

DREAMING OF ANGELS

Vayetze 5779

I.

I'VE MENTIONED A FEW TIMES BEFORE the fascinating view of the Rambam on angels: they don't exist. As he writes in his *Moreh Nevukhim*, his *Guide of the Perplexed* (2, 41):

Know again that in the case of everyone about whom exists a scriptural text that an angel talked to him or that speech came to him from God, this did not occur in any other way than in a dream or in a vision of prophecy.

But there are many who resist his view. Because, if the *Avot* don't actually see angels, if our forefathers merely saw them in a dream, then what is so special about that? If angels don't truly exist, then so much of the magic of the early narratives in the Torah is lost. But I think the opposite. It's the very fact that our forefathers dreamt of angels that makes them remarkable.

Take Yaakov, who dreams about angels twice in our *parashah*. In the first, he has just fled from his home and, stopping somewhere to sleep, has his well-known dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder (Gen.28:11–12). In the second, he is heading home from the house of Lavan, wives and family in tow, and, once again, he sees angels (32:2).

For the Rambam, both of these are not actual events, Yaakov doesn't actually see or meet an angel, it's merely a dream. But I think that tells us a lot about who Yaakov is. Someone who dreams of angels. It's unsurprising that, shortly after leaving home, he's dreaming of angels. He grew up in the home of Yitzchak and with Avraham for a grandfather, of course angels are on his mind! It's no great shock that, upon heading to sleep his mind still revolves around the world of spirituality, of connectedness to God. This is underscored by the famous *midrashic* idea that the Torah's description of him as an *ish tam yoshev ohalim*, "a mild man who remained in the tent" means that he devoted his life to spiritual pursuits (Gen. 25:27 and Gen. Rabb. 63:10).

But the last verses of our *parashah* are surprising. Because it's been twenty years since Yaakov was last in his parents' home. He's spent this time immersed not only in a mundane world but a corrupt one. He's been a husband, father, and farmer. He's been swindled by others and swindled others himself. He is no longer an *ish tam*, a mild, simple man but, in his own words:

הָיִיתִי בַיּוֹם אֶבְלָנִי הָרֶב וְקָרַח בַּלַּיְלָה וַתִּדָּר שְׁנֵתִי מֵעֵינַי:

Often, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes (31:40).

Twenty years after leaving home Yaakov is an exhausted, weather-beaten, nearly-defeated man. *Yet he still dreams of angels.* Despite the years of anguish and struggle, despite all the years of frustration and hardship he has had, he is still able to dream about angels. His spiritual spark never

burned out. He's still able to think about God: his spiritual connection to *Hakadosh Barukh Hu* is still strong.

II.

I was thinking this past week about the goals I had made for myself during the *Yamim Noraim* – the things I wanted to do and the person I wanted to be. While it's been around two months since we left that period of time, I think this is when we need to remember how we felt during that time. Because, it's not hard to see angels during the *Yamim Noraim*. It's very easy to go to sleep at night on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and think about our religious selves; to think about the things we want to do during the year.

But, it's very different now. Work's grind is beginning to take its toll and exhaustion is setting in. The cold assails us at every moment of the day and will get worse. We'd be forgiven for forgetting about angels. For going to sleep at night with other things on our mind.

But this is why we must remember the angels we dreamt of during the *Yamim Noraim*. This is when we must recommit to our spiritual values and ideals. Just like Yaakov, we cannot forget the presence of angels amidst our hardship.

Angels don't exist. And this makes Yaakov even more remarkable. Because he dreams of them even when no one else would. But now is the time for us to do so, too. Now is the time for us to once again dream about angels.