

I'm grateful for our Adath community who has heard me struggle with our movement's stance on interfaith couples. So many of us struggle to belong and wonder how to work for change inside and outside of systems - when to stay and when to leave. I know the Rabbinical Assembly policy will eventually change, but how many couples will we turn away before it does? This is the moment to offer a framing that reflects our powerful expression of Judaism.

I'm struggling and asking questions, and thankful to our Adath community for being on this path with compassion. I've included my words from last Shabbat below.

The Tradition We Love Has Something to Say

Have you ever had a moment of something really hitting you unexpectedly?

Maybe hit by lightning? Hit by love? Hit by frigid cold? I know two new Adath clergy from California who've had that happen thanks to our very chilly December. Welcome to "summer" 40s today.

We've all been hit by major joy as we celebrate you, Audrey, becoming bat mitzvah. Your parents, your beautiful family, are hit by a whole lot of naches.

Maybe when you're hit by something it's the kind of experience that totally changes you. Maybe it's more subtle.

But if you're hit by something, big or small, you might feel something in you has shifted. You might never quite be the same after. Individuals, communities, even God have the power to hit and be hit and leave somehow different.

Our Torah reading, Parshat Vayetzei, puts us in chapter 28 of Breisheet and also puts us squarely on the path of Jacob's journey — running from his brother Esau who is angry at Jacob's capture of the firstborn blessing.

The portion begins Vayetzei Yaakov m'beer shava, vayeilech haranah. Jacob left Beer'sheva and set out for Haran.

And then Jacob has a moment of hitting something, and that something being hit by Jacob. *Vayifga ba'makom vayalen sham...*

The translation reads “Jacob came upon a place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.”

But *vayifga ba'makom*, translated as “coming upon a place,” really means something stronger. Jacob hit upon a place unexpectedly. And that place was hit by Jacob. *Makom* is also another name for God, and this moment is the basis for what is known today as the *maariv*/evening prayer service. One could imagine that Jacob fully encountered the Holy Blessed One, and the Holy Blessed One fully encountered Jacob.

Rashi, writing in the Middle Ages, comments:

"The Torah purposely changed the usual word for “praying”, not writing יתפלל, “And he prayed” (which would have been the more appropriate word, but ויפגע which means to hit upon a place unexpectedly), to teach you also that the ground shrunk before him (the journey was miraculously shortened) as it is explained in the Chapter גיד הנשה (Chullin 91b)."

When we make ourselves available to feel impact by something, we make ourselves willing path markers and lifelong learners. The journey Jacob was making away from his vengeful brother, at least according to the commentators, was made shorter. Was that a physical diminishment of a grueling journey? Maybe. But more importantly, by running into God, *vayifga*'ing — and God being hit by the power of encounter with a human being — I have to believe something changed psycho-spiritually. Jacob was never the same. God was never the same.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, teaches in his piece *Encountering God*:

“None of us knows when the presence of God will suddenly intrude into our lives... Jacob, in flight, trips and falls – and finds he has fallen into the waiting arms of God. No one who has had this experience, ever forgets it.”

When we encounter, when we come into contact, when we make ourselves available to be hit by the wonder of every being, our paths have the power to change. This is the season, when we might otherwise turn inward, to notice how being hit by something can reorient our internal darkened, trodden navigation. This is the season when we seek light, when we look for the slightest glimmer, the sense that we are not alone and operating in darkness.

Spiritual life is not about reaching a superficial high, but putting us in relationship with one another to be moved, to feel impact, to leave somehow changed in big or small ways. And to find blessing from the experience.

I was reminded on Thursday evening of the power of being hit by something, of deep and powerful encounter. Hazzan Dulkan debriefed with me the important work she is doing as part of an intermarriage working group in the Conservative movement. The working group is convened by the professional association of 1600 Conservative rabbis, the Rabbinical Assembly, and our congregational arm, USCJ. I am proud that Hazzan Dulkan, as the president of the Cantors Assembly, has been asked to serve in such a distinguished role as a member of the group. Our former Rabbi Aaron Brusso is one of its co-chairs. Among other things, the intermarriage working group is taking part in one-to-one conversations with people who are most affected by our movement's stances on intermarriage.

You have already heard me address this topic in my Kol Nidrei sermon in 2022, now over two years ago, and specifically the prohibition of Conservative clergy to officiate in any way. As a Conservative movement, we continue to do damage by not encountering interfaith couples on their wedding day, who believe our tradition has something to say to them under the huppah, but we say no. We also continue to damage by stifling diversity of practice on this issue, not trusting our clergy to be creative, and to have options that reflect the range of ideological and geographic realities that may mean some participate and some do not at such ceremonies. That has always been a hallmark of our movement.

To be clear, it remains prohibited for Conservative rabbis and cantors to officiate in any way at an interfaith wedding ceremony. I quote, "Officiation means signing documents or verbal participation of any kind." Violating the prohibition is grounds for expulsion from our professional associations. For now, I have chosen to remain a member of the Rabbinical Assembly, believing that working for change within systems is a true path for me and as a rabbi at Adath. I stayed in our denomination to fight for the ordination of LGBTQ clergy, an 18-year milestone that was marked this past week. I would not be here today if I didn't work for change within the system. And yet, I need you to know my Rabbinical Assembly membership is something I am struggling with. I am grateful for the wisdom of my colleagues in it, of being part of something greater than myself that binds us across continents through Jewish learning, public policy statements, and meaningful relationships among colleagues. There is great value in belonging to it. But it is out of alignment with how I believe I am called in this moment to be a rabbi to our people at Adath, and to support a creative, pluralistic, and expansive understanding of Jewish law that is core to what it means for me to be a Conservative Jew; in which we say, there is enough, more than

enough. *Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu*, we should be overjoyed by the goodness of our portion, the enormity of our blessing, the creativity that is in our hands. A creativity and nuance that are desperately needed at this moment and that we, as Conservative Jews, are so uniquely positioned to offer because of who we are — not in spite of it. The incredible work of Adath's Keruv Committee, over many years, is a testament to that creativity. I will continue to be in honest conversation with our congregation, with my Adath clergy partners, and our board as we discern a way forward.

I believe the *vayifga*'ing — the sacred encounter — that Hazzan Dulkan and other clergy are doing as part of the intermarriage working group — are allowing us to be hit by stories of couples, their families and friends. I believe when we allow ourselves to hit upon a place unexpectedly, much like Jacob, we create a light like him in the midst of the dark. A new prayer in the midst of running away, of being scared, of feeling such scarcity. We might create a prayer, a blessing, something that allows us to affirm, “Yes, the tradition we love has something to say to you in one of the most beautiful moments of love. Like Jacob and Esau, we might acknowledge finally that there is enough blessing, enough prayer, enough wisdom in our tradition that we can stop running away. We don't need to operate from a place of scarcity. We have such abundance. Let's make ourselves available for that *vayifga ba'makom* right now — to encounter, to hit, to come across, and to be changed because we didn't run away. We found God and humanity yet again. And there is a new blessing, anchored in the past and alive today, ready for this moment.”

Like Jacob, when we're willing to encounter God and God is willing to encounter Jacob, something shifts. We center relationship and we center God. A new prayer emerges in the darkness and ensures a new day will dawn. May that be so for us, and let us say: Amen.