

*Stones and Boulders*

*Dear Readers: I wrote this piece as a d'var torah for the recent convention of the Reconstructing Judaism movement. Due to the death of my brother-in-law, I was unable to deliver the teaching in person. I intended this piece as a thumbnail sketch of a theory of "welcoming Judaism" for our time. May our dear Steve Schiller's memory be for a blessing. He was truly a welcoming person. LB*

The parashah of the week is *Vayetzey*. One is tempted to concentrate on the pyrotechnics: the ladder reaching to the heavens; the angels ascending and descending; Jacob's great awakening to the divinity that radiates the world; and his famous "to be or not to be" utterance, "Indeed God was in this place, and I, I did not know."

אכן יש ה' במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי

But look down with me for a moment, down on the ground. Down to where a lost and trembling Jacob finds himself suddenly laid out on the hard wilderness floor. The sun has quickly set on this no-place place, leaving him helpless in the dark. Then the Torah says:

ויקח מאבני המקום

Usually we take this phrase to mean "he took one of the stones of the place, as in 'he took a stone for a pillow.'"

But the ambiguous Hebrew can easily mean "he took *from* the stones of place," meaning that he selected *several* stones. That's how Rashi reads the verse, following a midrashic tradition that no doubt wants to create a problem so it can solve it in a transformative way. Here's Rashi: Jacob selected some stones from the place. The stones began to argue one with another, one saying 'the tzadik will lay his head on me,' and another saying 'the tzadik will lay his head on me.'

Why would this teenager who is a total stranger to camping be going around selecting stones, rather than simply rolling up in a ball on the ground and trying to get through the chilly night? Because, as I say, the Rabbis want to use the scene to shed light on their own problem, i.e., on a problem of the Jews of their own time, and then to offer a transformative way forward. Where are the Rabbis going with this? Easy. The same place we would go with it if we were trying to make a midrash to describe our own fractured times.

Start with the fact that there's only one Jacob, and he is the eponymous ancestor of the Jewish people. He will eventually be Yisrael, the God Wrestler. So he represents the destiny of all the Jewish people. He's not just Jacob the character, or even Jacob the patriarch. He is the symbol that contains all of us, past-present-and future. That raises the stakes on the interpretation of this passage.

The stones are the various strains of approach to *halakhah*, the "way" or "path" that will become the norm of Jewish practice. Now, who gets to be the one pillow for his head? That is to say,

who gets to have their way be *the* way for all of Jewish eternity? Who gets to define the Jewish future?

Now do you see why the stones have broken out into fights? Each knows that the winner will own the right to shape Judaism for ever more, and the others will have to recede into history. Darwinian Judaism.

This was the landscape of Jewish life under the Romans in the First and Second Centuries, and probably for some time thereafter. Just as it was between Aristotelians and Mystics in southern Europe and north Africa in the Thirteenth century, and between Chassidim and Misnagdim in eastern Europe in the Eighteenth Century. Just as it was between Enlightenment Maskilim and Orthodox Traditionalists in central Europe in the Nineteenth Century. Just as it was between Zionists and anti-Zionists and non-Zionists in Europe and America deep into the Twentieth Century. Just as it is today between...and you can fill in the blanks yourself.

How does the midrash resolve the problem? Here's one take:

כולן צריכות להיות צמודות זו לזו ועשאו כולן אחת

“All of the stones needed to join together into a single boulder.”

If we stop there, we have an elegant solution, and one that would satisfy a lot of Jews, especially Jews who don't spend a lot of time struggling with the issues of Jewish life, or with the application of Jewish ideas and values to the larger world. Jews who wish we would all make nice and just get along.

Why do I say this? Because in the world of serious Jewish ideas, striving for one singular voice is a cop out. It is nothing less than the squelching of the mixed chorus of voices that sometimes harmonize and sometimes clash in the loving argument over the meaning of Torah in every age. It is a pretending away of the true differences that animate us as a people and as a religious tradition.

So yes, unity is a desirable goal, but not if it silences voices that need to be heard.

In other versions of the midrash, Jacob picks *twelve* stones that come together in a bunch to form the twelve tribes of Israel. Not one boulder, but a conjoined bunch of stones, like a rock garden; a sort of precursor to *e pluribus unum*. How comfortable that is as a pillow, I don't know, but it could work for us as a model for pluralism if we want to avail ourselves of it.

Here's the solution I like best, but mainly because it feeds my own agenda for contemporary Jewish life. I found this quote in *Itturey Torah*, the marvelous collection of mostly chassidic short takes on each parashah. It begins with a reference to the classic midrash, B'eresheet Rabba 68, where Rabbi Nechemia asserts that Jacob took *three* stones from the place, as opposed to one or twelve or some other number. Why three? Rabbi Nechemia doesn't say. But the *Itturey Torah* does. I'm quoting:

“It’s possible to say that Jacob’s intention was to take three stones representing the foundation on which the world stands: Torah, Avodah, G’milut Chasadim. [Or in modern terms: sacred learning, spirituality, and social justice.] The three stones began arguing with one another. To wit, each one said “I am the essential one; on me will the tzadik rest his head.” [Or, in our terms, ‘on me will modern Judaism place its emphasis.’] But the Blessed Holy One said, “I need all of you to be joined one to another in a unified whole in order to create the singular foundation of Judaism.”

I like this interpretation because I am one of those people whom we used to call in the old Reconstructionist literature from the Eighties a “serious maximalist Jew.” I of course enthusiastically welcome someone who comes into our tent looking mainly for spirituality, or mainly for *tikkun olam* work, or mainly to fill his or her head with ideas and information. Or someone who is mainly looking for community and connection. For *chevra*. For “belonging.” But I will always try to get that single-minded person to branch out: to apply their learning to justice work, or to buttress their justice work with learning, or to go deep into their spiritual self to calm their active mind or their exhausted body.

And I will always always try to get that one Jew to make of herself, himself, an *integrated* Jew; a Jew that stands like a stool on the three legs of Torah, Avodah, and G’milut Chasadim. Of Jewish *head* work, *heart* work, and *hand* work.

I’d like to think that that’s the epitome of Jacob’s legacy; that Jacob could only survive out there in that God-forsaken place by being cool-headed, open hearted, and physically resourceful. By being an individual, but also by learning to open himself to others. By allowing himself to fall in love and to create covenantal family and community. By striving to stay close to God, but also to listen to his own conscience. By learning, ever so slowly but surely, to value truth, and to place truth at the pinnacle of his Godly ideals.

One last thought: Only two verses after Jacob takes that stone and erects it upright to mark the place where his life was changed forever, he walks into Haran and sees everyone gathered around a water well stopped up by a huge stone. As if to say that the stone simply followed him to the next leg of his odyssey. And always will.

Once again, the stone presents a dilemma and an impasse, but it also points the way toward growth. Toward his eventual journey of leaving the stone-blocked narrowness of “Jacob” behind, and coming fully into the open name of “Israel.” Toward learning how to unstop the well that keeps him from becoming his full self: the thinking, feeling, doing, acting, communing, covenant-ing prototype of the Jewish people we are still striving to become. A Jewish *e pluribus unum*, both within each one of us and for all of us together.

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