

D'var Va'yeitzei 27 Nov 2020

- Been under the weather this week and my world has shrunk even further than it has over the last 8 months.
- This notion of being in a confined space has been on my mind a lot this week.
- Wanted to share a teaching of the SE on this week's parasha, which I'm still trying to make sense of.
- This week's parasha is called Va'yeitzei, which means "and he set out", so it immediately is in the realm of transiting space.
- It begins with Yakov setting off on a journey, having fled from his brother's Esav's wrath after stealing his blessing. More on that in a moment.
- He has his famous Divine encounter, the dream of the ladder going up to heaven, and when he awakes he hears the voice of the KBH saying
 - "Ha'aretz asher ata shocheiv aleha, l'cha etnena u'l'zarecha",
 - "this land that you're lying upon, I will give to you and all your descendants."
- The SE starts out by quoting from the Talmud
- There, the Rabbis were apparently concerned that the land that Yakov was lying on was only about 2 square meters and so the literal meaning of the pasuk is a pretty poor inheritance indeed.
- So they decided that God had actually folded up the entire land of Israel and placed it underneath Yakov as he slept.
- And they justify that assertion by drawing on the legend that Yakov actually represents or contains all people, since after all it is well-known that Yakov's image is carved on the underside of the throne of glory in heaven,
- So just as he contains all people, this place that he is lying on, this place that belongs to him, this place contains all places.
- These teachings of the SE were all delivered around the table on Shabbes afternoon, so the SE here makes a small detour to foster a connection to Shabbat.
- He quotes from a different section of the Talmud that those who honor and celebrate Shabbat, they are given an inheritance without limit, referring specifically to the inheritance of Yakov.
- And the blessing of that inheritance is manifest in the pasuk from later in this parasha,
 - "U'faratzta yama v'keidma, tzafona va'negba",

- that he and his descendants will spread into the land of Israel to the west, east, north and south.
- And the meaning of all this, the SE says, is that the purpose of Shabbat to elevate everything to its root, because we are enjoined on Shabbat, “Al yei'tzei ish mimkomo b'yom ha'shvi'i”, a person shall not go out from his place on the seventh day.
- And that is the part I don't really get. What does all of this have to do with Shabbat?
- But circling back, though, there is something even more explainable: this idea of Yakov representing every person. In fact he is held up as a symbol of perfection by the rabbis in various sources.
- This, the guy who tricked his blind dying father into giving him the blessing meant for his older brother Esav.
- In what sense, exactly, does he represent all people?
- Although the SE is my Chasidic rebbe of choice, there is a criticism of his work that is hard to get around:
 - He focuses a lot on Jewish exceptionalism, on the unique and special relationship Jews have with God and the land of Israel, which of course is deeply embedded in our founding myths and origin story.
 - And of course is a central element of this teaching.
 - Yet, there is a beautiful, universal message to be found in this teaching.
 - I heard a podcast recently with Rabbi Jonathan Saks, who died a few weeks ago, in which he said that the most compelling universal teachings arise from our very specific stories.
 - He cited the Exodus story as an example, but I think it is also the case here.
- Take that story of Esav's blessing that we read last week.
 - I always thought this story of Yitzchak asking Esav to make him a stew and then he would bless him to be a little weird.
 - Very transactional
 - The SE teaches on that passage that what Yitzchak was doing was creating space for Esav to receive the blessing
 - Esav is proud, manly. Probably a little insecure. Hard for him to take this blessing in.
 - And so Yitzchak connected with Esav in the aromas of Esav's experience, a well seasoned mutton stew,

- On Shabbes you need not leave your place, because your inheritance, is the boundary-lessness of Yakov's inheritance. The blessing of Shabbat, is that your place contains all places, that wherever you are, there is no boundary between you and everything else in Creation.
- I made a mistake on my Friday email, which for about 30 minutes this afternoon completely tortured me.
- My entire experience for that time had collapsed on this one mistake, of all the things in my life and all the things going on in the world.
- And I like to think that Yakov also did some ruminating after behaving like such a jerk, and night after night on the trail he beat himself up until one night he was finally able to see past his pain and glimpse the magic and majesty of the universe beyond.
- And so creating space is a form of healing, of flourishing, of connection between my narrow, limited perspective and all the other perspectives that are out there.
- There is a spiritual spaciousness that is invoked here, an expansiveness of the soul that far beyond worldly possessions, is the only true blessing.
- And that is the gift, and the blessing of Shabbat. And my prayer for all of us is that we can find in this Shabbat a little extra space, and allow our souls to flow into that space and intermingle. Shabbat shalom.