# Don't Underestimate Yourself: Thoughts for Parashat Vayetsei

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vatyetsei

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Jacob was having a life crisis. He had to flee because his brother Esav wanted to murder him. He was leaving from his parents' home with no idea when he would be able to return to see them again. He was alone, heading to a new land where his future was uncertain.

Along the way, he sleeps and has an amazing dream—a ladder connecting earth and heaven, with angels ascending and descending. He receives a glorious message from God that he and his descendants will inherit the land, will be numerous, and will be a blessing to all the peoples of the world. God promises to protect Jacob.

Jacob awakens and realizes that he had a communication from God. He was awed. "And Jacob awoke from his sleep and said: surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it (ve-anokhi lo yadati)—Bereishith 28:17. This verse is generally understood to mean that Jacob had not realized that God was with him at this particular place.

I suggest an alternate interpretation with a different translation: "Surely the Lord is in this place, but I did not even know who I am (anokhi—myself, lo yadati—I did not know.) Jacob had originally thought of himself as an insignificant person caught in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation. He was a refugee, a person without a home, without status, without family or friends. But then God appeared and assured him: you are somebody, you are precious to Me, you have a great future. Jacob is stunned. I did not know that I was valuable, I did not know my own worth. Anokhi, lo yadati. Myself, my personal significance—I did not know!

Jacob came to recognize what all humans need to recognize: our lives have significance, we have goals to strive for; we are not lost and forgotten. We should

not underestimate ourselves.

Let us look again at Jacob's dream.  He envisioned "a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (Bereishith 28:12). Rabbinic commentators have noted the anomaly that Jacob saw angels ascending from earth to heaven, although one would normally have thought that angels would first be descending from heaven to earth.

Perhaps the dream is alluding to how to cope with difficult situations. We first must draw on our own inner strength and let our dreams yearn upward; we must send our "angels" on an ascending path; we must let our minds rise above our actual setting so that we can expand our vision. Once we've done that, then the Lord sends His angels down to help us achieve our goals.

To overcome feelings that our lives are contracting, we need to have ideas, dreams and goals that are expanding. Otherwise, we sink into the prison of despair. We must believe in ourselves and our ability to grow.

Jacob needed to develop self-worth; he had to learn that his life meant something, that God expected great things from him.

If we can dream Jacob's dream and let our "angels" ascend heavenward, we can attain inner freedom and wisdom. If our "angels" will aspire and rise, then we may hope that the Lord will send His angels from heaven to help us on our way.

Angel for Shabbat