Impasses...and Beyond: Thoughts for Parashat Vayetsei

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayetsei

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And Jacob awakened from his sleep and said, surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it” (Bereishith 28 16).

Sometimes we reach an impasse and are not sure how to proceed. We face new challenges, unexpected setbacks, daunting choices for the future. We consider this option or that possibility; we consult with others; we think as carefully as we can. But we still feel uncertain. As we agonize over our situation, we admit: I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what’s best.

Our forefather Jacob faced such a crisis, described in this week’s Torah reading. He had to flee his parents’ home for fear that his brother Esau wanted to murder him. He set off to a land he had never been to before, to start a new chapter in his life without a clear idea of how things would unfold. As he was on the road, he went to sleep and had a dream. He envisioned a ladder resting on the ground but reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. When he woke up, he realized he had received a message from God. The Almighty reassured him that he would move forward successfully and receive many blessings.

When we find ourselves in transitional dilemmas, we might draw insights from Jacob’s dream and his encounter with God. The ladder’s legs were on land; i.e. we need to be realistic, grounded in the reality of the world in which we live. The ladder reached the heavens; i.e. we must have great aspirations, a spiritual worldview that transcends the moment. Angels were ascending and descending the ladder; i.e. we must understand that life has ups and downs and that we have the ability to cope with fluctuations if we keep a proper mindset.

When we are at an impasse, we are not likely to receive a prophetic dream as did Jacob. But we can think of our situation as a challenge from God in which the Almighty prods us to be strong, resilient, clear-headed, unafraid. It is as though God places Jacob’s ladder before us and says: will you ascend or descend? Do you have the courage to climb and reach for the heavens?

Personal dilemmas offer us the possibility of personal achievement. Rabbi Israel Salanter once taught: when most people come to a wall they can’t go through, they stop; when Jews come to a wall they can’t go through, they go through! Perhaps we learned to go through walls by keeping Jacob’s ladder in mind.

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