

Parshat Vayeytze
The Decade from Hell
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We are still weeks away from the end of 2009 but Time Magazine apparently didn't think it was too early to pass judgment not only on the year, but on the entire decade as the cover of this weeks magazine shows the picture of a baby preparing to usher in a new year – crying and the text reads in bold print: “Goodbye to the decade from hell.” The article suggests that the decade began with the predictions of the Y2K worldwide computer meltdown that would paralyze commerce and make life difficult if not impossible for everyone and it was to begin January 1, 2000 - a meltdown that never materialized. But the article goes on to suggest that the decade was bookended by 9/11 at the start and a financial wipeout at the end and in the words of the Time Magazine article, “the first 10 years of this century will very likely go down as the most dispiriting and disillusioning decade Americans have live through in the post – World War II era.” They even suggested giving it a name, calling it the decade from Hell, or the Reckoning, or the Decade of Broken Dreams or the Lost Decade.

Now I will leave it to others to debate whether this was in fact the worse decade since WWII, but what is not debatable is that the article is accurately capturing a spirit of gloom and doom that seems to be prevalent and significant. Between our ongoing struggle against radical Islam, a war that we so far don't seem to be winning, and our recent near-death economic experience – most of us feel like we have taken a beating and it is not surprising that according to the Time Magazine article Americans have a very dark view of recent history: as a nation we are not in a good mood.

Just flipping through the magazines pictorial essay of the “10 worst things of the worst decade ever” – it is hard not to admit that they have a point. There are pictures of the contested presidential election of 2000, the fall of the World Trade Center, the invasion of Afghanistan, the war on Iraq, the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the market meltdown in 2008, Bernie Madoff, the disintegration of Detroit and Guantanamo – wow they sure make a good case for being depressed. It is not easy to be an optimist these days. The world does indeed seem to be falling apart. But there is a significant difference between how we *should* feel and how we *do* feel and the one should not be confused with the other.

I don't know about you – but even though Time Magazine makes a really persuasive argument why I should be feeling really depressed – I don't. Even though Time Magazine makes a rational argument for why this was the worst 10 years in a long time – that is not how I feel – and I suspect that I am not alone. In psychology it is called a “disconnect between affect and effect” – and it can be a cause for concern about the psychological health of the patient but truth is, I don't think we are crazy. I don't think we are crazy at all.

When a person experiences a terrible loss but speaks in an upbeat, joyful tone – I can understand why a therapist may be concerned. When someone experiences a joyous occasion – a wedding or the birth of a child – but speaks in a depressed tone – again, I understand why alarm bells might go off - -but when Time Magazine confronts us with evidence of this being a really bad time and many of us – just aren't ready to fold up the tents and declare defeat – I don't think this is a sign of mental illness but maybe just the opposite – it

maybe in fact a sign of our mental health. This possibility first occurred to me when I was in Israel.

If ever there was a country that ought to be in a national state of depression – it is arguably Israel. Whenever I am in Israel I am treated to briefings by leaders in one or another area of the country – politicians speak of the deadlock that is the Israeli political system – designed for gridlock and based on such pettiness and vindictiveness it is no surprise that good people want no part of it. The prevalence of so many small parties makes it practically impossible to propose anything of significance. The country does not even have a constitution. Want to talk about education – Israel is rapidly approaching third world status. Poverty is on the rise as the divide between rich and poor grows with each passing day. The divide between the secular and ultra-orthodox has never been greater. Tensions exist everywhere you look. Generals speak to us of the bleak outlook that confronts Israel on every military front – Hamas and Hizbollah have rearmed themselves with bigger and better missiles that can now reach every major city in the country. Syria is empowered and allied with Iran – Jordan and Egypt – the only two Arab countries Israel has made peace with - have never been weaker – Hamas is strong, the PLO is weak, Iran is developing a nuclear weapon and threatens to use it to annihilate Israel – and the whole world seems to believe that Israel is the problem. Israel's dilemma is not looking back on a bad decade – its entire national history has been an unending story of gloom and doom. In 61+ years since its founding, Israel has hardly known a moment of peace.

And yet, each time I go to Israel I am always amazed by the difference between what I hear and what I see. I hear gloom and doom. I see vibrancy and vitality. After listening to the experts, I expect to go out and see a country in a national state of depression – but I don't. The cafes are full, life goes on and people are engaged in the day-to-day challenges of living and building a life and a country. To walk the streets of Israel is to feel the energy and dynamism of a country on the move. How is that possible? Don't they know how bad things are?

