

The Dream of the Ladder

By Rav Tamir Granot

The opening section of *Parashat Vayetze*, known as "The Dream of the Ladder," actually contains two distinct subjects, to each of which the Torah accords importance:

1. the dream itself, in terms of its content
2. the place where the dream takes place, and that which is destined to happen there

The dream itself may be divided into three parts –

- a. The vision: "Behold, a ladder was standing on the ground, with its head reaching to the heavens, and behold – angels of God were ascending and descending on it."
- b. The bestowing of the blessing of the forefathers upon Yaakov: "I am the Lord God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzchak; the land...." This blessing contains a clear repetition of the blessings given to Avraham as he left Charan and on the east of Beit El, the blessings given with the name YKVK.
- c. A personal promise: "Behold, I am with you" – a promise that is apparently meant not only in the general sense (protection, etc.) but that the Divine Presence will accompany Yaakov. This is seemingly a reference to revelation and prayer, which God promises will be available to Yaakov wherever he goes.
 "And I will guard you wherever you go" – protection against personal harm (Eisav) as well as monetary loss (Lavan),
 "And I shall return you to this land" – the tangible fulfillment of the promise to Avraham, to be realized not only by his descendants, but by him himself. This is a return to the mission entrusted to him by Rivka – to escape from Eisav, and a promise that ultimately her efforts and actions will bear fruit. It is also a return to the mission given to him by Yitzchak, its purpose being marriage, in accordance with the prototype established by Avraham: "Only do not take my son back there."
 "For I shall not leave you until I have performed all that I have spoken to you" – a concluding phrase of summary and reinforcement, defining the horizon of the promise, and returning to the introduction – "with you" (Until when? Until I have performed...).

When Yaakov awakens, he addresses both aspects of the dream.

The vision of the ladder: "How awesome is this place; this can only be the house of God, and this is the gateway to heaven." This, apparently, is the simple explanation of the vision of the ladder, supplied by Yaakov himself; this must be the gateway to heaven because it is here that the ladder reaching to heaven stands, and therefore the place itself has special significance. The placement of the monument thereafter, and the oath to establish a house for God – along with giving the place a name – all demonstrate that the revelation of the importance of the place is central in Yaakov's eyes.

The personal promise: "If God will be with me..." An examination of Yaakov's statement here shows that he addresses God's promise directly, and turns His unconditional promise into a conditional one:

God's Promise	Yaakov's Version
Behold, I am with you	If God will be with me
And I shall guard you wherever you go	And guard me ON THIS ROAD which I am taking
	AND GIVE ME BREAD TO EAT AND A GARMENT TO WEAR
And I shall return you to this land	And I return in peace TO MY FATHER'S HOUSE
For I shall not leave you until I have fulfilled that which I have spoken to you	
	Result 1: "The Lord will be my God
	Result 2: and this stone which I have placed as a monument will be a house of God
	Result 3: And all that You give me I shall surely tithe to You.

A comparison between Yaakov's oath and God's promise shows that Yaakov repeats God's words – as noted above – as a condition for his oath, although he also alters a few details. Yaakov in no way addresses the blessings of Avraham which have just been bestowed upon him, and it appears that the changes that he introduces in his repetition of God's promise to guard him personally reflect a similar perception.

God's promise to Yaakov, in fact, complements the bestowing of the blessing upon Avraham. The first part is uttered with the pathos and style reminiscent of the previous occasions of blessing. But the unique context of the present blessing – Yaakov's flight from his home – demands an addition, with God promising Yaakov that He will protect him so that he will be able, in the future, to receive Avraham's blessing. Indeed, the conclusion of God's words testifies to this intention:

"For I shall not leave you until I have fulfilled that which I have spoken to you."

This clause, which is the purpose and cause of God's promise, is missing from Yaakov's words. Yaakov fails to make the connection between the individual promise and the general one. His oath is that of a man in trouble, who prays for deliverance and for success on his way. This is further evidenced both by his addition, "And give me bread to eat and clothes to wear" – an individual, practical request, and by the change that he introduces, "And protect me on this road which I am walking" – in other words, the prayer is concrete and directed towards Divine protection on this journey/flight. God tells him, "I shall protect you wherever you go" – in other words, He gives him a promise of perpetual protection that is bound up with the national blessing that is being passed down to him from Avraham. Furthermore, God says, "I shall return you to this land" – meaning that He will ensure the essential conditions for the fulfillment of Avraham's blessing for Yaakov. Yaakov, on the other hand, concludes his condition, "And I return in peace to my father's house." It is not the national promise of the land that is his principal concern, but rather the success of his personal endeavor – to be able to return home in peace, despite Eisav.

Yaakov's changes obviously arouse our surprise: why does Yaakov have a problem with accepting the Divine promise in full? Even more problematically – why does Yaakov need to make a promise, given to him directly from God by prophecy, into a conditional oath? Clearly, a person who is in trouble promises to bring a sacrifice, etc., because he cannot be assured of God's help. But surely someone who has received God's word has no need for all of this?!

Moreover, the result of the oath is three-fold:

- a. "The Lord will be my God"
- b. establishment of a house for God from the monument
- c. a tithe

The latter two promises seem logical. The second speaks of revealing the importance of the site; the third is the essence of the oath – the promise to give something to God.

But the first promise is difficult to understand – as several of the commentators note. Can acceptance of the Lord as God be presented as the result of fulfillment of a condition? Does Yaakov perhaps – heaven forefend – not accept the Lord as God? Is the previous revelation not sufficient; must acceptance of God be made conditional?

