

A Vision of Angels

In this week's reading from *Parashat Vayetze* (*Shemot / Genesis 28:10-32:2*) Jacob flees from his brother Esau. While traveling, he lays down and falls asleep. The Lord speaks to him in a dream (ויִהְלֵם) reaffirming the covenant He made with his fathers (*Bereshit / Genesis 28:10-19*). Jacob travels to Haran and meets Laban his mother's brother (*29:9-14*) and also meets Rachel, Laban's daughter (*29:6-8*). He falls in love and makes a deal with Laban to work seven years for Rachel to be his wife (*29:18-21*). Laban tricks Jacob and gives the older daughter Leah instead and as a result, he must work another seven years for Rachel (*29:22-28*). We are told the twelve tribes of Israel are born to Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah, (*29:31-30:27*). Jacob and Laban agree on wages (*30:28-43*) however, Laban and his sons are upset that Jacob has become so wealthy (*31:1-3*). The Lord then speaks to Jacob to take his family, and all he owns, back to the land of Canaan (*31:4-21*). Jacob makes a covenant with Laban to do no harm to one another (*31:22-32:2*).

In the opening verses of this week's portion, the Lord speaks by a dream and Jacob has a vision of angels ascending and descending upon a ladder. According to the biblical text, this is the first time that God has revealed Himself to Jacob. As the Lord reveals Himself to Jacob, He reiterates the covenant that He made with his fathers Abraham and Isaac and promises to be with him too. As a result Jacob renames the place as "*Beit-El*" (בֵּית-אֵל, Bethel) meaning "*House of God*" because God was in this place and He did not know it.

ספר בראשית פרק כח Bereshit / Genesis 28:11-13

יא וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיֵּלֶן שָׁם כִּי-בָא
הַשָּׁמַשׁ וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשֶׂם
מֵרָאשִׁיתוֹ וַיִּשְׁכַּב בַּמָּקוֹם הַהוּא: יב
וַיַּחְלֵם וְהִנֵּה סֹלֶם מְצָב אַרְצָה וְרֵאשׁוֹ
מֵגִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְהִנֵּה מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים
עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ: יג וְהִנֵּה יְהוָה נֹצֵב
עָלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֶיךָ
אָבִיךָ וְאֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה
שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנַנְנָה וְלְזַרְעֶךָ:

28:11 He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. 28:12 He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 28:13 And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. (NASB)

In Jacob's dream of the ladder with angels ascending and descending, the Scriptures say, יג וְהִנֵּה יְהוָה נֹצֵב עָלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֶיךָ אָבִיךָ וְאֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנַנְנָה וְלְזַרְעֶךָ *28:13 And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. (NASB)* The MT is interesting by the use of the words יְהוָה נֹצֵב עָלָיו that describe God standing above "it." The word that

is written here is על used as a preposition means “on, upon, above, over, about, on top, atop,” and we recognize that this word has a type two pronominal suffix עליו meaning “him” or “it.” The English translation says “And behold, the Lord stood above it,” where the pronoun him refers to it (the ladder) since the dream is focusing upon the ladder that Jacob is seeing with angels ascending and descending from heaven to earth. The vision of the ladder and the angels ascending and descending has been discussed at length by commentators in an attempt to understand its significance. Even Yeshua spoke about this ladder according to *John 1:51*. Based upon the MT rendition of Jacob’s ladder, commentators have asked questions such as: “What was the purpose of the dream for Jacob?” “To whom do ‘angels of God’ refer?” “What does ‘going up and down’ signify?” and based on our analysis of the MT, “Was the Lord standing beside Jacob, above Jacob, or upon the ladder?”

