

Letting Go of the “I” on the Journey

[Dramatic entrance – Yaakov running in with a backpack, water bottle, and walking stick]

Hi! I’m Ya’akov! Or Jacob, or Jake, whatever you like....

I am a little out of breath as I have been on the run. Things got a little messy at home with my dad and my brother.

I guess I am a little embarrassed to say this, but I kind of...swindled the birthright from my brother for a bowl of lentil soup.



And then my mom and I, kind of...conspired to trick my dad – who’s almost blind and somewhat gullible....

And here’s the thing.

It actually worked!

He thought I was Esav, my older brother!

It was pretty exciting....

But, anyway, things have not been going well since then....

My mother just told me that Esav was going to kill me as soon as my father dies, and – that I need to run away to Haran to my uncle’s place.

So, I just sort of stumbled upon this place.

I figure I'll stop here for the night and just go to sleep.

[Stretch, yawn, rest head on amud, mini-sleep, 8 hours later, yawn]

I had the weirdest dream – I saw a ladder to heaven and there were angels going up and down.

And it felt like God was speaking to me, reassuring me, telling me that the Divine was going to be with me, guarding and protecting me on this journey – all the way to Haran, there, and back.

*Akhen yeish Adonai BaMakom
Hazeh V'Anokhi lo yadati* – Wow – God is in this place and I, I did not know it.

[Shuddering, hands to face]

*Ma Nora HaMakom hazeh, Ein
Zeh Ki Im Beit Elohim V'Zeh Sha'ar HaShamayim* – how awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven!" (Gen 28)

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So, what is Ya'akov feeling as he sets out on this journey?

Scared? Afraid? Anxious?

But he leaves this place which he names *Beit El* – the house of God – transformed. He has had a profound life-changing experience. As we will



read in next week's *parashah* when he wrestles the mysterious assailant, Ya'akov has these intense encounters.

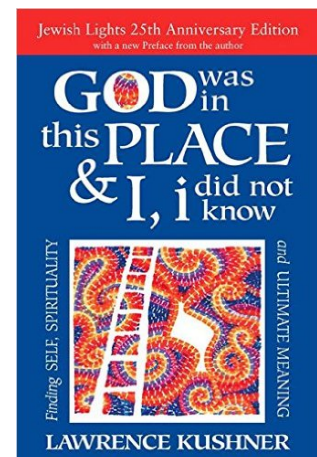
Here, we see him having a spiritual moment with the Divine. God reassures him on his way. Let's look at the words he uses.

He begins with "*Akhen* – wow! Or: Yes! Or, in a more free-form translation: holy cow!

Yesh Adonai BaMakom Haze V'Anokhi Lo Yadati – God is in this place and I did not know it. Now, there is an unusual word here which I want to explore. It sort of leaps out at the reader.

Anokhi – *Anokhi* is a rarely used Hebrew word for the word "I." You see "I" is not needed in Hebrew since it is built into the verbs and therefore, unnecessary. When it does appear as a pronoun, it is more often *ani*. The sentence should be: *Yesih Adonai BaMakom Haze V'Lo Yadati* – And yet, here, we find Ya'akov using this very formal word, sometimes used by God when speaking. Why this emphatic "I?" This rare "*Anokhi*?"

There are many interpretations of this word and this phrase; in fact, Rabbi Larry Kushner wrote an entire book about this passage and Ya'akov's experience!



One teaching that especially resonated with me is from Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz, the author of the Hasidic commentary on the Torah, *Panim Yafot*. His insight is that "it is only possible for a person to attain that high rung of being able to say 'surely God is in this place,' when he or she has utterly eradicated all trace of ego from his or her personality, from his or her sense

of self, and from his or her being. The phrase ‘I, I did not know,’ must mean, ‘my I – [that] I did not know.’” (Kushner, pages 47-48)

Horowitz jumps on the redundancy – *Lo Yadati* – “I did not know” and *Anokhi* – “I” means that the sentence reads, my “I,” my self, my ego did not know. So, Ya’akov is teaching us that his ego was too focused on himself to see anyone else, to see God.

