

Parashat Vayatzte 5781, 2020:

*Of Ladders and Greatness*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* presents us with one of the most famous *nevuot* (prophecies) in the entire Tanach, Ya'akov and the *sulam* (ladder):

And he dreamed and behold! a *sulam* — ladder set up on the ground and its top reached to heaven; and behold, angels of G-d were ascending and descending upon it. And behold, the L-rd was standing over him, and He said, "I am the L-rd, the G-d of Abraham your father, and the G-d of Isaac; the land upon which you are lying to you I will give it and to your seed." (*Sefer Bereishit* 28:12-13, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The first verse contains the word, "*sulam*," which is of particular interest since it is the only time that it is found in Tanach. One of the more celebrated explanations of its symbolic meaning was offered by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in *Midrash Tanchuma* (Buber), wherein he suggests that the *sulam* is a metaphorical representation of *Har Sinai*:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: "[The Almighty] showed him [Ya'akov] Mount Sinai. And this is the manner through which this idea may be derived: the letter *samech* in *sinai* has the numerical value of 60, the first *yud* equals 10, the *nun* is 50, and the final *yud* is 10. [If we add these numbers together,] the total is 130 — the same exact value as the letters in *sulam* [*samech* = 60, *lamed* = 30, *mem* = 40]. [Moreover,] the text states in regard to the *sulam*: 'and its top reached to heaven,' and it states in reference to *Har Sinai*: 'and the mountain burned with fire up to the midst of the heavens.'" (Parashat Vayatzte, section VII, translation, underlining and brackets my own)

The identification of *sulam* as *Har Sinai* appears, as well, in *Midrash Rabbah* (Vilna), Parashat Vayatzte 68 and *Midrash Pesikta Zutarta* — *Lekach Tov*, Parashat Toldot-Vayatzte 28. While this

notion is emphasized in these midrashic sources, the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), focuses his exegetical efforts upon the singular import of the phrase, “and behold, angels of G-d were ascending and descending upon it,” and stresses its overarching significance within Jewish theology:

In his [Ya’akov’s] dream He [Hashem] presented to him the prophetic vision that everything that takes place in this world is done through the agency of the Angels, and everything is undertaken based upon the divine decree of [Hashem], the most High. This is the case, since the Angels of the Almighty that Hashem sends to walk upon the earth do not do anything whatsoever — neither small nor great — until they return and stand before the Master of the Entire World. They then speak before Him and say: “We have walked upon the earth and, behold, it is dwelling in peace, or it is filled with war and blood.” [After receiving their report,] He commands them to return and go down to the earth to carry out His word. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit* 28:12, this and the following translations and brackets my own)

The essential phrase in this passage is found in its opening sentence: “everything that takes place in this world is done through the agency of the Angels, and everything is undertaken based upon the divine decree of [Hashem], the most High.” The Ramban opines that while this concept is operable in general, *Ya’akov Avinu* is a notable exception to the rule:

He [Hashem] showed him [Ya’akov] that He, may He be blessed, stood on the apex of the ladder and pledged a great promise to him wherein He made known that he would not be under the control of the Angels, rather he would be governed by Hashem, Who would ever be with him. As the text states: “And behold, I am with you, and I will guard you wherever you go.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 28:15) The reason [for this exceptional treatment by the Almighty] is that he achieved a higher level than all other *tzadikim*, for as it states in their regard: “For He will command His Angels on your behalf to guard you in all your ways.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 91:11)

In the Ramban’s view, *Ya’akov Avinu* emerges as an exceptional individual who established a matchless relationship with the Almighty that differed in kind and degree from all other *tzadikim*. I believe that it was precisely this connection that enabled Ya’akov to withstand the trials and tribulations engendered by Eisav, Lavan and his exile in Egypt during the twilight years of his life. It is important to remember that Hashem promised him before traveling to Egypt: “I am G-d, the G-d of your father. Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 46:3) It many ways, it is this promise that has enabled the Jewish people

to survive exile after exile, and catastrophe after catastrophe for we know that no matter where we may be, and what we may suffer, Hashem is with us.

May the time come soon and in our day when we will witness the fulfillment of *David HaMelech's* stirring words: "May all those who seek You exult and rejoice, and may those who love Your salvation say constantly, 'May G-d be magnified.'" (*Sefer Tehillim 70:5*) *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

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