

## Jacob's Dream, Moving Stones, & the Call for Jewish Moral Imagination

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Rabbi Michael Adam Latz

In ancient Jerusalem, when the Second Temple stood, *Tannu Rabbanan*: The Sages taught: There was an “*even to'en*”—a Claimant’s Stone or the “Stone of Claiming” in Jerusalem. Anyone who lost an item would be directed there and anyone who found a lost item would be directed there. This finder would stand and proclaim their find and the owner would stand and provide its distinguishing marks and take the item. [B. Talmud Bava Metziah [28b]]

It was quite practical; in the heart of Yerushalayim, where Jews made pilgrimage three times annually, where thousands of people and the animals they would sacrifice gathered in a sweltering, smelly, holy cacophony, there was a stone in the city where people who had lost items and people who had found them could meet.

The Talmud is fascinating because while it describes in some detail the process one had to go through to reclaim a lost item—and the obligations of the person who found something that wasn’t theirs—the focus was on the human encounter between the finder and the claimant and the place they met—the *even to'en*—rather than their status or the objects they lost or found.

As someone who is constantly misplacing my phone and my glasses and my books, I imagine the *even to'en* was a place of relief, of tearful rejoicing, of profound gratitude as those who lost items connected with those who found them.

We find ourselves situated this Shabbat—or, at least our ancestor Jacob did—facing stones of a different kind, between a rock and a hard place. Literally.

Last Shabbes, Jacob—at his mother Rebecca’s behest—tricked his elderly vision-impaired father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing that was meant for his older twin brother, the skilled hunter, Esau.

Esau, heartbroken, raged against his brother, who fled the scene of the crime heading East.

Our story picks up tonight, Shabbat Vayeitzei, and tells the next chapter of Jacob and his journey. I want to focus this evening briefly on the dream that Jacob dreamed and two episodes that involve stones.

Scene One, the First Stone: [Gen 28]

*Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.*

וַיִּחְלֹם וַהֲגַה סֵלֶם מְצֹב אֲרֻצָּה וְרֵאשׁוֹ מִגִּיעַ הַשְּׁמַיְמָה וַהֲגַה מִלְאכְי אֱלֹהִים עֲלֵים וַיִּרְדּוּ בּוֹ:

*Jacob had a dream; a stairway—some say, a ladder—was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were rising and descending upon it.*

*The Eternal stood with Ya'akov and told him, "Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."*

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲכֹל יֵשׁ הַיְהוָה בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי:

*Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Whoa! The Divine in this place, and I did not know it!"*

וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר מִה־נִּנְרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵין זֶה כִּי אֵם-בַּיִת אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם:

*Shaken, he proclaimed, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven."*

Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it and he named it Beit-El, the House of the Divine.

וְהָאֶבֶן הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַתִּי מִצְבָּה יְהוָה בֵּית אֱלֹהִים וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ-לִי עֹשֶׂר אֲעִשְׂרֶנּוּ לָךְ:

And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode.

Stones in the desert are rather ubiquitous. And yet, these stones captured the rabbinic imagination. The Midrashic rabbis feel Jacob's terror alone in the dark of night. "They imagine that 'He arranged the stones in the form of a drain-pipe around his head for he was afraid of wild beasts ([Genesis Rabbah 68:11](#)). They (the stones) began quarrelling with one another. One said, "Upon me let this righteous man rest his head", and another said, "Upon me let him rest it." The Holy One, however, had no patience for such nonsense and straightway made them into one stone!"

S'forno, a Medieval commentator, explains it differently. He contends that every town had an inn where travelers spent the night; the place where Jacob landed had no inn, so the townspeople put out these stones [המקום](#), which had been placed there for the travelers to eat on and to sit on. The stones were the place of gathering for wandering and weary souls.

What exactly are the rabbi's doing here? They are reading into this story of our Biblical ancestor exquisite possibility—a world in which stones speak to one another and make peace, where towns who still couldn't afford an inn offered what they had to strangers, where the power of people coming together would ameliorate our greatest fears of each other.

Sometimes stones are so much more than the rocks that comprise them.

### **Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai writes in his poem, *The Amen Stone***

On my desk there is a stone with the word "Amen" on it,  
a triangular fragment of stone from a Jewish graveyard destroyed  
many generations ago. The other fragments, hundreds upon hundreds,

were scattered helter-skelter, and a great yearning, a longing without end, fills them all: first name in search of family name, date of death seeks dead man's birthplace, son's name wishes to locate name of father, date of birth seeks reunion with soul that wishes to rest in peace. And until they have found one another, they will not find a perfect rest. Only this stone lies calmly on my desk and says "Amen." But now the fragments are gathered up in lovingkindness by a sad good man. He cleanses them of every blemish, photographs them one by one, arranges them on the floor in the great hall, makes each gravestone whole again, one again: fragment to fragment, like the resurrection of the dead, a mosaic, a jigsaw puzzle. Child's play.

