

Lisa Miller, Dvar Torah, December 6, 2020

Thank you Rabbi for recruiting me to give the d'var torah, tonight, my home has been even more so a mikdash ma'at this week—a little sanctuary—as I've sat among pages of open Torah commentaries and texts all week. And now Jonathan and I are here with our daughters and their life partners (Zooming from their homes); this Shabbat on a cold night in December feels especially warm.

Last week, my ten-year-old niece Lili, told me she was disappointed in some of her friends for being “So Rude.” She described Zoe the emerging petty tyrant, who decided among their friend group that one girl, Megan, should now be O.U.T, out. As in, no longer included in all the group text conversation.

Curious about how that affected her developing conscience, I asked Lili why she felt de facto leadership to be So Rude. Without pause, she said: “It's not just that it wasn't fair to Megan, it's also not fair to the rest of us either, because, being rude affects everybody. No one made Zoe the boss, why did she think she could walk over everybody, especially when we were all having a nice time? And now some of the other girls are being rude too.”

I confided that I'd felt the same way when it happened to me at that age—and told her that I admire her character. She said thank you. Then I asked her if she knew what I meant by *character*. She said, “No, what is that?”

There's a lot of focus on Jacob in **Parashat Vayishlach, in Genesis**. A renown patriarch in the story of our Jewish lineage—a long story—we get to know Jacob's character from the womb, through adolescence, to adulthood. I remember considering this parasha from my own ten-year-old eyes, and then during bar/bat mitzvah season, and how it was handled year after year by my peers.

If you're an auntie like me, fascinated by how people become who they are, or you're a teacher, uncle, parent, or even a fan of soap operas and mythology and good fiction... If you're interested in human behavior, Jacob is an interesting character study.

And where Jacob is concerned, God's actions are interesting too because he makes Jacob a patriarch in our faith tradition, despite apparently terrible human instincts leading to terrible choices.

Jacob might not be the Zoe petty tyrant of Torah, but there's no doubt he's wily, calculating at times, and ultimatum delivering to God! And fails time and time again to see how his internal narrative, and then his actions affect everyone around him. Whether we're talking about Zoe or Jacob, you know my ten-year-old niece would not reward rude thoughts and rude behavior.

So why does God?

Let's go all the way back to Jacob's birth where it's said that he was born holding the heel of his older twin brother as if *trying* to pull Esau back into the womb in order to be firstborn. Later in adolescence he tricks his blind father, Isaac, into giving him his brother's first-born birthright blessing. But when Jacob flees, he's gifted a dream in which God appears to him presenting the image of the ladder from heaven to Earth: a promise of protection, offspring, and the land on which he lay. This generous promise from God, following Jacob's betrayal is curious. Isn't it?

Arriving at his Uncle Laban's house, Jacob agrees to marry his less favorite cousin, Leah, in order to be granted permission eventually to marry his first favorite cousin, Rachel. None of Jacob's internal process or behavior sound worthy of being rewarded, and yet, he does in fact grow to be a wealthy man with servants and prosperity just as God promised.

Years into adulthood, Jacob receives word from God again: it's time to return home. And from this directive, he fears facing his brother Esau, whom he'd betrayed in young adulthood. Left alone on the river bank, anxious, curled in the fetal position—scared of what tomorrow might bring and imagining Esau's desire for revenge—we find Jacob in full-on panic mode. The text gives us insight into his thinking: "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape." This seems to be the picture of cowardice.

So at this point in the story, I'm waiting for God's confidence to be revealed. Jacob is hardly a man of obvious character or heroism up until now, but I know that he'll in fact be blessed with descendants who will become the eventual 12 tribes of Israel. Jacob had even uttered what seems an ultimatum: "If God remains with me, protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house — the Eternal shall be my God."

But then finally a turning point. During Jacob's sleepless night—when he can no longer run from the bad decisions of the past, from wily calculating tendencies, from fear, from his youthful mistakes— it seems he's finally alone and honest with himself. It is a wrestling match of personal reckoning. Who ever, whatever the wrestler, I see that it is the witness to the *consciousness* in Jacob that tossed and turned and twisted over a life of events and choices.

Battle with self is very much a back and forth combative war. We all know how this feels. And I'm cheering on the remorseful Jacob whose body is forever changed from this.

Whether symbolically or literally, wrestling with conscience is absolutely a meeting with self and God in truth and reality.

The vulnerability of self-reckoning requires risk, humility, and sometimes injury, and I feel hopeful that this Jewish patriarch will become a person of great equanimity from now on.

But then, I read on about a lot of other less desirable character themes related to Jacob's life and family.

