

DRASH: VAYETZE Nov 29, 2025 (Rabbi Carol Caine)

Shabbat Shalom and Thanksgiving Sameach! This week's parsha, parshat Vayetze, is an amazing action-packed adventure. It tells the story of Jacob fleeing from his home, having an amazing dream, falling in love with Rachel, marrying both Leah and Rachel, having lots of children, and eventually returning to his homeland with his now large family and entourage. The parts I want to focus on with you this morning come at the beginning and then towards the middle of this story and involve communication with God, with the Divine. The first takes place in solitude, in the wilderness, when Jacob dreams of a staircase to heaven, with divine beings going up and down. Later, we read of a communication in the hustle and bustle of family life, when Leah gives names to her children that are prayers, expressions of how she feels. I want to explore Jacob and Leah's Divine communications and see what they might mean to us.

The portion starts with Jacob fleeing. He's running away because his brother Esau, whom Jacob tricked out of his father's superior blessing, has threatened to kill him. Jacob lays down to sleep and has this amazing dream, of a sulam, a ladder or more likely a staircase, or as our teacher Robert Alter translates it as a ramp. This ramp, this staircase, is rooted in the earth and reaching up to heaven, with malachay Elohim, messengers of God, going up and down. Even more amazingly, Jacob sees God. God tells Jacob he and his descendants will be given the land, and promises that God will be with him wherever Jacob goes. What do we make of this dream?

One possible meaning: the messengers, the angels are going up and down. They're not just moving in one direction. Some Hasidic teachings I learned from Rabbi Miles Krassen said that movement, of the angels on the staircase in Jacob's dream, is about the ebb and flow of spiritual life. We go up and we go down. It's what the Hasidic tradition calls "ratz v'shov", run and return. We fall into despair, hurt and regret, as Jacob may have been here, then we rise again. We fall and then we bounce back up again.

Another intriguing insight into Jacob's dream comes from a teaching of Rabbi David Wolfe Blank, my friend and teacher of blessed memory, quoting the great 16th century mystic, Isaac Luria, the holy Ari. According to the Ari, the secret of this staircase in Jacob's dream is that it's actually a circle. The end returns to the beginning. The secret therefore to spiritual life is to just keep going forward. This explains the Talmudic story of the 4 who went to Pardes. Here's a quick recap for those who might not know this story. The Talmud relates four went to Pardes, paradise. Whatever they encountered there was so overwhelming that Ben Azzai died, Ben Zoma went insane and the one they called Acher, the other, Elisha Ben Abuya, become an apostate, Only Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and left in peace. According to Isaac Luria, the way Rabbi Akiva did it was that he knew not to turn around. He never tried to descend on the spiritual ladder they ascended to get there, but just kept going forward, and eventually returned home in peace.

The staircase that connects heaven and earth can also represent us human beings. We are sentient creatures of this world, bound to the earth by gravity, but part of us is always reaching upwards to heaven, to God. We live a practical life on earth, and, at the same time, our intentions lift upwards, to a higher purpose.

I was taught that, in dream interpretation, the dreamer gets to offer their own interpretation first. We don't know if Jacob would have agreed with any of these interpretations. But what might it mean for us? Another beautiful teaching I've received is that Torah is like a dream we dreamed. If we dreamed Jacob's dream, what might it mean to us? Is it about the ups and downs of our lives? Is it about knowing we need to keep going forward, as the Ari said Rabbi Akiva did when he was in Pardes? Is it us living a practical life on earth while our spirits lift up to the heavens? Or is does it have some other meaning entirely?

While we don't know if Jacob would have agreed with these specific interpretations, we do know he felt visited by God and that he took note of it. When Jacob awakens up he says "surely God was in the place I didn't know it." Va'yirah, Jacob is awe-struck.

