

Shabbat Sermon 11 24 17

These times of the year, at this time of the year, I can't avoid talking about darkness. As Leonard Cohen said, if you want it darker, kill the flame. It's getting darker. And how do you work with darkness, I think is a question I want to talk about tonight. We talk about it almost every week in some way, shape, or form. Darkness is real. Or at least we experience it that way, whether it's ontological reality, if it's a real thing out there, who cares? We experience dark things. And it's tough. It's a tough thing.

I don't know how you feel about working with things that are dark or difficult, painful. But I know that I have, at least personally, there's an impulse that I have, maybe you share this, to run away when things are painful. And running away can take a lot of different forms. Running away can be picking up a book. Running away can be putting down a book. Running away can be turning on the TV, turning it off. Running out of the house, running into the house. You name it, whatever it is, there's a way to run. There's a way to hide.

Famously, the Baal Shem Tov, one of the great mystics of all our traditions said, that one word, where are you, that God asked the first human in the Torah, is a question that doesn't have a period when it was asked. It was always asked, and it is always asked of us. Where are you? So where are you? That's what happens every time something unpleasurable or painful arises.

So where do you go? Some of you go to anger. Some of you go to denial. Some of you go to Black Friday. Some of us eat. Some of us pray. There are all kinds of ways of running. And it isn't limited to any one definition, because it's up to you to define whether or not that moment was a moment of facing or turning away. It's tough to know. And it's tough to know how to work with it, because at any given moment, am I facing this? It's the same behavior. Or am I turning away? Some clear behaviors, though, some clear behaviors, I think, can be definitional around running away. There's actually running away.

And that would be a really good way of talking about Jacob. Because if the Torah wants us to know one thing about our patriarch named Jacob, whether he was a real person or not doesn't really interest me. And, by the way, I want to say it shouldn't interest you, just as it shouldn't interest you whether God is real or not. We can let theologians debate it.

But what's real is that Jacob is part of a story that has been told for over two millennia, and in that story, Jacob is the heel grabber, the one who comes from behind, the one who is very much identified even in his name with legs. His name is Heeler, with a double E. He's the heel guy. The heel, of course, in his name is not his own, but his brother's, whom he's trying to hold back from getting out, or maybe trying to attach himself to so that he can come behind him. But Jacob and his life will turn from being the heel grabber to being the one who runs. He gets out of Dodge. Tomorrow morning, Vayetzeh Yaakum u'be'er Shavah, Vayed Echarana, and Jacob left. The first Yitziyah, real going out. It, of course, foreshadows, it prefigures the great Yitziyah of Yitzrayim. Jacob will leave to go down, and eventually also leave to go down to Egypt, but all leavings.

He leaves a place, and in some way, this running away, which is clearly foundationally and definitionally a running away from a situation his brother would like to kill him, but it's also a running towards. Jacob will learn what it is to stop running by running. He's going to exhaust himself. He's going to run so much that by the end of his running, he's going to have to face what he was longing not to face, what he was avoiding, the dance of avoidance, avoid dance. He didn't want it. And so Jacob will learn, like in any hero's journey, Odysseus, or whatever the hero's journey, Jacob will learn that until he faces legitimate suffering, he will not become a whole human being. And that's an important line to remember. It's not mine. It's Carl Jung's.

We don't become who we are until we suffer the legitimate suffering that we have wanted not to feel, not to experience, not to face. We come to ourselves by way of the wound that every one of us carries, which doesn't mean that everybody here deserves pity and deserves some kind of condescending compassion. Oh, Nebuchadnezzar.

But to be human is to be one who carries a wound. And Jacob refuses to own that wound, and so he runs, he runs. And before he's going to be on this 20-year exile from his family, and by the way, that's never mentioned. Just think about what it's like. Jacob will miss his mother and father for 20 years, and then his son, Joseph, will be away from his own father for 17 years. No word, right? Jacob doesn't get right back to his mother, Rebecca, and it happens kind of seamlessly in the story. It'd be lovely just to think about that. But Jacob is now on the run. He's going to be in exile for 20 years, and during those 20 years, like Siddhartha in the second stage of Hermann Hesse's novel, he will learn eros. He will learn what it is to love not one but two women, to have many children. He'll learn what it is to be a businessman, to be cheated the way that he cheated. He's going to learn everything he needs to learn, almost.

And before he goes down, in this story, my story, your story, all of our stories, before Jacob actually descends into the dark night of the soul, he has a great vision. He has a great vision. People know this vision, right? Every year when you're in this synagogue slash church, you know that we have the angels on Jacob's ladder.

And as the Torah says, he arrives at a place. He comes to Haran, and he lies down there. The sun had come down. Right? And he sees in a vision there is a ladder, or some kind of stairwell, or stairway to heaven, or some kind of, right? There's a ramp. And there are angels going up and going down on this ramp. And God appears on him, to him. God says, hey, I am the source, the one of your father and your grandfather. You happen to be lying down on land that you will own one day, that is given to you.

