

“And Jacob Remained Alone”

Parshat Vayishlach

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The words “And Jacob remained alone” (Genesis 32:25) set the stage for the most transformative and crucial moment in Jacob’s life. Jacob wrestles with an anonymous adversary, perhaps a projection of his brother Esau, perhaps an angelic messenger from God. Certainly, at that very moment, Jacob wrestled with himself. Left all alone in the darkness of night, Jacob had to face the person he had become.

In that very moment of honest confrontation, Jacob becomes Israel. Or put differently, Israel, as person and nation, is born out of solitude.

The idea of being born out of solitude, of becoming who one is inherently due the ability to remain solitary, is worth exploring specifically during these times of physical distancing and sheltering in place.

One particular midrash offers an important insight by drawing a comparison between Jacob’s solitude and that of God. In the midrash, R. Berachya teaches in the name of R. Simon the deeper meaning of the verse “None is like the God of Yeshurun” (Deut. 33:26). Yeshurun, which is another name for Israel, experiences God in a unique way, unlike anyone else, due to the fact that both God and Israel have the capacity to remain alone. The midrash teaches: “Just as the Holy Blessed One is described as ‘God, elevated and alone’ (II Isaiah 11:3) so too is Jacob ‘and Jacob remained alone’ (Genesis 32:25)” (Genesis Rabbah 77a).

Solitude is godly in distinct ways. Solitude is also a primary feature in the paths of our forefathers.

One does not need to be alone to stand alone against public opinion, social pressure, or the latest trend. This sort of solitude requires courage and confidence. It demands that one stands on principle even if one stands alone. It is no wonder that God, who stands apart from the world, chooses Avraham Halvri (Abraham the Hebrew), whose name speaks of his capacity to stand opposite of world opinion. By remaining alone, Jacob truly becomes the spiritual grandson of Abraham. He becomes worthy of the moral wealth bequeathed by the first religious man who chose to stand alone.

In addition to social, cultural or political solitude, we are also familiar with a spiritual solitude. It is the comforting solitude we encounter in prayer, in meditation, in moments of self-knowledge, or grand discovery. It is also the awesome, beautiful, burdensome, and humbling solitude we seldom experience in a dark night, gazing at the distant stars. This form of solitude requires inner silence and quietude. Isaac, unafraid of this solitude, goes out alone to pray in the field, seeking the God who dwells within. In his own moment of solitude, Jacob finally becomes his father’s spiritual son and one who is truly worthy of the blessing he initially received through treachery.

During these dark times, many of us find ourselves wrestling like Jacob, with unique elements from both within and without. Like Abraham, we are called to stand on principle and heed the moral call of this hour. Like Isaac, we are invited to look within and find God despite the chaos. With wisdom and through fortitude, we can transform today’s challenges into birth pangs. Our own experience with solitude can give birth to a new world, politically, culturally, morally, and spiritually. At this time, let us cling to Jacob’s solitude so that we may truly inherit our Father Israel.