

Jacob's initial relationship with God was limited and defined by his father's worldview and the narrow social context of Eretz Yisrael. Jacob awakens in Beersheba finding himself in a new cultural setting. His changing environment leads him to the revelation of God as an undefined, moving, and fluid entity.

Unlike his father's stationary and culturally static lifestyle, Jacob's destiny has him wandering around the map. He emerges as the father of Knesset Yisrael encompassing twelve different tribal voices. God must be re-envisioned to hear the multiple voices emanating from Jacob's plurality of worlds. Only after Jacob attains that vision — a vision that "God is what He will be" — does God become "known" to him personally. With this in mind, Jacob proclaims "if God will protect me in my travels... I shall make Him my God" (20–22). Living in a global age that celebrates difference, let us rise to the challenge that Jacob put forth — creating multicultural optics for making God our God.

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What does it mean to awaken? In this case, Yaakov is descending from a vision of the ladder of angels and of God speaking to him. He was close to what the kabbalists called *Mochin Gadlut*, the Greater Consciousness, the God Consciousness space. This is the space from which a seer, a prophet, sees God.

What does it mean to know? *Da'at*, in one system of the kabbalistic "Tree of Life," is a *sephirah* that follows *chochmah*, wisdom, and *binah*, understanding or insight. From *da'at* the other *sephiroth* grow. So how could Yaakov not know that God was in this place? In Yaakov's descent on the ladder, he returned to *Mochin Katnut*, ordinary everyday consciousness. That is where unity is shattered into dualities — knowing and not knowing. In that place, a place of restricted vision, if there is no visible evidence that God was there, then God was not there. The paradox is that God is always there; we have only to focus our eyes into that place of vision.

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Rashi interprets the phrase "and I knew it not" as implying that had Jacob known of the place's great sanctity he would not have slept there. Astounding! Awakening from a magnificent prophetic vision assuring his own future well-being as well as the perpetuity of the people Israel, Jacob's immediate response is not one of joy but of concern at having improperly (and unwittingly) impinged upon the site's holiness. After all, Jacob describes this place as the house of God and the gateway to heaven.

An understanding might lie in Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's observation that the pagan conception of ritual is nothing more than spiritual self-stimulation. Devoid of intrinsic meaning, its validation inheres solely in its impact on the performer's psyche.

In Jewish terms, however, a true spiritual experience — however personally empowering — is above all a vehicle for the ultimate goal of relating to the will of the Holy One. Better to forgo the experience, says Jacob, when it comes at the expense of overstepping the bounds of the holy. Every successful relationship, no less with the Divine, must balance heady intimacy with circumspect restraint.

ויקץ יעקב משנתו ויאמר אכן יש ה' במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי.
בראשית כ"ט:

And Yaakov awoke out of his sleep and said, "Surely God is in this place and I, I knew it not." Genesis 28:16

From this verse are many lessons to teach! 1. God's presence is everywhere, all the time. Think of the most unlikely, God-forsaken places. Now think of how God's presence truly is there. 2. Context. Jacob is fleeing from: a) Esau, who wants to murder him for stealing his birthright and blessing; b) Isaac to whom he has lied; c) Rebecca who had seduced Jacob into lying. Wasn't God present at those times too and Jacob "...knew it not?" 3. Rabbi Larry Kushner says the extra "Anokhe," "I," is the ego, the self-centered "self" that keeps a person from being aware of God. 4. Why the "Surely" (*ah-chayn*)? It's superfluous. *Ah-chayn* can also mean "Yes, but": "Yes, but is there God in this place?" Maybe Jacob wasn't so sure? After all, he had been dreaming. 5. "Knew." In the daily *amidah*, we ask for knowledge, *day-ah*, wisdom, *beenah*, and discernment, *hahs-kayl*. What's the difference between them?

Day-ah means knowledge (information); *beenah* means build on that knowledge in order to wisely interact with life; *hahs-kayl* (intelligence) refers to the ability to discern what patterns. Knowing the facts is just the beginning. Discern what they mean. Build them into a meaningful guide for life. Then follow the plan. Jacob is just beginning. With this epiphany, Jacob is just beginning to wrestle with God.

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*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."