

Learning from Darkness  
(Genesis 28:10-22; Genesis 32:25-31; Ps. 130)

A student I came to know during RA training spoke about the most difficult part of his day. For this gregarious and confident man, it was not socializing during mealtimes or over a volleyball game. For this bright and articulate scholar, it was not preparation for and participation in seminars. From his casual affability one would never know that he struggled each night. But every night, he would lie in bed in anguish, in the transition between wakefulness and sleep. He had a habit of searching the hallways long after most people had gone to bed, to find one or two still awake to hang out with. He would look for problems he could help to solve. He was trying to stay up late enough, to become tired enough, so that he would fall asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. He was trying valiantly to avoid that moment which filled him with fear, with raw terror. Not about his education or his social life. Not about his family or his future. Not about anything specific, but about life itself, meaning itself. By day, one would never know from his easy demeanor what awaited him in the darkness.

How many of us have known those midnight moments, when *in* the face of darkness, all is deeply etched and stark? Psalm 130 gives voice to those moments, "*Meamakim karatichaya. Adonai Shama bkoli, shema lekol tachnuna?*" "Out of the depths I have called to You, **○** Eternal One, Hear my voice, hear my supplications."

Out of the depths, from within the shadows of the darkness, our cry to God is from ourselves unmasked. Our cry to God comes from the wrenching of our souls.

In the Book of Genesis, there are two places in the life journey of another man when night brings challenge and confrontation, when out of the depths, a voice seeks an assurance of God's presence. These moments occur in the story of our ancestor Jacob. Jacob's story is framed by two encounters of the night-encounters with angels, encounters with God. At the first encounter, Jacob is the same age as Stanford students in their first year here. But unlike our students, who were greeted with Stanford's exuberant RA welcome outside your houses, Jacob was not greeted with welcome and community. He left home after being blessed by his father, but since he received that blessing by stealth and deception, Jacob knew himself to be an impostor. The blessing was meant for Esau, his brother. The blessing was not meant for him. He didn't

deserve it. He took advantage of his father's blindness. He didn't belong in his place. Surely God's face was hidden from him despite the lofty words of blessing. And to complicate matters, his brother Esau was so angry and bereft that he threatened to kill him. Jacob left home as a fugitive. He had a destination but no promise of a welcome. Jacob faced the night.

We read in Genesis, "Jacob left Beersheva and set out for Haran."  
"*Vqyifga bamkom ha hu.*" "He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set." The Hebrew for "He came" "*vqyifgd'*" also means "he approached", and *Hamakom*", "the place", is one of the many names for God in Hebrew. From this language, the rabbis taught, "He approached God." He prayed...Jacob was the first human being to pray in the dark. Jacob initiated the tradition of the Evening Prayer.

Imagine Jacob, a young man with no experience beyond his parent's home, on a journey to the unknown. Imagine Jacob exiled, with his brother's threats ringing in his ears. The rabbis pause at this moment of Jacob being cast out, of finding his way in a strange place as darkness falls, and they fill in the pause. According to the rabbis of the Midrash, this was Jacob's prayer. "May it be Your will, O God, that You bring me out of darkness into the light."

Darkness loomed so heavy for Jacob that he was moved to cry out to God. The midrash continues, «God caused the sun to go down so as to speak to Jacob in private--like a king who calls for the light to be extinguished as he wishes to speak to his friend in private."(Bereshit Rabbah 68:11, 12)

There is a precious intimacy in darkness. Out of the darkness came a dream in which Jacob himself-not a pretender-is blessed by God. «And the Holy One was standing beside him and God said, «I am Adonai, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; ...Remember, I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land..." (Genesis 28:13-15) And Jacob awoke and exclaimed, «*Achenyesh Adonai bamakom hazeh vanochoi Joyadati.*" «Surely the Holy One is in this place and I did not know it."(Genesis 28:16) Jacob's evening prayer has been answered.

Jacob feels himself to be unworthy. - And, yet, in spite of his unworthiness, he still asks not to be alone. He seeks God's help and awakens to the realization that God is with him. God does indeed bring him out of the darkness into light. Jacob is been blessed in his nakedness, not by ruse and deception, but by looking his troubles in the face. For Jacob, courage comes when the clothes of Esau are removed, when the lone prayer is uttered, when the unworthiness, the darkness is named. For Jacob, and for us, courage comes

when we ask not to be alone. For Jacob, and for us, faith grows by leaps and bounds in our most challenging times.

Some believe that religion enables us to escape from darkness, to escape from trouble and from the difficulties of life. They tell us with certainty that the will of God can be unequivocally discerned by a literal reading of God's word. They offer charismatic leaders to ward off doubts. Or they offer rules to wall off straying. But these comforts are false gods. Life can be skimmed on the surface, but it is in the depths that true religious faith challenges us. Courage grows not like weeds in sunlight, but in small steps taken in the darkness. Courage grows when we let in the doubts, the imperfections, the missed turns. Courage grows when we face the terror of the night.

