

Praying in the dark
Parashat Vayetze
December 2, 2022

1.

The Mei Hashiloah talks about someone who wants to enter a house

But knocks on a wall far away from the door

Even if he knocks all day, it will not help him

He can't get in

But the minute he goes to the door and knocks, then it will be opened for him right away

We could say Jacob from where we find him in Torah

He was knocking his entire life, just far away from the door

Orchestrating, manipulating,

Some of it his own doing, some he was raised to do

He was knocking his entire life

But no door could open for him, not really

Everything was difficult, entrenched, bogged down

You see Jacob

in order to be loved, was asked to be someone else

Let's remember, last week

His mother asks him to dress up like his brother to receive their father's blessing

It is so simple and so violent

And we understand that Jacob being Jacob is never on the table, it is somehow not an option

And the lingering of torah over many verses where Jacob,
with obvious ambivalence, obviously uncomfortable
Puts actual fur on his neck and hands to mimic his twin brother's
look
In order to pass with his blind, yet also obviously uncomfortable
father
Makes it clear this is a psychologically devastating act of dress
up
Putting the concept of being closeted on a whole new level

And we notice that everyone in the family
Everyone except that twin Esau who is out in the fields,
Everyone is moving mechanically, robotically through the
motions
That is although they all know the truth
Rebecca, the mother who set it up surely knows
And Jacob, who is dressing up surely knows
And even Isaac, the father
Yes he is blind but
We can tell by Isaac's tentative responses and repeated
questions he knows
Honestly, what parent would be fooled by fake hair into
confusing one of their two sons for the other?
Isaac knows he is just, like everyone in this story, lying to himself,
pretending that there is no choice, that this strange pretense is
how it must be
As if it must be this way
As if there is no other way

As if Jacob is only able to be blessed by being someone else.

2.

You can probably guess the next part

Jacob's twin Esau is none too happy to find out what has happened

And so Jacob runs away from home

And that is where our Torah for this week begins

With Jacob on the run

For the first time, alone

For the first time: Not his mother's favorite nor the younger twin who tricked his brother nor the one who deceived his father

Just Jacob

And we read he comes to *hamakom* / "the place"

He doesn't realize it is a significant place

But the Rabbis say this was the same place where Abraham once took Isaac and where the Temple would one day come to be built

A place certainly worth stopping

But back then, see, there were no commemorative plaques and it seems that Jacob, running, was clueless

He would have continued running right through this holy place, he would not have noticed or bothered to stop

But according to Sforno,

וַיִּפְגֹּעַ בַּמָּקוֹם

Means the place came to meet him,

Jacob hit upon that place unexpectedly

He had no choice in the matter

In other words, Jacob came to a place he had not intended to go to at all.

Not only that but God, so wanting Jacob to stop in that holy place, intervenes in the natural order of things
And made the sun set a few hours early.

In other words, God forces Jacob to stop *just as he is in that moment*

– I imagine – out of breath and still pulling the glue off his neck and hands from when he dressed up like his brother

Jacob is forced to stop and spend the night just as he is

Now maybe we do or do not believe in a God that could or would change the cycle of the sun like that.

But let's think about this idea

That sometimes we come upon a place in our lives

And we have not realized we are in a holy place, we didn't realize we were in a unique place / a moment

We think it is a day just like every other day

Maybe we're only thinking of what we're running from

Or running towards, some other destination

But then we, like Jacob, receive an unanticipated stop

Maybe it is Shabbat, something that happens in our lives

Some news

And the stop, like it was for Jacob, the stop gets in our way

In the words of the midrash "He tried to pass through but world became entirely like a wall in front of him"¹
It makes going as we were now impossible
We cannot continue running, *we simply cannot continue as we were*

Not only that but this stop that God created for Jacob, as I said, was in the form of untimely darkness
How does Jacob, the quintessential mover, respond when he can't move?

