

Bringing meaning to life

Parsha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BERESHIT

NOACH

LECH LECHA

VAYERA

CHAYEI SARA

TOLDOT

VAYETZEI

VAYISHLACH

VAYESHEV

MIKETZ

VAYIGASH

VAYECHI

VAYETZEI

07 I PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE

Isolated in the wilderness, Jacob dreams of 'a ladder grounded in the earth, with its head reaching the Heavens and behold, angels of God are ascending and descending.'¹ This intense prophecy brings Jacob to an acute awareness of the sanctity of the ground on which he is resting – Mount Moriah. Jacob awakes and says, 'Indeed God is in this place and I did not know!'² What does Jacob mean when he professes to not knowing that God is in this place? Surely God's presence resides everywhere? Is Jacob, the forefather of faith, exhibiting here a lack of faith?

Jacob is exhausted; physically fatigued from travelling and emotionally drained after duping his father and angering his brother. He is roaming from his painful past into his arduous future

where he will have to dedicate over a decade of his life to a deceiving father-in-law.

But in this moment of tranquilly, his body and soul crave sleep. Rashi explains that if Jacob had known he was in such a holy place, he would not have slept.³ Moreover, Jacob is sorry that he slept in the place of the Divine presence when he could have instead stayed awake to pray or engage in other meaningful activity.⁴ Essentially Jacob, is painfully disappointed to discover that he has missed this opportunity of a lifetime; his chance in this unique moment of calmness, on the holiest site on earth, to pour out his heart to his Creator. In that very moment that is filled with so much spiritual potential, he instead lies down to escape reality, and falls asleep.

Regret can be a gut-wrenching sentiment. It is terrible when an opportunity passes us by and in retrospect we realize that we could and would have done it differently. We review what we have done and realise it is simply 'a twisted thing that cannot be made straight, a lack that cannot be made good'.⁵ Yet

We often live in the moment, for the moment and within the parameters of the moment.

This means that much of the significance of our acts and their effect on others are hidden from view – both from us and from those around us.

And in this moment of a missed opportunity, Jacob has his historic dream. What is the essence of a dream? A dream is a set of thoughts taking place in the mind without direct or explicit connection to the outside reality. In that sense, a great deal of our waking life is like a dream; all the thoughts and ideas that float in and out of our heads while we are busy doing other things, absorbed with the world of practicality. Dreams are thoughts that occur while we are focused on other things. So often, it seems, we actually sleepwalk through life, too busy with thoughts of our past or our future to truly live consciously in



the present. In relation to this ongoing state of slumber, Maimonides states, ‘Awake sleepers from your sleep; rouse yourselves, slumberers from your slumber.’⁶

We can all name people with whom we wish we would have spent more time, activities in which we wish we would have invested more, conversations during which we wish we would have been more mindful, and life moments during which we wish we would have been more aware. Hindsight works to our detriment when considered in terms of regret and we can become caught up in the thinking of: ‘I probably should have.’ In the same vein, however,

Hindsight can propel us forward, offering us a lens through which to learn for the future rather than dwelling on the mistakes of the past.

Perhaps the Torah brings the example of Jacob’s painful moment of realisation as a wake-up call. It serves as an alarm bell to awaken within us the profound understanding that the seemingly insignificant moments in life can often hold great significance and that the greatest opportunities are sometimes right beneath our nose.

Notes

¹ Genesis 28:12.

² Genesis 28:16.

³ Rashi on Genesis 28:16.

⁴ Netziv, Ha’Emek Davar on Genesis 28:16.

⁵ Kohelet 1:15.

⁶ Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Teshuva 3:4.

Parsha Fact:

The word for ladder, *sulam* סולם, in Jacob’s dream, is a hapax legomenon, a word that only appears once in the Bible, underscoring the importance of tradition in understanding the text.

Next Week in Vayishlach

Jacob and Esau, two brothers, each representing diametrically opposed worldviews, are pitted against one another regarding who will carry the torch as leader of the Jewish nation. Will Isaac appoint the more studious and spiritual Jacob, or the more earthly and physical Esau? Does leadership draw upon qualities of the intellect, or does it lean more upon worldly skills? As the complex story unfolds, it becomes apparent that Jacob is undergoing an inner transition, one that enables him to sensitively straddle both worlds, and ultimately become the leader and role model for the People of Israel.