

## God Is In This Place...

Last year, our then 4-year-old son, Adam, had just begun his final year here in the Temple Beth Shalom Children's Center. It was a couple of weeks into the school year when I bumped into one of his teachers who wanted to share a story with me. It would seem that during the class circle time they had been discussing God. Adam very eagerly raised his hand, and when he was called upon, explained to the rest of the class that there are, in fact, two gods. "That's interesting," probed his teacher. "Where did you learn that?" "My father." "Really?" the teacher inquired. "Your father told you that?" Adam insisted that it was so, and they went back and forth until, ultimately, his teacher said with a smile on her face, "Well, OK. I'll have to check with your Dad about that when I see him." Adam walked away and went about his business only to return a few minutes later, approach his teacher and say, "Actually...you don't need to check with my Dad."

But Adam redeemed himself recently. I was driving him home from school, and out of nowhere – from the back seat – comes his adorable voice, "Daddy? Is God alive?" I was delighted to hear that God was now in the singular. "How would we know?" I asked. "Where could we look for God?" Poor rabbis' kids...always having their important questions responded to with more questions.

"Outside," he replied while gazing out the car window. "Yeah," I said, "I've often felt like I experience God in nature." "And maybe inside too," Adam suggested. "Inside where, buddy?" "Inside me!"

Torah tells us that our patriarch, "Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. 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. He had a dream; a ladder was set on the ground and its top reached to heaven, and angels of God were going up and down on it. And God was standing beside him and said, 'I am Adonai, the God of your [grand]father Abraham and the God of Isaac...I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' Jacob awoke from his sleep and exclaimed, '*Achein! Yeish Adonai bamakom hazeh, v'anochi lo yadati* -- Surely God is present in this place, and I, I did not know it!'"<sup>1</sup>

What an oddly redundant grammatical construction. "I, I did not know it?" Perhaps Jacob was providing a hint for my little backseat theologian to uncover someday. "God was in this place, and in I, and I didn't realize it until now."

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once asked his disciples, "Where does God live?" "Everywhere!" they unanimously replied to this apparently foolish question. "No," said the Kotzker, "God dwells wherever we let God in."

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 28:10-16

God lives in each of us – in each unique “I” – when we see the world around us with awe and wonder and when we recognize in ourselves the Torah truth that we are each created in God’s image.

In the words of Rabbi David Wolpe, “God is evoked inside of us [through Jewish study, and] when we demonstrate those qualities that we know God wishes us to exemplify in our lives: qualities of compassion and of conscience. God is evoked inside of us when we work to understand ourselves and others. [God is evoked inside of us when we] work to grasp something, when [we] struggle to understand [ourselves.]”<sup>2</sup> “We can find God inside ourselves at all times, but most easily when we are at our best.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is one of the goals of all the repenting and improving we strive for during these Days of Awe...to discover our true selves and – in so doing – to discover God as well.

Jacob’s story continues. “Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a monument...”<sup>4</sup> This is the first time that this word for “monument” – *matzevah* - is used in the Torah. Jacob’s forebears had built altars to God...Noah after the flood, Abraham when he arrived in Israel, and Isaac when he came to inhabit the city of *Be’er Sheva*, where his father had lived. And while Jacob will build altars of his own, his first offering to God is our people’s first stone monument. Why?

In his commentary on this segment of the Torah, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin teaches that this was because “a monument is made of stone. The Hebrew word for stone is *even*, comprised of the letters *aleph-bet-nun*. This is also a contraction of parent-child [in Hebrew], *av-ben* - which also uses the letters *aleph-bet-nun* symbolizing the eternity of family continuity.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Jacob erected a monument as an expression of his commitment to continue the covenantal legacy begun by his grandparents and passed down to him by his parents. Maybe he was imagining what it would be like to pass the spirit of his tradition on to his children and grandchildren. And don’t we do the same?

A group of adult learners sits before me. They are similar to so many groups of adults with whom I’ve done this activity. The topic...God. I play the game with them that my teachers played with me when I was in elementary school. “Everyone close your eyes so you can’t see how your neighbors are voting,” I say. “Now, raise your hand if you believe in God.” Several hands go up immediately. Many more hesitatingly waffle somewhere around shoulder height, clearly trying to express their confusion and ambivalence through some sort of impromptu interpretive dance. A smaller group does not raise their hands at all and – in spite of having their eyes closed – appear to be

---

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi David Wolpe, Teaching Your Children About God: A Modern Jewish Approach, HarperPerennial, New York, 1993, pp. 109-110

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109

<sup>4</sup> *Genesis 28:18*

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Torah Lights: A Biblical Commentary, Maggid Books of Koren Publishing, Jerusalem, 2005. P. 190

staring at the floor as if to avoid eye contact with the rabbi who just asked them this question.

“Put your hands down,” I say. “Now, raise your hand if you can think of a time when you’ve felt God’s presence.” At least 90% of the hands now go up in the air. When I ask them to tell me about those times they’ve felt God’s presence, those moments of transcendence, what do I hear?

“I felt God’s presence when I held my newborn child for the first time.” “On our wedding day.” “I felt God’s presence standing at my mother’s graveside on the day of her funeral.” “When I saw my grandson read Torah on the day of his *bar mitzvah*.”

These are momentous times surrounded by those closest to us – *Shehecheyanu* moments, we call them – that simply stand out as something extraordinary. At *Shabbat* dinner tables, and lighting *Chanukah* menorahs, and gathered around at Passover *seders* we create lifelong memories filled with sacred encounters. When we look into the mirror and catch a glimpse of our parents, or see our children echoing mannerisms and behaviors we know to be our own...we experience a flash of being part of something larger than ourselves, a link in a much longer chain of legacy and love. Whether joyous or somber, these moments inspire us and elevate us, help us to feel the presence of loved ones and – through them – the presence of The Holy One.

