

The leader of the mitnagdim denounced

Rabbi Schneur Zalman,

the rabbi of Reussen,

to the government

on account of the rabbi's beliefs

and the conduct of his life.

He was jailed in Saint Petersburg

and awaiting his interrogation

when the chief of police came into his cell.

Deep in contemplation,

the rabbi was not aware of his visitor.

The chief was a thoughtful man.

When he noted the rabbi's -

powerful but serene facial expression,

he intuited the sort of person his prisoner was.

He began to converse with the rabbi until,

finally, he asked:

“How am I to understand that God,

who is omniscient,

asks Adam,

‘Where are you?’

The rabbi replied:

“Do you believe

that scripture is eternal

and encompasses every age,

every generation,

and every person?”

“Yes, I believe that,” said the chief.

“Well now,” said the tzaddik,

“in every age God addresses every person

with the question,

‘Where are you in your world?’

Where are you?

But really, where?

Is God here too?

Here might be strange and scary,

here might be a night refuge,

a stop on our journey

or a long term home,

but the journey itself –

is the most important part.

It is the hero's journey:

The transformation is more important than the destination.

This week's Torah portion, V'yeitzei,

Will be the rock upon which I build my invitation ,

For a theology of presence.

I see four necessary tasks to living with a theology of presence.

These four are Exile, Integration, Imagination, and Rootedness.

They are all here in Vayetzei.:

The first task -

is, as Avivah Zornberg described,

not only to exile one's self from one's geographical home,

but, in some radical sense, from one's self.

V'yeitzei Ya'kov m'Beer Sheva Harana,

And Jacob went out

from Be'er Sheva,

From the well which Abraham had dug,

And set out towards Haran,

the land of his kinfolk,

where he had been promised –  
love and safety and blessing.

The story of our people, –  
is often one of radical leaving.

Willingly, we separate from  
wells which have sustained us,  
family which has  
comforted and challenged us,  
Toward the unknown.

Jacob knew he couldn't stay.

He knew his brother would kill him.

He had been given a mission;

charged with the continuity

of the Jewish people,

he set out towards Haran.

For many of us,

who are situated here -

on 1 West 4<sup>th</sup> Street,

Jacob's story should resonate.



Were it not for wells dug -  
by those who preceded us,  
we could not have set out –  
on journeys far,  
or not so far,  
from home.

We all have physical places -  
we left behind,  
and former selves -

We vowed to change.

Which again begs the question:

Where are you?

The answer, of course, is: You are here.

Whether this place –

is a dream –

pleasant or turbulent,

You are here.

At the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

or possibly on the livestream.

This place bears witness to our highest highs and lowest lows,

To our frustrations and aspirations,

To failure and success and all the growth in between.

This place is our ivory tower and foundation stone.

When Jacob came to that place,

that seemingly anonymous place,

which might have been –

but a night refuge on his journey,

he collected stones from that place,

and placed them under and around his head.

Rashi and later scholars -

have suggested -

that Jacob placed those stones -

as a sort of protective barrier against wild beasts,

as well as one for a pillow under his head.

While there was an Ancient Near Eastern –

practice of using stones as pillows,

I believe Jacob was embracing –

another aspect of that culture and place.

The midrashic translation of the word -

used for his encounter in that place -

offers us insight into the second task -

in developing a theology of presence: Integration.

The rabbis read Va'yifgah - he encountered -

As prayer.

Prayer is a primary method of sanctification,

it is our task to use it as such,

in places familiar and alien.

Zornberg describes

creating structure and meaning in the diverse and chaotic,

through prayer,

as an essentially human act.

Upon encountering, and sanctifying, this makom,

Jacob integrates elements of it -

into the narrative of his journey.

In this verse alone –

the word makom occurs 3 times –

the most in any single verse in the bible.

The Torah is, through its rhetorical repetition,

emphasizing the importance of this place.

Even if Jacob doesn't know it yet,

this makom he has happened upon,  
the makom in which he establishes the evening prayer,  
is already sacred.

Even if Jacob doesn't know it yet,  
the stone upon which he rests his head –  
is the cornerstone.

It is the foundation of a motif –

Which J.P. Fokkelman identifies:

From a single stone,  
to a pillar of stones,

from the stone –

which he removes –

to drink from a new well with his love—

to the stones he places –

to mark his treaty with an old nemesis,

stones mark Jacobs path.

Stones which he gathers and integrates –

and constructs his life's story.

Stones which we find -

often seem impediment rather than imperative.



The stone is heavy and often unwieldy –

in our short lifetime –

It is seemingly eternally unchanged.

