Max and Shai, yashar koach, you were so thoughtful in your divrei Torah this morning, grappling with the text we're reading, what it means for your own life and ours.

Max, you picked up on some serious themes in parshat Vayeitzei, surfacing the **dangers** of deception, while still empathizing with Jacob's perceived need to deceive Lavan in order to save his own life. And yet, as you taught us - even if one can justify their use of deception at the highest levels - even the need to save a life! - it will come at a cost - the loss of a relationship. Which can make us feel alone and disconnected and fearful in this world - to be or to feel alone as a result of the break of our relationships because of our own choices.

And Shai, you also talked about the idea of being alone, exploring a handful of creative interpretations of the ladder in Jacob's famous dream. ***One*** that you taught us was that the ladder was a promise to Jacob that he would never be alone. That God was with him on this journey when he was most afraid because his brother Esau had threatened to kill him. And you noted wisely that this is a value, a quality, and a promise that can be quite human, too, that people can also make sure that someone else doesn't feel alone.

The intersection of your two teachings made me wonder what we can be learning from you and from this parsha about how to not feel alone in this world. In fact, twice in this Torah portion, more than any other, God says to Jacob: You are not alone. I am with you. So we know that this idea is central to our narrative in some way.

The commentator, Radak, interprets God's words to Jacob to mean: "Even though you are presently fleeing, do not be afraid for I will be with you, both on your way out and eventually, on your way home, so that, in effect, Radak understands God's message to be: I will never abandon you." It's such a comforting thing to hear when we're feeling alone and wishing that we weren't.

Now we know that being alone at times can be quite wonderful. Having privacy, quiet enough to think, to reflect - this can be profoundly moving, a great relief for the introverts among us, and spiritually fulfilling. But when we're feeling alone in the midst of fear like Jacob is, or abandoned at a particularly difficult moment - this parsha offers us three ways to try to break that feeling of isolation.

The first has a lot to do with your teaching, Max. You talked about the ways that deception can fray our relationships, while being someone that people know they can trust can draw others toward us. In Pirkei Avot, we learn that there are three crowns—Torah, priesthood, and sovereignty—but the crown of a good name, it says, rises above them all. Our name, our reputation, is the most valuable thing that we have. Jacob knows that he's done significant damage to his, having tricked his brother twice now.

But taking care of our relationships by taking care of our reputation as a trustworthy person, a loving person, a listening person, a generous and kind person - these are things that help others

know that they are protected and cared for in our presence. They help us keep our relationships healthy and holy.

Now this doesn't mean that any one of us has to be perfect in our friendships or our family relationships. There's room to be human and make mistakes and still find our way back toward each other. That's what our entire system of *teshuvah,* of repentance, and changing our ways, and forgiveness, is all about.

In our text, it'll be some time before Jacob and Esau meet up again - but I want you to keep an eye out for it - Max and Shai. Keep an eye out for how Jacob, whose reputation has understandably taken a severe hit with his brother, and Esau, who has been deceived and manipulated - find their way back to one another. Jacob will go many years feeling alone and being tormented by it, which may be why God promises him the long game of God's presence. But in a way that teaches us what's possible, somewhere around Genesis chapter 33, keep an eye out for how Jacob earns back Esau's trust. We break our isolation when we show up for one another, are willing to apologize, and also eager to forgive.

A second way that this parsha teaches us how we might feel less alone in this world is by encouraging us to seek out community or being part of something greater than ourselves. Jacob's running away from his brother is not aimless. He's running toward family. Toward love. Toward community. When Jacob finds and then realizes that Rachel is his kin, he breaks down weeping. And when Lavan brings him into his home, he tells him: you are truly my bone and my flesh.

Now this method of breaking our isolation is somewhat baked into this moment and this congregation. Every time a person comes to Shabbat services, or joins a small group, or tries out a CBE justice team, or comes to a learning session - you are running toward family, toward community.

We're doing this thing during the month of January called Try January - you'll get that pun in about 10 minutes - in which every member is invited to try out a team, a committee, a study session - to do like Jacob did, to actively seek each other out. To run toward each other.

Finally, there's a third teaching about how to not feel alone in this world embedded here in Parshat Vayeitzei. When we are going through something - having a hard time, struggling, feeling sad or afraid - it's very natural to feel alone, like Jacob does in this moment in our story. Often, our instinct is to squish those feelings down and keep it to ourselves. Maybe we don't want to be a burden. Or we feel some shame about whatever our struggle is. Or we want to look strong. I don't know why we do this, to be honest - but it's very very isolating.

Jewish tradition also concerns itself with this human instinct. The Gemara explains a verse in Proverbs, saying: "If there is anxiety in a person's heart, let him quash it. Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi dispute the verse's meaning. One said: He should forcefully push this anxiety out of his mind. One who worries should banish his concerns from his thoughts. (Which of course we

know always works). And the other said: No - it means he should tell others his concerns, which will lower his anxiety.

It is, of course, the latter which helps make us feel less alone. When we share what we're going through, most often, we find we're not the only one going through it. Actually, we've found this throughout many of our small groups and teams here. Like the Pregnancy Loss Small Group which has found that so many people who have lost a pregnancy have grieved alone, and never really talked about it. But here, they've found in sharing their story, they are surrounded by others who can see and hold them.

It's actually Leah - Jacob's first and less favored wife, who is the one in this parsha who seems to understand this best. In the naming of her children, she expresses the pain she's in, saying: "God has seen my affliction," "God has seen that I am unloved." Her courage to speak ultimately draws her closer to her children and to her sister and husband in some ways.

Sometimes, we find that when we give something sunlight and oxygen, we find other people.

This past week was a reminder of that. All of these outages and unknowns - airplanes and computers and banks and communications and more. It can be ominous, portending a future we can't know and which we wonder if we're prepared for. Parshat Vayeitze reminds us, and you, Shai and Max, remind us, specifically not being alone when we are afraid is most important. This is an invitation to talk about the uncertainty in the world - not to catastrophize it, but to be honest about how we're feeling, to reach out to others who may be caught up in it, to be a neighbor, a friend, a shoulder, a confidante, a distractor, a helper.

The nights are getting longer. The days are getting colder. What can we do to be a person who helps make other people feel less alone, too?

A few small ideas - Thanksgiving is coming. Is there an extra seat at your table? Or do you want to make up packages with your family or friends and walk around the city handing them out and talking with folks who don't have enough? And Chanukah is coming soon, too. Ya know, there's a growing tradition that on the 6th night, instead of receiving a gift, we give to someone in need. We know many families through our CBE Refugee Task Force that are in great need - maybe you and your family want to go buy some presents for them this year or to donate to our annual Chanukah collection, which you'll see more about in The CBE Weekly. Or maybe you want to be a mentor to a young asylum seeker who's here all by themselves. Please talk to me if you want to do any of this. There are so many ways to help someone feel less alone in this world - and something kind of magical happens when we do - we feel less alone, too.

Shai and Max, thank you for the work you've done to surface this learning today. As you take your next steps in this community, we are so proud of the young men that you are becoming and we pray that you will feel connected and find community and know that you are seen and cared for AND that you will always be among those who bring comfort and connection to those who need it. Yashar koach on this day and mazal tov.