One interpretation on these verses is found in *Midrash Rabbah Bereshit Parashat 68, Part 12* which cites Rashi saying the ladder stood on the boundary between the Land of Israel and the Diaspora. Rashi comments saying, “The angels who escorted him in the Land of Israel do not leave the Land but ascend to Heaven, and angels whose domain is outside of Israel descend to accompany him [further].” Here Rashi says that God’s holy angels go about accompanying the children of God. In a similar way, *Midrash Tehillim 55, Part 3* which opens with the Dibur Hamathil (דיבור המתחיל) saying, “He has delivered my soul in peace so that none came near to me (*Tehillim / Psalms 55:10*).” The homiletic introduction to the Midrash says “Rabbi Joshua son of Levi taught, What do the words, He has delivered my soul in peace, etc. mean?” Rabbi Joshua continues, answering his question, by saying the following:

That a company of angels goes before a man, and these heavenly beings cry out saying, Make way for the likeness of the Lord. What need is there for a company of angels? Rabbi Yudan explained in the name of rabbi Levi, in the wide space of the universe there is no place, even one so small that it holds no more than a fourth of a kab of seed, that is without nine kab of demons. (Midrash Tehillim 55, Part 3)

אלא איקונייא מהלכת לפני האדם והבריות מכריזות ואומרות תנו מקום
לאיקונין של מקום, למה אמר ר' יודן בשם ר' לוי אין בית רובע בחללו
של עולם שאין בו תשעה קבין של מזיקין

The idea is that the Lord delivered David’s soul in peace so that none come near is explained by drawing a parallel to the angels who go before man and declare “*Make way for the likeness of the Lord.*” Mankind is given great honor and respect by the angels because the Scriptures say that we are made in the likeness of God, and it is in this way the glory of God is placed upon man. Remember, man is only able to see the glory of God and not God Himself. With this in mind, being made in the likeness of God, the Lord has given us His glory having made us in His image and therefore the concept here is that a company of angels go before a man and declare that we have been made in His

likeness. Rabbi Yudan says that “*in the wide space of the universe there is no place, even one so small that it holds no more than a fourth of a kab of seed, that is without nine kab of demons.*” Note the Aramaic states קבין של מזיקי a “*cab of insects*” where insects are translated as demons. A קבין, cab, kab is a measure of capacity of a small quantity. The concept here is that seed contains insects, and if man has a company of angels declaring the glory of God, then seed has its company of insects. Demons are paralleled to the insects associated with the seed. Seed has the capacity of producing good fruit, and so does man have the capacity to produce good works. The insects however inhibit the amount of good fruit that are produced by the seed, and in a similar manner, demons inhibit the good works of a man on this earth. The insects are paralleled to Demons in this translation of the midrash to illustrate these concepts.

The midrash continues saying the following:

And blindfolds are fastened over the eyes of each of these demons as over the eyes of millers' asses. Why? That the demons may not injure mortals. But when a man's sins bring it about, the blindfolds are removed from the demon's face, so that as he looks upon the man, he injures him. Hence, the Heavenly beings cry out before a man, Make way, etc. in order that the demons may not injure him. Accordingly, He has delivered my soul in peace, and the words which follow, so that none came near to me mean that David said, None of the demons came near me. And why not? (Midrash Tehillim 55, Part 3)

Here we find the rabbis developing their understanding of the angels who go before a man declaring God's glory for the purpose of dispersing the demons who are bent on injuring the man. Blinders are placed upon the demon so he is unable to injure a man. One's sins however cause the blindfolds to come off giving demons the ability to injure the man. All of these interpretations appear to come out of this dream that Jacob had according to this week's Torah portion.

Another interpretation from *Midrash Rabbah Bereshit, Parashat 69, Part 3* (מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה סט סימן ג) states the following:

Midrash Rabbah Bereshit, Parashat 69, Part 3

What precedes this text? And, behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it. Rabbi Abbahu said, It may be compared to an infant prince sleeping in his cot on whom flies were settling; when his nurse came she bent over and suckled him, and they flew away. Similarly, at first, And behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it; but when the Holy One blessed be He revealed Himself to him, they fled from him. This is the meaning of And behold, the Lord stood by Him.

