

Vayeshev – No Mud: No Lotus

Silent Center of Things

5775 Text Study by Yael Shy

1. Now Jacob settled/sat in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.	א. וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מְגוּרֵי אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:
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(Bereshit 37:1)

This seemingly simple sentence has been the jumping-off point for the Rabbis and commentators throughout the centuries, eager to point out that Jacob’s wish to “settle” was problematic.

Jacob sought to settle in peace – there leapt upon him the agitation of Joseph. The righteous seek to settle in peace—God says, ‘Is it not enough for the righteous, what is prepared for them in the world to come, that they seek to settle in peace in this world?’

(Rashi, 37:1)

Rashi, speaking in the voice of God, rebukes Jacob for his desire to find peace of mind in a world that is filled with “agitation” and trouble. As Aviva Zornberg writes, “In God’s rhetoric, the righteous are made to seem importunate, almost greedy, their desire for peace in this world wrongheaded, a view of the treasure awaiting them in another world.” (*The Beginning of Desire*, 243)

Is Jacob’s mistake his attempt to settle and find peace when his lot in this life is to suffer? Or is his error his desire find an unsullied, pure state of peace, completely separate from the troubles of the world? I believe it is the latter. Jacob’s inclination to try and find a way out of his suffering is natural (and even, according to Rashi, an indicator of righteousness). It’s his disavowal of that suffering – his desire to find peace *outside* of it that sets him up for failure.

“Vayeshev” in Hebrew means “settles,” sharing a root with the Hebrew word for “sit.” In mindfulness parlance, “sitting” is another word for meditating. Jacob reminds me of myself and so many other meditators who, when we first start meditating, fall into the trap of wanting to “meditate away” our troubles, hoping to escape ourselves and the world through sitting.

Bestselling author and psychiatrist, Dr. Mark Epstein, recounts his early experiences with meditation and excitement about the Buddhist concept of “no-self”:

[M]y understanding of no-self was limited at this point. I took it to mean that my inner anxiety, my “self,” was unreal and would drop away once I woke up. It was confusing to find that meditation – rather than dropping me into a void of no—self – backed me into myself...While meditation was teaching me to hold myself with a light touch, it was also helping me...to emerge *through* my suffering, not in spite of it.

(*Trauma of Everyday Life*, 9)

This has been my experience as well. Each of my attempts to find peace outside of the chaos of my own heart, mind and life eventually fails. The only way out of suffering is through it. The Buddhists' have a phrase for this: “No mud, no lotus.” Lotus flowers, one of the symbols of enlightenment, only grow in muddy, swampy waters. Working with our pain in this world (as opposed to the “next”) is our best chance of attaining the inner peace that Jacob may have been seeking.

This is not only true on an internal level, but on a communal one as well. [Yanki Tauber, on Chabad.org](#), reads Rashi's comments about Jacob onto the struggle for social equity and justice today: “There are the righteous: men and women who cannot relish their meal as long as someone, somewhere, remains hungry; who, if there is ignorance in the world, know their own wisdom to be deficient; who, if there is discord anywhere in G-d's creation, cannot be at peace with themselves.”

In Tauber's reading, Jacob's mistake is one of trying to settle and find peace while others are suffering. Jacob is trying to create an artificial separation between his own well-being and the well-being of the world. This is what Rabbi Alan Lew called a “psychic squint” – a conscious effort to screen out pain and suffering in the world.

To be honest, I've not only felt like squinting against the injustice in the world in recent days and weeks, I've felt like closing my eyes altogether. The heartbreaking devaluation of black life in this country, the brokenness of the criminal justice system, the unimaginable scale of suffering in war zones like Syria and Iraq – at times it all feels like too much – too overwhelming, too sad. I want to shake it off, to go about my business. I want to settle and be at peace.

The trouble with this “psychic squint,” however, is that, in Rabbi Lew's words, “this squinting requires a tremendous expenditure of energy, energy we desperately need, and it never works anyway.” (*This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*). The trouble always manages to catch up to us because we are not truly separate from each other, and never were. As this week's parsha so painfully teaches us, we *are* our brothers' (and sisters') keepers and our fate is bound up in theirs.

So there is no escape from our individual suffering, and no escape from the suffering of others, what is our plan? Should Jacob simply have resigned himself to a life of pain, and so should we?

I think the answer lies not in closing our eyes to suffering, and not in simply slipping into despair, but committing ourselves to acknowledging the pain, turning towards it, holding it gently, and working carefully for peace with our entire being. What does that mean, more tangibly? It requires us to stand in the middle of painful circumstances without squinting, or hiding. It means having a radical commitment to telling the truth, holding the inevitable pain of that truth close to our hearts, and working towards change without creating more divisions or separations.

This is no easy task, which is perhaps why Zornberg says that Jacob's true settling is a "long story." There is no shortcut and no escape from the pain in the world. There is only the willingness to practice courageously facing it, relaxing into it, and moving forward to crafting a better world.

Practice Guidance:

As you read, watch or listen to news this week, and/or if you come up against difficult painful places in your personal life, practice turning towards the source of pain and opening your heart if there is an instinct to shut down or turn away. In your meditation practice, practice the courage of settling *with* the troubles of your life and the world, and allow the breath, and God, to move through the tight and constricted places.