

Torah from around the world #192

Learning from Jacob, the Weekend Warrior of Faith // Parashat Vayetzei (Genesis 28:10-32:3)

by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor, Vice President, Philanthropy, [World Union for Progressive Judaism](#)

There is a popular expression: "In every life a little rain must fall." That is not only true, but very much reflected in the philosophy and the teachings of Judaism. Judaism is an imminently practical and rational religious faith which evinces a keen understanding of the human condition. This is best demonstrated, for example, at perhaps the most joyful event anyone can experience in one's life – a wedding. And how does this remarkable and joyful celebration end? It ends with the breaking of a glass.

There are hundreds of bubbleinses or fairy tales that are used to describe the reason for the inclusion of the breaking of the glass, most of them silly at best. However, a study of the custom reveals that the breaking of the glass is a momentary recognition of the fact that at this, the most joyful of moments in one's life, we cannot ever forget that life will deal us blows, that there will be moments of pain and sorrow and now let's get back to the celebration that is life.

The breaking of the glass in a sense is a prayer – a prayer that those moments of pain that we will, in fact, experience, are as short-lived as the time it takes to smash the glass and the joy and the passions that we feel in life will be much more sustaining. That is our prayer. That is our hope. And often, that is the case.

But we also know that there are those who are plagued by dark moments where their faith is tried and pain seems not to abate. That is precisely the position that our patriarch, Jacob, finds himself in this week's Torah portion. He's in fear for his life for his trickery and deceptiveness in gaining his father's blessing over his brother, Esau, has finally come to haunt him. His mother sends him out of the family house for fear that Esau's anger will wreck revenge not just on Jacob but the entire extended family. The pain that Jacob experiences is real and palpable and it would have been impossible for Jacob to sink any lower in despair. The text then tells us that Jacob came to a place and he made a pillow out of one of the rocks and lay down to sleep. Out of his despair, he dreamed a dream and in it he saw a ladder that connected heaven and earth and angels were going down it and up it.

This dream was a message that there is a link between heaven and earth and God was watching over him. And God cared. And when Jacob awoke he

declared, "Surely God was in this place and I - I did not know it."

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk, Israel's first Chief Rabbi, taught that this statement reveals Jacob's sorrow, for he believes that he is so cursed he couldn't possibly deserve this gift of the message of God's providence, that this was an undeserved gift - a gift that was not the result of hard work or labor. And had he truly known, had he truly believed, he would have done something more with his life in his waking hours to deserve the blessings of God.

This scene is further echoed in the Psalms in which the psalmist says, "Out of the depths I call to you, O God." (Psalm 130) How often do we, in our darkest moments, all of a sudden find a faith that seems so difficult to express when life seems good for us. How often in moments of pain do we find prayer easy but in times of joy we find prayer silly. Jacob finds God in the darkest times of his life. And even then he is so much like all of us because despite this revelation, this reminder that God is looking over us, he does not yet have mature faith. After his darkness is lifted and after he has erected a marker to sanctify the place where this revelation occurs, he says, "If God remains with me, if God protects me on this journey that I am making and gives me food to eat and clothing to wear and if I return safe to my ancestral home, then Adonai shall be my God." (Genesis 28:20) His grip on faith is tenuous and conditional at best once this dark cloud is lifted.

Jacob is so much like all of us. When we climb out of the depths, faith seems less important. But we should use the story of Jacob as an object lesson, as an example of what we must overcome: we must overcome our conditional faith with which so many of us live.

How many of us have stopped to say a blessing when something wonderful happens in our lives? How often do we pat ourselves on the back for our luck or cunning or brilliance or strength of will when we succeed? In our moments of greatest joy we are most alone because we are most prideful of our accomplishments. And yet it is in our moments of failure that we seem capable of reaching out and finding God or at least beginning the quest for God.

As I grow older, I can't help but marvel at what some of us do to grab hold of our fleeting moments of youth. There are people I know whom we call "weekend warriors." All week long they sit behind a desk, sedentary. And then, for an hour or two on the weekend, they try to recapture the glories of their youth in a brutal game of basketball, football or soccer, only to hurt their bodies and bruise their egos. On the other hand, there are people I know who go out every day, keeping their bodies in shape, running or working out, taking care of themselves. And when the opportunity comes to exert themselves, the effort is easy, for they have already conditioned their

bodies. Prayer is like that. Those of us who don't practice it, find it difficult to do. And our sporadic attempts seem fruitless and unnatural. Yet those who work at it: make prayer and the recognition of God's presence in our lives a regular habit, seem better able to do it both in moments of pain and in moments of great joy.

Jacob was the weekend warrior of the faithful. He was not adept, and his moments of transcendent recognition seem forced and conditional. It takes Jacob a lifetime to learn the lessons that we should all learn now, that we can at any moment in our life say "God is in this place and I know it!" This we do in community as we gather together in worship and prayer. This we do in the moments of our joy, when instead of feeling lucky, we teach ourselves to feel blessed. And this we do in our dark moments when we need the strength to go on, and the ability to battle the loneliness that we all feel at our low points with the affirmation that we are not alone and we are loved.

We are B'nai Ya'akov. We are the children of Jacob, who in his better moments becomes Israel, as he struggles to break out of the habits that drag him down. And we aspire to be like Jacob in his better moments when he is Israel, which is why we say that we are B'nai Yisrael.

Judaism is eminently practical and is a faith very much based upon the human condition - a condition that finds each of us, throughout our lives, faced with joys and sorrows, and a faith that encourages us and teaches us to recognize that in every moment, both good and bad, God is in this place and it our responsibility, and our privilege, to know it.