

Leaving to Awaken

“Vayetze Ya’akov mi’be’er sheva, vaa’yaleich Charana”

“And Ya’akov went out from Be’er Sheva and went towards Charan”.

This is how this week’s parasha, *Vayetze* opens, and thus begins Ya’akov’s solo journey. He is leaving Be’er Sheva, in the south of Canaan, the place where his father and mother live, to travel to Charan, where his grandfather Avraham is from, in northern Mesopotamia. Ya’akov is sent by his father Yitzchak to their ancestral land of Charan, ostensibly to find a bride for himself. However, the story immediately preceding this one centers on the competition and derisiveness between Ya’akov and his brother Esav. The plotting and strategizing which culminates in Ya’akov’s usurpation of Esav’s birthright.

The medieval commentator Rashi poses a question on this first word, *“vayetze/ and he went out.”* In typical rabbinic fashion, he points out that this word seems totally superfluous. Why would you need to explicitly say that he left Be’er Sheva? It would be sufficient to say, *“and Ya’akov went towards Charan.”* So, to say *“and Ya’akov went out from Be’er Sheva”* would be like saying, *“Isaac went out from Chicago and went to Philadelphia.”* No, you would just say, *“Isaac went to Philadelphia.”* And, as we know, since Torah is so frugal with its words, whenever there is something that appears superfluous in Torah, we are actually noticing an opportunity to learn something new. My teacher, Rabbi Alan Lew, points out that this event comes to highlight not where Ya’akov is headed, but the very fact that he left. If I said, *“Isaac went out from Chicago and went to Philadelphia”*, I am emphasizing that it was necessary or important for Isaac to leave Chicago in order to go to Philadelphia.

Rabbi Lew observes that in every religion there is a tradition of necessary leave-taking. These leave-takings necessarily precede all great awakenings. Without the act of taking leave, the person would remain caught in the mild form of imprisonment that forms around habituation, safety, and familiarity. In Rabbi Lew’s words, *“leave-taking is a universal prerequisite to the encounter with God. It is part of the archetypal human religious experience. In all the religions of the world, we see a single figure taking leave, going off by himself, quite often to the wilderness, and experiencing the transcendent there”.* And indeed, there are stories of great leave takings in Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and in our own tradition. Leave-takings form some of the most critical, fulcrum points for the spiritual development of Avraham (the command to *lech l’cha*), Ya’akov (here) and Moshe (fleeing into the desert which allows him to see the burning bush).

These leave takings are necessary because we grow accustomed to understanding our world in a certain way. Our particular way of seeing and relating becomes habitual, calcified. We lose the potential of walking around with curiosity or wonder. We become alienated from the sharpness and depth of the present moment. In order to become flush with the present moment, to encounter the Divine, one must actively leave that which constrains him/her. For all of us, in order to wake up, we have to leave. Ya’akov left his home in Be’er Sheva, the land that was promised to him and his ancestors, and he heads towards a mysterious ancestral land. It must have been incredibly scary, yet Ya’akov needed to leave the shelter of that which he understood as his; he needed to be cast free from what he believed he could depend upon.

This leave taking is not only for sake of leaving, but rather, it is a leaving for the sake of awakening. Ya’akov left so that he could wake up. After a day’s walk from Be’er Sheva, at an anonymous place in the desert, Ya’akov promptly falls sleep. And

while asleep, he has a dream which abounds with divine symbols and pronouncements. We will return to the dream shortly, but first, I want to focus on perhaps the most important part of this incident, the awakening. Ya'akov's awakening was both literal and spiritual.

He awoke and proclaimed, "*achen yesh Hashem bamakom hazeh, v'anochi lo yadati. Vayirah, vayomer mah norah hamakom hazeh, Ain zeh ki im beit Elohim*" Ya'akov awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely Hashem is present in this place, and I did not know it!" Filled with awe, he said, "how awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God!"

Ya'akov awakens with the realization that the Divine truly is in the very place in which he is sleeping. He went to sleep lying on an anonymous piece of desert- the same as all the rest of the desert for days walk in any direction. This is the epitome of the mundane- just dirt and rocks. And when Ya'akov wakes up he is astonished by the splendor of that which surrounds him. Ya'akov awakens to the presence of the Divine in the mundane. This realization would not have been possible were it not for the leave-taking. It is likely that if Ya'akov never left his parents' home, he would have continued in his habitual, comfortable patterns without ever pausing to really see what surrounded him. This is perhaps the greatest gift of religion.

Religion, I believe, provides incredible opportunities for leave taking. In Judaism, we have a really interesting and powerful model of leave-taking, because on the one hand, we insist that one needs leave-taking in order to awaken and experience the Divine, *and* we insist that that we must be committed to being in relationship, in family, in community. We are supposed to be both a seeker and a householder. Judaism posits that these two ideals are not mutually exclusive. This very ideal is hinted at in the description of the ladder in Ya'akov's dream:

"*Vayachalom v'henei sulam mutzav artzah v'roshe magiah hashamaimah v'henei malache i Elohim olim v'yordim bo*" And Ya'akov dreamt, and behold a stairway (or ladder) was set on the ground, and it's top reached the heavens. And, behold, angels of Elohim were ascending and descending upon it"

Here, the ladder can be understood as a tool or structure which facilitates the reciprocal angelic movement that Ya'akov witnesses, "*Olim v'yordim*" up and down between Heaven and Earth. In order to do allow for ascendance towards the Divine, the ladder must be firmly rooted in the ground, as the ladder is described being, "*mutzav artzah*", "set on the ground". So too, we must be firmly rooted in the ground of our lives: the everyday- seemingly mundane- rites of family, work, and responsible citizenship. We must be grounded in order for us to also extend heavenward, stretching towards the depths beyond our ken.

In this way, Judaism provides opportunities for us to engage in spiritual leave-taking in the midst of our lives. These opportunities come to us as holidays, Shabbat, regular prayer and/ or meditation, study, and the traditional system of mitzvot. All of these spiritual technologies of Judaism provide structures or conditions that are conducive for cultivating this leave-taking.

Of course, these opportunities can be engaged in any number of ways. We all know that *davvenning*, for example, has the potential to be rote, mechanical, and meaningless, and it has the potential to be inspiring, energizing, and even transformational. *Davvenning* can be both a further entrenchment of our habitual momentum, and it can be as Heschel suggests, a subversive act against the tyranny of the habitual. In other words, a leave-taking. Perhaps our charge is to find ways to make the forms of our religion more conducive towards cultivating the experience of leave-taking.

Mordechai Kaplan taught that we have the obligation to manifest our Judaism in the ways that are most appropriate to our times. This is a continuous process; one which dies when we accept complacently the insights of our predecessors as the ways we should understand. Will we be content with the Judaism of our parents or grandparents? Will we be content with the Judaism of a decade or two ago? Will we forever be satisfied with the insights we had years ago about prayer or text or a particular holiday? Will our curiosity and awe become displaced by stagnation and acceptance?

If Ya'akov never left home, he never would have woken up and proclaimed that this very place is none other than the house of God. May we too have the courage to engage in leave-taking. And may this leave-taking be for the sake of waking up and engaging in this awesome world of ours in the most appropriate and powerful ways. Is this not our birth rite as the descendents of Ya'akov, as *B'nei Yisrael*?