#### Scene Two: More Stones [Gen 29:]

*Jacob resumed his journey and came to the land of the Easterners.*

*There before his eyes was a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for the flocks were watered from that well. But they looked thirsty. The stone on the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, the stone would be rolled from the mouth of the well and the sheep watered; then the stone would be put back in its place on the mouth of the well.*

*As Jacob was debating with the shepherds about whether or not they could remove the boulder from the well and let the animals drink, Rachel arrived with her flock.*

וַיִּגֶשׁ יַעֲקֹב וַיִּגְדֹּל אֶת־הָאֶבֶן מֵעַל פִּי הַבְּאֵר וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־צֹאן לָבָן אֶתִּי אִמּוֹ:

*And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, and the flock of his uncle Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well and watered the flocks.*

How was it possible, the rabbis wondered, that Jacob could singlehandedly move this enormous boulder, when it normally took several strong shepherds to do so? And remember—Jacob is the weak brother whose mother had to dress him in hairy drag to steal his bigger, brawnier brother's blessing.

Rashi claims that it was a big heavy stone, but because "God was with Jacob," he was able to move this stone [[Bereishit Rabbah 70:12](#)].

Midrash T'hilim [91:5] claims that Jacob conjured up his great strength as a burst of love for Rachel; *ahavah m'kalelet et hashurah*—love changes everything.

We've all heard stories like this: I'm thinking of the ubiquitous story of a parent who summons the strength to singlehandedly lift a car off of a trapped child.

Indeed, the Kedushat Levi teaches [Vayetzei כ"ב22 ויצא בראשית, ויצא כ"ב22 ויצא בראשית, ויצא כ"ב22 ויצא בראשית]

“This verse [of Jacob moving the boulder upon meeting his beloved Rachel] is an allusion to the joy experienced by loving couples under the chuppah, which is also compared to the joy of the Jewish people making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the festivals, as we know from [Ezekiel 11,19](#) where the prophet describes the reaction of the returning exiles experiencing the feeling that a heavy stone has been lifted from their hearts. Our author cites Psalms 90:12 ונביא לבב חכמה, “so that we may obtain a wise heart,” as a heart capable of receiving prophetic insights. Yaakov’s ability to remove the rock from the well once he set eyes on Rachel, means that obstacles to serving the Eternal were removed by his vision of Rachel.”

Love, dreamed the rabbis, is our super-power.

Each of these moments represent an *even to'en*: a stone of claiming.

Jacob’s dream upon the rocks which he erects as an altar to the Divine is the claiming of his faith, his belief in a purpose greater than himself. It is this faith that will guide him forward, to build a family, and eventually to reconcile with his estranged brother Esau.

Jacob’s removal of the well stone upon meeting Rachel is the claiming of his capacity to love, to be touched, to obtain a *lev chochma*—a wise heart. It is the recognition that we have strength we do not know we possess and wisdom we are called to access, that inside each of us is the capacity for powerful, world-transforming love.

But the rabbinic moral imagination is not simply of Jacob’s fabulous dream or the power of stones to argue or represent our human hearts; it is the moral imagination of the rabbis to dream into Jacob the hope of our people: He will, in a few *pasukim*, become *Yisrael*—the God wrestler, the namesake of our Jewish people.

The rabbis had to envision Jacob moving the stones from his life in order to clear the path and move forward towards family and community and productive work because they themselves felt stuck; they lived under the brutal oppression of the Romans—they were tortured and hungry and felt the destruction of the Temple in their bones; despair was served for dinner.

So these early rabbis, they imagined Jacob with great physical strength and spiritual power and tried to see themselves in him: If a poor exhausted weakling like Jacob had the spiritual strength to create an altar of stones and anoint them for the Divine and then conjured up the physical strength to remove the boulders that held prevented the shepherds and their flocks from drinking, so could they, so could we. It’s this power—this bravery— to reimagine old stories, to creatively explore different endings, that give us the strength to keep going.

We are living in a crushing moment of history, where the weight of white nationalism and antisemitism and the brutal treatment of immigrants and the murder of our trans sisters of

color are as suffocating as boulders upon our weary lungs. Four years of descending escalators and rising intolerance. Four years of rising sea levels and leveling seashores. Four years of callous disregard for the planet, for rising white supremacist attacks on Black churches and mosques and synagogues. For years of children in our schools crouching in closets and beneath their desks, practicing active shooter drills because of rising gun violence and politicians who prostrate themselves upon the altar of the NRA. Four years of casting women down as the government assaults their dignity and their bodies and their right to safe, legal, affordable abortions. Four years of abandoning the elderly and forcing undocumented people into church basements and synagogue attics and reducing food stamps and emergency food services. Four years of rising intolerance and rightwing political leaders throwing stones and casting aspersions rather than sitting down to solve solvable problem. Four years.

These problems, of course, did not begin four years ago. But we are feeling them and witnessing them and experiencing them more collectively, more acutely, more as a community than we did before.

Those rabbis. Those rabbis rose from the destruction of the Temple—brutalized, traumatized, shaking, demanding hope, rising for a future they could only conjure in their dreams. And they dreamed a new world into being. A Judaism that was portable, that demanded the life of the mind and the acuity of our human hearts. A holy community centered on compassion and dignity, of robust argument and mutual respect. Those rabbis, they embedded into their hearts the words of the Psalmist: *The stone that the builder rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*

So must we.

We rise, each of this Shabbat, to join one another here, at our *even to'en*, our Stone of Claiming, upon the altar of moral courage where we rest our weary heads each night, at the well where we are called upon to find great strength we aren't sure we know is possible but where love demands it of us is nonetheless. We are here, inheritors of our rabbi's dreams, crying out for a tender, broken world where we join together at the *even to'en* and we reclaim the most precious inheritance of all: our humanity.

Shabbat Shalom.