

Riboyno Shel Oylom
I will sing a song to You (familiar)
Where shall I seek You, Riboyno Shel Oylom?
And where shall I not seek You, Riboyno Shel Oylom?
Where can I find You, Riboyno Shel Oylom?
And where can I not find You, Riboyno Shel Oylom?
You, above; You, below;
East, You; West, You; South, You; North, You.

Jacob is fleeing from his past into an uncertain future. Jacob, the young man who took advantage of his brother's quick temper and his father's weakness. This man struggles with his demons, bargains with God, and wrestles a dark opponent in the night. In that dark night, he is renamed: Israel, "God wrestler." We take our name from a willing deceiver, a man whose inclination to bargain knows, it appears, no limits at all.

Here's the tale: In this week's parsha, Jacob has just begun his flight from a raging brother. He lies down in the black night and puts a stone under his head. He falls asleep to night visions, a dream of angels traveling before him, up and down a mysterious staircase of sorts, a ladder perhaps. Where is he? Heaven?

Suddenly, God is standing by, making promises, announcing a brilliant future for our clever ancestor. Jacob the deceiver – he's *God's* man.

When Jacob awakes he is back on the earth, it would seem. How awesome is this place, he says. This is the house of God, he says, and here is the gateway to heaven. The word for "place," *makom*, is also used as a synonym for God. God is – literally – all around him. Overhead, underneath, in every direction.

And from this wondrous moment Jacob awakes to fear and anxiety and lack of trust. God, he says, I'll take you for my own – but only if you make sure I have food and clothing and a safe return – someday – to my parents. Then, I'll give you a tenth of all I have. Then, I'll *be* your man.

We read this act of chutzpah, this bargaining with God and we are horrified. But let's be fair. What do we want? To be able to count on things, to escape the pain of change. We want God to give us a life we can take for granted. We want safety, security.

We know threat. We know danger. Our history is one long prayer for certainty, for safety. It is a painful inheritance.

Try this thought experiment: Imagine Jacob born in the twentieth century, in Europe. Let's even say Germany. This Jacob travels down the coast of the Rhine River, or the Mosel, or the Nahe river. One night, he camps by the waters, sits on the bank. The stars circle overhead; all is calm and sweet. He feels God's presence, God's compassion and tender love. He dreams of a climb into the very heavens above him.

The next morning, he awakes to the place, God's place. For is the Holy One not everywhere? Even in Germany in 1938?

It is November 1, 1938.

Our German Jacob knows the world is a dangerous place. So he makes a deal with the Holy One. Make sure I stay safe, he begs God. Make sure that I will come home to my family. I'll give back, I promise.

Eight days later, Kristallnacht.

Our ancient ancestor, our Jacob of Torah, knew how dangerous the world of his time was. What happens to visitors, travelers, strangers in Torah? Think back to the threats of the angry mobs of Sodom against the strangers Lot had offered hospitality to. Think of the horrific fate of the Levite's Concubine? Think of what happens to Jacob's own daughter, Dinah, when she goes out into the open. For those of you who are wondering what these stories tell us, here is the message: The world can be a dangerous place. Then, and now.

Rabbi Pinchas Halevi Horowitz (1730-1805), student of the Maggid of Mezritch asked: "When can a man experience God's nearness? When he is suffused by "I don't know," when he himself knows that he does not know and does not pretend to have wisdom and insight."

We bargain with God because we don't know. But we also bargain because we do know – this much, at least: There must be a partnership between divine and human.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg tells us what we should learn from the events of seven decades ago: To listen to the divine cry: God, Greenberg believes, is calling to all humanity to step up and grow up, to work for the complete eradication of all forms of cruelty, to build a world of peace.

May our all-too human struggles bring us closer to the God we long to know, for that God can give us strength for the tasks before us. May we forgive our own tremulous, pleading and bargaining voices – these are human ones. But may we also commit to work together to create a world without danger for our children, and children's children. May we feel free to ask for God's help.

May we succeed.