

Va-Yetse 2008
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Jacob's dream is one of the better known incidents in the Bible. It has been the inspiration for countless artists—just try a Google search for “Jacob's dream” and “art”. (Some of you may indeed have seen the Byzantium Exhibition currently at the Royal Academy of Arts, including the powerful portrait called “The Ladder of Divine Ascent by St John Klimakos, brought here from the Santa Catherina Monastery in the Sinai desert, and clearly inspired by Jacob's dream.) Narrative renderings include a once popular play by the German Jewish writer Richard Beer-Hoffman. Without turning to Freudian dream analysis, I would like to discuss with you today several interpretations of the meaning of this passage, illustrating by their diversity the open-endedness of biblical narrative and the ingenuity of Jewish commentators devoted to unpacking the biblical text.

The central idea of this dream—the ladder connecting heaven and earth—is a powerful assertion that there is more to existence than our immediate environment, our narrow self-interests, the perceptions of our senses. That would be a life-changing insight for Jacob, whose entire world to this point seems to have been bound up with himself. But what specifically is communicated about this connection?

The starting point for the commentaries is a close reading of the text itself, and this contains a fairly obvious unexpected formulation. We are told that the “angels of God are עולים ויורדים בו ascending and descending upon it” (28:12). Now since the natural dwelling place of angels is, we would assume, in heaven, the expected formulation would be “descending and ascending”—coming down to earth for a particular purpose (e.g., arranging for the destruction of Sodom), and then re-ascending back home. This is precisely the kind of textual detail that the commentators seize upon to derive a message. Here is what Rashi wrote, “The angels that accompanied Jacob in the Holy Land do not go outside the Holy Land. They therefore ascended to Heaven. Then the angels for outside the Holy Land descended to accompany him.”

This interpretation of the dream makes it an assurance of divine protection, later articulated by God in His proclamation, “I am with you, I will protect you wherever you go” (28:15). It fits the specific situation of Jacob near the border of the land of Canaan, preparing to depart for the world outside. The underlying assumptions are: a. that God's protection is provided through intermediate supernatural beings under His command, and b. that certain angels have jurisdiction only within the borders of the Holy Land, but that others are appointed to operate in the rest of the world. What Jacob envisions is a “Changing of the Guard” at the border palace of Bethel. Or to use an American analogy, these are like Secret Service members assigned to protect the President while he is in the US, but a totally different detachment accompanies him on journeys abroad. That is why they are seen ascending and descending.

A second interpretation, from the rabbinic Midrash (*Tanhuma*). [

“And behold the angels of God ascending and descending”; these are the princes of the gentile nations which God showed Jacob our father. The Prince of Babylon ascended seventy steps and descended. Media, fifty-two and descended. Greece, one hundred steps and descended. Edom ascended, and no one know how many! In that hour, Jacob was afraid, and said, ‘Perhaps this one will never descend?! The Holy One said to him, ‘Fear not, O my servant Jacob, nor be dismayed, O Israel’. Even if you see him ascend and sit by Me, I will bring him down from there.”¹

Here Jacob is presented not as an individual at a specific turning point in his life, but rather as a prototype and representative of the Jewish people, which bears both of his names, as in *Beit Ya’akov*, the House of Jacob, and *Sh’ma Yisra’el*, Hear O Israel.” The underlying assumption here is that each nation has its *sar* or prince in the supernal realm that governs its destiny. Thus what we have in the dream is a preview of history, the rise and fall of world powers. Each rung on the ladder represents a year of supremacy. The prince of Babylonia ascends 70 steps, referring to the traditional 70 years of the Babylonian exile. Persia conquered Babylonia, and reigned supreme for 52 years (the rabbis were not very good at chronology and massively underestimated the length of the period between the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great and the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great). Greece then prevailed for 100 years. And finally there was Edom, understood by the rabbis as a code word for Rome, ascending out of sight. A descent is expected and eagerly awaited, but it does not come—that was the situation of the rabbis, living under Roman imperial rule. Will Rome remain on top of the world forever? The answer is No. Rome will fall as the others did.

When God speaks, it is a message pertaining not to an individual but to a people: “Behold I am with you”. The nations may come and go, rise and fall, but God’s relationship with the Jewish people remains uninterrupted. The dream, in this reading, is about God as sovereign master of history, overseeing the entire process, guiding the people of Israel through its periods of turmoil.

Third is a philosophical interpretation, suggested by Abraham ibn Ezra. Maimonides alludes to it somewhat cryptically in his Introduction to his classic *Guide for the Perplexed*. “The word ‘ladder’ refers to one idea; ‘set upon the earth’ to another; ‘and the top of it reached to heaven’ to a third; ‘angels of God’ to a fourth; ‘ascending’ to a fifth, ‘descending’ to a sixth; ‘the Lord stood above it’ to a seventh. Every word in this figure introduces a fresh idea.” From various other places in the *Guide* and from the explanations of other commentators, we can unpack what Maimonides meant.

