

## Romemu Dvar Torah December 09, 2016

So one of the things you learn, I think, you know, I don't know, I've learned. One of the things I've learned. Maybe you've learned too. Maybe all of us learn on some level that when we're afraid, when fear is alive for us, when we're scared, when we're nervous. As a kid, I used to make all kinds of conditions with God when I'd be nervous. I'd make deals.

And the deal was always, was called in the language of the rabbis, it was a t'nai. It was a conditional deal. It was if X, then Y. If the islanders win the cup, then X, you know. Or if you do this for me, then I'll do my homework, or I'll be a good boy. And we have that with kids too, right? So one of the things I'm learning as a parent in terms of compliance with children, you know, one of the schools of thought about behavioral modification is that you give kids, you know, choices. You say, you know, if you do this, you can get a reward.

It's a behavioral, it works. Until the kids start realizing that it works too. And so you basically, they'll say, well, if you want me to do that, then. So now my kids are, you know, it was if you get out of the house on time, you get a reward. You'll get a card, you'll get a, I don't know, you'll get a Pokemon or something like that. And now it's like, if you want me to get out of the house, then you better get me a Pokemon or iPad or something like that.

Conditions and setting conditions. Part of growing up is learning that we do things unconditionally. We do things for their own merit, their own worth. Intrinsic worth, inherent worth. I do it not because I'm going to get something back, right? Don't do something so you'll receive reward. Do it because it's the right thing to do. We hope our kids will do that. We hope that we would do that. But sometimes we're still scared.

Sometimes we don't feel as though we can motivate ourselves to do something unless we have that external or exterior, right? You guys get what I'm saying, right? Sometimes we feel we need that. And sometimes we're not even afraid that we won't do it because we're not externally gratified or we have a reason for it. Hope it wasn't something I said. And sometimes we do things or we're afraid or we set up conditions not because we need the motivation but we're terrified that nothing will work.

Let me give you an example. In this week's Torah portion tomorrow morning, I mean, if you want to individuate, you got to leave the home. If you want to grow up as a human being, you have to leave conditions sometimes that were hiding who you really were. Maybe because the conditions were unhealthy, they were dysfunctional. Maybe just the nature of growing up in a home is that they don't really, parents and family systems don't really let us become who we're supposed to be or we're not sure who we are until we leave. All those good reasons.

Vayetzeh Yaakov, tomorrow morning. Vayetzeh. And Jacob leaves his home. Vayetzeh Yaakov mib'er shava. That word, Vayetzeh, to a really good reader of the Bible, when you read the Bible, everybody, read the Torah, when you read the Tanach, Chamishah Chum Sheh Torah, you have to smell the Torah, you can't just read it.

When words happen, you have to say, well, is this word remind me of another word somewhere else, right? Yitziat Mitzrayim. The only time the word Vayetzeh is used by the patriarchs is Vayetzeh Yaakov. And he left his family. And if you're reading that word, Vayetzeh, as Exodus, and Jacob had an exodus from his family. He was free, maybe for the first time in his life. Free from being the one who sits in the tents. Free from being the one who has to dress up like his brother in his brother's clothing to receive his father's blessing, as we've talked about on many occasions. Jacob is finally out on the road. He's not looking back.

Good old Jacob is on his way. Vayetzeh Yaakov Mib'er Sheva, Vayeh Lecharan. He's on his way to Charan to where his grandfather had taken off on his great journey. He was going to gather in the energy of his grandfather Abraham, Vayifgah Bamakom, and all of a sudden, boom. And he happened upon a place, the word in Hebrew, Vayifgah Bamakom. It's a strange word, Vayifgah. Usually Vayivoh Elmakom. Vayifgah, he was hit almost. It happened, he bumped into it.

Vayal ensham tiva ha'shemesh, the sun sets and Jacob for the first time alone in his life is now in a posture that he's not used to being in. He's used to sitting, he's used to walking, but now he is lying down. Jacob who will run his entire life until an angel or some mysterious individual will hit him in the hip and will be dislocated. Jacob the runner will one day become Jacob the limper. And Jacob who needs to lie down to have a dream has a dream. And in this dream we all know it.

