

SERMON VAYEITZEI

Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai Nov 16, 2018

FINDING JACOB'S LADDER

As I understand it, in Latin American folk culture, there is a belief in “el mundo Bueno” and “el mundo malo” – the good world and the bad world. The two worlds exist side by side, and sometimes, if we are not careful, we can unknowingly step from the good world where things make sense and people are basically good, into the bad world, where nothing makes sense and people turn into monsters.

This is, of course, the entire premise of the outstanding television show, *Stranger Things*, when these nice adorable kids find themselves going in and out of “*The Upside Down*” where things that are familiar suddenly become completely ominous and threatening.

This is also the underlying idea of many outstanding *Star Trek* episodes, like ‘*Mirror, Mirror*’ with evil Spock.

Think of how many books, stories, and movies are about accidentally stepping through a portal into another dimension, into the *Twilight Zone*.

As a very small child, I had a sense of a ‘mundo malo’ from a recurring nightmare I had. I used to love to hide in my parent’s closet, with its louvered doors, piling up boxes of shoes to make a hiding place from my brother. In my nightmare, I was in that closet, hiding, but outside the door were men in uniforms, speaking a language that I didn’t understand, with larger German Shepherds sniffing at the louvers. I remember how terrifying it was to see the dog’s nose up against the cracks in the door, and feel the hot breath finding me. Then the door would open and I would wake up terrified. I had that dream for as long as I can remember.

Sometimes lately, it seems as if we have stepped through from one world into a another, where what we thought we knew, what we thought was settled is turned upside down. We see nationalist anti-Semitic marches with the government in Poland. We see shootings in synagogues. We see openly anti-Semitic white-nationalists running for and sitting in Congress. We see the press attacked as the enemy of the people. We see “alternative facts.”

I think for many of us, the last two years and especially the last few weeks have triggered those fears, and for us as Jews, this universal fear of “the bad world” carries particular weight. It is in our living memory. We carry it in our collective epigenetics.

That is why I found the Torah portion this week to be such a gift.

In our Torah portion we read:

וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעַר שׁוּבַע בְּיַלְדֵי הַחֲרָנָה: וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיִּלֶן שָׁם כִּי־בָא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשֶׂם מִרְאֲשׁוֹתָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא: וַיִּתְּלֵם וַהֲגֵה סֶלֶם מֵצֶבֶב אֶרְצָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מֵגִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וַהֲגֵה מִלְּאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים עֲלֵיהֶם וַיְרִדִים בּוֹ:

Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.

And the LORD was standing beside him and He said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring.

וַהֲגֵה זֶרְעוֹ כְּעַפְרַיִן הָאָרֶץ וּפְרֻצֹתֶיהָ יָמֶה וְקִדְמָה וְצָפֹנָה וְנִגְבָּהּ וְנִבְרָכֵי בְךָ כָּל־מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה וּבְנוֹרְעָדָ:

Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants.

Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

וַיִּקְץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי: וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר מֵהַנּוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵין זֶה כִּי אִם־בַּיִת אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם:

Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!" Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven."

While the promise of protection and return is particularly nice to hear right now, it is not God's promise that I find most comforting, but Jacob's ability to hear it.

Remember, Jacob is on the run from his brother, and here he, with nothing, is trekking alone through the desert, and it suddenly gets dark and he has to lie down, and the only thing he can find for a pillow is a stone.

And still, Jacob is able to sleep - something I have great trouble with on a good day – and to dream a beautiful dream about angels going up and down, and then when he wakes, to realize that this ordinary, rocky, place is a "Gate to Heaven" a place of wonder.

Even at a rotten time in his life, and a scary time – have you ever slept out in the Israeli desert without tents? I have and it is terrifying with snakes and scorpions and all manner of creatures roaming around making occasional noises.

But here, Jacob, this man who lived his life "in the tents" manages to find wonder, find the gate of heaven in the most unlikely of places.

He steps through a different portal – into not just the “good world” but the “world of amazement and wonder”.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, *“Indifference to the sublime wonders of living is the root of sin.”* (*God in Search of Man*)

He also said that the principle characteristic of a spiritual life was cultivating a sense of wonder, of “radical amazement” at the “great fellowship of all beings.”

What an important lesson that is right now!

Jacob shows us that even at difficult scary times, we can find our way to moments of great transcendence and beauty. We just have to stop long enough and open our “inner eyes” to let ourselves see it.

At its best, coming to pray together at a temple should help us step through that same portal. When I have a good prayer experience, that is how I would describe it. I am in the same familiar place but I can see how much it glows with the divine connections we share. Prayer is, in some way, a deliberate choice to step through that gate, to suspend disbelief, and let ourselves feel the sacred that is all around us as our words climb up and down like angels. That is what I want to cultivate here at Sinai.

But let’s remember that Jacob’s “holy place” is not the Temple, not an elaborate building, and not a formal prayer service, but simply sleeping out in the open and letting himself be in the sacred world that is always around us, always open, always wherever we are, if we can pause long enough to see “the sublime wonders of living.”

A spiritual life asks us and helps us to pay attention to and notice the blessings and wonders present in our own lives, even when we are struggling or when the times we living in are overwhelming.

So as we hold one another close through these worrisome times together, as a community, let’s also remember to look for Jacob’s ladder. To find the ladder that our ancestor found one night on the run. It is planted in the ground where we stand, wherever we stand, at every moment, if relearn what we all knew as children – how to let ourselves experience the wonder of just being alive, taking a breath, holding your child, or your dog, or the hand of a friend, or sleeping out under the stars.