

Dear Chavraya,

It had started as a difficult meeting, the last meeting of the planning committee for a program this coming Monday that would bring together imams and rabbis to learn each other's texts. At the outset, one of the Muslim members suggested it was time to step off the committee, having come to feel uncomfortable with our approach to texts. Having begun "Building Bridges through Learning" several years ago now with a Muslim colleague, precisely to create a bridge between Jews and Muslims through sacred text, I felt pained and worried, also knowing there was still much to take care of in a short span of time. We decided to begin with very mundane details, the amount of food needed, who would get the paper goods and plastic ware, the printing of study materials, directions to the location. An almost meditative process, addressing the details seemed to bring a sense of calm, each one taking responsibility for something, itself an act of affirmation. Gradually we returned to the texts themselves, speaking straightforwardly about our different approaches, each honoring the way of the other. It was late in the day, the soft light of dusk seeming to settle upon us. At some length, we had come to a point of closure, the texts selected, a sense of the questions to be raised articulated, each of us palpably aware of new awareness and appreciation. Following a moment of quiet amazement, each knowing that something special had happened, I felt deeply moved to say that God's presence had surely been among us.

What does it mean to be in God's presence? If God's glory fills the entire world, as we say daily in our prayers, *m'lo chol ha'aretz k'vodo*, then are we not always in God's presence? Perhaps it is only our awareness of being in God's presence that is lacking? There are times when there is a stirring from deep within, awakening us to the knowledge that we have been touched by something special, opening us to experience a depth of meaning so often fleeting in its intimation, but so real in a given moment. We stand at times in moments of grandeur, when we know beyond a doubt that we are in the presence of something greater than ourselves. It may be to witness the first fluttering breaths of a baby emerging into the world. At the other end of life's spectrum, it may be to hold the hand of a dying person and witness the parting of a soul, given wing upon a last breath. In moments that are most grand or most ordinary, in every place in which we may find ourselves, we can be awakened to God's presence if we are fully present to its possibility.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayetze*, Jacob has set out upon a journey that unfolds on many levels. On his first night away from home, he dreams his famous dream of a ladder that extends from heaven toward earth, angels ascending and descending upon it. Awakening from his dream, Jacob says, "surely God is in this place! And I did not know it/*v'anochi lo yadati!*" In a famous comment, Rashi understands Jacob's acknowledgement of not knowing as meaning, "if I had known, I would not have gone to sleep in such a holy place." This can't be a matter of physical sleep, which we all need. Nor can it be a matter of one particular place or time. It is a teaching about awareness, about our presence as much as God's, about remaining awake and open to the possibility of holiness, of that which is beyond the ordinary, even in the midst of the ordinary.

Of Jacob's ladder, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches, *it is to show us that it is God's will that we engage with the matters of this world, and from within our engagement with the world we shall find the way to be holy to God.* Awakening to God's presence in the day-to-day details of life wherever we are, Jacob's words of recognition become our own, *mah norah ha'makom ha'zeh/"how awesome is this place!"*

It is for us to be holy to God in the way of our being in the world. Reminded in moments of grandeur of life's deepest meaning, we affirm that meaning and make it real in the ordinary holiness of day to day. In the nature of our interactions with others, we create the possibility for our own awakening. From the mundane details of preparation for a meeting, of food and paper goods, and of directions for how to get there, we can arrive and say with prayerful awareness, "surely God is in this place!" And we can know it.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor