

Parshat Vayetze  
December 3, 2011  
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

**“Don’t it always seem to go – you don’t know what you got till it’s gone!” So sang Joni Mitchell in the 70’s. There was more than a touch of cynicism in those words – but a hint of optimism as well. The feeling back then was that we had, as a society, lost much – we had made mistakes – but there was still time to fix things. Yes, we tend not to appreciate what we have till we don’t have it any more – but then we appreciate what we have lost and do what we need to do to get it back.**

**Today seems a lot like 40 years ago. Like then there is a sense that much has been lost. But today we have the cynicism without the hope. Today we don’t seem to be learning from the mistakes that got us here.**

**The mood in our country is not good. Everywhere we look we are confronted with disappointment. Our economy is in ruins with little to hope for improvement in the near future. Our politicians are a never-ending source of embarrassment – our current president ran last time on a platform based on the “audacity of hope!” How do you think that would work for his next campaign? Cynicism is more the mood of our day.**

**For years our best and our brightest young people found their way from the elite colleges and went directly to Wall Street – it was the land of dreams and of riches untold – today we “occupy Wall Street” and it has become the symbol – fairly or unfairly, of what is wrong with our society. And on the front page of the New York Times yesterday we read, “Exam Cheating on Long Island Hardly a Secret”.**

**Here is how the article begins: “Great Neck, NY – The suspected test takers came from prominent, respected families...among the five facing felony charges were the son of a well known lawyer, the president of the local library board, and a wealthy philanthropic family.” The only thing more depressing than where we are – is the distinct possibility we don’t seem to be learning anything from our mistakes.**

**One of the things I love about our Bible – is that it is not the story of saintly people whose exemplary lives we are supposed to strive to model. On the contrary – as one of my teachers used to say, “there are very few people in the Bible you would want your child to grow up and be like –Adam and Eve disobey God, Noah gets drunk, Abraham banishes one son and is willing to sacrifice another, Isaac tricks his brother out of his birthright, Joseph lords his favorite status over his siblings, David commits adultery and on and on it goes. No – our Biblical heroes as they are portrayed in the bible are deeply flawed and frequently problematic models. But what they all have in common – is their willingness to learn from their mistakes, their desire to strive to do better and to be better.**

**We see this most clearly in our torah reading from this morning, *parshat Vayetze*.**

**We find Jacob on a lonely road far from home. Last week we read of the deception by which Jacob steals the birthright belonging to his brother *Esav* from their father Isaac. Fearing his brother’s wrath, Jacob leaves home and takes to the road. And there that first night, alone, he lies down to sleep and is forced to use a stone for a pillow. He must have thought that he was at the very lowest point of his life. Alone, afraid, forced to abandon his home and family - he was nowhere, he had nothing and he was with nobody – he probably went to sleep thinking, “how could one man screw everything up so badly!”**

What could be more desolate than the spot upon which Jacob lies down to rest - the rock for a pillow at first seems to be a symbol of Jacob literally hitting rock bottom. Yet, in the morning father Jacob wakes up with quite a different perspective on his place and position. During the night he dreams, *v'heney sulam mutzav artza v'roshe magiah hashamayma...* and behold a ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward; and behold! Angels of God were ascending and descending on it and behold! *Adonai* was standing over him, and God said: "Behold don't it always seem to go, you don't know what you've got till it's gone..." Well, that isn't *exactly* what God said - but in Jacob's response to this dramatic dream: *yesh adonai bamakom hazeh v'anochi lo yadati* – "surely God was in this place and I did not know it" - seems to capture the same spirit that Joni Mitchell tried to capture in her song from the 70's. Jacob though he was lying down to sleep with nothing but a rock for a pillow when in fact he was occupying sacred ground and about to have the experience of his life!

All of Jacob's life can be divided into two parts – before and after that fateful night when he slept on a rock and dreamed of angels. Before, was the story of a young man headed for a fall – after, the story of a man on the rise. Before, we see a Jacob who seemed to embrace all the wrong values; after, a Jacob who seems to know all the right things to do.

What did he learn that night? Well, the Bible does not tell us, at least not explicitly – but if we pay close attention to his life the lesson seems quite clear. Before – Jacob believed he was entitled to success and was willing to embrace any and every short cut to achieve it. Even though he was the second born and his brother Esav was entitled to the rights of the first born – the inheritance of father Isaac – Jacob believed he was the one who deserved all of life's blessings. His mother Rebecca reinforced this and whispered over and over in his ear – that he was the talented one, he was the deserving one, he was the one who deserved his father's blessing. And if meant a little trickery, a little cheating and deception to get what was rightly his – well so be it – the ends so clearly justified the means – go for it – do what is necessary to take what is rightfully yours.

But Jacob gets caught, he is forced to flee for his life – he is banished from his home – he loses not only his birthright but his family, his home – everything – and finds himself alone, sleeping out in the cold – with a rock for a pillow. There is – he learns – no shortcuts on the road to success. When Jacob proclaims - *yesh adonai bamakom hazeh v'anochi lo yadati* – "*there is a God in this place and I did not know it*" – he seems to be discovering a universe that operates on laws different from the ones he had been raised with.

Fast forward several thousand years and we still have not learned the lesson Jacob learned. Like Jacob *before* the dream – we raise our children to believe they are entitled to a life of blessing. "Good colleges, nice things, good jobs – these are your birthright!" or so we teach them. And like mother Rebecca of old – if a little trickery – a little cheating is necessary to achieve what is rightfully yours – well come on – only fools play by the rules.

When we read of the details that led to the banking collapse – what was going on with sub-prime loans – we ask, "what were they thinking?" When we read of kids paying as much as \$3600 to have someone else take the SAT and ACT tests for them, we ask, "what were they thinking?" But, the truth is – we know what they were thinking – they were thinking the same thing Jacob was thinking – and it got them the same place it got Jacob – busted. Sleeping alone, with a rock for a pillow.

Jacob learned his lesson – will we? I am not so sure.

The rest of Jacob's life is built on hard work, solid values and dedication – his exile lasts 20 years. Uncle Lavan is going to give him a second chance – and this time Jacob will not take any short cuts – he works hard and makes a success of himself. And when he is cheated by his uncle, the way he used to cheat others – he does not complain, he just goes back and works even harder – and when he

returns – to be reunited with his family – he will come back a different man – a self-made man – who, for the rest of his life – knows the value of hard work and honesty.  
I wish I could be as optimistic about our getting the message today.

Jacob's lesson has been lost on too many of us, especially on too many of our children. Whenever I step into the classroom, there is one comment that is guaranteed to get my blood boiling: "rabbi, why do we have to learn all of this dumb stuff?" Of all the complaints and questions I have heard from my students during my years in the classroom, this is the one for which I have the least patience. I come with Torah, I offer them paradise and they would rather play in the parking lot!

You see: it is not that our schools are failing our children – we are. Jacob knew what was right and what was wrong – but he had a mother whispering in his ear to forget all that – go for the gold, steal the birthright – do what you have to do.

There was one paragraph that really troubled me in the Times article (actually there were many paragraphs that troubled me – but I will single out just one) "Even in today's hard times, a Porsche Panamera 4-S and Mercedes, Range Rovers and Audis mingled with more plebian vehicles in the parking lot of Great Neck North." I am afraid to take a look at the student parking lots at Roslyn High School or Wheatly. My friends, if our kids are driving Porsche's to school what difference does it make what we teach them in the classroom when they get there? "Work hard and success will be yours." "There are things in life more important than stuff." "Come let's learn Shakespeare or Calculus." "Teacher, why do we have to learn all this dumb stuff?"

