

Transitions, Anxieties, Resolutions: Thoughts for Parashat Vayetsei

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By

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“And he [Jacob] lighted upon the place and tarried there all night because the sun was set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold the angels of the Lord ascending and descending on it.” (Bereishith 28: 11-12)

Jacob had left home for the first time, fleeing from his brother Esau. He was alone on the road to relatives in another land, people he did not know and had never met. He must surely have been filled with anxiety as his life was taking a new turn.

As he travelled, he experienced nightfall. He could not continue in the dark; he was tired; it was time for sleep. “And he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head.” We would have thought that Jacob had brought a back pack of clothing with him, since he knew he would be away from home for an extended time. Why didn't he rest his head on his back pack? That would have been far more comfortable than resting his head on a stone.

Yet, the Torah goes out of its way to specify that Jacob rested his head on a stone. Perhaps this is a symbolic way of saying: Jacob was truly in a hard, difficult place. He had come against a rock, not knowing how to get past this dark, frightening impasse in his life.

When faced with crisis and moments of significant transition, everyone might experience the feeling that the sun has set, that darkness pervades, that one's head is pressed against a rock. There are moments when one may feel lost and abandoned. How will he/she get past this crisis? What does the future have in store? The safety of the past is gone; new roads need to be travelled; uncertain destinations will lead to unknown consequences.

As Jacob faced his personal crisis of transition, the Torah informs us that he had a dream. He saw a ladder connecting earth and heaven. “And Jacob awoke from his sleep and said: surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not” (28:16). The dream enabled him to understand clearly: he was not lost or abandoned, the Lord was with him, he had a mission in life that linked earth and heaven.

What did Jacob do with the stone upon which he had slept? “And Jacob rose up early in the morning and took the stone that he had put under his head, and set it up for a pillar and poured oil upon the top of it” (28:18). The very stone that had been a symbol of a hard impasse was now transformed into an altar of service to God. The morning lifted the darkness, the stone became a symbol of life and hope; Jacob’s crisis had been overcome.

This episode in Jacob’s life serves as a parable of how each human being might cope with crisis. Instead of being overwhelmed by fear and hopelessness, one can dream of a better future, one can find ways of connecting earth and heaven. One can get through the transition and move forward with a clear head.

Each life crisis is a threshold in time, when we move from one stage to another. At such times, we need to turn the stone that blocks our way into an altar of the Lord that inspires us to a more enlightened vision of life.

Thresholds in time are, in some ways, analogous to thresholds in space. Mircea Eliade, in his book “The Sacred and The Profane” (p.25) has described a threshold as “the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.”

Whenever we find ourselves on a threshold—a time of transition—we will do well to envision Jacob’s ladder, focusing on how we ourselves might link heaven and earth; how we can turn stone blocks into altars of spiritual growth.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)