There is a sulam, there is this kind of ladder going up and down. It's a stairway to heaven and everything is great. There are malachim, there are these angels going up and down. We all know the story, right? And then he wakes up. Jacob wakes up and he has this very mystical moment. Vayomer, wow, ma norah ha'makom hazeh, this is a great place. I had no idea. I had seen a vision of God. I didn't know that God was in this place, right? And then Jacob after hearing the promises in the dream, what were the promises in the dream? In the dream God promises him, Jacob, not to worry.

I'm going to go down with you into Haran. You will return. I will be with you. I will watch over you wherever you walk. I will bring you back to this land. You will come home. I will not abandon you. He says again, ki lo e'ezavcha, I will not abandon you. Adasher imasisi asasher dibakirach, I will not leave you until the fulfillment of all of these promises that I have given to you.

And Jacob, right, as I said, woke up and he had a profound mystical moment. But then what happens? In verse 20, in tomorrow morning's reading, only one verse after he said, this is the place. Vayidar Yaakov neder leimor imie Elohim imadi. And Jacob made a vow. This is the first vow in the Torah. Jacob is like my little boy.

It's like Tal, Bear, you know, name your favorite kid. I promise you when we go to basketball practice and you're scared, I'm going to be with you the whole time. I promise I will not leave you. I'll hold your hand. Abba, I promise you. I promise. Well, if you hold my hand, then I'll go. But wait a second. I just told you that I was going to hold your hand.

What's going on with Jacob? Jacob just had a deep realization. God said, no matter what happens, I will be with you, Jacob. You don't have to worry about squat. But Jacob is still

scared. He wakes up. He says, I realized God was in this place. And I'm scared. And he makes a vow. And he says in the vow, if you will be with me, didn't I say I would be with you? But if you'll be with me, and you are indeed the one who will provide for me all the things that you said you provide for me, if that is the case, then you will be my God.

And it's like, you know, it's I'm done. And the commentators, all of the rabbis are saying, what's going on? How could Jacob, who just had this deep moment of realization, nothing could have been clearer for Jacob than that he was in the place of the divine, and if he would come back to the place of the divine, nothing could have been clear for him. And yet Jacob in the very next moment, Jacob has to back his way into a childish conditional game. God, if you will be with me, but I said I would be with you, and what's going on?

So the rabbis say, well, first of all, he made a mistake. So there's one school of thought that says Jacob was sinful. He lacked faith. There's another school of thought that says Jacob couldn't be one who lacks faith to such a degree. Something else must be happening here. And so the rabbis say, here's what's happening in their mind.

Could it, says the rabbis in the commentary, could it possibly arrive, arise for us that we imagine our patriarch Jacob so lacking faith after God had made these promises that he himself has to now engage in a nether, a vow, says the commentaries. Jacob was afraid. He said, there is no promise to the righteous in this world because I am worried, says Jacob, not that you won't come through God. I trust you, God. You made a promise. You were going to see it through to the end. I don't have any worries because you made it clear, explicit. My vision was as clear as day and I wouldn't raise my voice if I didn't see people fall asleep. So either you listen harder or I yell louder. Jacob in the rabbi's mode is not afraid that God won't come through. He's not a child in a conditional frame. Jacob is me and you.

What's Jacob's fear? Jacob's fear is that the guy that he was promised, the guy who was promised to by God is not going to be the same guy once he gets done being in Haran. That what was clear for him today will not be clear for him in 20 years after he's done individuating, making himself into a very wealthy man and coming back to this very place. Jacob is not worried that the promises will change but that he will. Jacob is worried that in his changing he will no longer be worthy of the promise that he received at this moment. He will be altogether a different person. He's me and you.

Today, tomorrow, last week. I'm nervous when I leave Yom Kippur. I, you know, speaking of vows, I'm always nervous that what I see clearly on Yom Kippur by the time Hanukkah rolls around, I'm not the same guy. Anybody get that? I'm nervous after the first date with my wife, which our anniversary was this week of our first date. I was worried that what was clear for me on that first day would not be clear to me 10 years later. We change. We change a lot and we make promises and then we change. We're not sure. We might have moral clarity one day and then moral, let's say, ambiguity the next.

