

Jacob's Image Ain't All That Is On The Divine Throne

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I am going to begin this Jewish year by appealing to all the baby boomers in the congregation. You know who you are.

I am going to ask you to name the song that has been played so often on commercial radio – that as of 1993 – already almost thirty years ago – the song had been played no less than two million, eight hundred seventy four thousand times.

If you were to add up all those times together, they would amount to nothing less than 44 years – solid -- of radio play time.

The song? Anyone? Anyone? Bueller?

The song is “Stairway to Heaven” by Led Zeppelin.

It occurs to me that a certain percentage of this congregation this evening has no idea what I am talking about. It is because you are either too young or too old. In which case, the Jewish year is not even fifteen minutes old, and I have already committed my first sin. Please forgive me.

I am going to teach you all I know about what it means to build a stairway to heaven.

If you do not know “Stairway to Heaven,” you certainly know the story of Jacob's dream from the book of Genesis – the famous story of Jacob's ladder.

Jacob has fled from the murderous anger of his brother, Esau. He comes to a certain place, and he falls asleep. As he sleeps, he dreams of a ladder that stretches from the earth to the heavens – with angels of God ascending and descending on the ladder.

Questions: What was the meaning of Jacob's dream? What are those angels doing on the ladder? Why are the angels going up the ladder, and coming down the ladder?

My favorite answer to this question comes from the Zohar, the most important Jewish mystical text of all time. It emerges out of Spain, at the end of the 1200s. It is a mystical commentary on the Torah and on other books of the Jewish Bible. The Zohar imagines that the Torah is actually a collection of metaphors for, among other things, the inner life of God.

If there was a New York Times Jewish Bestseller List, the Zohar would be close to the top. In the Middle Ages, entire Jewish communities knew it by heart. The Zohar has a special melody, just like the Torah and the haftarah and other books have their special melodies. Jewish children

vied with each other to see who could chant the Zohar most beautifully. It is arguably the most important Jewish book you've never heard of.

So, this is the story from the Zohar that I want to offer you for Rosh Ha Shanah.

The Zohar teaches that God sits on a throne in the heavens.

On that throne, there is a portrait.

Whose portrait is it?

The portrait is of Jacob, our patriarch.

Why Jacob?

in the words of one of the greatest Jewish scholars of the past generation, Louis Ginzberg: Jacob is the ideal human being.

According to the Zohar, God sits on the throne, and God gazes at the portrait of Jacob.

And so, therefore: why must the angels ascend and descend on that ladder?

They descend on the ladder. They want to see whether the earthly Jacob – the one who lies there sleeping and dreaming – they want to know whether that earthly Jacob has the same face as the heavenly Jacob.

And then, they ascend the ladder. They report back to God. They tell God what the earthly Jacob looks like.

The earthly Jacob. The one that is.

The heavenly Jacob. The one that could be.

Jacob represents all of us. Jacob is the only patriarch whose name we bear. Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov – How good are your tents, O Jacob!

Perhaps that is why the great Hasidic master, Rabbi Zadok of Lublin, says that in every generation, it is not just the image of Jacob that is on the divine throne.

Our faces are on the divine throne as well.

The angels are going up and down upon the ladder.

They want to see who we are. They want to see our faces, our panim.

They have already seen God's portrait of us.

Now, they descend to see what we look like down below – and they will bring their reports to God.

Or: perhaps it is not that the angels will bring the reports of how we look on earth back to God.

Perhaps it is that the angels will invite each of us to stay within our dreams, and to take each of us up the ladder to God's throne – and our angels will show each of us our own individual portraits. Our angels will then invite us to re-do ourselves – to make our panim into the panim that God has of us.

Which might be why the Hebrew word for face, panim, or in Yiddish, punim, is in the plural form. Not that we are two faced. Two would be too few. We are multi-faced – with a face that we show to others, a face that we show to ourselves – and the face that God knows that we really have.

Right about now, in my mind's eye, there is at least one person in this sanctuary who is mentally folding his or her arms and is saying: What. Is. He. Talking. About? I don't believe in God. Or, if I do believe in God – then I surely do not believe in a God that has a body. And if I want a game of thrones, I will watch reruns on HBO.

Fine. Have it your way.

Let me put it another way: God is the soul of the universe. God is that aspect of existence that gives meaning to our lives. Somewhere, there is an ideal You – that you could actually become this year.

The question that I get most often, as a rabbi, is something like this: Rabbi, do Jews believe in hell?

Or, more often: Rabbi, do you believe in hell?

My answer is sometimes something like this.

Yes, there are times when I believe in hell.

I do not believe that hell is a place of sulfuric fire.

I do not believe that hell is a place where the Devil tortures errant souls.

Hell is far simpler than that.

Hell is God sitting you down, and God showing you two pictures.

A picture of who you are.

And, a picture of who you could have been.

The earthly you.

And, the heavenly you.

There is the me that is, and the me that could be. There is the me of my aspirations.

There is the you that is, and the you that could be. There is the you of your aspirations.

Perhaps it goes even farther, and even deeper, than that.

Here is my extension of that mystical teaching. God has a portrait of the entire Jewish people on the divine throne.

There is the Jewish people that is, and the Jewish people that could be. That would be the Jewish people of our aspirations.

For what brings us here this evening, and tomorrow, and the next day, and on Yom Kippur – is simply this.

The morning liturgy says that God mechadesh b'kol yom maaseh vereishit: God renews the work of creation every day. All creation – nature, all life – and human life – and human lives – and each of our lives – all of that undergoes perpetual renewal.

Every day we are new creations.

The days of awe is nothing less than the season during which we re-imagine, reclaim, and remake the selves that we could be. It is the season of our aspirations.

Therefore, what is teshuvah?

This past week, I had trouble with my cable television. The picture was distorted.

So, I called Comcast or Xfinity or whatever it wants to call itself this week. A woman came on the line and told me to unplug the cable for a few moments – to see if that would fix the picture.

That didn't work. So, she sent a refresh signal to my cable box. That worked.

Now you know what these Days of Awe are all about.

The picture that we have of ourselves is distorted.

We will do what we can to clear it up. It is as if we have spiritually unplugged the boxes of our souls – and we are about to plug them back in.

But, if we fail, on Yom Kippur we will ask God: God, only you can do this. God, send that refresh signal to my soul. God, re-boot me.

May the image that you have of yourself be the image that God has of you.