And then verse 10. These great words, these famous words. Jacob awakens, or he wakes up quickly from his sleep, and he says, God was in this place, and what everybody? And I did not know it. And he's afraid. How great is this place? Jacob's about to go down into the dark night of the soul. He's about to run away. He's going to have a 20-year education in how to grow up to become a more full human being, a more direct human being, someone who faces things. And before he goes down, he's going to get good advice that each and every one of us needs to take with us, because, as I said, on the first moment, it is getting darker. It gets dark. So what's the good advice that Jacob gets? Because Jacob isn't giving advice.

He's getting advice. The Torah wants us as readers, as listeners, to know something about Yaakov Avino, about Jacob, that is instructive for us too when we go out on our way. That's the point.

As we go down into the dark night, whatever it might be, whatever hurts, whatever is painful, whatever is closed, whatever is narrow, whatever is shadow, we must know what Jacob experienced, which is that you will go up and you will go down. You will rise and you will fall. And the litmus test of your evolution, your growth, your coming to fruition will be when you wake up and you are able to label the place that you did not know as where you were intended to be. That will be your litmus test, Yaakov. Will you wake up from the dream, the 20-year dream, and look back and say, that was where I needed to be. That was where I learned that mistake wasn't a mistake.

It was a grand opportunity that was my higher learning, my education. Jacob has a dream and in that dream, which is supposed to hold him for 20 years, he will not have another vision of God for full on 20 years. He won't get a phone call, he won't get a text, he won't get a message, there won't be a Facebook post, there won't be a letter, there won't be anything left for him. This is what he's got for 20 years. Put it in a doggy bag and go, or a goddy bag and go. Here you go, Jacob. Good luck with your uncle, Laban Whitey, who's going to cheat you. Good luck with the woman whom you fell in love with, named Rachel, but she doesn't really love you, but then Leah, and that you're going to be deceived, and all of the business. But here's what you have. Take it with you. Shlep it with you. What do I have? There are angels that go up and down on a ladder.

I wake up and wow, this is God's place. Ma'an l'ram ha'kom hazeh. That's it. That's what you got. Take that with you. The Hasidic masters say that when it says angels were going up and down on the ladder, the word for on the ladder isn't on the ladder, it's really on him, in him. In the Hasidic rendering, Jacob, in the vision says, God says, Jacob, there are angels that go up and down in you. One moment you'll be flying high, everything will seem so great, and the next moment, not so good. Will you ride the wave? Will you remember the rhythm? That education is not linear. It isn't circular. It is spiraling. And you will have dark moments, you will have shadow, you will be on the other side, Jacob. You will not understand why it is that you didn't get a chance to marry the beloved of your life, but there's something working through you, Jacob. There is something working through you. Will you wake up and smell the divine coffee that was made for you in that place?

That is a great litmus test for me, for you, for all of us on Thanksgiving, when we retrospectively, reflectively say, wow, how great are things? And I didn't know until the music started. Anybody notice that in movies, right, the way they use music to let you know a banal moment is so not banal? Anybody ever have one of those moments where they're sitting at their computers, sitting in your home, in your living room, or wherever you are, and you're thinking, you're kvetching, you have kvetch mind? Nobody here has kvetch mind, I know. Silly question, I'm sorry. Everybody here is always in abundance, I know. But if you've ever been in small mind, and then a song that tugs at your heart comes on, and the very thing that you were just meditating on, ruminating on, debating with, angry at, all of a sudden shifts. Anybody ever have that? You think, how silly am I? All of a sudden, it's a wonderful life is playing in your brain, and you're thinking, wow, there's no place like home.

The Torah wants to say that that quality, that question, is a deeply important spiritual question. In a given moment, can I wake up and say, wow, this place is where I need to be? How wondrous is this place? How wondrous, how miraculous, how mysterious. Will Jacob learn that lesson? It'll take us 20 years and one week, actually, until next week when we're here, if he did.

But let me clue you in. He does. And the next time we find Jacob back at this place, it will be when he's finally wrestling with his demons, when he's finally ready to face. This time, he's not running away, but he's running home. And he can't get there fast enough. What would the world look like if each and every one of us could commit to asking this question once a day? What would your life look like? What would your life look like? What would my life look like if we could, each and every one of us, ask this question? What is holy in this place that I am not seeing at this moment? How can I, without turning on cheesy music or nostalgia, how can I ask myself that question and wait for an answer? Do I need to know that angels are going up and down inside of me? Do I need to know that whatever is up will go down, but at this moment, even when I'm down, I will go up again, if only I can remember Manarah, maybe.

The artifice of Thanksgiving and then Black Friday gives us an opportunity to see how often our culture will answer the right question with the wrong answer. Perhaps we can ask the right question. What does it really feel like when I feel abundant? What does it really feel like when I feel like I have enough? And then from that place, ask, Okay, God, is this where I need to be? Is this my place? I'll leave it out as a question for each of you because you each know your patterns of running and arriving, but I'll tell you this, my experience is this, is that when I have felt moments where I could not stay for one more minute in a feeling, in a situation, in a relationship, I said, God, give me some space to feel the up and down, the revolution that is happening in me as part of the revolution of the evolution of me as I walk this spiral dance.

Give me the strength to withstand the dark night with the questions of the night of dreaming so that I might arrive back in that place and know it as the place I was destined to be and know it as a place that is Ma Norah Hamakom Hazeh.

Please rise.