How often does this happen to us? We see only ourselves. We do not see others. It can happen to us; it can happen to our leaders.

This is a teaching based on the great Hasidic Master, Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotzk, also known as the Kotzker *rebbe*, who encouraged us to move away from being too focused on ourselves.

As Kushner explains, “God was here all along, and the reason I didn’t know it is because I was too busy paying attention to myself.”

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There is a second element here that I would like to point out and that is the ladder itself. The angels are going up and down; while there are many things that this could represent, I see it as the circle of life. Think about it – they are going up and down, a complete circle as they ascend from earth to heaven and then back down again.

Ya’akov’s dream is about his entire life, an entire lifecycle and his hopes that God will be with him throughout his life, the entire journey – the ups and the downs, the successes and the challenges, when he soars and when he falls.

That is what we yearn for as well. We all want God's blessing to be with us on our journeys – our literal journeys or trips we take and the entire arc of our lives.

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This week, I was participating in our new weekly sit, our weekly Tuesday morning meditation where Barbara Neustadt was lovingly guiding us, utilizing the language of a journey.

It made me think of the prayer we recite on a journey: *Tefillat Haderekh*, the traveler's prayer. It opens simply: "*Yehi Ratzon Milfanekha Adonai Eloheinu V'Elohei Avoteinu She'toleekheinu I'Shalom V'Tatzedeinu I'Shalom* – may it be your will Adonai our God and God of our ancestors that You guide us in peace and lead us in peace and support us to our chosen destination in peace, joy and well-being, and lead us home again in peace."

First, it is noteworthy that this prayer seems to have been written with this moment of connection between Ya'akov and God in mind. God blesses Ya'akov after his dream and some of the elements in God's blessing are picked up by this prayer.

But there is another element that struck me. The verb form *Toleekheinu* – "that You guide us" or the other verbs like *Tatzedeinu* – "that You lead us" is not the regular form of a verb. It is the *hif'il* or causative form – we are asking God to help us stride – *toleekheinu* is from the same verb as *lalekhet*, to walk. So we are asking for help walking, that You, God, guide our steps. Same thing with *Tatzeedeinu* – "that you lead us." *Tza'ad*

means march – we are asking God to be the marching band leader and guide our march, our steps – help us by pointing us in the right directions.

I find two elements here. First, the letting go of the self. We sometimes have to let go as we are on the journey. When we fly, we are trusting the pilot to take great care of us; when we ride a bus, a cab, or take an Uber™, it is the same. We place our trust in someone else, and let go of our sense of control.

So, it is in life – there are many areas where we cannot control what is taking place, and the best we can do is let go and ride the wave of that moment. That is an important meditative practice to know that there are moments where we cannot control everything and we should allow ourselves to be more passive.

Let me just add – that there are also moments when we should NOT let go, nor can we be passive. There are many things that are going on in the world right now that demand our participation – that is why we held an interfaith rally Sunday evening at the Mosque in Roxbury to bring peoples from different faiths together to support each other in a call for dignity and diligence. I was so proud to represent our community and that we had two buses of attendees.

The second element is partnership. When we ask God for help on the journey, we are asking to be led,



to be guided, but not to be carried. We will still do the walking, just point us in the right direction.

We call out for God's help in walking, but it is up to us to keep our feet moving. It's as if we have a divine GPS – but we are still driving. Perhaps we should rename the GPS: the God Positioning System! That is what we ask for.

When we were complaining on a long walk with my *Savta*, my grandmother, she would tell the story of the poor farmer on a long, hard walk who turned to God for help making it to the end. God, of course, helps those who help themselves, so he suggested, "My feet are so heavy, Lord, you pick them up, Lord; I'll put them down."

Ya'akov's statement after his dream reminds us of the importance of letting go of our ego, letting go of control at times, to bring us closer to realizing the partnership we hope for with God.

And may that partnership bring us much blessing on our journeys, the journeys of life and the journey through these and all challenging times.