On a recent trip I traveled to *Kiryat Bialik* a suburb of Haifa to meet, Rabbi Mauricio Balter a colleague of mine who was ordained in the *Seminario Rabbinico* in Argentina - which is affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary. Upon ordination, he approached the Mayor of *Kiryat Bialik* - a wholly secular town, and said that he wanted to begin the process of bringing Jews from Argentina to Haifa to settle and to live and in the last 15 years or so - Rabbi Balter has single handedly organized the immigration of over 1500 Argentinean Jews to *Kiryat Bialik* - where they now live as a vibrant and vital part of the life of that community - demonstrating the power of Jewish hope and vision and the vibrancy of the Jewish vision that we represent. It is a miracle to see what has happened there and the relationship and respect that Rabbi Balter has earned in a country that too often sees religion as the source of all that is wrong with the world.

Those of us who visited were treated to a presentation by a troop of some 30-50 young people ranging from ages 6-18 who presented a musical presentation for us at the community center of *Kiryat Bialik* - it was overwhelming. We saw these young people sing - of their love for *Eretz Yisrael*, we saw Ethiopian children, and Iranian children, and Russian children linked arm in arm singing of their hope for a better tomorrow in the Land of our ancestors. We were all brought to tears - how could we explain this energy? How could we understand this optimism and enthusiasm after all that we had heard, after all that we had learned in the briefings that

had been presented to us? Didn't these young people know of the realities that awaited them? Didn't they know anything of the world in which they lived?

Both the Time Magazine Article and my experiences in Israel highlighted the same conundrum. How can things be so good if things are so bad? *They* tell us all the reasons we should be depressed. However, *we* don't feel that way. We are not ready to crawl into our beds, pull the covers over our heads and declare defeat – on the contrary – we celebrate our *simchas* and embrace our holidays – we enjoy our friends and family and count our blessings when we should be doing just the opposite.

There is a fascinating *midrash* on a textual problem in today's torah reading that may shed light on our dilemma. The Torah speaks of Jacob fleeing from his brother Esau - whose birthright he had stolen and whose anger he had aroused. The torah speaks of a lonely night on the road and a young frightened Jacob who lays his head down on a rock to sleep, and of a dream of a ladder extending from heaven to earth and angels of the Lord descending and ascending that ladder.

Now if you think about it – Jacob, like us, like our friends and relatives in Israel had much to be pessimistic about. He was alone; he was frightened that a vengeful brother may be after him. He was alienated from his family and his home. And there, alone, on the road far from home, with a rock for his pillow, he dreams of a ladder to heaven and angels ascending and descending on it. And Jacob who is overwhelmed by the dream takes a solemn oath – let's take a look at the wording of that oath: page 168 in our *Chumashim* – ch 28:20. "Jacob then made a vow, saying: "If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house – the Lord shall be my God."

The rabbis had a lot of problems with this vow. First of all – it sounds as if Jacob is making a deal with God – that Jacob is suggesting that his faith in God might be contingent on God delivering the goods as it were. They didn't like that possibility at all – and a good deal of the commentary is spent explaining that couldn't be what Jacob meant. The second problem the rabbis had is that God had already promised him that He would be with him! Seven verses earlier – on the previous page, as part of the dream God speaks to Jacob and explicitly says, "I am the Lord, the God of your father...and the ground on which you are lying will I assign to you and your offspring – I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land..."

So it surely does not seem very nice that right after God assures Jacob that He will protect him and bring him back – that Jacob says: "Well God if you will protect me and bring me back – than you will be my God?" Wasn't Jacob listening? And the rabbis spend a lot of time dealing with *this* problem. But, there is yet another problem in this short but as you now see very problematic text – this one requires a little knowledge of Hebrew and Hebrew grammar – so bear with me – if we turn to the Hebrew side of the page – we see the words: v.20 – *Vayidor Yaakov neder laymor* – "Jacob made a vow saying: *Im yihyeh elohim imadi* – If God remains with me.... And later in that same vow, right after the statement – "and if I return safely to my father's house," we see the words: *V'haya adonai li leylohim* – – the Lord shall be my God. "If God will do these things for me, *then*, if this should happen, the Lord will be my God." The rabbis said that God took these words uttered by Jacob and made them key words for the redemption of his future descendants. What word was the key - the rabbis say: *v'haya*. You

