

Parshat Vayetze

Rabbi Josh Strosberg

I have been hearing a common theme in recent Disney movie songs: someone is on the verge of journeying to a place beyond where one has previously been. I'm thinking "How Far I'll Go" from Moana, "Beyond" from Moana 2, "Into the Unknown" from Frozen 2, and I could even throw in "Defying Gravity" from Wicked.

This is an old theme that appears in our own Torah. Avraham traveled into the unknown when he left his home in Charan at Hashem's command, his destination not yet revealed. And in Parshat Vayetze, Yaakov travels back to Charan, almost the reverse journey of his grandfather, not knowing what he will find there. The major difference between these journeys is that while Avraham goes with his family and his followers, Yaakov goes completely alone. He doesn't even seem to have a change of clothes or much food or money.

Why is Yaakov going on such a dangerous and lonely path in the first place? His father, Yitzchak is sending him to find a wife, but couldn't he have sent a servant like Avraham did? A possible answer is that Yitzchak wanted to protect Yaakov from the anger of his brother Eisav; Charan would be Yaakov's sanctuary. The text, however, gives no indication that Yitzchak had this in mind, and still, why is Yitzchak sending him with very little possessions?

I believe a possible answer has to do with Yaakov being **אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֲלִים** "a simple man, a dweller of tents." Yaakov's life up until this point involved secluding himself in the study of Torah with no real interaction with the outside world. Yitzchak knew that to complete Yaakov's education, he would have to go beyond his tent to travel to a place where he would have to push himself out of his comfort zone in raising a complicated family, working long days and nights for a shady boss, and eventually putting everything he loves in danger on the return journey to confront Eisav. Going through this process is what gives him the name Yisrael - someone who struggles with God and with people. That transformation could never have happened in his tent.

Jewish education begins in the classroom, which is like our tent, a secluded place that allows us the comfort and resources to explore our sacred texts. But the education is not complete unless we journey beyond the tent into the outside world. This past week, I had the opportunity to journey with my 4th-grade class to a JARC home, where we encountered individuals with special needs that we normally don't encounter in our "tent." It pushed us outside of our comfort zone. We need to look for more of those opportunities. But that is the journey that our Avot needed to take and that we need to take as well.

Shabbat Shalom