

VaYetizeh 2004
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November 20, 2004

Woodrow Wilson once said, "We grow great by dreams, (for) dreamers...see things... Some of us let these great dreams die, but others nourish and protect them, nurse them through bad days til they bring them to the sunshine and light which comes always to those who sincerely hope that their dreams will come true."

Fleeing from his brother Esau, who vowed to kill him, Jacob pauses on his journey to Haran. As he rests in a particular spot, he has a beautiful and mystical dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder.

As the text tells us, *Vayalen sham kee bah hashemesh*: He spent the night there because the sun had set.

The midrash however interprets the words kee bah hashemesh not as three words, but as two – keebah hashemesh, meaning: God extinguished the sun, implying that God deliberately took this action because He wanted to have a private moment with Jacob. But if we look at what is happening at this moment in Jacob's life, we see there is a more profound and relevant understanding of this midrash.

He has just departed from his family and the place of his birth. He is overcome with worries and uncertainty about what will happen to him. He is concerned if he will survive in his new environment, or even last that night. With the darkness surrounding him, the question Jacob confronted was whether or not he would be sustained. In that context, his experience is a turning point for him. How would he proceed – would it be alone, or with God? Would he still feel the presence of God; or would he feel abandoned?

With all of these concerns whirling around in his mind, Jacob is understandably overcome by fears and anxiety about his future and his journey.

And this is when he lies down and has his dream.

In one explanation, the ladder is viewed as a parable, representing the nature of human existence. Though we are "rooted to the ground," going about our daily lives and dealing with the physical world, each of us is nonetheless given the opportunity to have a "head reaching to Heaven."

We all dream, but not all of us act upon them. It is up to us to determine what we do with our lives and our dreams. Jacob could have awoken from his sleep without giving much thought to what had just transpired. But he paused, and was overwhelmed by what had occurred.

Michtav MeEliyahu teaches, "We must learn from Jacob that the key to spiritual ascent and growth is to seize the moment."

I think this is what Woodrow Wilson must have meant as well in his comment on the power of dreams.

Jacob awoke from his sleep and was profoundly aware of the Divine Presence. He arrived at the place consumed with anger, fear and deceit. He left it, however, a very different man. Jacob awakens from his sleep and his dream of the angels ascending and descending the ladder, and immediately realizes: "Surely God is in this place and I did not know." He was transformed by the experience, in large part, because he allowed himself to internalize the vision and reflected upon its significance.

What he did not initially know, but came to understand is not just that God was in this place, but that God was within him. Jacob suddenly became aware of the potential divinity within himself. He came to understand that God resides in the *Ich*, within Jacob, himself.

The Chofetz Chayim noted that every day we confront various challenges, and therefore the message of the dream was not just for Jacob. A person can either go up or down a ladder, for the issues we face in our lives every day can either exalt or diminish us. We do not stay stationary in life. We have ample opportunities to either grow and respond in an elevated manner, or not.

I have been following with interest the travails, for example, of our Washington Redskins, and especially the problems the team has had at quarterback. Mark Brunell has not done well, and so, Coach Joe Gibbs has announced that Patrick Ramsey will get the starting nod this coming week. One can only imagine how difficult this must be on a personal level. And yet, if the statements each player has made to the press are to be believed, each has handled the matter like a real mensh, offering support for the other, and not taking joy in the downfall of the other. All too often, we make the mistake of thinking that life resembles a seesaw, rather than a ladder. We think that if one goes down, the other goes up. But as Brunell and Ramsey have demonstrated, this is not the case. We can climb the ladder together, and lift up others, for the ladder, as in Jacob's dream has room for an infinite number of angels.

I think this is what the Chofetz Chayim was referring to in commenting on the ladder, when he said that every "difficulty is a means of elevating yourself. Every time you overcome a negative impulse, you grow as a person...Always, ask yourself, he advises, am I presently climbing in my spiritual level or am I going down?"

On a personal level, Jacob took the journey and the dream and came away from it all a very different person. He allowed himself to grow. In life, we must allow ourselves to grow as well, not to be set on our path and never deviate from it. Perhaps this is why Jacob came to sense the presence of God. He was reassured that God would be with him as he strived to go forward and upward, as he continued on his path. He knew that he would come away strengthened in his resolve to leave behind his life of deceit and deception. It was then that he was able to discover and proclaim, "Behold God is in this place, (within me), and I did not know it."

As we seek to bring out the best within each of us, may we find the power within, and may God accompany us on our journeys – so that we are lifted upward and beyond.

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