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 VaYetzei 5780

### A Stairway Set on the Ground; Its Top Reached the Heavens

The brief presidency of John F. Kennedy is sometimes credited with destroying the American hat industry. According to this legend, the glamorous young president's decision to appear at his inauguration without a hat led millions of American men to instantly throw off their own hats and never look back. The truth is more complex. Kennedy did wear a black silk top hat to his inauguration but he was frequently seen in public with his head uncovered, both before and after he became president. Rather than instigate a trend, Kennedy himself was the result of decades of declining hat wearing among American men rather than the instigator of a turning point in American fashion history.

Whatever the causes, it cannot be denied that most American men wore hats in public in the early decades of the twentieth century and that this practice dwindled into the second half of the twentieth century. Today the American hat industry is sustained by Orthodox Jews. But those Orthodox Jews who maintain their traditions of hat wearing are actually doing something quite different from their fathers and grandfathers who may have worn identical hats. Students at the great Lithuanian yeshivot of the 19th and early 20th centuries dressed in fashionable clothing as a way to comport themselves with the dignity that is appropriate for Torah scholars. Their descendants who dress in outwardly similar ways have adopted a counter-cultural distinctive form of dress merely by avoiding change as the world has shifted.

And so a yeshiva student who dresses in a traditional yeshiva-student's outfit can be seen as maintaining the traditions of our people by dressing the same way as earlier generations. Or, he can be seen as having abandoned the traditions of the very yeshiva where he studies by no longer dressing with sufficient style and elegance to show the dignity of the Torah. Change and avoiding change are not simple opposites. They are always relative terms that only have meaning in the context of ever changing surroundings.

At the very opening of our parashah, Yaakov, fleeing his brother Esav, has one of the most famous dreams in the Torah:

וַיַּחְלֵם וְהִגָּה סֵלֶם מֵצֵב אֲרָצָה וְרִאשׁוֹ מֵגִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְהִנֵּה מַלְאָכָי אֵל-לְהִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ:

He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.

And from that moment until today, Jacob's ladder is a motif in artwork, a common refrain in songs, and a powerful symbol of the encouragement and fortitude that can follow moments of intense religious inspiration. Yaakov's ladder is an image that can represent the spiritual bonds that can connect our world and lived experiences with a higher metaphysical realm that is nonetheless accessible via the ladder.

But Yaakov's ladder is not the only structure we've encountered in Sefer Bereishit that reaches the heavens.

In the generations after the flood, people gathered in Bavel and started to build a great tower. Their goal was to reach the heavens. The ladder that Yaakov sees in his dream, "סֵלֶם מֵצֵב אֲרָצָה וְרִאשׁוֹ מֵגִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה", whose head reached to the heavens, evokes the tower עִיר וּמְגִדֵּל וְרִאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם, whose head was aimed towards the very same heavens.

Rabbi Amnon Bazak, the incredibly brilliant Israeli Tanakh scholar, compared those two structures that were directed towards heaven and discovered three binaries that divide them:

The tower was built by people traveling from the East to the West:

As the Torah says: "וַיְהִי בְנֹסְעִים מִקְדָּם" and it occurred as they traveled from the East. In contrast, Yaakov dreams of his ladder on his way to the East: "וַיֵּלֶךְ אַרְצָה בְּנֵי קְדָם" and Yaakov traveled to the land of the easterners the בְּנֵי קְדָם.

The tower was built out of bricks that were made through human ingenuity instead of building the tower out of hewn stones: הֵלֶכְנָה לְאֶבֶן whereas Yaakov's dream took place on a pillow made of local stones: מֵאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם

Perhaps most significantly, the builders of the tower tried to anchor their tower in the very heavens so that they would never move from their place or be scattered across the earth in their own words: פֶּן נִפּוּזִין עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ. Their punishment was precisely that which they most feared: they were scattered: וְנִפְּצוּ אֶתְּמֹלְצוֹתָם עַל פְּנֵי כָל הָאָרֶץ.

In contrast, the blessing that God gives to Yaakov is the same as the punishment he gave to the generation of the tower: וּפְרָצְתָּ יָמָה וְקִדְמָה וְצַפְנָה וְנִגְבָּה.

Yaakov sets forth from his parents' home and from his native land to seek his destiny abroad. That spreading forth, according to God's blessing, will include his descendants, and will take us to every corner of the earth.

What is one to make of these diametrically opposed details of these two structures with their heads up in the heavens? The three binary oppositions between the Tower and the Ladder are meant to put those two structures into dialogue with each other and in so doing to contrast the purposes of each structure.

The Tower was built to be resistant to forces of movement and change. The tower's builders thought that if they could anchor their tower into the heavens than no force could ever push them away or pressure them to change anything about where they lived and how they lived.

This dynamic should be familiar to us. We began to pray for rain by adding the phrase "ten tal u'matar livracha" in our weekday amidah just this past Thursday night because in Talmudic Babylonia, the site of the eponymous tower, it was determined that winter rains came sixty days after the fall equinox and sixty days after the fall equinox as it would be calculated on the inaccurate ancient version of the Julian calendar that the Talmudic sages utilized, occurred on Thursday night.

When Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel moved from Germany to Spain in the early 14th century he wondered why we pray for rain based on when rain was needed and expected in Babylonia rather than pray for rain when and where it is needed in the places we live. But he was unsuccessful in changing this practice. When something is connected to heaven, when it evokes our sacred traditions and our relationship with God, we so often resist change, whether it concerns a matter of liturgy or the style of hat that we might wear.

But let's also remember Yaakov's ladder. For Yaakov, seeing that ladder and recognizing the holiness of the place where he had spent the night did not stop him from completing his journey. He was not cemented in place or tethered to that ladder. On the contrary, he was launched onward and forward by the security and confidence he obtained from knowing that he was connected to God.

The rise of the great yeshivot in the 19th century, the first with faculty and administrators and dormitories, and all of the successor institutions including midrashot and day-schools, are all examples of ways in which we responded to the challenges and opportunities and needs of changing times.

As a Modern Orthodox community, and as Jews who are trying to live lives with authenticity and with integrity, we can try to build our own connection to heaven. The stronger we can make that ladder, the more we can reinforce, through Torah, tefilah, and mitzvot, the lines of communication between us down and here and the realms above, the more confident we can be to pursue our destiny, just like Yaakov, in unfamiliar territory and away from the homes that our parents made for us.

To be human is to grow. To be human is to move. And a ladder that reaches the very heavens, should give us the confidence to undertake any journey.