He says...Ma Norah Hamakom HazeH, how awesome is this place, this is the house of God, the gate of heaven”, in what may be the first recorded “oh, wow!” in human history. Jacob made concrete what he’d received from his dream by speaking out loud, rather than merely thinking about it. Jacob’s words formed a bridge between his numinous experience and his lived, waking life. His words made the dream real. We may have powerful experiences and then kind of brush them off. When we speak it out loud, or write it down, or tell it to a friend, we make it real. After all Jacob could of said “weird dream! Time to get going!” But he didn’t brush it off. He took it seriously. And then he took more action to put it into the world, by pouring oil over the stone he’d slept on and making it an altar to God. He changed the name of the place, calling it Beth El, the house of God. So, too, when we have what feels like spiritual experience, we can take action to make it real. As I once heard Reb Zalman of blessed memory put it, if you have an epiphany and don’t talk about it, it goes piff!

After this time of solitude, Jacob gets very busy, as we know: he meets Rachel and falls in love with her and works for her father Lavan for seven years, so he can marry her. Lavan tricks him and marries Jacob to Rachel’s older sister, Leah. After that, Jacob marries Rachel too. The women proceed into what appears to be a baby contest. Leah is at first the fertile one, and seems to consider her ability to have sons a way to even the score with Rachel, who is more loved by Jacob.

Leah communicates her feelings through the names she gives her first four sons. It may be her way of praying—not in the solitude of a dark night with an amazing dream, but in the midst of family life. She names her first son Reuven—which has the word for seeing in it—because, she says God has seen my affliction. The second son she named Shimon, with the word for hearing in it—because now, she says, God will hear she’s unloved. Then she has Layvi, with word for joining or accompanying. Now Leah says, my husband will be attached to me. Then she had Judah, Yehuda in Hebrew, with the root word for thanking in it.

Leah says, now I will thank God. So, it appears something has changed. Maybe Leah has undergone some healing and she's no longer focused on making Jacob love her more. She is just grateful to have children.

I don't blame Leah for the names of her first three sons. Maybe sometimes we need to say, like Leah—see me, hear me, touch me, as some of us remember from that old song by the Who. And the qualities she assigns to her first three sons are also important. Rabbi David-Wolfe Blank comments on these names, saying that Reuven, embodies the quality of seeing the whole picture, Shimon represents the ability to hear and understand others' feelings, while Layvi embodies the quality that makes alliances and connections. Those are all pretty important qualities to have.

Leah's name for Yehudah, though, takes it another level. I admire her for deciding to choose gratitude for what she had over rather than focusing on what she couldn't have. Leah's story is not quite so dramatic as Rachel's, the gorgeous woman Jacob fell so madly in love with he moved a huge stone that usually took ten men to move. But we could say that Leah is more our mother than the other matriarchs. Many of us know the word for Jews in Hebrew is Yehudim—from Judah's name, because of the survival of the tribe of Judah..

Leah, with her eyes that were racot, maybe weak, or maybe sensitive, gave us our name. As Rabbi Bradley Artson writes, with the birth of Judah, "Leah finally achieves the inner strength to stop craving her husband's approval... Judah is a source of pure joy." According to a Talmudic quote in our Etz Chayim, no one ever thanked God the way Leah did. So that's a pretty cool lineage for us Judah-people.

We Jewish people are the Yehudim, the thanking people. Perhaps that means thankfulness is essential to the Jewish experience, or maybe to the human experience. I don't mean forced gratitude. I know it doesn't work for me if some one tells me I should be grateful about something.

But when I can reach that place of pure gratitude, despite difficulties, it's the kind of happiness that nothing can shake. I may only have it here and there. We don't know if Leah kept being grateful. But those moments can feed us. I think of my favorite line from Leonard Cohen's opus Hallelujah, "even though it's all gone wrong I stand before the Lord of Song/with nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah"

I'd like to bless us that when we receive communications that seem to come from a power beyond us, that maybe blow our minds, that we find ways to talk about it, write about it, and make it real for us. May we talk about our epiphanies so they don't go piff. May we communicate what's on our hearts to the Divine Power, including when we feel the need to be seen, heard and touched. And may we find many reasons for sincere gratitude in our lives. Thanksgiving Sameach & Shabbat Shalom!