**Bereshit Chapter 28 בְּרֵאשִׁית**

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| **י**וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב, מִבְּאֵר שָׁבַע; וַיֵּלֶךְ, חָרָנָה. | **10** And Ya’akov went out from Be’er-sheva, and went toward Haran. |
| **יא**  וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיָּלֶן שָׁם, כִּי-בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, וַיִּקַּח מֵאַבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם, וַיָּשֶׂם מְרַאֲשֹׁתָיו; וַיִּשְׁכַּב, בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא. | **11** And came to a certain place, and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place, and set it at his head, and lay down in that place. |
| **יב**  וַיַּחֲלֹם, וְהִנֵּה סֻלָּם מֻצָּב אַרְצָה, וְרֹאשׁוֹ, מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמָיְמָה; וְהִנֵּה מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים, עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ. | **12** And he dreamed, and [הִנֵּה- here] a ladder was set up on the earth, its top reaching the heavens; and here: messengers of God were going up and down on it. |
| **יג**  וְהִנֵּה יְהוָה נִצָּב עָלָיו, וַיֹּאמַר, אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אָבִיךָ, וֵאלֹהֵי יִצְחָק; הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ--לְךָ אֶתְּנֶנָּה, וּלְזַרְעֶךָ. | **13** And [ הִנֵּה- here]: God was standing over (or beside) him, and said: 'I am Adonai, the God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzak. The land on which you lie I give to you and to your seed. |
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| **טז**  וַיִּיקַץ יַעֲקֹב, מִשְּׁנָתוֹ, וַיֹּאמֶר, אָכֵן יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה; וְאָנֹכִי, לֹא יָדָעְתִּי. | 16. And Ya’akov woke from his sleep, and he said, "Indeed, God is in this place, and I, I did not know." |
| **יז**  וַיִּירָא, וַיֹּאמַר, מַה-נּוֹרָא, הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה:  אֵין זֶה, כִּי אִם-בֵּית אֱלֹהִים, וְזֶה, שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמָיִם. | **17** He was awestruck, and said: 'How awe-inspiring is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and that is the gate of heaven.' |
| **יח**  וַיַּשְׁכֵּם יַעֲקֹב בַּבֹּקֶר, וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר-שָׂם מְרַאֲשֹׁתָיו, וַיָּשֶׂם אֹתָהּ, מַצֵּבָה; וַיִּצֹק שֶׁמֶן, עַל-רֹאשָׁהּ. | **18** And Ya’akov arose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, and set it up as a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. |
| **יט**  וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שֵׁם-הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא, בֵּית-אֵל; וְאוּלָם לוּז שֵׁם-הָעִיר, לָרִאשֹׁנָה. | **19** And he called the name of that place Beth-el (city of God), but the name of the city had, at first, been Luz. |
| **כ**  וַיִּדַּר יַעֲקֹב, נֶדֶר לֵאמֹר:  אִם-יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי, וּשְׁמָרַנִי בַּדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ, וְנָתַן-לִי לֶחֶם לֶאֱכֹל, וּבֶגֶד לִלְבֹּשׁ. | **20** And Ya’akov vowed a vow, saying: 'If God will be with me, and will watch over me on this way that I go, and will give me food to eat, and clothes to wear, |
| **כא**  וְשַׁבְתִּי בְשָׁלוֹם, אֶל-בֵּית אָבִי; וְהָיָה יְהוָה לִי, לֵאלֹהִים. | **21** and if I come back to my father's house in peace [then]Adonai will be to me my God, |

**Leading Idea: What do we think about God?**

Ya’akov’s experience of encountering God in his dream opens up an opportunity for students to explore their own ideas about God. How do they understand God talk? It is very important to remember that the goal is not to lead everyone to any particular position on God, or even belief in God, but rather, to offer them a wide range of possible ways of thinking about God and to offer them a richer more nuanced language through which they might reflect on their own theological ideas , understandings, challenges, uncertainties and commitments. After the discussion guide there are several quotes from different sources that students could read and discuss.

**Discussion Plan: Our Ideas of God**

*The idea of God can be something we wrestle with for a very long time; for some people for their entire lives. Indicate what you think of the following possibilities (these possibilities reflect many philosophical positions in Western and Jewish thought). For each possibility, consider how it would affect the way we thought about the world and life.*

1. Is it possible that God once existed, but no longer exists?
2. Is it possible that God is nature? (if so, what might this mean?)
3. Is it possible that God is something beyond the world (beyond nature?)
4. Is it possible that God exists within you? What might this mean?
5. Is it possible that God is a physical being?
6. Is it possible that God is an literary character? A character in the Bible rather than a force in the world?
7. Is it possible that God is female?
8. Is it possible that God does not exist?
9. Is it possible that God exists as an ideal (like peace or justice)?
10. Is it possible that God is everything and we are a part of God?
11. Is it possible that God is another name for our conscience?

