



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Vayetze 5773

By Rachel Travis

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In the wake of hurricane Sandy I felt immensely blessed. My home was warm, light and entirely unscathed. When I ventured downtown two days later to volunteer on New York's Lower East Side, however, it was as if I had crossed into another dimension, one in which people lugged buckets of water up a dozen flights of stairs and huddled shivering in their dark apartments. I had known what to expect from days of insatiable news consumption, but the storm's devastation was not fully real to me until I actually encountered those suffering its consequences.

I thought about this experience as I read this week's *parashah*. *Vayetze* opens with one of the most famous spiritual encounters of the Torah: Jacob's vision of angels climbing and descending a ladder stretching from earth to the heavens. According to a *midrash*,¹ God actually offers Jacob the opportunity to climb the ladder himself. In the *midrash's* telling, Jacob declines, terrified that an ascent to heaven will be followed by a frightening fall. Even after God promises that he will never descend, Jacob is too afraid to climb the ladder, and instead remains ensconced in the mortal world.

And indeed, following this ethereal revelation, the rest of the *parashah* is grounded in entirely human encounters—stories of love, betrayal, jealousy, and the building and splintering of family bonds. Jacob falls in love, unwittingly marries Leah and then knowingly Rachel, toils for a duplicitous father-in-law, and struggles with marital tensions and with earning a livelihood. These dramas are incredibly human and often heartrending—begging the question: wouldn't it have been better for Jacob to have climbed the ladder to heaven, sparing himself the pain and trials of his earthly life? It's easy for us to pity Jacob, frozen by fear, for having made the "wrong" choice that led to a lifetime of avoidable human challenges.

Yet, I'd propose that Jacob's decision to decline God's offer to ascend to heaven was not driven by fear at all, but rather by a bold determination to stay rooted in the matters of the world. Perhaps he understood what would be later articulated in the Talmud: that the Torah exists not in heaven but on earth.² In other words, Jacob realized that he could only have a true impact by acting in this world, not by ascending to the heavens.

We are often exhorted not to bury our collective heads in the sand to avoid awareness of distressing world issues. Jacob teaches us that it is just as important not to hide in the heavens—aware of the problems in the world, but removed from the action. His choice to remain on earth meant a messier and more difficult existence, but it also promised an authentic and meaningful journey—and gave him the ability to affect its outcome. We, too, often have to choose whether to remain observers (even informed ones) or to fully tangle with the world's problems.

I experienced this on a micro level following the hurricane. From the safety of my comfortable home I could watch the news, discuss the impact of the storm and debate the effectiveness of the rescue efforts and administrative

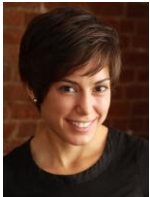
¹ Vayikra Rabbah 29:2.

² Talmud Bavli Baba Mesi'a 59B.

decisions. But watching the events unfold from my distant perch, my talk was empty unless I took action to help. It wasn't until I went downtown to distribute water and flashlights that I was able to make an impact myself.

Those of us who try to do global development work from afar—espousing well-intentioned theories and ideas yet avoiding real engagement—often experience this same state of removal from the reality on the ground. While it isn't impossible to make a difference from a distance, we must find ways to contribute that have a tangible and quantifiable impact. That means making sure our voices are being heard and our hands are being utilized in meaningful ways—whether by engaging in the political process and lobbying on important policy decisions, or financially supporting development work and inspiring and motivating others to do the same.

When God appears to Jacob in the *parashah's* opening sequence, God promises that “all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your offspring.”³ Jacob, it seems, understood that in order to bring blessings to himself and others, he had to be fully engaged with the world around him. Each of us has the potential to be a source of blessings and to have a meaningful impact; but actualizing our potential requires that we, like Jacob, actively engage in the critical work of the world.



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³ Genesis 28:14.

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