FINDING GOD
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Everything the Torah shares with us about Jacob's youth is negative and yet still we hold him up as one of our patriarch's and heroes to be emulated. Why?

Consider the character of this young boy who grows to be the leader of the tribe of the Israel, who's very name becomes Israel and is synonymous with the Jewish people.

In his youth he takes advantage of his brother's hunger to extort the family birthright from him. The birthright is defined as the double share of the family inheritance given the eldest son in those days. If one of our children did what Jacob did to Esau to his or her sibling, we would have had a long talk about how unacceptable his or her behavior was, and I am pretty certain Sharon and I would impose an appropriately instructive punishment.

Later at his mother's urging, Jacob stood before his blind father, dressed in Esau's clothes, lied twice through his teeth when he swore to Isaac, "I am Esau your first born."

The purpose of this horrible charade was to obtain his father's blessing that designated him as the spiritual heir to the Covenant God first made with Abraham to (ironically considering what Jacob did) make the world a better place.

Esau is furious, and Rebecca prudently advises Jacob to lay low for a while and sends him off to her home in Haran to live with her brother Laban.

Despite being designated as the principal heir to the family fortune and spiritual partner of the Eternal One, Jacob flees his home as a penniless refugee.

But on his first night away from home Jacob's life and its direction change forever. In this week's Torah Portion which Daria will read and teach us tomorrow morning Jacob encounters God in a dream and awakes to a realization that there is a purpose to his life beyond his own selfish interests. "Surely," he exclaims, "the Eternal One is here, but I had no clue. How awesome is this place!"

"This place" was neither the Garden of Eden or nor some magnificent edifice. "This place" was a barren desert stopping point where Jacob lay down with a rock for his pillow.

Jacob's transformation was not instantaneous, but it was profoundly transformative. Like a Bar Mitzvah he did not become a man in that moment, but neither was he still a child. He was becoming.

It would take twenty years of hard living and being tricked and cheated by his father-in-law Laban just as Jacob had tricked and cheated his father and brother for him to fully mature.

But after those twenty years, we see a much different Jacob than the boy who left home.

Twenty years later we see Jacob eager to return the value of what he stole to his brother and then some.

Twenty years later we see Jacob, “the supplanter” fully embrace his destiny as Covenantal partner with the Eternal One

What does this mean to us?

God, however we understand that force in the universe that compels us toward good, that gives meaning to our pain our struggles, elevates our joys and accomplishments. God is a context, and awareness that IT is bigger than the self and self-interest, our life has meaning, as Rabbi Heschel taught, maturity comes when you realize that, “life has meaning beyond absurdity. That every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments.... That we are building our lives as if they were a work of art.".

The God of this understanding, a moment of profound clarity of why we are here; what purpose is can appear in our lives anywhere and at any time, but like Jacob, we must be receptive to the encounter.

I think I had my first encounter with God in this context when my grandmother has a suffered a stroke and I watched my mother drive from our home south of San Francisco to my grandparents home 30 minutes north in the city to care for her every day. I was young 11 or 12 years old and I was frustrated and angry that most days my mom was not home with me after school and most weekends we spent in the city with nothing to do and no friends to play with as she cared for my grandma. But then like Jacob’s I realized that this was not about me, or my mom, it was about grandma, caring for her as she had cared for us. I realized that what my mom was doing, her mom had done for her when she was young and I would one day do for her when she became old.

Every deed counts, every word has power – life is a work of art. God was the force that compelled me toward this generosity of spirit.

The change at that moment was barely perceptible, as was the change in Jacob’s life after his dream. For me as well, the change from self-centered boy to (I hope) responsible and caring though, (like Jacob) still flawed adult took many years. I understood in my heart why mom had to care for grandma, but I still wanted to have it both ways, play with my friends, and support my mom in her acts of loving kindness.

It would take 20 years or more for me when I too became a parent and learned that its not sacrifice to take care of your children when they cannot care for themselves, it's an act of of loving kindness, selflessness is a high form of Godliness.

But I learned that year to open myself to the possibility that any time and any place God may be trying to tell me something or give me an opportunity to make a positive change in my life or do something good for someone, and often that message comes in the good example, and generally selfless example set by others, by the people in our life that are messengers of God in the world.

You may dismiss my 'God Encounter' as quaint theology, just as some might dismiss Jacob's dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven as 'magical thinking' but there is one thing I know for sure.

If we are all on the alert for moments when God, through the works of others or the experiences of nature is offering us insight as to how we can live more meaningful purposeful lives, the world in which we live would become a much better place.

For the God I worship, making the world better is the highest goal of all.

This sermon is based on an article by Rabbi Steven Fuchs, "Is that You God"
https://findingourselvesinbiblicalnarratives.com/2017/11/24/is-that-you-god/