



Parashat Vayetzei November 17, 2018 - 9th of Kislev, 5779

This issue of the FJMC Unraveller, a weekly commentary explaining the aspects of Jewish history, ideas and thought, is being sent to you by the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs. We hope you enjoy it and find it intellectually challenging.

Dear FJMC leaders and supporters,

Just as with the commentary I have offered each of the last two weeks in relaunching this column, I am presenting this week some reflections on experiences that I have shared with FJMC leaders since the massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. That tragedy continues to shape the context of how I revisit earlier material that I published for the Jewish Theological Seminary, just as the aftermath of that act of domestic terrorism continues to influence the daily lives of so many of us.

One way that I sadly continue to find the past few weeks reverberating each Shabbat is during the Kabbalat Shabbat service. After the congregation concludes singing the uplifting mystical poem Lekha Dodi, we pause to greet anyone in mourning who has waited to enter the sanctuary until that moment, as is our custom for those still observing Shiva, the first week after burial. While the families of those murdered in Pittsburgh had already moved from Shiva into the period of Sheloshim, the less-restrictive remainder of the first month after burial, the FJMC leaders gathered last weekend for our international Leadership Development Institute (LDI) included several members of our clubs in and near Thousand Oaks. Even though none of their families were directly affected, that senseless massacre reopened the psychological wounds that they and so many others among us have experienced as a traumatic response to Pittsburgh.

In pausing our LDI participants' welcoming of Shabbat for this moment, I drew their attention to the phrase traditionally offered to mourners entering that prayer space, language that finds deep resonance with the beginning of this week's Torah portion:

HaMakom Yenachem Etchem B'tokh She'ar Avelei Tzion V'Yerushalayim.

May the Everpresent One comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

While the origins and history of those words and this custom are worth exploring, their relevance here comes from the way that our Ancient Sages turned a seemingly-innocuous term (HaMakom, or "the place") into a powerful nickname for God that encompasses the full emotional and spiritual experience of the Divine. Indeed, the idea that God is transcendent and immanent, that God fills and surrounds us, comes not just from "peak experiences" of joy and

ecstasy but during the depths of mourning and sadness. Whether we find God in the support of our family and community members, or perhaps in the catharsis of wailing and crying, our ancestors articulated great wisdom in locating God's presence in every realm of human experience.

This week's Torah portion opens with the beginning of Jacob's journey from the only home he had ever known. He is both literally and figuratively unsettled when he has his nighttime vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder right next to him. We, too, might continue to feel unsettled by the tragic events of recent weeks. Let us open ourselves to the rawness of that reality and to the needs of those likely experiencing the same challenges. Perhaps we will find God's presence within and around us in that process. I hope that my words below, written almost a decade ago, can be helpful as we attempt to walk this path together. Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Andy Shugerman, Executive Director

This Unraveller was sent out on November 15th, at approximately 11:00 PM (Eastern and prior to Shabbat).

Parashat Vayetzei - Genesis 28:10 - 32:3

Genesis 28:10-12, 16-17

- 10) Jacob left Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran.
- 11) He came upon a certain place (makom), and remained there all night, for the sun had set...
- 12) He dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and angels of God were going up and down on it.
- 16) Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely God is in this place (makom); and I knew it not."
- 17) He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place (ha-makom)! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gateway to heaven."

Genesis Rabbah 68:9

ויפגע במקום - ר' הונא בשם ר' אמר: מפני מה מכנין שמו של הקב"ה וקוראין אותו מקום? שהוא מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו מקומו, מן מה דכתיב (שמות לג) הנה מקום אתי...א"ר אבא בר יודן לגבור שהוא רוכב על הסוס וכליו משופעים אילך ואילך הסוס טפילה לרוכב ואין הרוכב טפילה לסוס

"[Jacob] came upon the Place..." (Gen. 28:11) R. Huna said in R. Ammi's name: Why do we give a changed name to the Blessed Holy One as 'the Place?' Because He is the Place of the world, but the world is not His place, as it is written, "Behold, there is a place near Me." (Ex. 33:21) ...R. Abba bar Yudan said: [God can be compared to] a warrior riding a horse, his robes flowing over on both sides; the horse is subsidiary to the rider, but the rider is not subsidiary to the horse.

Few of us today would claim to have had epiphanies like those of Jacob and Moses, as referenced in this midrash. At the same time, our God-language (the names for God that we have inherited especially from biblical and rabbinic literature) reflects experiences we all have had in which our sense of reality has suddenly and irrevocably shifted. The midrash above

seeks to express that insight through a comparison of human encounters with the Divine that inform the rabbinic understanding of how God relates to the world.

The midrash opens with a playful citation from the second verse of this week's Torah portion, in which Jacob arrives at an unnamed location. After having a vision within a dream of an angel-transporting ladder extending from the ground to the heavens, Jacob awakes and declares that "Surely Hashem is present in this place, and I did not know it!" (Gen. 28:16) The repetition throughout this passage of the term for "place" (ha-makom) strongly influences the early rabbis in choosing to adopt it as a euphemism for the ever-present God. R. Ammi claims, therefore, that Jacob discovers God not within that place but as that Place - as the totality of this world.

This theological assertion that God encompasses all of existence presents a problem for R. Ammi, who must explain that God nonetheless transcends as well as fills our reality. In order to establish that God dwells within and beyond the created world, R. Ammi cleverly selects a verse in which the term ha-makom figures differently in another revelation scene. When Moses asks to see God's presence (Ex. 33:18), God provides "a place" nearby as a safe location from which he may see God's back only. That partial viewing imparts the sense of an immediate yet incomplete grasp of God's being in this world.

One of the common challenges to this theology is the question of free will, the question of human destiny independent of fate. In an interesting conclusion to this discussion, R. Abba bar Yudan chooses to illustrate his response to this problem through a metaphor in order to convey his conception of God's omnipresence along with human free will. Just as a warrior rides on top of his horse with partial control over its gait, so too God travels with and directs us as we move about the world without determining for us how we act.

May we find God's presence similarly within and around ourselves as we continue Jacob's journey through the world, seeking to find places and moments of clarity.

This week's Torah commentary was written by Rabbi Andy Shugerman, Executive Director of FJMC.