

Vayeitzei 5778

On the last Thursday of November, Americans engage in what can only be called highly ritualized behavior. Businesses close. Families of all types gather across the country for a meal that typically includes indigenous American foods. We then ritually stuff both turkeys and ourselves. Many then watch or play football, itself a deeply ritualized activity, as all sports are. These are cultural rituals, repeated year after year, and so carrying some expectation of continuity from year to year. We mark off time and space as special and distinct - which is to say sacred - by making our behaviors something of continuity, or even permanence. Ritual expresses our values. On Thanksgiving, it is the value of gratitude for a life of plenty, but every ritual symbolizes something deeply felt, or a particular experience that we want never to forget.

After Jacob has his famous dream at Beit El – a vision of angels ascending and descending on a ladder from heaven to earth – he commemorates the event by setting up a stone marker. By erecting a monument to the vision that God had shown him, Jacob ritualizes his experience; having been overcome by the magnitude of what had happened to him, he feels the need to create a permanent remembrance of it.

That feeling – something has happened to me, and I want to do something tangible in response – occurs often in life. Feeling thankful to God for our food, we recite blessings; when a child becomes bar or bat mitzvah, we get them a tallit or make a donation to the shul in their honor; when we mourn, we sit shivah in the presence of family or friends to get us through a sad time. Ritualized behavior helps to guide us through difficult times and to celebrate happy ones. It tells us how to behave in situations where we might otherwise be at a loss as to what we should

be doing. And it tells us who we are by participating in a shared experience with others who share our identity and our values.

In Jacob's case the ritual of the stone marker serves as public reminder of God's presence at Beit El, a place that would later serve as a major northern sanctuary in the land of Israel. But it is not only at a sanctuary that we suddenly become aware of God's presence and not every place that we feel that presence will become one. There are moments in life when we can expect to feel overwhelmed, and do, such as at a birth, yet there are others when we have no idea that such a thing is going to happen until it does. Like Jacob, we are suddenly shocked into a realization of the miraculous in our midst.

It is at a moment like that when we discover the hidden worlds that swirl about us, unseen and unnoticed for most of our lives. It's not that they weren't always there, but rather that we didn't know it, that we couldn't access them. Suddenly becoming aware of something like that suggests that there are any number of other moments when we might also be in God's presence and not know it.

So when Jacob puts up that stone monument, it is because he wants a physical reminder of what had happened to him, a memorial to a moment. Seeing it later, he or others will know that God had appeared at that place, and will also know that beyond the particulars of that appearance, God dwells in this world and can be apprehended. The ritual is at once a remembrance of a particular instant and a promise about the recurrence of such instants. And it is the same way for all rituals: They invoke past experiences with the divine in order to remind us that those moments can and do continue to happen.

But a ritual can also outlive the experiences or values which initially inspired it. When that happens, we can either pretend that nothing has changed, risking rendering the ritual meaningless, or we can reconsider how we do it, or whether to do it at all, in order to conserve it and invest it with new meaning. That can occur when history overwhelms us, such as when the Temple was destroyed in the first century. Sacrifices could no longer be offered, so the early rabbis substituted prayer for sacrifice. It can also happen when Jewish culture changes, such as when Jews began to live too far away from Jerusalem to know when holidays would fall, and so added second days to festivals, just to be sure. In other words, for rituals to retain meaning and continue to represent values or significant events, they have to be supple enough to allow for innovation. Living in a time when many Jewish women feel the obligation, or simply the desire, to engage seriously in Jewish prayer, lead services and read publicly from the Torah, EBJC took the step to begin regular egalitarian Shabbat services. That was a ritual change in response to a social one, and we will be discussing where that practice may go later in the year.

Because we will be discussing the use of the mahzor next week, I will add now that the way the books we use continue to make prayer meaningful, or don't, is also a ritual question. If the mahzor - or any book - no longer reflects the way we see God or our own Jewish identity, we are obligated to consider alternatives. That is what we will do on Thursday night after minyan and next Shabbat during kiddush. We will have three mahzorim available for comparison, in order for us to see how each of them approaches, and shapes, the experience of the High Holidays.

Like Jacob in this week's parsha, we want to express our relationship with God in ways that are personal and meaningful. Monuments last only so long before they fall down or, as we

have seen this year, are removed because they no longer represent how we see ourselves. Rituals operate the same way: We continue them out of devotion to our past, and so as our view of the past changes, so too must the rituals that tie us to that past. Instead of repeating rites that no longer make sense, or which even alienate large segments of the community, we need to talk about reinvigorating our practices so that, like Jacob, we can have feelings of sudden inspiration and connection to our time and place, so that we too can say “God is in this place and I did not know it.”

Shabbat shalom.