in this *place*," is "*makom*" which is also a name for God in Hebrew. The Torah commentator in Yalkut Shimoni asks, "Why is God called *Makom*?" The answer, "because He is the place of the world and the world is not His place." (Vayetze *remez* 117). In this riddle-like language, God is *in* the place and God *is* the place. God is the container and the contents within the container.

Personally, this concept is not difficult to understand when I think of a rose bush or a child. Of course they are all God! It is much harder to accept when I'm feeling scared or in pain. When my stress is at a fever pitch, I miss the train, I am in a fight with my partner, and I am seriously worried about the health of a family member, my first instinct is not to say, "its all God." My first instinct is to scream or hurt someone.

When I *do* release the things I can't change, however, and recognize that this unfolding is bigger and wider than anything I can understand or control, I do feel a sense of ease. There is suddenly space in my heart and mind. When I "let go and let God," as my Christian friends might say, I begin to understand Jacob's statement in a different way. "God is in this place," becomes "this situation or place is composed of the raw materials of God, and I didn't know it." As Rabbi David Cooper, author of *God is a Verb* might say, "God-ing is happening." The world is manifesting itself through and around me – sometimes as joy, and sometimes as tremendous pain, sometimes as birth, and sometimes as death. To *know* it is to step back, wake up, and realize it.

### Practice Guidance:

Jacob leaves us with the challenge of recognizing our encounters with God in all God's forms. This week, notice the places in your life that feel stuck or difficult. Could God be in this place? Could God be the stuck-ness or difficulty itself?