

Va Yetzay 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 11/25/17

Sometimes I think that the name "Beth El" is to synagogues what Starbucks is to coffee shops. They're everywhere. I wish we could get franchise fees for our name, but we, of course, were not the first to come up with it. The origin of the name "Beth El" comes from this week's Torah portion, Va-Yatzay. Jacob has a dream, and when he wakes up he says, "How awesome is this place! This is no one other than the House of Gd; this is the Gate of Heaven." And indeed that is what we have written across the top of our ark. It's our way of saying that through prayer and study we can enter into the Gates of Heaven and be that much closer to Gd. If you want to find holiness in your life, come here.

But really, that's a bit of false advertising, because that's not really what this story is all about. It makes it sound like Jacob knew some supernatural truth and that if you come here you will, too. But really, that's not it at all. The language tells us something else entirely. What the Torah really says is: "Jacob happened upon a certain place [*vayifga bamakom*] and stopped for the night because the sun had set." It wasn't a destination, it wasn't deliberate. He wasn't thinking about it. He just stopped at the place he was when it got dark. It wasn't planned. The text continues: "Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep." He wasn't on a camping trip. He didn't even have time to pack. He was on the run from his brother who wanted to kill him. He didn't even have extra clothes to use as a pillow. He was scared and he was alone. Then "He had a dream. He saw a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching heaven. Gd's angels were going up and down on it. There above it stood Gd...Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Gd is truly in this place, but I did not know it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of Gd; this is the gate of heaven."

Notice that he doesn't declare this with faith and confidence. This is not a spiritual triumph. The Torah makes it clear he is speaking in fear. You can almost hear the pain in his voice. What is more, he has really done nothing to prepare for this spiritual moment in his life. He did not initiate this connection. He wasn't looking for it. His thoughts were elsewhere. It is into his troubled mind that this vision of Gd and the angels and the ladder appear.

You know, we often think of the religious life as one of discipline, of ritual. Ritual brings with it the possibility of an encounter with a force greater than ourselves. And that is indeed true, but that's not what is going on here! This section is a reminder that there is an element of spiritual life that is beyond our conscious control. It comes out of nowhere, like Jacob's encounter with the angels, the ladder and Gd. It's a kind of clarity and meaning that we cannot anticipate, let alone plan for.

And so part of why Beth El is such an appropriate name for a shul is because it is a place where unanticipated encounters with deeper meaning, with Gd, can happen. We can't anticipate it, and we also cannot predict for whom such an encounter will take place. I have heard so many stories from people, Jews and gentiles alike, who have come to a deeper level of understanding about their own lives simply by coming here for a Shabbos service. This is the kind of place where people can have that "Ah-Ha" moment and say like Jacob did, "Gd is in this place and I did not even know it."

But it is also most significant that Jacob's random encounter at Beth El takes place at night. These kinds of encounters often take place when we are in the "night of our lives", alone, vulnerable, afraid, as if we are wandering in the dark. I often take my Hebrew High kids into this Sanctuary at night. I ask them to sit several seats from one another so that they can be alone in their own thoughts. Then I ask them to be very quiet so that they can hear the sound of the gas coming out of the Ner Tamid as it turns to fire. Then I tell them about how each and every High Holiday I come into the room at night before Rosh Ha-Shannah, all by myself. I sit here all alone. Why? Because as many times as I have led services here for the High Holidays, I still get scared every year before the holiday begins. Thousands of people will be here, listening to my every word... It can be overwhelming. But it is in the quiet, alone here, that I can feel Gd working inside me, pulling me up, trying to lift me like the angels on the ladder.

Many of you, and so many more not here today, come to shul afraid of the future, hurting inside, feeling broken or empty. And for many it is precisely in that broken hearted moment that a spiritual encounter can take place. And if it really does work for you, you walk away, like I do, feeling more whole, more peaceful inside. You come to realize that we can only really feel whole when we know what it is like to first feel broken inside. Sometimes, for some of us, it is when we are at the bottom that we come to see the ladder before us, beckoning us to climb higher. And that ladder is surrounded by angels to remind us that we are not alone in our climb back up. There are angels here to help us. And THAT is why this place is Beth El. That is the potential of this holy space.

And so on this Thanksgiving weekend, I give thanks for my spiritual community, the community we have built and maintain for on another. Few can anticipate the meaningful moments in advance, but for those who experience it, this place can really be none other than the house of Gd; this place we have built together can give us a glimpse through the Gates of Heaven.