The ladder in the dream represents the interconnectedness of the entire realm of being, including the full panoply starting with inanimate matter and ending with incorporeal God. ‘On earth’ refers to the material realm

¹ Midrash *Tanhuma Va-Yetsei*, cited from Nechama Leibowitz, *Studies in Genesis*, p. 299.

of change, of ‘generation and corruption’ as Aristotle put it. Human knowledge begins through sense perception of this realm, the world around us. Reaching ‘to heaven’ refers to the realm of eternal essences: the heavenly bodies, the intellects which in ancient and medieval cosmology empower and move them. The goal of human knowledge is to move from our immediate environment of changeable matter to the eternal, unchanging, the truths in the realm of pure intellect.

‘Angels’ refers to the thoughts emanating from the human intellect: they ‘ascend’ by rising to the realm of pure spiritual being, culminating in God: the realm of metaphysics, beyond matter. They ‘descend’ because the intellect of the prophet is not content with a mystical-intellectual contemplation of God; his thoughts return to earth with guidance for how we should live our lives. (Here we see the philosophical explanation of why the angels first ascend and then descend.) And God, stationed above the ladder, is ultimate Reason, the supreme cause of all creation.

To review: the first interpretation—the angels guarding Jacob with jurisdiction over the Holy Land return to heaven as he prepares to cross the border, to be replaced with a new contingent for his own exile—this applies to Jacob’s specific existential situation as a unique human being, fleeing for his life, frightened about what lies ahead, in need of personal reassurance.

The second interpretation—the angels represent the nations of the world, rising to position of dominance and then descending, while God’s assurance of continued protection remains with the people of Israel—this reflects Jacob in his role as the progenitor of the Jewish people that bears his name, and its experiences in history. The third interpretation—the angels represent human thoughts ascending to knowledge of what is ultimate and unchanging—applies not just to Jacob, and not just to the Jewish people, but to all human beings in their striving for knowledge and insight. Here it is Jacob as representative of the human condition.

God’s words of reassurances to Jacob, promising protection in his journey, promising land and offspring, promising that “I am with you” no matter what, applies to all three of these realms.

And is this not how we dream as well: as individuals facing our own unique existential circumstances, as members of the Jewish people feeling a special bond with other Jews throughout the world, as human beings concerned with issues that affect us all, not matter what our religious and ethnic identity?

To speak personally for a moment. I have dreams as an individual - especially powerful these days as my older daughter is expecting the arrival of the first representative of a new generation of the Saperstein family some time this month. Without having made his acquaintance as yet, I still dream for him:

that he will be born safely and healthy,

that he will grow and flourish in health of body and mind,

that he will have the capacities to pursue whatever course in life he decides upon,

that he will understand the place of material possessions in the hierarchy of values and find content in what he has,

that he will develop the strength of character to cope with and overcome what obstacles and difficulties he may encounter,

that he will become knowledgeable and proud of his Jewish heritage, which will enrich his life as it has so enriched my own, and then be transmitted to another generation,

that the world he will come to know will be freer from economic turbulence and uncertainty, environmental degradation, and bloodshed than the world into which he will be born.

I have dreams as a Jew - especially powerful in my role at the Leo Baeck College with its mission to prepare new generation of rabbis and educators qualified to carry the mantle of leadership long after we have passed it on:

Dreams that some of our finest young people will be inspired to dedicate their lives to the significant challenges and exhilarating rewards of rabbinic leadership,

that our Progressive movements in the UK, the US, Europe, Israel and elsewhere will flourish by remaining true to the vision of loyalty to a tradition open to change in response to the needs of our time, the vision of a pursuit of holiness through ritual combined with active engagement in the cause of social justice,

that the different religious movements of contemporary Judaism will no longer insult and vilify each other, but will respect the dignity of sincere, committed Jews who differ, and appreciate the strengths brought by religious diversity,

that the State of Israel will continue to flourish as a creative centre of a dynamic Jewish culture,

that it will come to be recognized throughout the world as a beacon of humane values in the Middle East,

that Jewish settlers will never again battle Jewish soldiers, desecrate Muslim holy places, and overtly repudiate the rule of law,

that no group in Israeli society have cause to will feel that it is a victim of discrimination and abuse,

that Palestinians and Israelis will live in peace, side by side, sharing the land of promise.

And I have dreams as a human being:

That this wonderful planet, with its fertile lands, its abundant water, its magnificent diversity of life forms, will be freed from the contamination resulting from human selfishness, so that it can be handed on unspoiled and untainted to new generations,

That human beings will never again be driven by religious fanaticism to the point where they would train young girls to become suicide bombers,

or plan an operation intended to kill as many civilians as possible, especially Americans, British, and Jews—criteria that some of us here meet on all three counts;

That genocidal conflict will be relegated to the history books rather than appearing on the international pages of our newspapers,

That children born even in sub-Saharan Africa will have a good chance of growing to adulthood safe from the ravages of famine, AIDS, malaria, and now even cholera,

And that all children of our own country will be able to grow up safe from the perils of gang warfare, or abuse by members of their own family.

These are my dreams, as an individual, as a Jew, as a human being. Central to these dreams is the ladder, binding earth to heaven, the connecting the realm of our struggles and achievements with a power beyond ourselves that can be with us, even as we depart, as did Jacob, from a familiar environment into the challenges and opportunities of unfamiliar territory. May we all continue to have these dreams of divine reassurance in what lies ahead.