

Our Heads in Heaven, Our Feet On the Ground Human Rights Shabbat, Vayetzei 5777

Chassidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once said: I learned the meaning of love from a drunk. I once passed two men drinking in a tavern and overheard the following conversation between them:

Drunk #1: "I love you!"

Drunk #2: "No, you don't."

Drunk #1: "Yes, yes, I do. I love you with all my heart."

Drunk #2: "No, you don't. If you love me, why don't you know what hurts me?"

Back in 2005, I was a fresh out of college, starting my work as a community organizer, the first thing I was asked was, "What keeps you up at night?" To be honest, I had no idea how to answer the question. I was happy, excited to start a new chapter of my life. I gave a bland answer: poverty, hunger, prejudice, injustice. But what it was a hard thing for me to think about on the spot.

That question has had many different answers for me throughout the years. I have asked hundreds of people that same question. Understanding the concerns, the pain, the fear of another person gives you a unique window into their soul, but sharing your own fears, naming that which keeps you up at night, not only takes away its power, but forges a loving bond with the soul of another person.

Parashat Vayetzei is a case study in sharing and overcoming our fears. Jacob is afraid that he will not be able to make it alone, and that he will one day face retribution from his brother, Esau. Lavan is afraid his daughter Leah will be left unmarried, and Leah, in turn, is afraid she is unloved by her husband. Rachel is afraid she will be unable to bear children. And all of them fear for that the prosperity of their newly budding family will one day fade away.

But the antidote to fear and suffering is found at the very beginning of the Parashah. In the well-known episode from chapter 28 of Bereshit, Jacob lays his head upon a rock and dreams of a ladder upon which the angels travel from earth to heaven:

וַיַּחְלֵם, וַהֲנֵה סֻלָּם מֵצֵב אֶרֶץ, וְרֹאשׁוֹ, מֵגִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה; וַהֲנֵה מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים, עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ. וַהֲנֵה יְיָ נֹצֵב עָלָיו

“And he (Jacob) dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder grounded toward the earth and its head was reaching toward Heaven, and on it, God’s angels went up and down. And God stood above him.”

The interesting part of this description is how the ladder is set up. It’s “head,” רֹאשׁוֹ, is going up to Heaven, while it is still grounded on the earth. Another structure was earlier described as going up toward Heaven: the Tower of Babel. But although we assume that they did build it from the ground up, the text never mentions it being “grounded in the earth.”

In the early Midrashic text, Bereshit Rabba, Rabbi Hiya and Rabbi Yanai have another interpretation: one taught that the angels/messengers were going up and down on a spiritual ladder, the other that they were climbing Jacob himself [to reach heaven]. Part of their explanation of this midrash is that during his dream, where was *Jacob's* head? On the earth, literally lying on top of stones he had arranged as an altar for his head to sleep upon one verse earlier!

This is the beauty of this text: it shows us that WE are the ladders that connect heaven and earth. Our heads must be at once looking toward heaven, grasping at our highest ideals, while at the same time been rooted in the reality of our everyday world. To only dream and long for what is possible makes us no better than the generation of the Tower of Babel, whose ideals were untethered from the realities of their lives, and whose actions had no connection to the real, individual people who surrounded them, who made up their community. On the other hand, to only look down, to never reach upward and dream inculcates in us a callousness and a hopelessness that makes us believe that any efforts at making a better future are in vain.

Sadly, in our *parashah*, many of the inner hopes and fears our ancestors harbored are kept private, hidden away by each individual in the narrative when they could have been reaching out to one another to offer compassion, to share that they too have fears that gnaw at their hearts.

This Shabbat, over 150 synagogues in America and around the world, are celebrating a Human Rights Shabbat on the anniversary of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This historic declaration, which was signed exactly 68 years ago today, includes such rights as freedom of religion and expression, freedom to work and to have leisure, freedom to marry and freedom from being compelled to marry, and the freedoms of personal rights, property, dignity and equality for all people.

But tucked away at the end, in Article 29 or the 30 sections that make up this document is one that states: "Everyone has duties to the community, in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible." Our freedoms are contingent not only upon law and order but on our ability to form a community side by side with the individuals and families among whom we live. We have the duty to know them, to know their hearts, to know their pain, to know their rights, and through knowing them, to love them.

The development of a close and compassionate community is one of our highest ideals. It is why we are commanded to know the stranger, care for the orphan, and protect the widow. It is why we are commanded to never forget the sufferings of our history, from Egypt through the modern day, because, in truth, what's past is present. Your pain is my pain is our pain. That must be our goal.

Lofty ambitions and dreams can inspire us and warm our hearts only when we ground them in the reality of the people around us can we reach up to Heaven and touch the Divine. How would the story of our People have been different if Leah had said to husband, “You don’t love me; listen to my pain!”? If Rachel had reached out to her sister, saying, “You don’t love me, listen to my frustration!”? If Rebecca had said to her twin sons and her husband, “You don’t love me, listen to my fear!”? It is the very act of listening and sharing honestly, not to convince someone or change their minds, but simply to let them understand your perspective and the uniqueness of your soul, that builds a community.

As we walk through this world, I urge us to keep our heads both in the clouds and grounded on the earth. Know yourself, understand your experiences, and share your story with others while staying open to hearing theirs as well. If we can do this, stay open to the people around us, to their needs and their fears, then this community can be, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights intended, a place where each of us can freely and confidently grow and change. And it can be a place where our dreams can enrich our life here on this earth.

Shabbat Shalom.