We could say Jacob has the god given opportunity to act for the first time just as he is – not in a machiavellian manner, not in a role, but just as he is –

And the rabbis say that the first thing Jacob does in that darkness is to invent evening prayer
That is, Jacob *invents* praying in the dark

3.

We remember: Abraham invented morning prayer,
Isaac invented afternoon prayer, sure
But we might say the evening prayer it is the most necessary prayer of all /
Anyone can pray when the birds are out
It takes a different kind of courage to pray in the dark, right?

¹ BR 68:10

Avivah Zornberg my teacher points out that the Sfat Emet says it praying in the dark is an oxymoron, as in, "One who is bound cannot free himself."

Not to mention, the Jacob we know is not a likely candidate for this praying in the dark

Remember, for starters Jacob *never let go*, not even for one night

They say he didn't even allow himself to sleep

He is the one about whom the rabbis say back when he lived at home,

He studied all night, every night at the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever

But praying in the dark is different, this is not abstract and removed study,

This is not about ideas

Praying in the dark requires an openness, lack of control, vulnerability

So what kind of prayer is that Jacob invents?

What is the kind of prayer we can only pray as ourselves, not as if we are pretending to be someone else?

What is the kind of prayer we pray when we are stopped, unable to run away or towards the next destination?

What is the kind of prayer we most need in the dark?

4.

It is possible

Perhaps Jacob just prayed to protect himself from the pain of the past

You see the rabbis teach us that if the morning prayers and the afternoon prayers correspond to the early morning and afternoon sacrifices that once happened at the Temple

When we think about the evening prayer
Since there were never any evening sacrifices,
Perhaps Jacob's invention of evening prayer corresponds to what was consumed on the alter all throughout the night²

That is, maybe the evening prayer is there to help us put down what has happened
To let it be consumed, to let it burn off
Maybe that is what Jacob invented, we'd understand
He did not want his fears to torment him while there was no sun in the sky, we get it
This would not be a bad start

Or maybe
Maybe Jacob prayed for protection from the dark, the first *hashkiveinu*, he prayed to be sheltered under the wings of shekhina while he waited for that light to return, just as we have in our own prayerbook

But you see none of these suggestions completely satisfy me because

² BR 68:9

What happened to Jacob after that first prayer in the dark – whatever it was he prayed – the result of it was not simply a burning off of the past, nor was it even protection, nor even, as it suggests in Beresheet Rabba, the end of the darkness

Instead, Jacob has the most incredible, memorable, cinematic dream of a ladder going up to heaven
And angels going up and down
Visions and promises and other worlds
And some say God showed him heaven and Mount Moriah and the Temple and the future
What I am saying is that whatever he prayed for
God met him there in that darkness
God stood next to him and met him there
Not just as a protector either, but also in profound mystery and imagery and encounter

I don't believe this all could have happened without Jacob signaling some readiness,
Without Jacob demonstrating he was not just spending energy running but rather knocking the right gate, the right door

What was it? What was Jacob's prayer in the darkness?

They say that there is a primordial light, that it was created at the beginning of the beginning and it is separate from the sun and the moon and stars
That perhaps it cannot be seen, only felt

And I think, following the Sfat Emet, it is possible that Jacob,
alone in the dark, felt that divine light for the first time, and that
he prayed according to that light

I think it was possible that Jacob then understood that he was in
a holy place, no matter how desolate it looked or how stuck he
was feeling

Because all places are holy

And he understood for the first time in that complete darkness
that the primordial light is impossible to extinguish

Because it never goes out

And then he understood – at last – that no matter what he had
done

That who he once was

Was not and would not determine who he would be now

And so I believe the evening prayer that Jacob said,

The prayer that he had to invent for himself and us

The prayer equivalent of night vision –

And we still say it in every evening service

U'mavdil bein yom u'vein Leila /

Thank you god who distinguishes day from night

Thank you to the holy one who separates light from darkness
and darkness before light –

Because it was there in the perfect darkness that Jacob found
his own, unwavering light