



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Vayetze 5775

Indigenous Ancestry: The Sacredness of Above and Below

By Adina Roth

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In the daily *Amidah* prayer we address God as *Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitzchak v'E'lohei Ya'akov*.¹ Many have suggested that the repetition of the word *Elohim* in relation to each patriarch indicates that each one had a unique understanding of and relationship to God. Today too, our individual and collective conceptions of God are vital and determining. Our ideas about God influence our relationships with self and other, male and female, heaven and earth—and can have a direct impact on our activism.

At the beginning of *Parashat Vayetze*, the third patriarch, Jacob, flees from home and his personal relationship with God begins to unfold. En route, Jacob stops at an outdoor, natural setting that the text repeatedly calls *makom*—a place.² In this *makom*, Jacob creates a shelter of stones and falls asleep. That night he has the famous revelation dream,³ in which he encounters God ‘poised over’⁴ him at the top of a ladder connecting heaven and earth. God assures Jacob that God will be with him always.

The language of the dream creates a binary between the earthly place where Jacob sleeps and the transcendent sphere where God is positioned. The contrast between earth and heaven develops as Jacob wakes from his dream while it is yet night. In a reverie, he exclaims:

How full of awe is this place!
This (*zeh*) is none other than the house of God
And this (*zeh*) is the gate of heaven.⁵

In a moment of profound understanding, Jacob affirms the presence of holiness in two different spheres: *Zeh... v'zeh*—*this* place down here is the house of God and *this* is heaven’s gate.

The *midrash* picks up on Jacob’s mirroring of earth and heaven and suggests that there is a Temple located in the heavens that sits directly above the Temple on earth.⁶ We need not read this *midrash* literally in order to appreciate its sublime understanding that the same God that illuminates the heavens radiates through the physicality of the land.

This idea is amplified in the text as Jacob assembles “stones” (plural) to create a headrest, and then the following morning, finds a “stone” (singular) beneath his head.⁷ A Talmudic explanation helps resolve this shift from the plural

¹ Many modern renderings include the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah as well.

² Genesis 28:11.

³ Rodger Kamenetz refers to Jacob’s dream as having the quality of ‘revelation.’ Rodger Kamenetz, *The History of Last Night’s Dream: Discovering the Hidden Path to the Soul* (New York: Harper One, 2007) 86.

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004) 149.

⁵ Genesis 28:17.

⁶ Bereshit Rabbah 69:7.

⁷ Genesis 28:18.

to the singular by suggesting that all the stones clamored to touch Jacob's head, but the struggle subsided during the night as they melded into one.⁸ Jacob's recognition of Godliness below as well as above is reflected in the amalgam of stone. The single stone on earth mirrors the single Deity of the heavens; the sacredness that inheres above and below is one.

We inherit from Jacob a dual recognition of the sacred above and below. However, for thousands of years, much of Judaism has focused on the image of God on high—a God of *shamayim* (heaven); a God we look 'up' to. This focus on a spiritualized God, located beyond earth, is symbolic of our human striving to transcend matter, to rise above the corporeal restraints of experience. In failing to honor equally the two aspects of Jacob's vision, we deny the fullness of our ancient heritage.⁹

But there are cultures today that still retain a complex understanding of the sacred link between heaven and earth. Consider indigenous peoples living in the Amazon region such as the Tageri of Ecuador, the Yanomani of Brazil and Venezuela, or the Waura of Brazil.¹⁰ Their belief systems affirm the sanctity and Divinity of earth and nature, and their religion and livelihood—which they get from the land—are intertwined.¹¹

Unfortunately, others haven't respected this delicate balance. Communities in this resource-rich region have to struggle to protect their land from industrial development. Multi-national companies and their own governments occupy indigenous lands to obtain oil and timber, minerals and water. The construction of megaprojects destroys their livelihoods as well as the *mekomot*—places—that they deem to be sacred. Having been self-sufficient for centuries, many of these communities now face eviction, poverty and starvation.

While the act of destroying the Amazon is not ours directly, the responsibility for this tragedy is on us all. Our disconnection from Jacob's "God below" has distanced so many of us from a sacred connection to the earth—so much so that we don't protest when holy ground is callously destroyed. When we don't speak up, we are complicit in harming the earth and those peoples who more directly depend on it. If we can reclaim Jacob's sense of the sacred in our theology, we may feel an imperative to protect the earth, and those cultures deeply connected to it, in our activism.

Jacob reminds us of these dual aspects to God's Divinity: God is located in an ethereal heavenly sphere and also in the rootedness of earth, stone and matter. In returning to the theology of Jacob, our spirituality can be enriched and our activism enhanced as we take action to ensure that all peoples retain their dignified relationships with the Divinity of heaven and sacred ground.



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This week's Dvar Tzedek was originally published in 2011.

⁸ Chullin 91b.

⁹ The importance of a theology that includes a God of the heights and the depths is expounded upon by Thomas Moore. Thomas Moore, *The Soul's Religion: Cultivating a Profoundly Spiritual Way of Life* (Harper Collins e Books, 2009).

¹⁰ Rhett A. Butler, "People in the Amazon Rainforest," *Mongabay.com*. http://rainforests.mongabay.com/amazon/amazon_people.html

¹¹ Sandhya Gupta, Gitta Zomorodi, Angela Martinez, Sarah Gunther, Jaron Vogelsang and Diego Merino, *Promoting Natural Resource Rights: Laying the Groundwork for Sustainable Community-Led Development*.