The story of Jacob’s dream concludes: “Shaken [from the experience], he said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and the gateway to heaven...So he named that site *Beit-El* – House of God.’”<sup>6</sup>

Our Sages of ancient days imagined that the base of Jacob’s ladder was not beside his sleeping body in the midst of the Judean wilderness but rather atop Mount Moriah<sup>7</sup>, the hilltop where his grandfather had almost offered his father up on an altar...talk about difficult family memories. Freud would have had a field day helping Jacob to unpack this dream.

More important, however, is the teaching that it was upon that very same mountain – according to tradition – that The Temple...the actual House of God in Jerusalem – would come to be built. This central location – the gathering place of the Jewish people – this is where one finds the ladder whose other end reaches to heaven.

I recall ten years ago, sitting in “senior seminar,” the special class at Hebrew Union College for 5<sup>th</sup> year rabbinical and cantorial students who are preparing to begin their sacred service to the Jewish people. The instructor asked us to participate in what he thought was a simple assignment. “Find a quiet place by yourself,” he said, “take a piece of paper, and describe the community that you want to be serving next year. The community you want to be serving in five years, and in ten years.”

---

<sup>6</sup> *Genesis 28:17 & 19*

<sup>7</sup> *Midrash Genesis Rabbah 69:17*

I proceeded to have what might be described as a mild panic attack. I wrote nothing. I just stared at the blank piece of paper as thoughts streamed through my mind at lightning speed. "I want to be in a place that actually strives to live its values. I want to be in a place that knows its roots but is open to change. Why is he assuming that I want to be in a different place five years from now than the one I'm in next year? I want to be in a place with a great professional team that has inspirational vision. I want to be in a place where people respect a variety of viewpoints and handle disagreements with maturity.

What if we have to go to Kansas? We don't have any friends or family in Kansas!

I want to be in a community that feels like people actually care about one another and don't just talk about caring for one another. I want to be in a place that loves learning and brings an entrepreneurial spirit to all that it does. I want to be in a congregation that takes its commitment to the larger community seriously and strives to repair everything that's broken in our world." After 30 minutes of this, I crumpled up the still blank paper and threw it in the recycling bin, wondering to myself, "Does this place even exist?"

Thank God...it does. And I could not be more thankful on this Yom Kippur that the community which I came to serve in my first year as a rabbi is the community I will continue to serve in my tenth year as a rabbi. That is a gift for which I cannot possibly express enough gratitude to all of you. Gratitude not only for inviting me to be one of your rabbis, but more importantly, for being the community I envisioned a decade ago.

It's a curious thing, note many Torah commentators, that the angels on Jacob's ladder are said to be ascending and descending. If angels – God's very messengers – live in heaven...then shouldn't they be descending first and then ascending? Maybe angels don't live in heaven. Maybe those who are capable of making God's ideals manifest in our world...maybe they live right here. I'm pretty sure they do. They're sitting in this room. Maybe it's the person next to you...could even be you.

This is so apparent to me because I see the members of this congregation doing God's work constantly. On this day when we are supposed to take a hard look in the mirror and assess ourselves...in this year when we approach our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation...allow me to hold up a mirror in which you can see your own reflections. This congregation dances with brides and grooms and celebrates 13-year-olds as they pass into young adulthood, embracing their Jewish tradition. We create rich learning for people of every age.

We give of our time, energy, and resources to provide food, clothes, shelter, education, and supplies of every variety to those in need. Temple Beth Shalom is a congregation that reaches out to the sick, offering meals, and rides, and healing gifts, and comforting presence at bedsides. This is where we come together to foster a deeper understanding of - and a greater connection to - the land of Israel, and this is where we

find peace of mind and guidance when the world around us seems to spin out of control. We insure that nobody who experiences loss walks the path of grief alone, that no family need feel on the outside of Jewish life and community. And while we'll always strive to be even better at all we do...if this isn't the stuff of angels, I don't know what is.

The Hebrew word for "place," – *Makom* – appears six times in the few short verses that tell of Jacob's dream. In the Rabbinic tradition, *Makom* is also a name for God, a reminder that God's presence can be felt anywhere...sometimes felt especially strongly in particular places.

The Talmud teaches<sup>8</sup> that both a synagogue and a Jewish home can be called a *Mikdash Me'at* – a little version of The Temple in Jerusalem from whence Jacob's ladder ascended. As we all know – our communal home here is far too little to accommodate our TBS family and all that we do. Just as we need one another to do all that makes us a sacred community, so too do we need one another to make the dream of our new home a reality. We'll accomplish this goal like we do all our aims here at Beth Shalom...side by side, hand in hand, giving from our hearts in order to create something bigger than ourselves in which we can all share. And when we're done, and we are even more fully able to be the community we strive to be, then we too will be able to say, "*Mah norah hamakom hazeh* - How awesome is this place? This is none other than the house of God...the gateway to heaven."

"I have one more," came the voice from the backseat several minutes after I thought the conversation was over. "One more what, buddy?" "God is also in Temple Beth Shalom." Amen to that.

May this be a year filled with opportunities for each of us to stand on that ladder joining heaven and earth and to know that God is alive...within ourselves, within our families, within this sacred community of ours. That God is in this place and that we, we absolutely know it.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Megillah 29a*