

Keep Climbing! – Parashat Vayeitzei

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Don't allow yourself to fall into the darkness. Understand that this is a critical part of the upward spiritual journey...

Parashat Vayeitzei is one of the longest weekly portions in the Torah, with several amazing storylines. The *parashah* opens with the description of Jacob leaving Be'er Sheva, fleeing from Esau's attempt to kill him. Jacob was also following the instructions of his parents to go and find a wife from his extended family and not from the local daughters of Canaan.

On the way, Jacob "encounters the place," which we are told is Mount Moriah, site of the future Temple. Suddenly the sun sets and the darkness causes Jacob to fall asleep. The Torah tells

us, "He dreamed, and behold! A ladder was standing on earth with its top reaching the heavens. Angels of God were ascending and descending on it." After God speaks to Jacob in the dream, Jacob wakes up and says, "How awesome is this place!"

What can we learn from this fascinating dream?

When Reb Noson of Breslov was still young, even before he met Rebbe Nachman, he was known to be an outstanding genius and Torah scholar, well-versed in all aspects of the Torah. Nevertheless, he felt a constant lack in his Divine service. Even after drawing close to several of the Chassidic masters of the time, he still felt unfulfilled and yearned for an even greater connection to God. At one point, he was even close to the great tzaddik, Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov.

One Motza'ey Shabbat, a group of chassidim sat together for Melaveh Malkah. Reb Noson was among them. Being one of the youngest of the group, they turned to him and asked him to go out and buy some bagels for the meal. Reb Noson went out with a broken heart. Here he was, an accomplished scholar, with a connection to one of the greatest tzaddikim of the generation, and all he was good for was buying bagels? He just wanted to serve God.

Instead of heading to the bakery, he slipped into the local synagogue and began reciting psalms. He reached chapter 50, but could no longer continue. Reb Noson slipped down to the floor and burst into tears. He cried out to God, "Master of the world! Is this what I was created for? To buy bagels?"

Reb Noson slipped down to the floor and burst into tears. He cried out to God, "Master of the world! Is this what I was created for? To buy bagels?"

At that point he fell asleep and dreamed. In his dream he saw himself climbing a ladder, when suddenly he stumbled and fell

off the ladder and hurt himself. He tried to get up and climb again. This time he managed to climb higher, but again he fell down; the blow he received was harder and even more painful. Over and over again he tried to climb up and then fell down, each blow hurting more than the last, until he no longer had the strength to climb back on.

Suddenly, in the dream, he saw a man with a beard, his face radiant like an angel. The man said to Reb Noson, "Keep climbing, but hold yourself well!" After hearing these words of encouragement, Reb Noson began to climb again and this time he managed to reach all the way to the top of the ladder. Reb Noson awoke from the dream, but the vision was engraved deeply on his heart. He went back to his friends who were still sitting at the Melaveh Malkah. They asked him what had taken so long, and he made some passing excuse. Not long afterwards, Reb Noson heard about Rebbe Nachman and decided to travel to Breslov to see him. As soon as he saw Rebbe Nachman, he recognized him as the man in the dream who had told him, "Keep climbing, but hold yourself well!" Reb Noson went on to become the leading student of Rebbe Nachman.

Returning to our *parashah* and Jacob's dream, Reb Noson explains that this vision teaches us about our spiritual journey in life. Each person at some time experiences a spiritual awakening when he feels the light of God open to him. He jumps aboard this wave and then expects this feeling to continue forever. Suddenly he is thrown down and feels as if he never was close to God at all. Just like Reb Noson in the dream, each time he lands with a greater thud and experiences more pain, until he can no longer continue. How does one strengthen himself in such a situation?



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Using the verses from our *parashah*, Reb Noson conveys to us the very first lesson he heard from Rebbe Nachman: how to climb the ladder.

“He encountered the place”—the site of the future Temple. This means he reached a level where he attained the light of God. Expecting to remain at this level, he is then suddenly faced with reality...

“He slept there because the sun had set.” The sun represents the light of God. The sun had now set and he no longer experienced this light. He finds himself in a sleep, in a place of darkness, far from the light of God. How does one move on from this?

Jacob then saw “a ladder that was standing on earth with its top reaching the heavens.” This is a person’s task in this world: to climb the ladder rung by rung. It is impossible to jump all the way to the top in one go.

“Angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” The tzaddikim are compared to angels. Even they need to go up and

down the ladder; there is no such thing as only climbing. Falling down is part of the process. As we know, "The purpose of falling is to enable the ascent." When a person does experience the darkness after the light, he should know that the light he experienced is still with him. It is not lost—it is just hidden from him right now. Sometimes a person "encounters the place" directly and feels the light of God. Other times this light seems far from him, as the verse describes that Abraham saw the same place "from afar."

At times like this, you need to "hold yourself well." Don't allow yourself to fall into the darkness. Understand that this is a critical part of the upward spiritual journey.

On the other hand, even when you feel the light of God on you, realize that in reality you are still far from God and have infinitely more levels to climb. Understanding this, you can strengthen himself during the times of descent, knowing that God is always with you.

As Reb Noson writes in *Likutey Halakhot*:

The truth is that the light of God never leaves a person and shines on a person constantly. It is only within our limited minds that it appears as if he only "sees the place from afar." However, in the end God will complete that which we have begun. He will draw only goodness to all of Israel, and to each person individually. Our job is to wait and yearn for this salvation.

Keep climbing, but hold yourself well!