

Climbing Jacob's Ladder

Congregation Shirat Hayam (www.shirathayam.org)

Rabbi Baruch HaLevi (www.rabbib.com)

I. Dreams In Judaism

The Bible expresses the belief that dreams can contain revelations from on high, as in the dreams of Jacob, Joseph, and Pharaoh in the book of Genesis. The prophetic vision, the bible states (Numbers 12:6), comes in a dream. A rabbinic saying has it that a dream is a sixtieth of prophecy. Maimonides (Guide of the Perplexed, 3.36-8) develops his theory that in the dream the imaginative faculty is awakened, without which prophecy is impossible. -The Jewish Religion, A Companion

Study Dreams/Torah

Jacob's dream is unusual because no interpretation of the dream is given in the Bible. This teaches us that if we want to connect to heaven, the Torah is our ladder and we have to ascend to heaven by our own efforts i.e. study of the Torah text. This is why the angels first ascend and then descend.

Angels & Israel:

The ladder keys into the fact that the angels first "ascended" and then "descended." The Midrash explains that Jacob, as a holy man, was always accompanied by angels. When he reached the border of the land of Canaan (the future land of Israel), the angels who were assigned to the Holy Land went back up to Heaven and the angels assigned to other lands came down to meet Jacob. When Jacob returned to Canaan (Genesis 32:2-3), he was greeted by the angels who were assigned to the Holy Land. (Midrash Genesis Rabbah).

Exile:

According to the Midrash, the ladder signified the exiles which the Jewish people would suffer before the coming of the Messiah. First the angel representing the 70-year exile of Babylonia climbed "up" 70 rungs, and then fell "down". Then the angel representing the exile of Persia went up a number of steps, and fell, as did the angel representing the exile of Greece. Only the fourth angel, which represented the final exile of Rome/Edom (whose guardian angel was Esau himself), kept climbing higher and higher into the clouds. Jacob feared that his children would never be free of Esau's domination, but God assured him that at the End of Days, Edom too would come falling down.

II. Jacob's Ladder (Chapter 28)

10. And Jacob left Beer sheba, and he went to Haran. 11. And he arrived at the place and lodged there because the sun had set, and he took some of the stones of the place and placed [them] at his head, and he lay down in that place. 12. And he dreamed, and behold! a ladder set up on the ground and its top reached to heaven; and behold, angels of God were ascending and descending upon it. 13. And behold, the Lord was standing over him, and He said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac; the land upon which you are lying to you I will give it and to your seed.

...16. And Jacob awakened from his sleep, and he said, "Indeed, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know [it]." 17. And he was frightened, and he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

God's Creation:

Yet another midrash (Leviticus Rabbah 8:1) views God as being involved in construction. A Roman woman asks what God been up to since the six days of creation, Rabbi Jose ben Halaftha answers that God has been building ladders for some people to ascend and others to descend.

Human Actions

A [Hassidic](#) interpretation takes a different view entirely, focusing on the end of the verse ascending and descending on it (bo). Bo can also be taken to mean within it or within him. In this interpretation, the ascending and descending is dependent on humanity's prayers and actions. If a person behaves in a certain way, then the entire world is elevated, if not, the world is degraded.

Right Here On Earth

This appears to me as a good image for the spiritual life. Our feet touch the earth because we are undeniably human and should have no illusions that our spirituality will separate us from all beauty and suffering our humanity brings. But, without negating for an instant the realities of our humanness, each of us is endowed with the gift of spirit, so that we can climb the ladder of the soul to reach its heavenly heights.

"How holy is this place," says Jacob. "The Lord is here and I didn't realize. This is surely the gate of heaven."

Jacob wasn't referring to some special faraway place or an exalted shrine when he recognized that he was standing at the gate of heaven. It's right here, he said, in this totally unremarkable place, now that I realize it. When consciousness awakens to the realization that life is a journey of the soul, and embraces life just as it is, right here, then we discover that, right now, we ourselves are standing at the foot of Jacob's ladder. The steps are there before us, waiting to be climbed. [Alan Morinis](#), Climbing Jacob's Ladder pp. 24-5

The Prayer Ladder

[Rabbi Abraham Joshua](#)

[Heschel](#), perhaps with the Hassidic symbolism in mind, views humanity itself as being the ladder: Prayer is our attachment to the utmost. Without God in sight, we are like the scattered rungs of a broken ladder. To pray is to become a ladder on which thoughts mount to God to join the movement toward God which surges unnoticed throughout the entire universe. Man's Quest for

God, p. 7 (The ladder represents the synagogue service. When our prayers are sung our words ascend to heaven. When the Torah is read God's inspired words descend to earth.)

Chutes & Ladders

Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (aka the [Kotzker Rebbe](#)) also contemplated the sulam and arrives at a spiritual theory of relativity. He asked his students, who was higher on the ladder? The person at the top or the one at the bottom? The answer is not the obvious one - the person at the top. It depends on where one is going, on whether an individual is ascending or descending. The person at the top might seem higher, but if he is spiritually on the chute, he is actually lower than the person on the spiritual ladder.

י. וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּאֵר שָׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חֲרָנָה
יא. וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיֵּלֶךְ שָׁם כִּי בָּא הַשָּׁמַשׁ
וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשֶׂם מְרֹאשֹׁתָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב
בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא יב. וַיַּחֲלֵם וְהִנֵּה סֵלֶם מֵצֶבֶת
אֲרָצָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מִגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְהִנֵּה מִלְאֲכֵי
אֱ-לֹהִים עֹלִים וַיִּרְדּוּ בּוֹ: טז. וַיִּיקֶץ יַעֲקֹב
מִשְׁנָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲכֵן יֵשׁ יְ-הוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה
וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי. וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמֶר מַה נֹּרָא
הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵין זֶה כִּי אִם בֵּית אֱ-לֹהִים וְזֶה
שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמַיִם

God Beside Us

While the divine messengers are busy ascending and descending the ladder in Jacob's dream, the Lord was standing beside him. Sometimes we are busy looking towards our goal, be it material or spiritual; at other times we focus intently on what we've achieved. In both cases we forget about where we are, and more importantly, where we can find God. As we climb the ladder rung by rung, or even if we slip down the chute, God is standing next to us, always. The opportunity to experience holiness is not in the distant future, nor is it in the past.

