

Parashat Vayeitze CBS Friday Night 12/2/11

So there I was, driving down the highway praying for dear life. Now, I must admit, I've never been particularly comfortable with spontaneous, lay-it-all-out there kind of prayer. I'm a Cantor: I've been trained to "go by the book" (or, siddur, if you will). Not that all Cantors don't also engage in spontaneous prayer, it's just that I've personally never really felt comfortable doing it.

Not to say that I don't admire those who can. Every year, as I watch "It's a Wonderful Life" on TV (I guess you can call it my Christmas ritual), I love that scene where Jimmy Stewart, who plays the everyman-hero George Bailey, is completely down on his luck. He's about to lose everything, due to the absent-mindedness of his Uncle Billy and the cold-heartedness of the rich town meany, Mr. Potter. And he goes into a bar, orders a drink, and, clasping his hands, desperately prays to G-d. And I quote, "G-d, Oh G-d, Dear Father in Heaven; I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there, and you can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope. I....show me the way, G-d." It's such a simple, quite moment: Jimmy Stewart, red eyes rimmed with tears, his bangs strewn haphazardly across his forehead, quietly pleading with G-d for help.

I was thinking of that scene as I gripped the wheel with both hands, having ended up in an HOV lane that was so narrow I felt certain that one slight move of the steering wheel would take off the side of the car. I was also cursing myself for having gotten into this mess. I was on the way to comfort a grieving family after the death that same day of a loved one. Against my better judgement I had picked up my ringing cell phone to speak to a Rabbi who would give me some last-minute advice about how to handle the situation. And while I was talking, I mistakenly took the wrong fork in the road and ended up in this dire predicament. So I thought of Jimmy Stewart, aka George Bailey, and after hastily

getting off the phone, began praying. My prayer didn't have the quiet, yet moving intensity of George's. It was actually more of a chant or mantra. All I could say was, "Please G-d" over and over. The chanting kept me focused and gave me something to do other than panic. Within a few minutes I did what I always said I'd never do when it comes to prayer. I added bargaining to the mix. "Please G-d....if you help me get out of this, I will never use my cell phone again while driving." Those were about as many words as I could muster before going back to the two-word chant again. And when, after what seemed like an eternity, I was out of HOV hell, the mantra morphed into, "Thank you thank you thank you thank you." Nothing more; just simple gratitude.

A very astute and thoughtful student of mine just asked me a few days ago, "How do we know that G-d answers our prayers?" What a wonderful question. One that has been pondered throughout the ages. I love Woody Allen's famous quote, "If only G-d would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank." As I pondered what words of wisdom to say to this child, I thought about citing my harrowing HOV experience and saying, "I prayed. I made it out safely. G-d obviously answered me. Case closed." But of course, it's not as simple as that. What if I hadn't been so lucky? Would that have meant that G-d didn't answer me, or wasn't there, or simply abandoned me completely? In my opinion, no.

I think it all depends on how we interpret the "G-d answering us" part. I personally believe that when G-d gave us free choice, free will, we were also given the gift of helping to determine our own destiny. And once we make those choices, it's certainly not G-d's responsibility to pick up the pieces if we've chosen badly, no matter how sincerely we pray for G-d to "fix it."

In my case, I made the bad decision to pick up the cell phone while driving. And I will never make that mistake again, and not just because I made a promise to G-d. It simply took being put in that frightening situation (again, completely my own doing) to slap some sense into me and make me realize that I had done a really stupid thing. So the promise I made wasn't just to G-d, it was to myself.

G-d's wake-up call to me was to make me acknowledge my mistake, and determine not repeat it again - and therefore to lessen the risk of my getting hurt in the future. That's also called "teshuvah" or repentance. So, did G-d answer my prayer? Yes, in the sense that I believe that G-d dwells within each one of us, and my answer came from within. I made the choice to get off the phone, put both hands on the wheel, drive with care and caution. I choose to slow down and not be thrown by the obviously irate driver behind me honking at me nonstop the whole time. I chose to chant my way onto the open road, and I chose to take comfort in my belief that G-d was sitting in the passenger seat beside me. And if things hadn't turned out so well, that doesn't mean that I wouldn't have thought that G-d was still beside me the whole way, calming me down and helping me face whatever outcome awaited.