**God is not a Person**

By Roland Gittlesohn, *Wings of the Morning*.

Not all modern religious Jews interpret God in exactly the same way. .. For all, however, God is… [ under some description, a way of addressing]:

1. The spiritual power which creates and sustains nature.
2. The energizing force which has been slowly working through evolution toward fulfillment of a plan. Not every detail of this plan has been projected in advance.
3. The Moral Power which impels and governs the operation of Moral Law. We see a portion of this Power within ourselves as conscience.

There is a fourth possible interpretation of God. We can think of Him as… a Goal…. God, in short, can be considered as a combination of all our ethical goals… In this sense, the more ethical our behavior becomes, the more closely we can be said to resemble the image of God in which we were created.

**Leading Idea: The feeling of Awe**

When Ya’akov awakes the text tells us he was ‘awestruck’ (וַיִּירָא). The word ִירָא is also often translated as fear. The same term, for instance, is used to describe the Israelites feeling as the Egyptian army came toward them at the Reed sea. Some have also described this feeling as a sense of our own smallness in the face of something much larger than ourselves (to sense it or be swept up in it). In other contexts ירָא השמיים, - fear of the heavens – is seen as the kind of awe, or fear, in which we are acutely aware of our responsibilities in relation to what it means to live in God’s presence.

In this case Ya’akov’s sense of awe in verses 16&17 seems to be close to what, in philosophy, has been spoken about as the experience of *realization*. The experience of something we didn’t know becoming suddenly clear to us (a moment of insight, or discovery) it is the kind of ‘coming to know’ in which:

... the knower’s own life thickens and solidifies. The reality in his realizing turns out to be his own as well as the fact’s.… It is as though the realizer of a truth owns it or otherwise has power through it instead of just happening to be in the neighborhood when it is apprehensible.

Steven Smith: “Realizing” in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1992. p. 363.

In the following discussion plan and exercises we explore these meaning of awe. This is particularly important because of the verses that follow – Y’akov’s conditions for accepting God as his God. If he has just had this powerful experience, how do we understand the conditionality of his taking this God on as his own God?

**Discussion Plan: The experience of Awe**

1. Are there times you can think of when you have been stuck with awe? Can you describe the situation and feeling?
2. When we say something is ’awesome’, what might we mean?
3. When we say something is awe-inspiring, what might we mean?
4. If you are in awe of someone else – does this mean you are afraid of them?

5. If you find something awesome, does that mean it has to be good?

6. Are there times where you are aware of the world around you as mysterious?

7. If you are in awe of something does that mean you are amazed by it? Explain?

8. Does being in awe – or seeing something as awesome – require you to *look at it* a different way than you usually look at things?

**Discussion: Knowledge and ignorance – four logical possibilities**

In small groups, fill out examples for the four categories.

**Know Don’t know**

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| --- | --- |
| **Things I know that I know**  **Know Don’t know** | **Things that I don’t know that I know** |
| **Things that I know that I don’t know** | **Things that I don’t know that I don’t know** |

In what square would you put ‘God exists’ and ‘God does’t exist’?

**Exercise: The experience of awe**

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| **Each of these experiences are ones which someone might describe as being ‘ירא‘ - ‘awesome’ or as themselves ‘being struck with awe’ – which kinds of ‘ירא‘ might they mean?** | Amazing – Astonishing | The feeling that this is a moment of great significance that carries with it responsibilities | The feeling of being swept up in something much larger than myself | Fear | A moment of realization – of insight when it all made sense to me | A feeling of Reverence,  ( deep respect or awe toward another person, or awe toward God) |
| Watching the man on the High-wire do a somersault |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Being part of the human wave in the soccer stadium |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| A father on first seeing his new-born child (or you seeing your baby brother/sister for the first time) |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| On Kol Nidre in synagogue, as you enter the spirit of Yom Kippur |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| The feeling that can overcome you when all the pieces of a problem fall into place and you suddenly know what to do. |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Walking up to the front of the synagogue to say a prayer or give a speech to everyone in the congregation. |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| The feeling you have when your parents do something that shows how much they care about you –leaving you in awe of the kind of parents they are |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| You are at a safari park when an elephant starts coming toward you, looking like it is ready to charge. |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| You are on the top of a mountain and see a beautiful sunrise |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Intertextual Exploration: ‘ירא‘**

**Look up the following passages:**

**Which kind of ,’awe’ do you think best describes this moment of ‘ירא‘ ?**

Bereshit 18:15;

Bersehit 32:12.