see there are two words - similar but different that are found frequently throughout the Biblical narrative. One is this word: *v'haya* which literally means: "and it was.."; the other - similar word is; "*V'yiye*" - which means, "and it will be". "*V'haya - v'yeyeh*" So similar - just flip one letter- yet so different say the rabbis. The first, *v'haya* - say the rabbis, is a sad word. It is a word filled with agony. Whenever it appears in the Torah it does not auger well - it focuses on past, on the history of Israel's suffering, its trials and tribulations. *But, yiye-* that say the rabbis is a very different word - it is an expression of joy and hope and optimism - it is a vision of the future and whenever it appears it speaks of the possibility of a better world, of an Israel that will suffer no more but be fully and wholly redeemed. This word, say the rabbis is the key to Israel's future redemption.

And the rabbis were unhappy with Jacob for yet another reason in this vow because he got his tenses mixed up – if you notice which comes first? *Yiye!* And which comes second: *v'haya!* He got it backwards! His dream forced him to look forward and he got all excited and hopeful and then he awoke and he confronted his reality – alone, running from his brother – he looked back and got worried and scared and made his conditional vow, unsure, untrusting – because he focused on the reality that was before him rather than the possibilities that lay in front of him. The dream tried to get Jacob to look forward – but he insisted on looking backward and he was not yet Jacob, he still had a lot of work ahead of him – to become the great leader and visionary he was destined to become.

The rabbis were upset with Jacob because his reaction was so – well un-Jewish. God had given him a vision of a bright future and he remained mired in his past. God had given him a vision of heaven and he remained rooted here on earth. It is the fundamental genetic disposition of our people to see the possibility in the world. That no matter how desperate our current plight, no matter how grim the circumstances - to be a Jew means that there is always hope for the future. And because Jacob was not there yet – they were unhappy with him.

When we conclude our Service today, we will conclude it as we always do, as we conclude all of our Services, with the singing of *Aleinu*. We will rise and join in joyous recitation of the words of the prophet: *V'neemar V'haya adonai l'melech al kol haaretz - bayom hahu, yiye adonai echad u'shemo echad - And it shall come to pass in that day that the Lord will be King, and in that day God will be One and his Name One!*

Notice here again we have the appearance of *v'haya* and *yiye*, but here the prophet gets it right – his vision begins with *v'haya* - the broken world in which we live - and ends with *yiye* - a vision of the world redeemed - of a better world in which we can all rejoice. This one verse captures the entirety of the Jewish approach to life - understand it and you understand it all.

How could those young Israelis sing and dance and rejoice in such a broken difficult world in which we live? Because that is what it means to be a Jew – to be able to sing and dance and rejoice in a broken world. *V'haya - v-yiyeh* - the present does not exist in isolation, it is not a unit unto itself - but merely a single point on a line that extends backward and forward in time - it is a dream that begins with the past but knows how to envision the future. Jacob's ladder was grounded here on earth but it reached up to heaven.

Time Magazine and *Yaakov Avinu* – both make the same mistake – they focus too much on the past which can indeed be very depressing. Fortunately *Yaakov Avinu* learned his lesson and in the process he was transformed into *Yisrael*, the Jewish people – a people who knew

how to dream and how to celebrate life – *af al pi cheyn v'lamrot hakol* – even though and in spite of everything that has happened to us. I am not at all confident that Time Magazine will learn this lesson. Time Magazine would have us all sign up for a world of gloom and doom. The decade from hell, the Decade of Broken Dreams or the Lost Decade. They see only the agony of the past and not the possibilities of the future.

Yes, it has been a rough decade – truth been told – it has been rough for much longer than a decade – but like Yaakov Avinu, we still have our dream – and like those children in Kiryat Bialik we still know how to sing.

I hope we will live to see those dreams fulfilled and until then may we each act in such a way so that our determination, our resolve, our courage will bring that future redemption a little closer: *V'neemar V'haya adonai l'melech al kol haaretz - bayom hahu, yiye adonai echad u'shemo echad - And it shall come to pass in that day that the Lord will be King, and in that day God will be One and his Name One!*