One example: when his beloved wife Rachel on her death bed just after giving birth to their son, Jacob changes the baby's name from the one Rachel gives him, Ben-Oni (son of my struggle and strength), to Benjamin, (son of my right hand).

Here's **Rachel's Midrash: The Torah, a Women's Commentary**

When Rachel lay dying, after a difficult labor and delivery of their son whom she named Ben Oni (son of my mourning and strength), she spoke to the infant about Jacob, who insisted on changing the newborn's name to Ben Yamin (son of my right hand):

“Your father is not always strong. All too often, he avoids experiencing pain at all costs, even when his actions cause others pain. The years that we have spent together have shown me that he is a man who loves deeply, but whose bravery and stoicism sometime overwhelm his compassion...”

However, it's in this Midrash, through Rachel's eyes, that I finally rest my judgments and understand that character is an evolutionary process fraught with forward and backward steps—equanimity never a given. We finally see Jacob through the eyes of another human being; someone who knew him in the depth of his human-ness and the emotional bandwidth that drove his behaviors. It's through the lens of human perspective that I gain a more balanced insight into this patriarch, and a possible understanding of God's ethereal view. I need to relinquish my judgment. Someone else's life is beyond my understanding.

The Mussar masters said that each of us are born with a life curriculum, and the lessons of that curriculum are the challenges that show up again and again in our lives. None of us are born with the very same curriculum, but we all have teachers, and challengers, and supporters, and peers along the way.

And like Jacob, we always have God *knowing* our full potential, waiting patiently for us to live up to it—and knowing that the obstacles and losses are often more important than the wins. Because it's the human experience that is holy. To be flawed, and to journey to reconciliation with loved ones, and self, and God, *is* the holy journey. The greater the flaws, the greater, and more celebrated the redemption.

A Mussar patriarch, Rabbi Salanter said: “As long as one lives a life of calm and tranquility in the service of God, it is clear that he is remote from true service.” (Every Day Holiness, Alan Morinis pg. 98)

And don't many Jewish teachers liken life to a ladder? We're taught to stay awake to life's inevitable ups and downs, and to be careful. Is there really ever a point of getting it all right, all the time? Even the angles in Jacob's dream traveled up and down, up and down, showing us that the humanity of Earth, and the enlightenment of Heaven, intersects everywhere on the ladder—everyday in life.

From Rabbi Steinsaltz, ([The 13 Petalled Rose](#)): The Jewish approach to life considers the person who has stopped going, who has a feeling of completion and peace and great light from above that's brought him to rest, to be someone who has lost his way. Only those, "for whom the light continues to beckon, for whom the light is distant as ever," only are *they* worthy of receiving some sort of response from God.

Maybe like Zoe and biblical Jacob, there are a lot of mitigating factors that explain, don't excuse, but explain bad behavior. It's always true in my own life. When I know different/better, I can do different/better.

Maybe like my niece Lili affected by someone else's bad behavior, recognizing it for what it is and distinguishing it from what's more desirable, is the grace that builds character in a bystander who becomes a person of right action, maybe even an ally.

And maybe, just as it was for biblical Rachel, aware of her husband's flaws and strengths, we can also be compassionate and understanding of our loved ones, no matter their behavior.

Finally, if we can dare to perceive ourselves through God's eyes: human's are a great living walking breathing paradox—not only humanly vulnerable to life's ups and downs but shaped by them—scarred them—even rendered visibly, physically changed by them sometimes, as Jacob was after his night on the river. And all the while, also full of great potential, deserving of faith and blessings and rewards despite the inevitable missteps.

When I was Lili and Zoe's age, with a young, narrow perspective about others and about myself, I really thought life and behavior was either good or bad, celebrated or damned, favored or rebuked. In adulthood it's never that simple. I see Jacob's life journey differently now too—flawed *and* deserving. Character can grow until the ripest old age. Considering my own areas of weakness, my own life curriculum, it's comforting to know I'm still held in the container of God's potential for my upgrading personality and evolving soul.

What I want to add to the venerable midrashim of this parasha, is more about our imperative to hold *ourselves* with compassion during the wrestling matches, to make a bigger space for *self compassion* to participate in the match. The compassion and forgiveness I can find for myself,

and really mean it, is the *compassion and forgiveness distance* I can go with someone else. The truth is that I have been a Zoe tyrant, a Megan victim, and a Lili bystander ally.

If the ladder of angels traveling up and down in Jacob's dream means anything about the intimate connection between heaven and Earth, God and human, it teaches us to see that God will hold human potential indefinitely, and that heaven is accessible.

From our own liturgy tonight:

“God, you are the still clear voice within us...”