

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Va-Yeitzei

WHERE WE FIND GOD

וַיִּקְוֶץ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵינֶן יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי:
וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר מִה־נִּוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵינֶן זֶה כִּי אִם־בַּיִת אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם:

*Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!"
Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the
gateway to heaven."
(Genesis 28:16-18)*

COMMENTARY : This week's Torah portion begins with Jacob leaving the house of his parents Isaac and Rebecca after tricking his brother Esau out of his birthright. The Torah gives few descriptions of Jacob's journey, only that he left Beer-Sheba, set out for Haran, and came to "a certain place" outdoors, where he decided to spend the night. During the night he dreamt of a ladder upon which angels climbed up and down. God was standing beside him in the dream, promising that Jacob and his offspring would possess the land, and that Jacob's descendants would be like "the dust of the earth." God also promises to protect Jacob throughout his journeys and that God will not leave Jacob until God's promise is fulfilled.

The story of Jacob's dream poses many questions about the nature of God and God's relationship to human beings. Modern Biblical scholars stress the anonymity of this "certain place," explaining that the text serves to inform the reader that the God of Israel is not associated with particular shrines or temples, but is found in unexpected places. As Nahum Sarna wrote in his commentary to this passage:

"[This] is a profane place with no prior tradition of holiness, and he treats it with indifference....Here it is God who freely takes the initiative in revealing Himself to an amazed Jacob."
(The JPS Torah Commentary for the Book of Genesis, pp. 197-8)

So many people who work in the "helping professions" or do the work of Tikkun Olam can testify to this idea - that God can be found in the most unexpected places, and in the times when we may feel most weary or most unworthy. Often it seems like God is taking the initiative, so to speak, in reminding us of the sacredness of our tasks. The following Rabbinic texts suggest this:

1. One who gives a penny to a poor person merits an encounter with the presence of God (*Shekhinah*).
(Bava Batra 10a)
2. Rabbi Abun said: The poor man stands at your door, and the Holy One. Blessed be He, stands at his right hand. If you give unto him, He who stands at his right hand will bless you... *(Ruth Rabbah 5:9)*

QUESTIONS: How can *tzedakah* and *gemilut chasadim* (giving to and caring for others) provide spiritual fulfillment? What are the challenges inherent to working for social justice that can obfuscate our own spiritual needs? What are other experiences and "certain places" that can unexpectedly force us, like Jacob, to confront the presence of God?