

Parshat Va-Yetzei: A God Who Takes Place

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran (Genesis 28:10). The landscape is a blur as Jacob makes his escape from his vengeful brother, Esau.

But Jacob's headlong flight stills at *a certain place*, at **the place**:

And he came upon a certain place and stayed there for the night, for the sun had set.

The Genesis story mentions *the place* six times in short order—three times before Jacob's dream and three times immediately after it.

This mysterious *place*, apparently known but unnamed, fires the imagination of an ancient sage who teaches that this is not a random place handy because of sunset. Rather, God made the sun set early so that Jacob would stop at **this certain place**. Further fuel for imaginative play: *He came upon a certain place* literally means, *he touched, bumped into, made contact with the place*. Hence, the story that Jacob literally bumped into an invisible barrier that made him stop just here—*the place* where (according to another sage) Abraham had been ready to sacrifice Isaac.

These teachings affirm the importance of *the place*. But another ancient tradition teaches that *the place* is not a specific site necessary for divine presence. Rather, *the place* **is** divine presence, itself. *Place* is a name for God: *Why do we nickname the Holy One, Place? It is because he is the place of his world, but the world is not his place.*

In the view of this tradition, God does not *take a place*. Rather, *God is the place*. There are no sites for presence, there is only Presence. There is no projection of God into the world, only animation of God who is the world. *God takes place*.

And he came upon a certain place means that Jacob made contact with *The Place*, with God. In other words, Jacob prayed. Every place is *the place* where sight and insight can meet, where outer and inner join.

Rivka Miriam, a modern Israeli poet, offers a poem about her relationship with *the place* which she does not name. The place has a quality of geography and of divinity, offering presence and partnership. It becomes for her a trusted traveler on a shared journey—she in her movement, *the place* in its stability. She measures her own progress by the steadfastness of *the place* which learns to understand her ways. The partnership of the poet and *The Place* produces mutual growth which Rivka declares to be one/echad—just as God is One:

*I was in the place and the place gave me its hand.
In our journeys we traveled together, I walked as the place took a stand.
On our way I rejoiced in its stance, while my steps it would soon understand.
And our mutual care was the growth we could share
which was one and the same, in the end.*

[For resources, go to <http://sichaconversation.wordpress.com/2010/11/08/a-god-who-takes-place/>]