And behold, the Lord stood Alav. Rabbi Chiyya and rabbi Jannai dis-

agree. One maintains that Alav means on the ladder; while the other says that Alav means on or over Jacob. The view that Alav means on the ladder presents no difficulty; on the view that it refers to Jacob, it means that He stood (protectively) over him. Rabbi Johanan said, The wicked stand over their gods, as it says, And Pharaoh dreamed, and, behold, he stood over the river (Bereshit / Genesis 41:1); but the God of the righteous stands over them, as it says, And, behold, the Lord stood over him, etc. Rabbi Simeon son of Lakish said, The Patriarchs are the Chariot of God, as it says, And God went up from Abraham (Bereshit / Genesis 18:22); and God went up from upon him (Bereshit / Genesis 35:13); And, behold, the Lord stood upon him.

מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה סט סימן ג

ג א"ר אבהו משל לבן מלכים שהיה ישן על גבי עריסה והיו זבובים שוכנים עליו וכיון שבא מניקתו שחה עליו מניקתו וברחו מעליו, כך בתחלה והנה מלאכי אלהים עולים ויורדים בו כיון שנתגלה עליו הקב"ה ברחו מעליו, ר' חייא רבה ור' ינאי, חד אמר עליו על סולם, וח"א עליו על יעקב, מאן דאמר עליו על הסולם ניחא, אלא למ"ד עליו על יעקב מי מתקיים עליו, א"ר יוחנן הרשעים מתקיימין על אלהיהם (בראשית מא) ופרעה חולם והנה עומד על היאור, אבל הצדיקים אלהיהם מתקיים עליהם שנאמר והנה ה' נצב עליו ויאמר אני ה' אלהי אברהם.

In Midrash Rabbah, the rabbis begin by paralleling flies to the angels, flies are chased away from the baby's crib by the nurse, the angels flee in the presence of God. The rabbis continue with a discussion on the word עָלָיו generating the same questions regarding this word and on whether the Lord stood over "him" (Jacob) or "it" (the ladder)? The rabbis say, "on the view that it refers to Jacob, it means that He stood (protectively) over him." On the other hand, "the wicked stand over their gods" providing the example of Pharaoh and his dream (Bereshit / Genesis 41:1). The midrash continues saying, "but the God of the righteous stands over them, as it says, And, behold, the Lord stood over him, etc." Midrash Rabbah concludes with an example from Abraham, the Lord God ascending from Abraham, concluding that the Lord God stood over Abraham and consequentially over Jacob as well. In addition to this, according to Maimonides (in his book *Guide of the Perplexed*), the purpose of the ladder is to explain the relationship between two realities, between existence on earth and existence in the "world of heavenly spheres," both of which are set in motion by God. According to Maimonides, the dream is a representation of two worlds, the connection between the worlds, one which is in heaven, and the other which is on earth, pertains to the understanding of God and of His ways. We are able to understand just a little bit about the Lord God in heaven (the world in heaven), by understanding His ways (His commandments) according to the Torah on this earth.

The point of this week's reading on Jacob's ladder and the midrashim, is that the Lord stands above the righteous. Note how this draws in the concept of a foundation that supports the structure above. However, in the midrash we learn the Lord standing above supports the righteous who are below. According to *Tehillim / Psalms 1:6* we read "*For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the wicked will perish.*" (NASB) The Lord knows the way of the righteous because the righteous live and walk by faith. This is a very important concept in light of the midrash that states "*the Lord stands above the righteous, whereas the wicked stand above their gods.*" Note how the way of the wicked is convoluted as compared to the way of God. The Lord God stands above His people protecting and providing for them. The idol gods do not stand over the wicked, the wicked stand overtop of their idol gods. If help proceeds from top down, (e.g. the Lord in heaven who helps his people) then the function of the wicked is to help the gods of their own making. The wicked perish because their faith, trust, and hope are in the inanimate object. The righteous on the other hand will succeed because, faith, trust, and hope is in the Lord. In Jacob's dream the Lord God Almighty renewed His covenant with Jacob, making the same promises He had made to Abraham and Isaac, promising to always be with Jacob, and to not be afraid. Today, we stand in these promises, the Lord God, our Father in heaven, will remain with us because we trust and obey Him, His word, and have faith His Son Yeshua the Messiah. Halleluia!

