

Parshat Vayetze
November 17, 2007
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Don't it always seem to go....

“Don't it always seem to go, you don't know what you've got till it's gone...”

So began a popular song by Joni Mitchell from the early '70's and it captures a truth we have all experienced from time to time: Don't it always seem to go, you don't know what you've got till it's gone!

Father Jacob learned this truth on a lonely road far from home in an episode we read about in today's Torah portion, *Vayetze*. Last week we read of the deception by which Jacob steals the birthright belonging to his brother *Esav* from their father Isaac. Fearing his brother's wrath, Jacob leaves home and takes to the road. And there that first night, alone, he lies down to sleep and is forced to use a stone for a pillow. He must have thought that he was at the very lowest point of his life. Alone, afraid, forced to abandon his home and family - he was nowhere, he had nothing and he was with nobody - or at least that was what he probably thought.

“Don't it always seem to go, you don't know what you've got till it's gone...” In one sense Jacob was probably mourning the loss of home and family - now that he no longer had them he was experiencing the depth of his loss. Yet this truth, “you don't know what you've got till it's gone” - is operating on another level in this story as well. What could be more desolate than the spot upon which Jacob lies down to rest - the rock for a pillow at first seems to be a symbol of Jacob literally hitting rock bottom. In the morning father Jacob wakes up with quite a different perspective on his place and position. During the night he dreams, *v'heney sulam mutzav artza v'rosho magiah hashamayma...* and behold a ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward; and behold! Angels of God were ascending and descending on it and behold! *Adonai* was standing over him, and God said: “Behold don't it always seem to go, you don't know what you've got till its gone...” Well, that isn't *exactly* what God said - but in Jacob's response to this dramatic dream: *yesh adonai bamakom hazeh v'anochi lo yadati* - “surely God was in this place and I did not know it” - seems to capture the same spirit that Joni Mitchell tried to capture in her song from the '70's. Jacob though he was lying down to sleep with nothing but a rock for a pillow when in fact he was occupying sacred ground and about to have the experience of his life!

Both Joni Mitchell and today's Torah portion are trying to teach us a fundamental truth - a truth that too many of us are reluctant to embrace - that we each have blessings to count even at those times when we seem bereft of blessings - even at those times when we have nothing but a rock for a pillow, when we seem alone and abandoned - there is still the possibility for great things just around the corner. “Paved paradise, put up a parking lot” laments Joni Mitchell - because we don't recognize the blessings that are already ours - we squander so much of life that is filled with blessing and opportunity.

Jacob awoke just in time to realize the possibilities that were within his reach - that God was in this place and he had not realized it. But, now that he did realize it, his life would forever change, - one less parking lot, one more paradise preserved. In fact that is precisely what Jacob did! The torah states: “He took the stone that he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar, and he named the place *Beit-El* (the House of God)”, and he said, “this stone which I have set up as a pillar shall become a house of God and whatever you will give

me from this day forward, I shall repeatedly tithe to You”

Scratch the parking lot - put up a paradise!

Time and time again we seem intent on preferring parking lots to paradise. Jacob’s lesson has been lost on too many of us; especially on too many of our children. Whenever I step into the classroom, there is one comment that is guaranteed to get my blood boiling: “Rabbi, why do we have to learn all of this dumb stuff?” Of all the complaints and questions I have heard from my students during my years in the classroom, this is the one for which I have the least patience. I come with Torah, I offer them paradise and they would rather play in the parking lot! Some of it is inherent in the nature of being a child, but some of our children never outgrow this basic outlook - of preferring parking lots to paradise.

There was a teacher by the name of John Wayne Schlatter who shared my frustration and whenever he used to get this remark from his students - the “why do we have to learn all of this dumb stuff” - he would tell them the following legend that I would like to share with you:

One night a group of nomads were preparing to retire for the evening when suddenly they were surrounded by a great light. They knew they were in the presence of a celestial being. With great anticipation, they awaited a heavenly message of great importance that they knew must be especially for them. Finally, the voice spoke, "Gather as many pebbles as you can. Put them in your saddle bags. Travel a day's journey and tomorrow night will find you glad and it will find you sad." After having departed, the nomads shared their disappointment and anger with each other. They had expected the revelation of a great universal truth that would enable them to create wealth, health and purpose for the world. But instead they were given a menial task that made no sense to them at all.

