

Vayetze 5779: How Important is the Synagogue to the Jewish Community?

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Rabbi Steven Saks

Q: How important is the synagogue to the Jewish community?

A: Rabbi Steven Saks, Adas Kodesch Shel Emeth

The survival of Judaism depends on our ability to maintain our relationship with God. God entered into a *Brit* (covenant) with our *Avot* (forefathers) so they would be able to have a relationship with him and bring his goodness into the world.

The synagogue allows us to make Judaism portable and maintain that relationship as a people regardless of where we find ourselves. The ten northern tribes of Israel disappeared from history because they were not able to find a way to make Judaism portable. Their inability to find new ways to worship God after losing access to the cultic centers of their homeland made it inevitable that these tribes would adopt the practices of their host communities and assimilate.

Unfortunately, these tribes didn't realize that their forefather *Ya'akov* (Jacob) had already established a precedent for making Judaism portable. *Ya'akov* was forced to endure exile in order to escape the wrath of his brother *Esav* (Esau), who sought to kill him. As *Ya'akov* fled, we are told *Vayifga Bamakom* (he encountered the

place). Rabbi Yossi (*Berachot* 26b) teaches that *Vayifga* (encountered) denoted prayer and *Makom*, though meaning “place,” can also refer to God. Therefore, *Vayifga Bamakom* should be understood to mean “he prayed to God.” Since *Ya’akov* prayed at night, Rabbi Yossi concludes that *Ya’akov*’s encounter represents the creation of the *Ma’ariv* (evening service). Why did God appear to *Ya’akov* using the name *Hamakom* (the place), a name God rarely uses? This was to remind *Ya’akov* that, though he was away from home, he could access God in this new place, for God is “The Place.” In other words, God happens to be in whichever place you find yourself to be.

Ya’akov then dreamt of a ladder reaching to heaven. God appearing atop the ladder affirmed the patriarchal *Brit*, promising to safeguard *Ya’akov*. *Ya’akov* awoke, exclaiming “Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know...this is the abode of God and the gate to heaven.” In essence *Ya’akov* had stumbled upon the world’s first synagogue, for he had found a way even away from home of connecting with God.

The descendants of *Ya’akov*, namely the kingdom of Judah, survived exile precisely because they learned the lesson of *Ya’akov*’s encounter and found ways to make Judaism portable by creating synagogues. By the time the second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. and sacrificial worship ended, the synagogue had been developing and was able to offer an alternative form of worship. In some places synagogues functioned primarily as prayer halls, in

others as study halls, and yet in others as meeting houses (the Hebrew expression for synagogue is *Bet Knesset*, a place of assembly). All three usages have one thing in common: they allow Jews to connect with God and bring God into this world.

Ya'akov's encounter reminds us that, even in the darkest of times and in the strangest of places, God can appear to us. But we shouldn't simply hope that God will appear in the nick of time. We can invite God to join us by building houses that allow us to speak to God communally through prayer and hear God's voice through Torah study. No matter where we find ourselves, let us not forget that God is looking to join us. Let's be prepared to welcome him. By doing so, we remind ourselves of the covenant God made with our ancestors and of our divinely sanctioned mission of bringing God into our world.