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D'var Torah for Friday, December 11
Parasha Vayeishev, Genesis 37:1-40:23
Congregation Or Chadash, Chicago Illinois

“One Sealed Vial”

This parasha, “Vayeishev,” is well known and much discussed. Biblical scholars say that this parasha begins the “Joseph story cycle,” which continues until the end of Genesis. “Vayeishev” features the famous Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob and the first son of Rachel, who died after giving birth to one of Joseph’s other brothers, Benjamin.

Spoiled, tactless, and favored by his father, Joseph demonstrates a talent for having and interpreting prophetic dreams. He talks about these dreams, which tell of his future glory as a leader, in an arrogant way to his father, and especially his brothers, who then dislike him even more. When he is seventeen, they plot to kill him, but, at Judah’s suggestion, they sell him to a caravan of Midianite merchants, instead, and he is taken to Egypt and resold to one of Pharaoh’s officers, Potiphar. The brothers convince Jacob that his son is dead by showing him Joseph’s tunic of many colors dipped in goat’s blood.

This parasha also tells of two women who seek to initiate intimate encounters. One is Tamar and her encounter with Joseph’s aforementioned brother Judah, who happens to be her father-in-law. After losing her husband, Tamar poses as a cult prostitute and solicits Judah, who does not recognize her. She becomes pregnant by him and gives birth to two sons, one of whom will be a forefather of King David. Her story is a compelling one. She is viewed by many as assertive and resourceful, a model of female independence for those times. The other woman is Potiphar’s wife, who attempts to seduce Joseph who is “fair of form and fair of appearance” (P.221, *The Torah, A Women’s Commentary*) and fails. The wife, who is unnamed, accuses Joseph of rape, and he is wrongfully imprisoned. But as verse 21 in Chapter 29 says, “God was with Joseph,” who finds favor with the prison warden and becomes a kind of supervisor. He practices dream interpretation for two prisoners, the Pharaoh’s chief baker and chief cupbearer. The chief cupbearer is later reinstated, he will remember Joseph’s skill, and Joseph will interpret the seven years of abundance/seven years of famine dream for Pharaoh.

As evidenced in this parasha and the next one, dreams are a vehicle for communication and an excellent opportunity to practice intuition and sensitivity. Plenty of scholars and psychiatrists have commented on dreams. For scholars like Rabbi Jeffrey Glickman at Temple Beth Hillel in South Windsor, Connecticut, dreams can be a path to mindfulness. “Like Jacob, who paid attention to Joseph’s dreams and their effect on the family, we should be mindful of events and experiences that evoke a sense of the Divine.”

Rabbi Glickman writes: “That which we are mindful of becomes a part of us: We view the world through such filters. When we see the world in a certain way, we act accordingly, and through our actions, the world actually changes. Rather than allowing our minds to be filled with whatever bombards us, we should choose to be like Jacob,

who sought to record words and moments of transcendence. Although he couldn't foresee how the divine plan would unfold, he was keenly aware that it was being acted out around him and that he and his family were central to it."

The wisdom in a dreamscape can lead you to a deeper understanding of human experience (fear, joy, loss, love) and clarify or offer a realization. This mindfulness and attention help create a closeness to God, a reminder that God is present. It isn't always important to remember every detail (unless you are Joseph and you badly want to get out of jail). Often, the mood of a dream, the feeling you have upon awakening, is what matters. Was there a presence that comforted you? Did you awaken with a feeling of well-being or hopefulness? Was there a reconciliation with someone from whom you are or were estranged? These experiences provide a sense of the company of a higher being. I recall a dream I had in my twenties about my father, which gave me a glimpse of what it might be like to be a parent and feel powerless or incapable of protecting your child against harm. It would behoove me to keep this in mind when I think about my other parent.

So mindfulness, the calm awareness of one's self, one's feelings, and one's consciousness, can help you recognize and even invite God's company. It will help you access a higher plane, more thoughtful action and behavior. This becomes difficult, perhaps, after the Days of Awe have passed, and you find yourself having to re-engage with the mundane. If we do slow down, practice mindfulness, and consider periods of quiet (as the Mussar tradition would suggest), we can better sense that force we call God.

In regard to higher forces, we have arrived tonight at the Festival of Dedication, also known as Hanukkah. This ancient winter festival continues until Saturday, December 19. It acknowledges God's presence — and a pretty impressive miracle — with lighting candles on a menorah, singing, and a lot of potatoes in a frying pan. In her book, *Jewish Family Celebrations*, Arlene Rossen Cardozo describes this festival as celebrating the Jewish refusal to assimilate into a majority culture. Though it is not prescribed in the Torah, she explains, this holiday has been a "major source of light to Jewish families the world over" during the dark winters. Cardozo writes: "Whatever the origin of the Hanukkah candle-lighting custom, it has come to symbolize Jewish survival against all odds. The account given in the Talmudic commentaries (the Gemara) maintains that when Judah Maccabee regained the Temple, he found all the sacramental oil profaned, except for one sealed vial, which held enough oil to burn in the Temple menorah for one day." In Temple times, she notes, the menorah was normally lit every day. The rest of the story is world history.

I would wager that most of us have our own version of one sealed vial, some thing we call a miracle, a force or element that holds out longer than we expect and supports us spiritually, mentally, or physically, especially during a critical time. This unexpected support is a way to think of the presence of God. A miracle, says the dictionary, is defined as a wonder, a marvel, a wonderful or surpassing example of some quality. Miracles can be large and dramatic, or they can fly by us in the course of an afternoon, and we are likely to overlook them.

I have recognized God in momentous events in my family's history, in their circumstances leaving the Ukraine and obtaining false passports to arrive in the United States, but I might also remember to see the sacred in everyday secular life. When we go from one road to another, one elevated Red Line stop to another, one security line in one airport —without mishap and with luggage — this is pretty spectacular for some of us.

When circumstances proceed smoothly, harmoniously, that is noteworthy. Some of us recovered from surgery this past year and seem to be well and thriving. Some of us experienced physical pain and other difficulties but are now up and running around as usual. Or Chadash is still vibrant and active after more than 30 years, which might also feel like a miracle on certain days. This, too, is a manifestation of God's presence, isn't it?

But in thinking, again, of mindfulness, I believe you can recognize transcendence in any act that is constructive or creative: in furthering a true and caring community, in expressing true affection and engaging in good deeds, in appreciating artistic expression, and in sustaining true friendship.