

Parshat Vayeitzei: From Fugitive to Forefather–Yaakov’s Spiritual Awakening Amanda Goldstein, Class of ‘27

Parshat Vayeitzei marks a significant turning point in the life of Yaakov. This *parsha* begins with Yaakov's journey from his homeland, fleeing the wrath of his brother Esav. However, what starts as a hasty escape transforms into a profound spiritual awakening that shapes the future of the Jewish nation.

A moment of extraordinary significance begins with a somewhat bizarre verse:

And he encountered a certain place (וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמְקוֹם) and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking from the stones of that place, he put them under his head and lay down in that place (Bereishit 28:11).

The verbiage of “encounter” is puzzling here. What does it mean to encounter a place? Rashi points us toward similar wording in Yirmiyahu 7:16 (“וְאֵל תִּפְגַּע בִּי”), which seems to explicitly reference prayer. From there we can deduce that, in our context, prayer is at work too. According to Rashi, Yaakov’s “encounter” was his establishment of the evening prayer service, *Tefillat Maariv*.

The Midrash Tanchuma offers a fascinating insight to this as well. Just as an accidental killer would flee to a city of refuge for protection, Yaakov fled to Haran to escape the wrath of Esav. The use of “*vayifga*,” which the Gemara (Brakhot 26:7) also explains can only refer to prayer, emphasizes Yaakov's vulnerable state and his need for divine protection. One can imagine that at this particular juncture in Yaakov’s life, fleeing out of fear and arriving in an unknown location in the dark would leave him feeling desperate. The Kedushat Levi, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, explains that this night marks an historic moment in the history of prayer. Not only do we gain the evening prayer service, but we are offered the model of seeking God “in the dark,” or more figuratively, in hard times. As Yaakov seeks out safety from the rage of his brother, *vayifga*, he turns to God.

Yaakov lays his head upon the rocks, falls asleep, and famously dreams of angels traveling up and down a ladder, as God protectively stands beside him and promises him a prosperous future with abundant land and offspring.

When Yaakov awoke from his dream, he exclaimed:

אָכֵן יֵשׁ ה' בַּמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי:

“Surely God is in this place and I (*anochi*) did not know it” (Bereishit 28:16).

How is it possible that Yaakov did not know that God was with him? Didn't he just establish the evening prayer before he fell asleep?

In order to understand this verse, we must first give attention to the word used to designate “I”: *anochi* (אֲנֹכִי). Typically, one would expect to see the word *ani* (אֲנִי).

Prior to this juncture, Yaakov predominantly exhibited a reactive disposition in his conduct. Characterized as a man of simplicity (*ish tam*), it is plausible that he neither perceived himself as possessing agency, nor envisioned himself in direct dialogue with the Divine. Our Sages tell us that when the less often used word “*anochi*” is employed, we are meant to understand a deeper sense of self and/or a connection to God. This suggests that when Yaakov awoke from his dream, it was not only a physical, but also a spiritual awakening.

Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropoli suggests that Yaakov was previously aware that there were creatures that could reach elevated spiritual heights. In Yechezkel’s prophecy regarding the throne of God, he describes it as having four sides, each with a different image—one side an eagle (נְשֹׂר), one side a lion (אֲרִיִּה), one side a cherub (כְּרוּב), and one with a human face. It wasn’t until Yaakov’s dream, where he saw the angels comparing the image on the throne with **his face** (Chullin 91:11), that he realized his true potential. He realized that the human face of the throne of God was his own. The *yud* in אֲנֹכִי was his own initial, **Yaakov**. Rabbi Shimshon suggests that alluded to in Yaakov’s word choice is the discovery of personal empowerment.

Now we can reread our verse with a new insight into what Yaakov meant by the transformation that took place that night:

אֲנִי יְשׁוּהָ בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי:

“Surely God is in this place and I did not know it.”

Or perhaps, God is in this place, but I did not know that God is in me.

Yaakov's experience at this pivotal moment in *Parshat Vayeitzei* represents a profound transformation in his spiritual journey. Initially fleeing in fear, he encounters a place that becomes a sanctuary not only physically, but also spiritually. Through the dream of the ladder and the divine promise, Yaakov's understanding of his relationship with God deepens. The use of the word “*anochi*” signifies a newfound self-awareness and recognition of his potential to connect directly with the Divine. This awakening is not merely about acknowledging God's presence around him but also appreciating that God resides within him. Yaakov's declaration, “Surely God is in this place and I did not know it,” evolves into an acknowledgment of his own divine spark. This moment encapsulates the essence of prayer and spiritual growth: the affirmation of God's presence both in the world and within oneself, even amidst life's darkest moments.

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