

VaYetzei – 5783

My doctoral dissertation, which I completed in 2006, focussed on the at journey many teachers took at the time, and still do, to acquiring technology skills useful for them in teaching and learning. It is one thing to use technology personally for communications and research and pleasure. It is another thing to figure out how to get students to use that same technology to facilitate their own learning. My work focussed on the implementation of a specific program, probably long over, which had students using technology tools to create web pages that featured their learning about specific subjects. I hope some of you are realizing that this was to take the place of the old duo tangs or posterboards which were a feature in every school and every classroom for decades.

I began my dissertation by making a connection between the Greek concept in mythology of the hero's journey on a quest of exploration or self-discovery. This involves embarking on a journey towards a specific goal, the challenges that are met and overcome on the way towards that goal and the achievement of that goal entitling the ancient Greeks to talk about heroes. My research focussed on the journeys of a group of teachers and their classroom denizens as they sought to master the skills of presenting their new learning in a very different way than they had before. This meant they had to learn the technology and the subject matter at the same time. It was accomplished by my test subjects and showed others just how they could use technology to further their teaching and learning goals. But, on this journey of theirs, I was their soul guide and resource. This was before one could Google just about anything and find essays and videos and so forth to help one master skills successfully. But to be successful, they had to have trust in me as their guide on the side.

Our parsha this week begins with a journey of a very different kind. Yaakov and Esav have become enemies and Yaakov has run away from his brother and his family. He stops for the night, falls asleep, and has the dream which almost all of us learned about in either Hebrew School or Sunday School. In the dream, it is revealed to him, the sages teach us, that he is on a sacred journey to a place that HaShem will show him and HaShem tells him that He will be with him. Those are the words used.... I will be with you. Yaakov awakens, builds an altar, and sacrifices to HaShem. The rabbis teach that this was a spiritual moment for Jacob who had lost his way somehow and HaShem reminds him that HE will be with him as he goes forward.

This is not the first time the expression I will be with you is used in the Torah, nor the last. The first time is when there is a famine in the land and Isaac is told by HaShem to go the land which I will show you. It is used again when Moshe is told by HaShem that he is to go to Pharoah and ask Pharoah to let the Children of Israel go and Moshe replies he is not capable of such a challenge and HaShem tells Moshe not to fear for He will be with him. I would argue that although those exact words were not used, Abraham heard the voice of HaShem tell him to leave the home of his father Terach and go to the place that HE will show him. Each of these heroes heard the voice of HaShem tell them to set out on a Hero's quest, but that they would not be alone. They were told to be confident that HaShem was with them. We know, because we have been taught, that each of them was more than successful. That is why we refer to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov as our patriarchs and Moshe Rabeinu as our teacher.

In each one of these instances, the sages teach that what was occurring was spiritual, an acceptance of the divine in our lives. But notice

that first the challenge was accepted. Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaacov, and Moshe each accepted a challenge given to them by the circumstances in which they found themselves. Then and only then did they sense the presence of HaShem in their lives and accept this to be so.

Whenever I officiate at a funeral, I include the 23rd Psalm in the service, either in Hebrew or in English. Most of us of a certain age had to memorize its lines. One of them is germane to my point here. Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for thou are with me. Spiritual moments happen when we are seeking them, not in spite of them. As the rabbis of old would say, it is all about the kavana, the intention. We have to seek HaShem through prayer to feel his presence.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a book he called Man in Search of God which was partially an intellectual response to a book by Rabbi Dr. Martin Buber called God in Search of Man. It is a dialectic. We do not exist without both, and the texts show us that so too did our heroes in the bible. They began a journey, accepted a quest, set out only to discover that they were not alone. Faith assumes we accept the presence of HaShem in our lives, but prayer helps us find that presence. We cannot have one without the other. WE have to believe that we are not alone. That is what enables us to make our own personal quests for meaning and happiness and contentment in our lives. Shabbat Shalom.