However, the memory of the brilliance of their visitor caused each one to pick up a few pebbles and deposit them in their saddle bags, just to be on the safe side, while voicing their displeasure all the while. They traveled a day's journey and that night while making camp, they reached into their saddle bags and discovered that every pebble they had gathered had become a diamond. As you can imagine, they were glad they had diamonds. But as you can also imagine they were also sad they had not gathered *more* pebbles. And so they had learned that the strange voice had been correct and now they were both sad and glad just as it had predicted.

The teacher from whom I learned this story, went on to add:

There was an experience I had with a student, I shall call Steve, early in my teaching career that illustrated the truth of that legend to me. When Steve was in the eighth grade, he majored in "trouble" with a minor in "suspensions." He had studied how to be a bully and was getting his master's in "thievery." Every day I had my students memorize a quotation from a great thinker. As I called roll, I would begin a quotation. To be counted present, the student would be expected to finish the thought. "Alice Adams - 'There is no failure except ...' -- "I'm no longer trying. I'm present, Mr. Schlatter." So, by the end of the year, my young charges would have memorized 150 great thoughts. "Think you can, think you can't --either way you're right!" "If you can see the obstacles, -- you've taken your eyes off the goal." "A cynic is someone who -- knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." And, of course, Napoleon Hill's "If you can conceive it, and believe it, -- you can achieve it." No one complained about this daily routine more than Steve - right up to the day he was expelled and I lost touch with him for five years. Then one day, he called. He was in a special program at one of the

neighboring colleges and had just finished parole. He told me that after being sent to juvenile hall and finally being shipped off to the California Youth Authority for his antics, he had become so disgusted with himself that he had taken a razor blade and cut his wrists. He said, "You know what, Mr. Schlatter, as I lay there with my life running out of my body, I suddenly remembered that dumb quote you made me write 20 times one day. There is no failure except in no longer trying.' Then it suddenly made sense to me. As long as I was alive, I wasn't a failure, but if I allowed myself to die, I would most certainly die a failure. So with my remaining strength, I called for help and started a new life."

And Mr. Schlatter concludes: "At the time he had heard the quotation, it was a pebble. When he needed guidance in a moment of crisis, it had become a diamond."

"Don't it always seem to go, you don't know what you've got till it's gone!"

I come into the classroom with torah to teach - I offer them diamonds, but all they can see are pebbles. That is why the essence of my advice to you this morning, put as simply as possible, is to gather all the pebbles you can, and you can count on a future filled with diamonds. That is what Jacob learned from the pillow that he thought was a rock that turned out to be a gateway to heaven. That is what I want my students to appreciate every time we teach them torah. That is what I want you to appreciate each time you have the opportunity to celebrate Shabbat or embrace one or another aspect of our sacred tradition. Why do I want you to bother with all of this dumb stuff?" Because it is no more dumb stuff than those pebbles were just pebbles and than Jacobs pillow was a rock. We are offering you diamonds, we are presenting you with the gateway to heaven - and all you have to do is embrace what is right here - right in front of you and the treasure is yours!

"Don't it always seem to go, we don't know what we've got till it's gone." And isn't it interesting that this message, this *parasha*, this particular section of the Torah falls on the Shabbat before Thanksgiving! You know that I love Thanksgiving. I have spoken before about how I think that Thanksgiving is one of the most Jewish of all of the American holidays. And if you have followed my message up until now, you now understand why. Thanksgiving is a time to sit down together with family and friends and count our blessings.... a time to realize that no matter what our differing situations in life, we all have much for which to be thankful. We all have blessings that can be counted, we all have pebbles that have become diamonds, we all have rocks upon which we can lay our heads that may in fact be a gateway to a brighter tomorrow.

Shabbat Shalom and have a Happy Thanksgiving.