

Going Out to Meet God and History

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There is no doubt that the Jewish world changed dramatically on October 7, 2023, and it seems, as I write in mid-November 2024, that America too is now headed in a radically new direction. What it means to be Jewish in America; how one should live and teach our tradition in the unprecedented circumstances in which we find ourselves—these seem the question of the hour for committed Jews. As I seek answers, familiar passages in the Torah arrest my attention in ways they have never done before.

Take, for example, the words that introduce the covenant ceremony on Mount Sinai that binds the people of Israel to one another and to God (Exod. 19:3): “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel.” I have always read that verse as a classic example of Biblical parallelism and nothing more. “Say” is another word for “declare.” “The house of Jacob” is synonymous with “the Children of Israel.” Rashi, of course, found significance in each element of the two pairings, but I did not—until now. As I read the passage in the light of this week’s Torah portion and in the shadow of the events that have shaken our world since the morning of October 7 these words take on new meaning.

In what ways do the Jewish people, the descendants of *Jacob*, still reside in his “house”? How can we, who bear the name by which Jacob will be called in next week’s Torah portion, become the *Israel* whom Jacob henceforth struggles to become? I’d like to suggest, using the indispensable categories for Jewish self-understanding contributed by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, that Jacob is party to the “covenant of fate,” while Israel signifies the “covenant of destiny.” The “covenant of fate” is imposed on Jews by history and circumstance, while the “covenant of destiny” is one that Jews are called on to embrace in partnership with God.

Many American Jews, shocked and alarmed at the outbreak of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism that swiftly followed the Hamas attack, have realized for the first time, or with greater clarity than before, that they are part of the Jewish people: a target of attacks upon it, regardless of their personal affiliations or opinions; caught up in its history; subject to its fate; forever linked in the eyes of Christians and Muslims to its God, Who is also *their* God. Such Jews may be wondering anew this year what the Torah has to teach about the house in which descendants of Jacob still live—and about the destiny to which children of Israel are called.

The first lesson is perhaps the fact of our connection to this ancestor and his story. We identify with Jacob from the start because he responds to the momentous events that overtake him in a manner that we recognize as what we too might have done. He dreams, as we all do, and his dream, like many of ours, is what Freud would call “wish-fulfillment.” What Jacob most wants and needs, as he flees for his life from his brother’s wrath and heads for an unimaginable future, is assurance that he will get home safely. That is what he receives in the dream from YHWH—not a distant Creator God but the personal deity Who “stands beside him.” When Jacob declares upon awakening that “the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it” (Gen. 28:16), he celebrates above all the promise of Divine protection. This is the knowing he gains from this intimate encounter. He knew beforehand that there was a God in the world, perhaps many gods. Now Jacob knows for himself that God is with him, near at hand.

In response Jacob does exactly what many people would do and have done: he builds an altar to God as a sign of gratitude and then tries to strike a deal. If God does X, Y, and Z for him, YHWH will be his God. Jacob will dedicate

the stone on which his head had rested as a pillar of worship—and he will give God back ten percent of what God has granted him! We smile at this all-too-human maneuver: the man owes God everything, owns absolutely nothing, and yet he thinks he can trade favors with the Lord! But how many of us have given even that much back, let alone more?

The instrument of Jacob's next life-lesson is Laban: a trickster and deceiver worthy of Jacob himself, in whose house Jacob finds neither rest nor safety. He does find love there and he acquires wives and children, but overwhelmingly his days are filled with toil, trouble, and challenge. The Torah details all this at length, until Jacob, with God's blessing, flees this home as he fled the last. "Had not the God of my father Abraham and the Fear of Isaac been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed (31:42)." Jacob has learned that having God "with him" does not mean immunity from hardship. Nor can he expect Laban to read the results of their interactions as Divine judgment. These aspects of the covenant of fate have endured for Jews. Jacob separates from Laban, as he will soon meet up with—and then separate from—Esau. He moves on, goes out, as Jews have done forever after.

At the conclusion of Vayetzei, as Jacob heads home, he meets up with angels and takes this as a sign that his camp is somehow connected to God's camp. We, who have read this story before, know that Jacob, as a consequence, will soon be Israel: a wrestler "with beings Divine and human" (32:28). He will hold his own in those struggles (v. 29) but never get to stop struggling, inside or outside the Land promised him in his dreams. That seems inherent in the covenant of fate to which our ancestor Jacob/Israel and his descendants ever after are bound. It continues to be part of the experience of the Children of Israel as we soberly, joyfully, and determinedly try to find our way to the covenant of destiny.

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