# Our Two Selves: Thoughts for Parashat Vayetsei

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayetsei

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Kotzker Rebbe (1787-1859) was an important Hasidic leader known for his incisive mind and his impatience with human frailties. He was once told by his personal secretary that some of the Rebbe's silverware had been stolen. The Kotzker cried out in disbelief: "Stolen? Is it not written in the Torah 'you shall not steal?'" To him, it was unthinkable that anyone would willingly violate an ethical commandment of the Torah.

And yet, his silverware indeed had been stolen. People did—and do—sin. They may know in theory that God hates arrogance, lies, murder, wickedness, theft, trouble-making; and yet they do these things anyway. Why?

People commit abominable acts for a variety of motives. They may be seeking personal gain, or taking vengeance, or trying to assert their own personal power over others; or they may be mentally ill or psychologically damaged.

King Solomon reminds us that "stolen waters are sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." People derive a certain degree of pleasure in doing that which is forbidden. Perhaps this provides a sense of freedom and power; perhaps this lets us think that we have outsmarted the system. Since the days of Adam and Eve, humans have been confronted with temptations; and since the days of Adam and Eve, humans have succumbed to temptations.

Each human being has the capacity to be righteous and each has the capacity to be wicked. We each have the responsibility to shape the direction of our lives…for better and for worse.

In Hebrew, the usual word for sin is *het.* At its root, the word *het* means "missing the mark." The assumption is that people are aiming to behave honestly and morally, but they may veer off course. Their goal is to be upright and fine human beings; but due to errors in judgment or self-control, the goal is missed. They give in to the temptation to sin.

The Torah reports on an amazing dream of our forefather Jacob. He had fled from his brother Esau's wrath and was on his way to Laban, his future father-in-law. At nightfall, Jacob went to sleep. "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (*Bereishith* 28:12). The usual understanding of this verse is that the angels were ascending and descending the rungs of the ladder.

A Midrash (*Bereishith Rabba* 28:12) offers a different explanation. The Hebrew words *olim veyordim bo* (ascending and descending on it) can also be translated "ascending and descending on *him*." That is, the angels were jumping up and down on Jacob himself! The angels said to him: "Are you the one whose image is engraved on high?  They ascended on high and saw his [ideal] image and they descended below and found him sleeping." According to this Midrash, the ideal image of Jacob was in heaven near the throne of glory of God. That ideal image represents the person Jacob could become…and should become. The angels viewed this perfected image of Jacob in heaven, but then descended to earth and found the sleeping Jacob who seemed unaware or unconcerned about his heavenly self. The angels pounced on him, as if to say, "wake up, don't you realize who you can become, who you are supposed to become?"

This Midrash relates not only to Jacob but to all human beings. In a sense, we each are two people: our heavenly ideal self; and our earthly self. The heavenly self is an ideal to which we should aspire. We are each born with unique talents, sensitivities, opportunities. If we strive to develop to our maximum potential, we can approach the heavenly ideal of ourselves. We will realize that the "stolen waters" may taste sweet in the short run; but that they are poisonous to our moral development in the long run.

The angels reminded our forefather Jacob to rise to the challenge of becoming his best self. It is a challenge that applies to each of us.