

Jacob Was Alone (2008)

I read the Torah texts looking for wisdom for border crossing rabbis. In this search, I was struck by the phrase, *v'yevater Yaakov levado*, Jacob was left alone to himself. This description follows two verses in which the root *ayin, vet, resh* appears four times. We have here a passage about border crossing. What can we learn about crossing borders from Jacob remaining alone?

V'yevater appears in the *niphal*, the intensive passive, so I am inclined to look for a more intensive translation than “remained alone”, something like “Jacob was stripped down to himself (*levado*).” No more sheep skins over his arms, no more rods for spotted and speckled goats. To prepare to cross the border, Jacob allowed himself to be stripped. He left everything behind.

What do we, rabbis who aspire to cross borders, need to leave behind? What does it mean for me to be stripped bare? Here I think that the metaphor of the spiritual market place may be helpful. The challenge of the market place, open doors and windows, sheds light on the risk we incur if we pretend that the people in our shuls belong to us and that our teaching belongs only to them. The risk is that we rest too easily in the comfort of the familiar. Here is what I mean: the synagogue or the classroom, with its familiar walls and familiar inhabitants, invites a certain familiarity of language and action. We use familiar words, words like *bracha, brit, kedusha, tefillah, mitzvah, hovah*—powerful, important words. But perhaps they are so familiar that we do not ask what they mean in the moment we invoke them, we do not seek to know the embodied experience they carry. We may not look as deeply as we can into these words to ask in what ways they can profoundly enliven and transform our students or congregants. Similarly with our rituals. These too can become so familiar that we move through them without bringing our full presence, and inviting the presence of our congregants to them. While being comfortable and familiar, our language and our rituals may lack vitality and transforming power.

When I am stripped down to myself, I cannot rely on my possessions--in this case, the past glories of my people and our vast *massoret* (tradition)--to deliver life changing teaching. The *massoret* must be delivered through my hands and my heart, through my aliveness and sensitivity to what is called for in this moment. I know that I never travel alone. My teachers and their teachers are always around me. But even when I teach in their name, I cannot rest only on their authority. I must stand naked to the present moment to see deeply what is being asked for, and what that asking brings forth in me.

In Beit Midrash today, a woman described the feeling of holding a newborn baby to her chest. She spoke about the awesome freshness and aliveness of that moment. That aliveness and freshness is the nakedness to the present moment that I seek in my rabbinate.

I present this perspective with some trepidation, dear colleagues, because I truly know that you would be the last to be complacent. You have joined RWB because you want

your rabbinate to be bold, fresh and alive. Me too. For this very reason, I find value in thinking about when the teaching that comes through me catches fire and when it falls flat.

My teaching catches fire when I allow myself to be stripped of everything outside the present moment. In those rare instances, I find myself *yevater*, made *yoter*, made abundant, with the strength, aliveness and wisdom of our tradition. When I can drop my possessions and stand naked to the moment, the *massoret* uses me as its vehicle to meet the present need. It is always a wonderful surprise.