Vayikra 19:3

Shemot 14:31.

* Do you agree with the choice of word the translator has used?
* Look at different Torah translations (Everrett Fox, Plaut, Etz Haim, etc,) - what choices do they make?

**Discussion Plan: Realization**

1. Can someone be in the room without you knowing it?
2. Can you know someone is the room without realizing they are there?
3. A friend says “I’m sorry, I only now realize why you are upset at me”? – what does ‘realizing’ mean in this case?
4. What is the difference between knowing something and realizing it?
5. Can you come to a realization, and yet not know anything more than you knew before?
6. When you come to realize something, can this take you by surprise?
7. When you realize something is true – does that mean you now *believe* it is true?
8. You overhear someone say? “Doesn’t she realize who she is?” – what could they mean?

**Leading Idea: “If-Then” – the language of Conditionals**

The language of “If-Then” is the language of *conditionals*. It is of the form

‘IF \_\_\_condition\_\_\_, THEN \_\_\_consequence\_\_\_”

Sometimes the connection between conditions and consequences are so tight we consider the conditions *necessarily* *cause* of the consequence (“If ice is left in open air of 700F, then it will melt) – at other times the relations in the conditional point to a form of formal contract or a promise. There is nothing that ties the two events together other than the conditional. For example, “If you do your homework, then we will have pizza tonight”). “Having pizza might still be a consequence of having finished your homework – no homework, no pizza -, but it was not a necessary consequence – it wasn’t inevitable, rather it followed from a choice make a promise (where a promise is a kind of agreement or contract) that acts to create a link between a certain set of conditions and an outcome. ‘Doing homework” is now the cause of a rather arbitrary effect (having pizza for dinner).

When Ya’akov states a list of conditions to God , stating that only after these are carried out in the full, he will take God to be his God, how tight is the connection between condition and consequence? Is it that *if* all this follows he will *then* have come to accept God – that is, his acceptance of God will be crystalized or constructed through these conditions being met (no further things needing to be done – God is now his God)- or is it that he is setting a contract or making a promise– only after God fulfills his side of the bargain, will he fulfill his. That is, and it will then take an additional act of will on his part to accept God as his God (once God has shown he/she is worthy)?? This is an importance difference - Do we choose to ‘take God to be our God’ or is it the natural outcome of conditions being met along the way? Can we ‘choose to believe?’ The following discussion plans and sources explore this issue. When we bargain with God (if he gets better, I will be good / go to synagogue regularly) is this the game we are playing? In what ways are such conditionals binding

**Exercise: “If - Then”**

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|  | Will naturally happen / follow | Contracted to happen – additional effort needed | Might happen –  a possibility |
| “If you put the ice cube tray on the table in 70oF heat, then the ice will melt” |  |  |  |
| “if we have time we can go to the pool” |  |  |  |
| “If you finish all your homework, we will have pizza” |  |  |  |
| “If you break the glass you will have to pay for it” |  |  |  |
| “If you pray for him, he won’t die” |  |  |  |
| “If I get an A on the test, I will be so happy!” |  |  |  |
| “If you really practice hard you will win” |  |  |  |
| “If you are good , nothing bad can happen to you” |  |  |  |

**Discussion Plan: Using Conditionals in our lives.**

1. Do you ever use the language of conditionals with your parents, or them with you (eg, “If you….. then …..”?)
2. If your parents were to say “if you finish all your homework then we will have pizza tonight” do you think they are making a kind of contract with you or making a promise to you? Is there a difference?
3. Have you ever used an ‘if… then… ‘ with God? Is this like making God a promise or making a contract?
4. Do you think you can decide to believe in God or is belief just something you have or don’t have?
5. Ya’akov wakes from his dream awestruck after his dream. “God is in this place” he says. He seems to be guenuinely moved - does it make sense for him, just 2 verses later to then be setting God lots of conditions to be met if he is to then become Ya’akov’s God? How do you make sense of this?

**Activity: Conditionals in the lives of Biblical Characters**

**In small groups, look up the following passages (one per group):**

* What is the *Condition* being set, what is/are the *Consequences*?
* What is the motivation behind it?
* Is the conditional ‘tight’ (where it necessarily follows) or is it ‘loose’ (a matter of contract – if so, does there seem to be any logical connection between condition and consequence, or is it just arbitrary?).