But the Psalmist teaches:

The stone that the builder refused –

will become the head cornerstone.

If we rearrange these stones,

if we see their placement –

as integral parts of the makom –

where we are,

we can integrate and incorporate them –

into our visions –

and into our stories –

they can become markers,

for us and those yet to come,

guideposts along our journey,

cornerstones of our dreams.

The third task of creating a theology of presence -

is to embrace imagination and mystery,

rather than imposing our own, old frameworks.

Va'yakhlom v'hinei sulam musav artzah,

V'rosh-o magia ha'shamayimah

And Jacob dreamed,

and behold there was a sulam,

set against the ground,

with its top reaching the heavens.

Robert Alter challenges –

the traditional rendering of sulam as ladder.

Instead he translates this hapax legomenon –

this word which occurs –

only here in the Bible –

as “ramp” instead.

And just picture: the messengers of God –

are going up and down this ramp.

Alter cites Jacob’s Mesopotamian destination,

and the language the Bible uses –

to describe the sulam,

proposing that the structure –

was a Ziggurat.

The Mesopotamians believed –

that these stepped temples –  
connected heaven and earth.

In true syncretic fashion,  
our ancestor incorporates -  
the stones of the ziggurat –  
into his theophanous vision.

It's not Jewish to deny our physical location.

If one is planting a tree,  
and hears that the Messiah is come,  
one should finish planting.

We, an uprooted nation,  
are compelled to plant ourselves in the here and now.

We, a transplanted people,  
should not shy away from the sustenance of foreign soil.

This rooting ourselves is the fourth task in establishing a  
theology of presence.

Like Jacob, we can see messengers of God –  
in the people and practices –  
which we encounter along our journey.

We should do so remembering –

God's promises Jacob:

To exponentially increase and –  
bring blessing into the world.

To be with you,

To protect you wherever you go,

To return you to this ground.

Where are you?

Sitting in the Petrie chapel,

On West 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

We, like Jacob, are not alone.

No matter what our personal relationship –  
is to this specific makom -  
it is undeniably a privilege to be here.

The expressions of Judaism -  
and spirituality in this makom,  
are numerous and vibrant –  
and ours to engage with.



It is easy to hide from struggle,  
from our true selves, and from God.

Whether we do so because we are overwhelmed with  
possibilities,

or challenged by the unfamiliar,

or just tired,

we all seek to protect ourselves this way.

But a theology of presence demands that we not hide.

We work on all of this - exiling ourselves, integrating all of ourselves, imagining a new way, and of putting down roots where we are, so that we simply can be present..

Jacob awakes from his dream and says:

Akhen Yeish Adonai B'Makom HaZeh –

Va'Anokhi Lo Yadati

Surely God was in this place –

And I did not know.

If you love this place –

and you've found your makom –

Good.

But not good enough;

it is upon us to leave comfort, –

like Jacob left the comfort of his home,

to seek out manifestations of God –

in new places on our journeys.

It is upon us to explore the depths and dimensions –

of the place in which we find ourselves.

We should endeavor to –

make the same proclamation as Jacob.

Once we have done so,

let us strive to do so again in the present.

So too with those of us –

who have a challenging relationship with this makom,

or with other extenuating factors,

who may still be struggling to be present here.

We must find and make a covenant with God –

and the Jewish people here.

There are undoubtedly challenging aspects -

to being present here:

the days are short,  
the work is copious,  
the workers may be lazy,  
but, the reward is great,  
it is a privilege to be here.

We have access to connection, learning, and growth –  
which will be the cornerstone –  
to living a theology of presence -  
in whatever present we inhabit.

All the more so with those of us still figuring out –

our relationship to this makom.

We are accountable for finding –

God in our own particular way.

Because the stone someone else refused –

could be our cornerstone.

God is not a makom,

God is the makom.

The gate of heaven is open –

so long as we approach it from where we are.

Jacob recognizes this and builds a pillar –

from the stones of that place.

He anoints it with oil,

and renames the makom –

Beit El, the house of God,

which could have been Luz,

but really could have been anywhere.

A theology of presence is transient.

the day will come –

where we will also leave –

this house of God.

We will leave behind precious –  
few markers of our time here –  
anointed with the oil –  
mixed with sweat and tears.

Whether or not HUC-JIR,  
or wherever you're sitting right now,  
is your Jerusalem,  
or your Beit El,

The Makom is present and accessible here and now.



A theology of presence demands that we realize and  
acknowledge that –

Here, and wherever we may go.

If not for yourself –

Then for whom?

If only for your self –

to what end?

If not here –

Then where?