There was a teacher by the name of John Wayne Schlatter who shared my frustration and whenever he used to get this remark from his students - the "why do we have to learn all of this dumb stuff" - he would tell them the following legend that I would like to share with you:

One night a group of nomads were preparing to retire for the evening when suddenly they were surrounded by a great light. They knew they were in the presence of a celestial being. With great anticipation, they awaited a heavenly message of great importance that they knew must be especially for them. Finally, the voice spoke, "Gather as many pebbles as you can. Put them in your saddle bags. Travel a day's journey and tomorrow night will find you glad and it will find you sad." After having departed, the nomads shared their disappointment and anger with each other. They had expected the revelation of a great universal truth that would enable them to create wealth, health and purpose for the world. But instead they were given a menial task that made no sense to them at all.

However, the memory of the brilliance of their visitor caused each one to pick up a few pebbles and deposit them in their saddlebags, just to be on the safe side, while voicing their displeasure all the while. They traveled a day's journey and that night while making camp, they reached into their saddle bags and discovered that every pebble they had gathered had become a diamond. As you can imagine, they were glad they had diamonds. But as you can also imagine they were also sad they had not gathered *more* pebbles. And so they had learned that the strange voice had been correct and now they were both sad and glad just as it had predicted.

The teacher, from whom I learned this story, went on to add: "There was an experience I had with a student, I shall call Steve, early in my teaching career that illustrated the truth of that legend to me. When Steve was in the eighth grade, he majored in "trouble" with a minor in "suspensions." He had studied how to be a bully and was getting his master's in "thievery." Every day I had my students memorize a quotation from a great thinker. As I called roll, I would begin a quotation. To be counted present, the student would be expected to finish the thought.

"Alice Adams - 'There is no failure except ...' "in no longer trying.' I'm present, Mr. Schlatter."  
So, by the end of the year, my young charges would have memorized 150 great thoughts.

"Think you can, think you can't - --either way you're right!" "If you can see the obstacles, -- you've taken your eyes off the goal." "A cynic is someone who -- knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." And, of course, Napoleon Hill's "If you can conceive it, and believe it, -- you can achieve it." No one complained about this daily routine more than Steve - right up to the day he was expelled and I lost touch with him for five years. Then one day, he called. He was in a special program at one of the neighboring colleges and had just finished parole. He told me that after being sent to juvenile hall and finally being shipped off to the California Youth Authority for his antics, he had become so disgusted with himself that he had taken a razor blade and cut his wrists. He said, "You know what, Mr. Schlatter, as I lay there with my life running out of my body, I suddenly remembered that dumb quote you made me write 20 times one day. "There is no failure except in no longer trying." Then it suddenly made sense to me. As long as I was alive, I wasn't a failure, but if I allowed myself to die, I would most certainly die a failure. So with my remaining strength, I called for help and started a new life." And Mr. Schlatter concludes: "At the time he had heard the quotation, it was a pebble. When he needed guidance in a moment of crisis, it had become a diamond."

That young student had his, Jacob moment – what will it take for us to have ours?

I come into the classroom with torah to teach, every day our children are blessed with some of the finest schools, some of the most wonderful teachers anywhere in the country - we offer them diamonds, but all they can see are pebbles. That is why the essence of my advice to you this morning, put as simply as possible, is to gather all the pebbles you can, and you can count on a future filled with diamonds. That is what Jacob learned from the pillow that he thought was a rock that turned out to be a gateway to heaven. That is what I want my students to appreciate every time we teach them torah. That is what I want you to appreciate each time you have the opportunity to celebrate Shabbat or embrace one or another aspect of our sacred tradition. Why do I want you to bother with all of this "dumb stuff?" Because it is no more "dumb stuff" than those pebbles were just pebbles and than Jacobs pillow was a rock. All Jacob had to do was get away from his mother to learn his lesson. What will it take for you to learn yours?

We are offering you diamonds, we are presenting you with the gateway to heaven - and all you have to do is embrace what is right here - right in front of you and the treasure is yours!