**Make up a short play in which you act this out.**

* Come together, share your skits and compare notes.

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| Yiftah  **Judges 11:29-35** |  |
| Hanna  **I Samuel 1:10-12 & 1:20--24** |  |
| God  **Bereshit 17:20-26 (esp. 26)** |  |

**Discussion Plan: Believing**

1. If you say you believe in fair play, does that mean that you:

1. think there is fair play
2. think there ought to be fair play
3. think that it is reasonable to expect there to be fair play
4. Are making a conscious choice to believe that fair play is a good thing..
5. Something else
6. If you say you believe that there are ghosts, does that mean you:
7. Think there are ghosts
8. Think there ought to be ghosts
9. Think that it is reasonable to expect there to be such things as ghosts
10. Are making a conscious choice to believe that ghosts are real.
11. Something else
12. If you say that you believe in God does that mean that you:
    1. Think there is a God
    2. Think that there ought to be a God
    3. Think that it is reasonable to expect there to be a God
    4. Are making a conscious choice to believe that ‘God exists’ is true.
    5. Something else

1a. Can you *know* something without *believing* it?

1b. Can you *believe* something without *knowing* it?

2a. Can you *believe* something you *doubt*?

2b. Can you *doubt* something you believe *and continue to believe it*?

3a. Can you *believe* something without *understanding* it?

3b. Can you *understand* something without *believing* it?

**Think about your own life:**

* Are their things that you aren't certain about but still believe in?
* How do you think you have arrived at these beliefs?
* Are their people or ideas that you think you will *always* believe in?
* Can we consciously choose to believe something? Can we consciously choose to believe *in* something?

**Leading Idea: Belief and Faith are not the same**

What does it take to believe in God? To have faith in his or her existence? Faith has different meanings – it might mean:

1. *To trust in someone or something* – for instance, in lending you money I have faith that you will do the right thing and pay me back.
2. *To believe without having good reasons to support that belief* - for instance, I can have faith that there will be peace in the world one day.
3. *To commit to something by an act of will - to be loyal.* For instance, I might have faith in you that you will win the race because I am committed to you” - it would be disloyal to say (or think) that you don’t have a chance of winning.

Faith is different than belief because belief is grounded in reasons. If I say that I believe the White Sox will win against the Red Sox, I can be asked on what basis I am making that judgment – what evidence do I have that suggests they will win? However; if I say I have faith that the White Sox will win against them, then I am saying that while I have no reason for believing they are the better team, I am ‘backing them’ anyway and giving them my support.

God talk can rest on belief or faith. Given a central theme of this unit concerns wrestling with God, the distinction between believing in God and having faith in God might come up.

The following two quotes challenge the idea that faith comes out of nowhere. The first quote from Shemot Rabbah suggests that belief ‘on evidence’ (God first rescues Israel, then they believed) is more appropriate than faith. Whereas the quote from Heschel challenges the idea that faith is ungrounded. Heschel suggests that faith is the end result of a process, not a first step - a ‘leap’ taken *ex-nihilo* (*out of nothing*).

**If the students are discussing the idea of God, it might be helpful to look at the following three texts in order to get them to explore their own assumptions vis-à-vis belief and faith.**

**Bereshit 28: 16-21**

Look up Ya’akov’s dream, the awe he feels after it, and the reasoning he then goes through regarding what it would take in order for him to accept the Lord as his God.

**A woman came to the Belzer Rebbe** entreating his help through prayer. He asked whether she had sufficient faith. Said she: “In the Torah it is written that God first rescued Israel and

that [only] then they believed”

*Shemot Rabbah 15:2*

**There is no faith at first sight**. A faith that comes into being like a butterfly is ephemeral. He who is swift to believe is swift to forget. Faith does not come into being out of nothing, inadvertently, unprepared, as an unearned surprise. Faith is preceded by awe, by acts of amazement…

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p.153

**Faith**

**== Belief**

**Think about your own life:**

* Do you think that there are aspects of Jewish life that are more about what you do – the way you live - than about what you believe?
* Do you think that there are aspects of being Jewish that are more about faith and/ or belief than about what you do or don't do?
* To what extent do you think belief and/or Faith in God is important in order to be 'a good Jew'?
* To what extent do you think that you need to have belief or faith *in Judaism* (in its value) to be a good Jew?
* Which of the readings and/or discussions in this unit resonated with you the most?
* What questions are now foremost in your mind?