

## Angels and Messengers: All Around Us is Shechinah

You have often heard me refer to Torah as a mirror. A kind of magic mirror, that would easily fit into one of Harry Potter's adventures, for Torah has the power to reveal to us much that is hidden away in our own lives. Nowhere is that power more evident than in the stories of Jacob's dreams, one of which we read last week and the other that we will read this Shabbat.

Last week we encountered an adolescent Jacob fleeing his home. Having just stolen his brother's birthright and having deceived his father he has, at his mother Rebecca's encouragement, run away to live with his Uncle Laban. For the very first time, this homebody is completely on his own, out in the wilderness. Imagine how he must feel: certainly scared, likely quite guilty, very likely feeling he is in imminent danger. Understandably these feelings completely consume him. He is filled to the brim with worry and anxiety about what is happening in his life.

Exhausted at the end of a long day he places his head on a rock, falls into a restless sleep and dreams of a ladder reaching into the heavens. Upon it are angels ascending and descending. Waking up he makes one of the most wonderful declarations in the entire Torah: "*acheyn yesh Adonai, bemakom hazeh v'anochi lo yadati ...*" "Surely God was in this place and I didn't know!" Unable in his conscious state to let go of everything that was consuming him, there was no room to let God in. But in sleep, as his body and mind relaxed and he momentarily could let go, he was vulnerable for a moment. And, in that moment Jacob experienced something quite profound. He had his first "God" experience. He had a sense of God's presence surrounding him and understood through that strange dream that he was not alone, that God's comforting and reassuring presence was with him there ... and surely as it was in his mother's tent. So strengthened he could journey on.

We encounter Jacob this week, 21 years later, now a grown man. Perhaps that first experience has become a cherished but distant memory of the salve that healed the

psychic wound he carried as he left home and allowed him to become the successful man he, indeed, has become. He has healed, grown and quite successfully moved on.

So it is that he feels he is ready to return home. After all, he is now a different man. Or is he? Each step towards home, also brings him closer to all he had thought he had overcome, all he thought had healed, all he thought he had overcome. With each step the wound begins to reopen. All those feelings, so carefully packed into a distant corner of his mind begin to reemerge. And when he learns that his brother is coming to meet him with 400 men the teenage boy fleeing from danger has fully reemerged. Imagine the flood of emotion in that moment, all the guilt, all the uncertainty, all the pain, all the danger ... All the careful defenses built up in a life time of creating the man he thought he was ... all of it flooding back in an emotionally and spiritually shattering instant.

Feeling just as alone as he had on that first night so long ago, perhaps Jacob looked back at the reassurance of God's protecting presence in that distant dream and wondered, "Where are you now?" And the wrestling match began. With who? With Esau? There is certainly literary reference in the story itself that could lead one to believe that he wrestled through the night with him. Or was it God? Or one of God's angels? Or was it with himself that he wrestled? Or, perhaps, most likely, did he, in some way wrestle with them all?

The assurance that adolescent Jacob had received in that first dream allowed him to ignore wounds long unhealed. But, they did not go away. They continued to fester in some dark and untouched place. Now in the presence of his brother he must wrestle with that from which he tried to run, with that he thought he had overcome. To be sure it is true of Jacob as it is true of us: "You, can run, but you cannot hide!"

And so he wrestles with it all and in the painful, difficult process is transformed. He discovers something new about himself, a new identity as a wrestler ... Yisrael, "one who has wrestled with God and human beings, and prevailed."

Of course, as we know, Jacob does not come away unscathed. A wound has been inflicted in the process. One he will carry with him for the rest of his life. In truth, the

wound was always there, just carefully hidden away. Through his wrestling, Jacob has come to understand that he is wounded, that he must recognize and accept this wound, rather to try and deny it. In doing so, the wound transforms Jacob, and for the first time it begins to heal.

Transformed in his awareness and acceptance of his wound Jacob is able to approach his brother Esau in deference and humility, ready to accept whatever may come to pass.

