

The Teachings of Rabbi Irwin Kula -- Sermon # 3
Delivered on November 24, 2012 by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick

This Shabbos we are continuing our examination of the teaching of Irwin Kula who will be our scholar in residence on December 6, based on his book “Yearnings.” You will remember that we spoke last week about the fact that no matter how much we want our lives to be simple and black and white life is infinitely complex, as well as colorful; that the mantra, “Keep it simple stupid”, is, as Irwin says, pretty stupid itself. Life is uncertain and unpredictable and inevitably your life-path is going to be circuitous. You want it to be straightforward, but that’s usually not the case. This doesn’t mean that life is devoid of meaning or purpose. It means, however, that meaning has to be found in the here and now, along the journey – not at some point down the road when things all fall into place. The sooner we can embrace what Rabbi Kula calls the “sacred messiness of life”, the sooner we’ll start feeling more whole and alive in the moment.

And what is true for your personal life is true for your spiritual life as well; a meaningful spiritual life is sometimes messy. As much as we want to be “whole hearted” in our faith, it doesn’t usually work that way. Faith is not a switch that we can just turn on and think that it will burn brightly forever. There are times when faith and hope and belief and a sense of Gd’s presence are strong in our lives, and there are times when doubt and insecurity and even despair slip in and decide to stay for a while. This is not to say that there are not a few tzadikim around, but most of us are “Yisrael”, which means “struggles with Gd”. We have moments of faith and transcendence, and moments of doubt and distance. Sometimes faith is lost and sometimes it is found, but Kula would argue – and I think he’s 100% right in this – that the sacred messiness of vacillating between faith and doubt, between encounter and spiritual void, is at the heart of much of the Torah and of Judaism. Not only are those swings allowed – they are expected.

There is a wonderful example of this from our Torah reading today that will help you to stitch together and better understand a few various pieces of your Jewish learning. As most of you know, we Jews daven- pray – three times a day. The morning service is called Shacharit, the afternoon service is Mincha, and the evening service is called Ma’ariv. Originally, only the first two services were required. Ma’ariv, the evening prayers were considered optional according to Jewish law. In fact, that’s why the person leading services doesn’t wear a tallis when leading Ma’ariv, even to this day. It’s also why the Ma’ariv Amidah is never said aloud, even though the morning and afternoon Amidot are.

So why is Ma’ariv optional? One reason according to the Talmud is that the services correspond to the sacrifices in the Temple and there was no evening sacrifice, just one in the morning and one in the afternoon. But another explanation for the three prayer services is that each was initiated by one of the patriarchs: Abraham was the first to call out to Gd in the morning. Isaac, the Torah tells us, meditated on Gd’s presence in the afternoon. But Jacob, according to our Torah portion today, *vayifga ba-makom* - “came across, met, and unexpectedly encountered Gd”. These are three very different kinds of

spiritual experiences. Abraham called out to Gd. He started it. Isaac also sat and meditated about Gd and meaning in the world. But Jacob just encountered Gd. Jacob was just going about his business, thinking about all kinds of other stuff. He had done nothing to prepare for it. In fact, he was totally distracted when the encounter occurred. He was on the run from Esau, fleeing his troubled past. He didn't stop to pray. But in the midst of all of that he encountered Gd. And that is the reason that Jacob's prayer could not be legislated; could not be fixed. You can't fix something that happens so randomly. Eventually, Jews world-wide adopted the practice of praying at night, but it was a voluntary task that only much later became an obligation. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Britain, teaches that the reason Jacob's prayer could not be fixed is because none of us knows when the presence of Gd will suddenly intrude into our lives. There is an element of the religious life that is beyond conscious control. Jacob's encounter with Gd was unscheduled, unplanned and unexpected. We can never know in advance what experiences may prove to be "heaven sent"; experiences that will touch us deeply and perhaps even leave us transformed.

It is also significant that Jacob's encounter, his Ma'ariv moment takes place at night. Many times our deepest religious experiences come at night, either physically or metaphorically. They happen when we are alone, afraid, vulnerable, even close to despair. It is then, when we least expect it, we can find ourselves flooded with the light of understanding; a beacon of hope comes that tells us that Gd has more in store for us and we are not alone. Sometimes it is when we are most pre-occupied with other emotions and with our own concerns that we come to realize that Gd is in that place and we did not even know it.

That is how Jacob found Gd. Not through a pre-planned encounter; not by beseeching Him in prayer, but when he least expected it. And you know, he named the place of that chance encounter – Beth El – the same name that we chose for our synagogue. And we come to this place to feel closer to Gd. There is a special warmth and connection to our spiritual selves that we can find here, something that reinforces our faith. But, at the same time, we call this place Beth El to remind us that spiritual encounters are random and cannot be forced; that to be wholehearted in faith need not mean that we have faith all the time. Moments of true faith and deep spiritual understanding are random, so random that we might not even recognize them as such when they happen. But this Beth El trains us, opening our hearts to the possibilities, so that we can sense those moments of transcendence wherever life might take us.