But to begin with, we need to hear that voice speaking to us and through us, at all times; every moment. Through every decision and choice we make, how treat others, how take care of our world. And we can also decide whether or not, or even *how*, we choose to see G-d's hand in our lives. When I finally reached my destination, I braced myself to face the grief that I was about to encounter. I was surprised by what I found. Yes, there was grief. But there was also such a sense of peace, of gratitude, and love in that home.

Here it was, only two days from Thanksgiving, and in the midst of their pain, these family members were recounting their blessings: the blessing of being able to mourn as a family, as everyone made it in time to say their goodbyes; the blessing that the deceased, who had suffered so much, was no longer in pain; and the blessing of all the memories that would be kept alive by every life that their loved one had touched. They could've chosen to be angry with G-d, or felt that G-d had not answered their prayers to cure their loved one. But they choose to thank G-d for giving them so much in the short time they had together, and they choose to see that G-d was with them in their sadness, and in each other.

This week's Torah portion, Vayeitze, begins with a most-likely very scared Jacob, who has just fled from his home after tricking his father into giving him the first born blessing rightfully belonging to his brother Esau, prompting Esau to vow to kill him. As night falls, he stops to rest, and has a dream about angels ascending and descending a ladder. G-d speaks to him in the dream and promises G-d's protection as well as a future home for him and his many descendants. Jacob awakens, and recognizes that he has had an encounter with the Divine, saying, (Gen 28:16): "Achein yeish Adomai bamakom hazeh, v'anochi lo yadati; Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!"

How many times can we say that in our own lives! Our Eitz Chaim comments, "Jacob's response here reminds us that to truly encounter G-d in our lives is a soul-shattering experience. We are shaken to the core of our souls, and we are never the same person afterward. Jacob's encounter changes him to a man prepared to take responsibility for his life."

What a gift to be able to acknowledge G-d's presence in our lives, not only when things are good, but when we struggle. What a blessing to believe that G-d is there, even if we cry out for answers and don't necessarily get the answers that we were hoping for. It's easy to see G-d in the good things: when we are celebrating a simcha, when we see a rainbow, or when someone we love recovers from an illness. It's more of a challenge to find G-d in the chaos of our lives or in our world. We have to search a little harder. But, as cliché as it may sound, I believe that we find G-d when we turn to each other in our darkest moments, when we aren't ashamed to ask for help or lean on someone for strength. I am certain that G-d was there in that house of mourning.

One of the blessings in the weekday Amidah, the standing prayer that observant Jews recite three times a day, is the Shema Koleinu: "Shema Koleinu Adomai Elokeinu, chus v'racheim aleinu. *Hear* our voice, Lord our G-d. Have compassion upon us, pity us, accept our prayer, with loving favor. You listen to entreaty and prayer. Do not turn us away unanswered, our King, for You mercifully heed Your people's supplication. Praised are You, Lord who *hears* prayer." Notice that this prayer begins and ends with the entreaty for G-d to *hear* our prayer, not *answer* our prayer. We need to know that G-d is there, and that G-d listens to us. We, in turn, need to listen to the voice within us and among us that is G-d. G-d is there when we *choose* to see G-d there.

In his book, "Jewish Wisdom," Joseph Telushkin recounts a conversation between the Hasidic Kotzker rebbe and his students: "Where does G-d exist?" the rebbe asked several of his followers. "Everywhere," the surprised disciples responded. "No," the rebbe answered. "G-d exists where man lets him in." Telushkin comments, "This is a remarkable statement of the power G-d has ceded to people, the ability either to keep Him out of their lives or to let Him in."

Let us all be inspired to find G-d wherever we seek G-d, and to be able, like Jacob, to say, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of G-d, and that is the gateway to heaven."

Shabbat Shalom