I believe that Jacob also comes to recognize the truth of that first dream in a different way. Angels serve many functions in our lives; they bring us comfort and protection, to be sure. But angels can also challenge us, push us, urge us to change and challenge us to recognize and wrestle with that which we would rather hide away. So that we might grow towards our fully Divinely inspired potential.

I must take brief note of poor Esau, who gets such a bad name from our tradition. For he too has grown and healed. How does he greet Jacob? With a kiss. With forgiveness. Jacob, reliving old wounds may well have imagined his brother stuck in the same place. How often do we do the same. But he is not stuck in the past. Esau has grown, he has become successful in his own right. And he is able to forgive.

Perhaps he is able to do so because Esau recognizes the transformation that has taken place in his brother. In either case, these are two very different men from the teens who so angrily parted ways all those years ago. There is healing and forgiveness.

Now, the great power of the Torah, of course, is that it is not a book of fairy tales. We can relate to its very real emotions because it is a very human book. Jacob's wrestling will continue. Anyone who know Jacob's story knows this as well. His journey, as Joseph's and Moses' and Miriam's and all who follow is a cyclical story of wounding and reconciliation and wrestling and healing.

And certainly we all recognize that the power of this story is that it is not just Jacob's story. We are all Yisrael. We are all wrestlers. We are all wounded, and healed and

wounded and healed again. And through it all we hopefully grow stronger, wiser, more humble and better able to serve, support, challenge, and comfort those who like us, are also wrestling.

Because, you see, not only are we wrestlers, we are angels as well. The Hebrew word we translate as angel "*malach*" does not translate as angels as we've come to understand them. Actually the word means "messenger, God's messengers." And isn't that us? Our job is to bring God's message to others. We are to be the challenging messengers when that is the message that needs to be carried, as well as messengers of hope, of comfort, of strength and healing and blessing.

Take a moment and look around this sanctuary. It is filled with God's messengers. At our highest that is what we are each meant to be, each of us created in God's Divine image. When we lift ourselves up on our toes with the recitation of "*kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*," It is, for me a symbolic reminder that we must raise ourselves up to a higher Divine purpose to serve as angels for others as they wrestle to do the same.

All around us are angels. We are reminded of this each evening as we say the bed time *shema* that is accompanied by a prayer asking that we be surrounded by God's ministering angels. By *Mi-chael*: by those who in their very being shine with God's Divine presence. By *Gavriel*: by those who bring us strength and support in our moments of weakness. By *Uriel*: those whose light brightly guides our way when we find ourselves in dark places. And by *R'faeil*: those who bring healing to us in our moments of pain when we feel most wounded and vulnerable.

Surrounded by such angels, we cannot help but feel enveloped by God's sheltering presence: the *shechinah*. Perhaps it was a sense of that Divine presence that gave Jacob the strength to overcome that which had wounded him and the humility to reconcile with his brother Esau.

So it is for us not just a bed time prayer, but also a prayer for when we gather here: that all around us we may feel the presence of *shechinah*, that we may, in each other find

our healers, our strength, and our light, that in each other we might see angels who simply carry God for us when we seem unable to do so ourselves.

So as we consider Jacob's wrestling and our own let's join together now in Debbie Friedman's beautiful words about the shechinah. That through it all we find blessing. That through it all we ultimately find, all around us, shechinah.

*“May our right hand bring us closer to our Godliness.  
May our left hand give us strength to face each day.  
And before us may our vision light our paths ahead.  
And behind us may well-being heal our way.*

*All around us is Shechinah*

*Miy'mini Mi-chael, umismoli Gavriel,  
Umil'fanai Uri'eil, umei'achorai R'faeil,  
V'al roshi Sh'china*

*May Michael be at my right hand, Gabriel at my left,  
Before me Uriel, behind me Raphael,  
And above my head the Divine Presence.”*

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