

# Vayetzei

In this week's parasha, parashat Vayetzei, we find Jacob running from his brother Esau, having stolen both his birthright, and their father's blessing. He is on his way to Haran, to his uncle Lavan's house, where he hopes to find safety and hopefully a wife.

On this journey, Jacob stops for the night and lays down to sleep. He dreamed there was a ladder set on the ground, that reached all the way up to heaven. Jacob observes angels of God ascending and descending this ladder.

God speaks to Jacob from God's place above the ladder saying, "I am the God of Abraham and Isaac. The land on which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants. Your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west, east, north and south."

God continues, "I am here with you; I will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this soil. I will not let go of you as long as I have yet to do what I have promised you

(Gen 28:12-15).

Suddenly Jacob wakes up and has an AH-HA moment and proclaims that God is here in this place, who knew? - In this place sit the gates of heaven! So Jacob gets up and consecrates the site where he had the dream.

It seems odd that this dream of ladders and angels, in which we hear God on high repeating the blessing bestowed upon Abraham, and again on Isaac, could elicit such a response in someone who STOLE the blessing. This dream could just as easily have been a warning from God, "Just sayin, Jacob. This is MY blessing to give to whomever I choose. Don't think it's yours just because you stole it. I've got angels following you, buddy.... every step you take."

It is what happens next that, perhaps, that will offer some clarity on both the dream, and Jacob's response to it.

Verse 28:16, begins, "Vayikatz Yaakov mishnato" translated as, "And Jacob awakened from his sleep". In this verse, Jacob awakens and has an epiphany; He declares, "Indeed, God is in this place, and I did not know it." he says.

In verse 17, he continues, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this the gate of heaven!"

And finally, verse 18 begins, "Vayashkem Ya'akov— 'And Jacob arose early....."

When examined up close, it appears that after waking up in verse 16 (Vayikatz Yaakov), Jacob wakes up again in verse 18 (Vayashkem Ya'akov).

In verse 18, The word used in verse 18-Jacob's second awakening, is "Vayashkem". "Vayashkem" has the same root as the word, "Hashkiveinu". Every evening we recite the Hashkiveinu prayer. In this prayer we ask God to, "Cradle us in the shadow of God's wings". To watch over us, and to provide a 'Shelter of peace" over us throughout the night so that we may live to wake in the morning.

In Berachot 57a, sleep is regarded as 1/60th of death. This number may seem bizarre and maybe insignificant but knowing that nightly we are dying—even a little—is incredibly unsettling. Throughout our history, the period between which one falls asleep, and one awakens, has been synonymous with fear, anxiety, and vulnerability. Some rabbinic teachings trace this connection between darkness, sleep, and the belief that sleep brings about partial death- as far back as the time of our deliverance from Egypt. That although the Israelites were spared from the plagues in Egypt, the horror of them nonetheless, caused such fear that the Israelites began to pray that Death would not come to their doors and inflict death upon their households.

The Hashkiveinu prayer was the answer to this fear. We could allow our soul to ‘die’ knowing that it was in the care of God, who would care for, comfort, and return it to us in the morning.

Hashkiveinu and Modeh Ani –with the words, “Modeh Ani l’fanecha.....Shehechezarta bi nishmati b’chemla”. “I give thanks before you, God, who with compassion and mercy, returned into me, my soul.” are like bookend prayers. One asking God to care for our souls at night, and one to thank God for giving them back to us in the morning.

When looking at Jacob’s dream through this lens, perhaps it went something like this:

Verses 16/17: Vayikatz Yaakov mishnato”: “Jacob awakens from his slumber”

Jacob’s soul- the part that left him as he slept- awakened in the presence of God. Wrapped in the presence of the Shechinah, he proclaims, “Indeed, God is in this place, and I did not know it.

Accepting that he has been given a rare gift- to connect with the divine in such an intimate way, he continues in verse 17, “How unbelievably awesome is this “place”. Physically, emotionally and spiritually. This can be none other than the House of God, and THIS: this ladder I’ve been given the great honor of bearing witness to-- is the gate of heaven!”

And finally, in Verse 18: “Vayashkem Ya’akov— And Jacob, soul returned, arose early. No longer the Jacob who carries his forefather’s blessing as a result of trickery and deceit, but a different Jacob. One who owns the blessing and responsibility of the future of our people and to God, with whom he now has his own unique relationship born out of the connection to the divine he just experienced. Jacob, our patriarch, creates an anointed monument to God from the stone on which he placed his head the night before. Thus, giving to God a gift of his own heart. To symbolize that he accepts the blessing of his forefathers.

The only difference between the words, “vayishkav” “and “he lay down”, and “Vayashkem”, ”to arise in the morning”, are the letters bet and a mem. A bima is an elevated space, the word most commonly used to describe the area on which the Aron Kodesh with the Torah stands in the synagogue. The first letter is a bet and the third is a mem. The missing two letters are yud and hey: together they spell YA- God. Jacob lay down to sleep and arose in the morning. For him to step up on that proverbial bima and take his place amongst our forefathers, all he needed to do was open himself up to YA.

Shabbat Shalom

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