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“And I Did Not Know” Between Genesis' Jacob and Amazo n's Transparent

Michelle Lynn-Sachs | Text and the City | Vayetze

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We will be hosting a conversation with Micah Fitzerman Blue ('00), one of the writers of Transparent, to discuss his work and the show on December 10th at 1 pm. Be in touch with naamah@byfi.org if you are interested in joining!

Sometimes one turn of phrase is enough to spark a transformative moment. This is what happened to me when I read this week's Torah portion, Vayetze. In it we accompany Jacob on his exile to Haran, following the episode where he, and not Esau, receives Isaac's blessing. We see the images in his dream: the stairway with angels going up and down, and we hear God's promise that Jacob's descendants will be numerous, that they will be a blessing, and that he will be accompanied by God's protective presence. But of all this, it is his first response to the dream which caught my eye:

“And Joseph awoke from his sleep and said:

Indeed Adonai is in this place, and I did not know.” (Gen. 28:16)

וַיִּקְרַח יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁנָתוֹ, וַיֹּאמֶר: אֶכֶן יֵשׁ יי בְּמִקְוֹם הַזֶּה; וְאֲנֹכִי, לֹא יָדַעְתִּי (בראשית כח:טז)

I am fascinated by Jacob's statement. What is the significance of his "not knowing." What does it mean to "not know," and how does it play into the act of transformation?

This phrase sent me to an unlikely source. A few weeks ago, I binge watched the first season of "Transparent," a television series that tells the story of three adult siblings and their parents, one of whom has recently come out to the family as transgender. The writing and acting are at the highest level, and the storytelling is at once poignant, hilarious, and jaw-droppingly original. I would have been hooked on the show for just those reasons, but as a Jewish professional, the fact that the family's Jewishness is so deeply embedded in the story makes me think about it on a regular basis.

Early in the series, we learn that years ago one of the daughters, now in her 30s, cancelled her bat mitzvah a week before it was to be celebrated. As seen in flashbacks, the conversation that leads to the cancellation happens between Ali and her father, who at the time is secretly struggling with his own gender identity. She tells him she doesn't want to do a bat mitzvah, holding her dress and insisting, "Look at this. It's torture in a dress. Just bring me out there in a noose. I'm not doing my bat mitzvah." When her father disagrees, focusing on the beauty of the dress, Ali moves on and ups the ante with what she imagines will be a provocative question: "Honest, do you actually believe in God?" Her father's initial response, "That has nothing to do with your bat mitzvah," sounds dismissive at first (and to many rabbis, cantors, and educators who work with b'nai mitzvah families, painfully familiar), but becomes more honest and touching: "But sometimes, uh, I have conflict. Sometimes I wonder if there's...you know, with pain and suffering...I struggle with it." He tells his wife Shelley to cancel the bat mitzvah and they argue: about money, about whose bat mitzvah it really is, and how much power they should hand over to their 13 year old daughter. It's like nothing I've seen on tv before, and it rings so true.

In the next episode, Ali is home alone on the weekend of her cancelled bat mitzvah, when Jules - a bartender who didn't get the message about the cancellation - arrives for the party. When asked how she got out of it, Ali tells her: "I didn't think I could memorize it all, so I said I didn't believe in God, and they cancelled it." While the bartender reacts to this with surprise and admiration, Ali begins chanting her Torah portion - *Lech Lecha*, no less, laden with images of transformation and journeying - building in intensity, performing gutsily with her whole body. For me, the show stopper of the whole season comes in the bartender's response. Clapping slowly after Ali completes her perfect chanting, she says, "I have no idea what you just said, but I am transformed." Here we have it again: "not knowing" and transformation.

Why did this line hit me so hard? One reason is certainly because of the work I've been doing with the [B'nai Mitzvah Revolution](#), a project that supports congregations that want to generate new ideas and models of engaging preparation and meaningful observance of bar and bat mitzvah. In our work, we hear two competing narratives, each related to the

bartender's proclamation of "not knowing" and transformation.

The first is that the Jewish education children receive in the years leading up to b'nai mitzvah is inefficient, inordinately spent on training them to chant prayers and texts that a) they don't understand, and b) are not spiritually meaningful to them. In this narrative, the bartender's statement is a devastating indictment of the b'nai mitzvah factory; we are meant to hear it with disbelief. Neither she nor Ali understands a word of what was chanted, so how could either of them expect to be transformed? But the second narrative I hear in my work is that despite dissatisfaction with the process from so many constituents, including the clergy, parents, b'nai mitzvah, and the congregational communities, and despite the cynicism in popular culture about over the top celebrations and all the "Today I am a man" jokes, so many students and parents describe the day of the bar or bat mitzvah itself as a cherished milestone that *does* mark a sort of transformation. I believe families when they say this, even when it's hard for me to understand exactly what that means to them.

My work with the B'nai Mitzvah Revolution is certainly one reason why the "I have no idea what you just said, but I am transformed" statement struck me, but these words also remind me of a way of thinking about Judaism that I've used, lost, and returned to over the years. My own experience as a Bronfman Fellow, way back in 1988, was marked by a growing awareness - something close to shame - at my relative lack of Judaic knowledge compared to some of my peers in the Fellowship, despite the fact that I was a highly involved, engaged Jewish teen. This feeling of "not knowing" sparked my desire to become a Jewish educator, a personal and professional transformation that has shaped my adult life.

But it's more complicated than that. As an educator, of course, I deeply value Jewish knowledge and understanding and believe them to be catalysts for both community building and personal growth. At the same time, I know that we don't have to understand something completely in order for it to change us. We never fully know another person, and yet we change in relationship with them. We never fully know how language works, but we are transformed by the words we speak, hear, and read. It is when we become aware of "not knowing," and when we react to it with humility, that we create the space within ourselves for new learning. Jacob had to step back and become aware of his "not knowing" in order to experience God's presence. What does "not knowing" allow us to become?

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