

## Parashat Vayetze 5781

Shabbat shalom. This Shabbat's Torah portion continues the story of Ya'akov. As in many of the Torah portions in Genesis (*Bereshit*), there's an enormous amount of interesting material in it and so many ways of understanding and approaching that material. It contains one of my favorite episodes in the Torah which is the scene of Ya'akov's dream.

Continuing immediately from the conclusion of the previous Torah portion when Ya'akov's mother, Rebecca (Rivka) tells his father Yitzkhak that she doesn't want Ya'akov to marry a local Canaanite woman and wants Ya'akov to go back to her brother Lavan's home to find a wife there because Rivka doesn't like the Canaanite women. Yitzkhak goes along and tells Ya'akov to go to Lavan's territory and find a wife there. The underlying motivation for Rivka was for Ya'akov to get away from Esav so that Esav's murderous anger towards his brother Ya'akov would have time to subside. So Ya'akov leaves Be'er Sheva and goes to Kharan.

What is this experience like for Ya'akov? Who is Ya'akov at this point? What the literal, plain meaning of the text (the *p'shat* as it's called in Hebrew) says is not necessarily how the Sages (*khazal*) understood it. Of course, we are all descendants of Ya'akov, not Esav, and early in last week's Parashah we read that G'd told Rivka that among the twins to whom she would soon give birth, the elder would serve the younger. Rivka also loved Ya'akov and saw that he was the more worthy heir to the mantle of clan leadership. In a way, the Torah portions that include Ya'akov in them portray his development of character. At the point in which this Shabbat's torah portion opens, Ya'akov is fleeing Be'er Sheva essentially to save his life. He is going somewhere, Kharan, where he has never been. He is all alone. I would imagine he must be quite frightened. He has no idea what awaits him when he gets to Kharan, nor how long he will be there. What is Ya'akov's relationship to his parents? What is his relationship to his brother Esav? Does he love his brother? Does he feel guilty for having taken advantage of his brother?

Okay, so Ya'akov is on his way to Kharan and it's more than a day's trip. The sun is setting and he sets up stones for a pillow as he lays down to sleep. He has an incredibly striking dream. (As a little footnote, let us remember that his most beloved son, the first born that he will

have with Rachel, the wife he truly truly loved, - I'm referred to Yosef here – will also have extremely memorable and meaningful dreams).

In his dream he sees a ladder “set on the ground and its top reached to the heavens and *malakhim* (either “messengers” or “angels”) of G!d were going up and down on it. And behold the Eternal One was present on top of it and said: I am Ad!nay the G!d of Avraham your father and the G!d of Yitzkhak. The land upon which you are lying I will give to you and your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you and through your descendants. I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Ya’akov awoke and said (in Hebrew) “*akhen, yesh Hashem bamakom hazeh v’anokhi lo yadati*”. I mentioned it in Hebrew first because there are different ways that one could translate this verse. The *p’shat* (literal meaning) is probably “indeed G!d is in this place and I didn’t know.” There are a lot of little fine points in here however. First the use of the phrase “*lo yadati*” literally means “I didn’t know,” so the use of the word “*anokhi*”(“I”) is superfluous technically. However, even on the *p’shat* level of reading the verse, the word “*anokhi*” serves as a form of emphasis that “I, I didn’t know.” However to give this another reading, maybe a more spiritual reading, which is the reading I prefer, we need to remember that two of the words in this short verse have wider meanings in our tradition. In rabbinical literature i.e. the literature of *khazal* (our sages) the word “*Hamakom*” which literally means “the Place” was one of the words used to refer to G!d (in that context meaning “the Omnipresent One” in which all things exist). And the word “*Anokhi*” one of the two words for “I” in Hebrew (the other, much more common one being “*Ani*”) is also the first word of the “Ten Commandments.” So I would like to read this verse as saying that Ya’akov was having a revelation that he suddenly realized that the Eternal One was indeed in this very place and Ya’akov didn’t realize it. And, to further this understanding, I would say that “this place” is everywhere at all times. All of us are usually in this situation – where the Eternal One, G!d, is wherever we are at all times and we usually are unaware of that, we don’t experience it, unless we are graced with a moment of revelation. But just as we may be graced with a moment of great insight, we usually cannot maintain that high level of awareness and we return to our less elevated perception of the world around us. Nevertheless, the possibility for a higher perception is always there. That understanding is

conveyed by the “messengers” or “angels” of G!d ascending and descending the ladder. We are like the ladder and our consciousness ascends and descends. Sometimes we are much more attuned to our surroundings and to the spiritual dimensions of our existence, sometimes less so. To me, our tradition of Torah study and performance of mitzvot is largely meant to cultivate our spiritual sensibilities and to help us live lives of holiness sharpening our awareness of, and sensitivity to, the Eternal in the midst of the ephemeral. Shabbat Shalom.