WHERE HEAVEN AND EARTH TOUCH
Parashat Vayetzei 5780
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This week's Torah portion Vayetze describes the first part of the journey of the biblical Jacob. Fleeing the wrath of his brother, who's birthright he purchased and whose blessing he stole Jacob is 'heading for the exists'.

At his mother's urging Jacob is going back to the old country, the safety his mother presumes he will find in her brother Laban's home. As the now iconic story unfolds Jacob stops for the night and has his famous dream of a ladder with angels on it going up and down between heaven and earth. In the midst of his dreams God appears to Jacob and makes the covenantal promise to him as he had made with Abraham. (Notice while Abraham spoke directly with God Jacob can only encounter God in a dream.)

Jacob awakens from his dream with a start and declares to no one in particular "*Achen Yesh Adonai B'Makom HaZeh V'Anochi Lo Dadati?!?! / Surely God is in this place and I, I did not know it!!*". (Genesis 28:16).

Two important themes emerge from Jacob's observation: The first is his focus on his physical place. For a young man who has been running from home, perhaps for his life, to identify any place along his journey as having a sense of safety and security, incumbent in the idea that he is in the dwelling place of God is profound and we can assume tremendously comforting to a young man who was previously described as being, "a homespun man keeping to the tents." (Gen 25:27). The place is significant in ways that Jacob is probably not even fully aware. According to our rabbis this was none other than the very same mountain that his father Isaac was nearly sacrificed upon and would later become the Temple Mount.

Maimonides teaches, "It is universally accepted that the place on which David and Solomon built the Altar, the threshing floor of Ornan, is the location where Abraham built the Altar on which he prepared Isaac for sacrifice. Noah built [an altar] on that location when he left the ark. It was also [the place] of the Altar on which Cain and Abel brought sacrifices. [Similarly,] Adam, the first man, offered a sacrifice there and was created at that very spot (Hilchot Beit Habechira 2:2)…" Jacob seems to have found the *Even ha-Shtiyya*[1], (*axis mundi)*, the connection place between Heaven and Earth.

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[1] Ezekiel 38:12, Mishnah Yoma 5:2, Talmud Bavli Yoma 54b. The Rabbinic commentary in the Talmudic period as well as later midrashim note specifically that the *even shtiya* was in the Holy of Holies and was the center of the world from where the entire Creation was wrought. (Jonathan Klawans "Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism" 2006, p111-144, 124)

The second theme that arises from Jacob's observation is that he is part of that nexus between Heaven & Earth. This is a pivotal moment because as our sages teach-here the young Jacob realizes seemingly for the first time-that there is something beyond himself—God is present.

As Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: "When Jacob wakes from his sleep,…., he says, "Surely (Adonai) is in this place ve'anokhi lo yadati." Anokhi means "I." In this sentence, it is superfluous. To translate it literally we would have to say, "And I, I did not know it." Why the double "I"? To this, Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz (Panim Yafot) gave a magnificent answer. How do we come to know that "G-d is in this place"? By ve'anokhi lo yadati – not knowing the I. We know G-d when we forget the self. We sense the "Thou" of the Divine presence when we move beyond the "I" of egocentricity… Only when we stop thinking about ourselves, do we become truly open to the world and the Creator of the world."[2]

This was the idea of Martin Buber when he articulated his understanding of human and divine relationships in the context of I and Thou.

(Please forgive the gender specific nature of the following explanation, it gets really confussing to follow when you try to remove gender from Buber's explanation of the theory, but the relationship he described applies in all genders.)

Buber taught that when I experience another person as a Thou, and have an I-Thou experience with him, then he is not a thing among things, nor does he consist of material qualities. He is no longer merely a pronoun (a He, She, They, Them), limited by other He's and She's (They, Them's), a dot in the universal grid of time and space. Nor is he a characteristic that can be experienced and then described. He is not merely a loose bundle of labeled qualities. Standing alone and whole, he is **Thou**, and fills my universe completely. It is **not** as if there were nothing but he. Rather it is as if everything else lives in his light.

This is true in the same way as a song is not merely a collection of tones, nor a verse a mere collection of words, nor a statute a collection of lines. One must tear and break apart in order to make a unified whole revert back to its component parts. So, it is with the person whom I call Thou. I can abstract from her the color of her hair or the shadings of her speech, or the aura of her graciousness, and in fact I must often do this, but as soon as I do, she is no longer Thou, whole and complete, she becomes and 'IT' defined by that thing.

Jacob's understanding of God in this moment is really an understanding of himself as inspirable from the divinity that is all round him and **with in him**.

When I was a teen on the March of the Living, I had an "I Thou moment", a moment when God was in that place a I didn't know it at first.

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[2] http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5769-vayetse/

It was 1990, I was standing with 5,000 other Jewish teens beside the ruins of the crematoria of Birkenau. It had been raining all day as we made our solemn march from Auschwitz to Birkenau. As Eli Wiesel began to speak, the rain suddenly stopped. We stood there contemplating the sky as his remarks were interrupted by a memory that prevented him from continuing. Then The Montreal Girl's Choir began sing Eli Eli, the poem by Hannah Senesh, "I pray that these things never end, the sand and the sea, the rush of the waters, the crash of the heaven, the prayer of the heart." As they sang the sun came out, the grey dreary day was replaced with bright sunlight (you can see it in the video) I recall thinking as Jacob felt; "Surely God is in this place and I, I did not know it!!"

There are places and moments when and where we feel that we are at the center of the universe, in the meeting point where heaven and earth touch. Jacob had that experience in that moment and his life was forever changed. May we each be so uniquely blessed.