Rather, it is here at every moment. In the words of the Kotzker Rebbe: Where is God? Wherever God is allowed to enter. -Reb Marsha Swirsky

Free Will

A human must either climb up or climb down the ladder. Talmud: Erubin 21a

The Ladder Is Everywhere:

Rabbi J. H. Hertz points out that in daily life many of us fall into the erroneous perception that there are certain places in which we can behave in a "secular" manner and other, more limited places, in which we are to act with a greater sense of spiritual awareness.

Materialism

The gematria (numerical valuation of the Hebrew letters) for sulam is the same as that for the words wealth/money and poverty. -Baal HaTurim

Voice & Prayer

The gematria for sulam is the same as the words "sound" or "voice". -Baal HaTurim

The foundational text of Kabbalah, the Zohar, teaches that Jacob's ladder was a metaphor for the experience of prayer (incidentally, the Hebrew words for "ladder" and "voice" - "sulam" and "kol" - representing the voice of prayer, share an identical numerological value of 136). Prayer constitutes the ladder through which a human being climbs from his or her earth-bound existence into deeper states of consciousness, until touching the heavenliness at the core of the human soul.

The Ladder of Intellect

According to Maimonides (Guide of the Perplexed) the purpose of the ladder is to explain the relationship between two realities, between existence on earth and existence in the "world of heavenly spheres," both of which are set in motion by God. Jacob sees "angels of God" on the ladder. Those "going up and down on it" are the prophets who, from studying the ladder--the connection between the two worlds, i.e., God's providence--are elevated to a higher, heavenly level of understanding. That is why it says "going up and down"; first they ascend and become inspired, then they descend and transmit the understanding they acquired to the world. In addition, "God stands on it," e.g., on the "ladder"; this means God is there constantly, as the Prime Mover, the Cause that governs and is providence over all. According to Maimonides, the dream is a representation of the two worlds, and Jacob, as the person who contemplates the ladder, e.g., the connection between the worlds, attains an understanding of God and of His ways in our world".

The Soul

Likewise, in Nefesh Ha-Hayyim, R. Hayyim of Volozhin interpreted an idea of the Zohar as follows:

'Regarding the vision of the ladder "set on the ground," ... note that it does not say "set in the ground, but towards the ground, to signify that its principal anchoring is in the heavens above, and from there it devolves downward, until it reaches the earth. This signifies the Neshamah in man... From there it descends like a ladder and chain, joining with the spirit (Ruah), then with the soul (Nefesh), until it finally comes down to this world and into the body of man.

Sinai

Some other Jewish rabbis taught that the ladder Jacob's ladder represents Torah. The ladder alludes to Sinai, since the words Sinai and sulam both have the numerical of 130; the angels represent Moses and Aaron; and God stood atop the ladder just as He stood atop Sinai to give the Torah. Accordingly, the Torah, given at Sinai and taught by sages such as Moses and Aaron, is the bridge from heaven to earth.

Religious Living

Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (the "Kedushat Levi"), one of the greatest of the Hasidic masters, offers a daring reading of Jacob's vision. He suggests that the ladder is intended to represent human beings in this world. Like the ladder, each of us is firmly planted on earth--we are corporeal beings with bodily needs and earthly desires. But through religious practice and striving, we are capable of "reaching upward"--presumably through entering into intellectual and emotional relationship with God, doing God's will, and becoming the kind of Jew and human being God asks for.

But our text goes much further than merely telling us that we can live on earth and still touch heaven. According to Levi Yitzhak, the ascent-descent of the angels suggests that the heavens themselves are affected by our actions.

Highs & Lows

Ephraim of Sudlikov (the "Degel Machane Ephraim"), another early Hasidic Master, offers a very different interpretation of Jacob's vision. The ladder filled with upward and downward motion is a metaphor for the religious life of any human being here on earth. There are times when we are in "expanded consciousness" and feel a deep connection to God and Torah (we are, in those moments, "ascending the ladder"), but there are also times when we are afflicted by "contracted consciousness" and feel far away from God (we are then, of course, "descending the ladder").

There is nothing wrong with this up-and-down process, Ephraim assures us. It is an inherent piece of the spiritual life. In fact, it is crucial that we understand that our descents make possible fuller and deeper ascents. Just as in a human relationship, distance or crisis now can often lead to a more profound sense of connection and intimacy later; so in our relationship to God, a period of descent can culminate in a more genuine connection to God. This, Ephraim tells us, is "descent for the purpose of ascent."

Transcendence

According to the midrash, what Jacob actually sees is the future revelation of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Torah serves as a kind of ladder that connects heaven and earth: We strive to live lives firmly rooted in the real world and yet reflective of the values and ideals of heaven. In a moment of utter fear and darkness, Jacob is shown that which can make life meaningful by giving it a connection to transcendence--the Torah, which eternally links God and Israel. -"Midrash HaGadol"

Spiritual Stages

The ladder symbolized the stages by which a person ascends in spirituality. The ladder has "angels of God going up and down on it", because the entire universe, including the angels, ascends and descends along the rungs by which human beings ascend and descend, and in their wake. That is to say, everything depends on human deeds, ascending as mankind ascends, and descending as mankind descends. -R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady wrote in Likkutei Torah: