

Shabbat Vayetzei 5783  
Visible in the Dark  
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Shabbat Shalom.

Kids sure ask the funniest questions. And kids also ask the most insightful questions. If you are a parent, I'm sure you remember your children asking you wise-beyond-their-years questions about the world, people, and G-d. Questions that are challenging even for adults to answer.

It seems to me that many of these deep, reflective questions happen at night, in the liminal moments between turning out the lights for bed and falling asleep. And just in those few minutes, the darkness of nighttime awakens a deep reflective consciousness in our children. Not every night, but often more than the daytime.

Why is that? What is it about nighttime that draws out another dimension in children - curiosity, wonder, reflection? Indeed, the dark is different for children because it's a time of vulnerability, of being afraid because they can't see what lies beyond the light, as they imagine bad guys lurking in the shadows. The dark is also different for children because it's the end of the day, a time to process all the events of a full day. The dark is different for children...and for adults too.

In our Torah reading today, Vayetzei, we read about our patriarch Jacob, whose life is defined by moments in the dark. Let me highlight five such moments in chronological order.

First, Jacob and his twin brother Esau struggle in their mother Rebecca's womb, and Jacob emerges second clutching his brother's heel. This birth order shapes *everything* in Jacob's life. This "following" is even encoded in Jacob's name, as Yaakov is connected to Eikev, heel. All this happens in the womb, a place that is completely *dark*.

Second, everything changes when Jacob steals the blessing of the firstborn from his older brother Esau. Recall that Jacob deceives his blind father by dressing up in Esau's clothes and brings his father food at his father's direction. He is able to do this solely because his father Isaac is *blind*. Metaphorically, he leaves his father *in the dark*. This single act leads Jacob to run away from home for 20 years.

Third, his act of deception forces Jacob to flee home because Esau understandably wants him dead. Jacob journeys north, and spends a night on a mountain with only a

rock for a pillow. He has a *nighttime dream*, one of the most famous dreams in all of literature. Angels are going up and down the ladder, and G-d promises him that even though he is alone and afraid, G-d will be with Jacob now and always. For our patriarch, it was the darkness that made him afraid, but it was his fear that allowed G-d to comfort him.

Fourth, in Haran Jacob falls in love with Rachel, the younger sister. But in the *dark of the wedding night*, her father Laban switches her for her older sister Leah. Jacob later marries Rachel as well, but here we see payback. The deceiver has been deceived. Jacob left his blind father in the dark to invert the birth order in order to steal his brother's blessing of the firstborn. Here, Laban inverts the birth order of his daughters in the dark. What goes around comes around, or in Hebrew, *Middah Knegged Middah*.

Finally, Jacob famously wrestles with an angel as he attempts to cross the river *at night*. The man who has run away from so many of his troubles finally confronts his alter ego. Jacob stands his ground and responds to the challenge without flinching. Only in the dark is this possible, for the angel must leave at daybreak. Departing, the angel leaves Jacob a new name as well- Israel- meaning one who wrestles with G-d.

All five of these pivotal events in Jacob's life occur in the dark, which is why Jacob is associated with the evening Ma'ariv service.

These nighttime trials shape Jacob and transform him. He emerges from these crucibles a different man, one who has grown up. Later on we read the moving account of him reconciling with his brother Esau with a tender hug and kiss. It's a reminder that as strained as family relationships can be, they can be healed when both parties are willing. Jacob emerges from the events in the dark - really a series of tests - a more poised and mature man.

Each of us undergoes tests to our character as well. Nighttime is different now than it was for Jacob: we flip on a light switch and it is no longer dark. We lock the house doors and we are no longer afraid. But I think that we can understand the test of being in the dark creatively. Metaphorically. I think for us, the test of darkness is when we are all alone, when nobody else is watching us.

It is plenty challenging to be honest and ethical people when people are watching, when others are around. That's hard enough, and the Torah gives us Mitzvot to strengthen our ethical muscles to always respond with love, compassion, and justice.

But it is indeed a separate challenge when we feel we are all alone. When no one is watching, who are we really? When our children, our spouse, and our friends are not present in the room, are we the same person we project to be when they are nearby?

It's the test of being alone. Some people succeed here while others fail.

First, a success. I have a longtime family friend, Mark, who is a retired lawyer. You don't need to be a genius to be honest and ethical, but this man is a genius to boot. Mark went to Harvard Law School and had a nice career following. Something happened on his law school graduation day, when he finally received his degree. Mark opened it up and saw in florid calligraphy his name, followed by the line "graduated with high honors." One problem: this was not true. The registration office had made a mistake and credited him with this distinction when he had not earned it. Now Mark had not falsified this information to anybody, but it was given to him as a gift. What did my friend do? With degree in hand, Mark went to the registration office and asked for a corrected version that just said "graduate."

From this incident alone, we see that he's a man of high character. Nobody asked Mark to do it. Nobody would even know otherwise. He stood to gain an advantage with the original version. And he was alone. But that wouldn't have been honest, and Mark was honest. He had an ordinary Harvard law degree, not that Harvard is ordinary. It was the test of being alone, the test of being in the dark, and Mark passed with flying colors...with high honors.

But being alone can sometimes bring out the worst in people as well. We all know that we shouldn't steal money, but that instruction doesn't stop everybody when they are alone. Not long ago the government distributed Covid relief funds like the PPP. They did so relatively quickly so Americans could stay afloat financially during those precarious days. But this ease of access to funds invited many people to steal, to game the system. Fraudsters stole literally hundreds of billions of dollars during those chaotic days, the largest fraud in a generation. While much can be said about this, it can't be ignored that these thieves felt themselves to be alone. Left unregulated, their greed carried them to extreme ends. It should also be pointed out that millions of other Americans were honest about their needs and financial situations throughout this same process. But for those thieves, being alone was an opportunity to take advantage. It was the test of being alone, and they failed.

The test of darkness, of being alone, is being aware that we are never truly alone. Judaism teaches that G-d is there with us in these moments, as in all moments. This should prompt us to always be our best selves, to always be "on" even if others are not

around. Pirkei Avot teaches: “Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi says: ‘Apply your mind to three things and you will not come into the clutches of sin: Know what there is above you: an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds are written in a book.’” (Avot 2:1). For our Patriarch Jacob and for us, even when we are by ourselves, we are never truly alone.

Shabbat Shalom.