What might have been obvious yesterday is no longer obvious. Jacob who needs to individuate, Jacob who needs to know that he's going to be safe when he comes back says to God, thank you so much God but maybe I won't be worthy or meaning maybe I will no longer have access to that file, to that clarity that I had then because now I'm about to go on a really deep journey. It's going to be painful.

It starts in the night and it will end in the night and during the day night that is in between I'm going to do a lot of stuff. I'll marry four, two women that become four wives. I'll have 12 children. How do I know, says Jacob, that you will bring me back safe and sound with the purity and clarity that I had today? Now you name that with anything in our lives right now. Anybody here feeling morally and ethically charged up by the environment now in this country? Yeah? You think so? Great. I think a lot of people are wondering where we were about this a year ago. I'm just going to say and I think a lot of people worried that we're not going to be clear about certain things in a year from now and so we have at every moment, I have at every moment a Jacob moment where I turn to God and say God as it is now in this moment of deep connection and clarity, please watch over that for me and I say to myself, I say David don't forget this and I know that I will and I so want to remember the beginning of the journey, a place of deep vulnerability where I stood under, I sat, I lay down, a rock was my pillow, there was a ladder. And I knew at that moment, Jacob says, I knew at that moment that God was with me. God won't be with me for 20 years. If you look in the Bible, God doesn't speak to Jacob for another 20 years.

Jacob doesn't know that. I sometimes feel like God hasn't spoken to me for 20 years or love hasn't spoken to me for 20 years. Sometimes in those moments when we're this clear and then we lose it, I say wait a second, where has it been? And then I really get Jacob's desire. I really get his yearning for clarity. I really understand. I really understand that what he's saying here isn't, if you will be with me, then I'll be with you.

He's saying, I know you will be with me, but will I be the one who's worthy of being with? Will I be able to look at myself in the mirror and wake up in the morning and say, I'm that person? And if not, how do I find that again?

This is Shabbat of human rights. It is the anniversary of the universal declaration of human dignity, of human rights. And here we are again, having conversations about the dignity of our fellow Americans, the dignity of our fellow congregants. We are enjoined over and over and over and over again, regardless of how many years pass and how dark it is or how difficult it is or two decades go by, or what feels like two decades, we are enjoined to continue to pray that we become the people who are worthy of that first revelation that we had. That we are the people and our hearts are still open to receive the same revelation that we received when we began the journey. That we don't forget that first place, no matter what. And it isn't given. And that's what Jacob says. Jacob says, if you think it's given, you're lost. If you think that you can confidently make your way through all of the harans, all of the exiles, all the places, and it won't affect you, you got it wrong. Jacob is nervous because Jacob knows something about what it means to be in the dark. And he knows what it is also to lose himself because he was lost.

So Jacob says, okay, now that I'm free for the first moment of my life, God, and now I have some clarity, I don't want to wear Esau's clothing ever again. I'm the one who lies down and receives your word. I'm the one who knows how to listen for those angels. So I know that I could get caught. So watch over me, please.

I feel very strongly at this point, you know, tonight, this weekend, and in general, where we are in our country, that we dare not imagine that we aren't also in positions where we could lose clarity.

We dare not imagine that as things move forward and normalize to some extent, that we too will become inured by certain things. We dare not imagine as we lie down here this Shabbat, imagining that that great vision of what America could be and will be one day is already accomplished. It might take 20 years. It might take who knows how long. But I pray here tonight, and I hope you all pray with me.

Source of life. Source of life for our ancestors, for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, for Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and especially tonight for Jacob, who went on a very terrifying journey away from what he knew to what he didn't, and had a dream, and had a vision, and had clarity, and then said, if you will be with me, knowing that he would change. Nervous that he wouldn't be brought back to that same place of clarity, but he is. At the end of his journey, he bumps into the truth again, knowing that he made it. We too now are on a journey, all of us, and we need guidance. We need support. We need help to remain clear with what is an image of the divine that is inclusive, that is humbling, that is empowering, that is dignified. Help us to be stewards of human dignity, to raise up our voices, to be clear, and to bring all of us back to that place where we started. This place is the place of God, if only we would know it. Amen.

Please rise.