The exile that Jacob knows, the prayer uttered in darkness, the acknowledgment of trouble in our lives, is fertile ground for growing courage. I am not suggesting that God desires suffering or exile or darkness. I don't believe that God wants us to seek troubles to grow. But troubles, failure, darkness come to us. They come in the form of sickness and death, disappointment and broken friendships. They come when we have arrived at Stanford with glowing achievements and wonder whether we can compete in a university where the extraordinary is an everyday occurrence. They come when

we see our friends in trouble--with alcohol, with eating disorders, with destructive relationships, and we don't know how-- or if--we can help. They come when we appear to have reached the apex of our career, but we doubt it's worthiness. They come when we see the inequalities around us and know that we have to fight despair to work toward justice. Life is simply full of troubling times. We have ample opportunities to pray with Jacob in the darkness, "May it be Your will, O God, that You bring me out of darkness into the light." We ask that in those moments, as much as in the sunlight, that God's face not be hidden. In prayer we know we are not alone. Jacob's first encounter with God teaches us that prayer is one response to darkness.

In the Eastern European Jewish world of my grandparents, along with delicious smells, earthy Yiddish expressions and ethnic plenty, darkness, danger and uncertainty was daily fare. Yet somehow the message of simple courage, of vitality, of hope and sheer will, of life triumphing over death was passed on from grandmother to granddaughter. Actress Ellen Gould has created a musical tribute to her two grandmothers, acting out their wisdom and stories. Through poverty and illness, Ellen's grandmother, her Bubbe Annie, danced in the kitchen, with a washboard as her drum. When the unthinkable happened, when Ellen's brother and a cousin died in a car accident, it was her indomitable grandmother who provided love and wisdom. Mourning her two grandsons,

her Bubbe taught her, "So now fate threw a mess on our plate; we'll pretend it's a banquet we ate. When toasting to life is a burden, think of this; Drink my every word in. That you should sing and you should dance, ride the waves and find romance. Grab each minute, take a chance, thank God you're living. Here's the message, more or less, my recipe for happiness is to make the very best of what you're given. When a drip becomes a puddle, then you've got to muddle through. Just to finish you're a winner and there is no number two. Make waves, make love, make dinner, and then sometimes just make do. But take more out of life than it takes out of you."

Take more out of life than it takes out of you. We can learn from the darkness. We can affirm God's delight in life-- in wresting life from death, in making waves and love and dinner, in making life in the presence of darkness. This is the courage of sheer will, the force of vitality enveloping whatever comes in its path. This courage is the refusal to succumb to despair. "L'chayim", "to life" is the Jewish toast in response to darkness. L'chayim is the demand for blessing amidst disappointment.

Our biblical ancestor Jacob, too, demands blessing. His second encounter with God is a wrestling match, which also occurs in darkness. Jacob left home a fugitive, but he returns, twenty years later, with wealth, a large

family and the certainty that he must finally face his brother. He must finally face his fear. He must finally confront that moment between wakefulness and sleep.

The Torah teaches, "Jacob was left alone." Alone and wrestling with a being in the darkness. As he wrestles, he tells his adversary, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And he is blessed, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Yisrael, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:25-31) Jacob left that struggle limping in his hip, but victorious in his spirit. He grew in courage, in vision, in vitality from having struggled in the night. We, too grow from struggling with our own darkness, from wresting blessing and life from darkness and despair, from finding hope and opportunity in crisis, from praying to be brought from darkness into light.

"May it be Your will, O God, that You bring us out of darkness into the light."

*"Meamakim karatichaya. Adonai Shama bkoi, shema iekoi tachnunai"* "Out of the depths I have called to You, O Eternal One, Hear my voice, hear my supplications."



For both Christians and Jews, this is a time of anticipation, a time of clarity, a time of prayer. For you, Lent brings the promise of resurrection and renewal. And, as I prepare for Passover, I clean the dark corners that are easier to avoid than to confront. Whether we are anticipating Easter or anticipating Passover, may the darkness, the struggles, the troubles in our lives become moments to say lechayim to life. May we, like our ancestor Jacob, know ourselves to be blessed by God's presence, even in those times when we feel most alone. May we, like Yisrael, face the terror of the night and come to know that we have striven with darkness, and that we have prevailed. May we be brought out of the darkness into the light.

Ellen Gould, "Bubbe Meises: Bubbe Stories", an original Cast Recording, 1991

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Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, Genesis: The Beginning of Desire. Jewish

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Special thanks to Reverend Emily Click for her sermon, "Threatened with  
Resurrection"