It seems that these questions require that we re-think the essence of Yaakov's dream.

There can be no doubt that the central part of the dream is the conveying of Avraham's blessing. If God were to reveal Himself and convey only that blessing, there would be no difficulty – as indeed was the case with both Avraham and Yitzchak. The vision of the ladder and the private promise are exceptional and require explanation. It appears that the dream must be understood against the background of the national perception of Divinity that was prevalent in ancient times. Yaakov, heading away from his home, knows that in Charan there are other gods. Will he be forced to accept their divinity? If this were a journey for a limited time only, the question would not arise. But Yaakov is going to live somewhere else for an undefined period. The crux of the private promise is that God will protect him outside of the land, too - not only in *Eretz Yisrael*. In other words, Yaakov is not obligated to the gods of the land in which he finds himself, but only to the God of Israel. Thus, the purpose of the revelation is two-fold:

- a. To teach Yaakov that the gateway to heaven is in *Eretz Yisrael* – Beit-El (literally, the "House of God").
- b. To teach Yaakov that God's Providence extends not only throughout the Land of Israel, but that it exists everywhere; Yaakov is protected wherever he goes. Thus, God directs Yaakov – by means of the dream – to regard his journey as temporary.

Hence, the essence of the significance of the dream straddles two dialectical foundations:

- a. The house of God and the gateway to heaven are here, in Canaan.

b. God's Providence and His Divinity extend everywhere.

How does Yaakov relate to these messages?

Yaakov undoubtedly understood what he was being told – after all, he repeats God's words. But why does he not accept them unreservedly?

In order to answer this question we must turn our attention to the nature of the experience that Yaakov undergoes. He dreams a dream. We know that Yosef's dreams, which occur later on in Chapter 37, are greeted with ambivalence on Yaakov's part. Is there truth in a dream? In other words, is a dream the manifestation of the innermost thoughts of the dreamer, or is it a medium for Divine revelation? It appears that Yaakov is uncertain. It must be remembered that at this stage Yaakov is still a prophetic "novice"; he has never before experienced prophecy. In wake of the dream he asks himself whether it is God who showed him a ladder, or whether it was an invention of his own mind. Did God speak to him in a dream, telling him everything that he heard, or did he just dream it?

There is no doubt that Yaakov understood his dream to be a prophetic experience: "Indeed, God exists in this place." But, like other prophets, he is not convinced of the full significance of his experience. Yaakov's reaction testifies to this uncertainty. "If God will be with me" – in other words, if indeed that which God has said is realized, then I will know God really spoke with me. Thus, Yaakov turns God's promise into a condition – not because he casts doubt on God's reliability, but because he has some doubt that God in fact spoke to him and told him these things. If it is all realized in the future, he will know that it was God's word that was revealed to him.

An example of a similar process is to be found, for example, in the case of Yirmiyahu:

Yirmiyahu said: God's word came to me, saying,

"Behold, Hanamel, son of Shalum, your uncle, will come to you, saying, 'Purchase my field which is in Anatot, for you have the right of redemption, to buy it.'"

And Hanamel, my uncle's son, came to me – as God had spoken – to the courtyard of the guard, and said to me, "Please buy my field which is in Anatot, in the land of Binyamin, for you have the right of inheritance; you can redeem it. Buy it for yourself." THEN I KNEW THAT IT HAD BEEN GOD'S WORD. (*Yirmiyahu 32:6-8*)

Yirmiyahu describes a prophecy that he had, whose content was very strange. Why was God commanding him to buy a field, and why in the midst of the siege, a moment before the destruction? But, when his cousin indeed approaches him, as promised in the prophecy, then he reports, "I knew that it had been God's word." In other words, beforehand, he had not been certain that God had indeed spoken these words to him; the reality verified the prophecy.

In light of the above, let us now examine Yaakov's promises:

"Then the Lord will be my God" - If God indeed protects me, even outside of *Eretz Yisrael*, then I shall know that He is not only the God of this Land, but that He is God everywhere – apparently also in the sense of the God of the family and, in the future, the God of the nation. This is a very important stage in the development of faith among the forefathers. Yitzchak is forbidden to leave the Land, while Avraham tells his servant, "only do not take my son back to there" – meaning that Divine service can take place only in the Land. Avraham's journey to *Eretz Yisrael* should be viewed in the same light. God commands him to leave Babylon/Aram Naharayim and go to *Eretz Yisrael*, because that is the place of His Divinity. One may ask: why does the God of another Land appear to a person in his homeland (Avraham is a Semite, not a Canaanite) and promise to bless him in His land? The answer is undoubtedly related to what we have said above: God chooses Avraham – to be his God in the personal sense and not only in the territorial sense. Attention should be paid to the fact that the idea of Divinity is garbed in a dual and dialectic garment:

- There is a God of place
- There is a God of person/family/nation.

In general, these two dimensions coincide. The god of the land of Babylon (as its inhabitants see it) is also the god of the Babylonians. But in the case of our forefathers, a split was created, for the people in question were not living in their Land; and it is for this reason, of course, that God sends Avraham away from his country so as to rule over him and fulfill His promises to him in his proper place.

When Yaakov flees to Charan, the opposite occurs. He is forced to do what his father – Yitzchak – never did, and what his grandfather Avraham had warned his servant not to do: to leave the Land for a protracted period. From the point of view of the ancient religions, this meant entering the realm of a foreign divinity. This appears to be the principal significance of God's personal promise to Yaakov.

- The general promise says that Yaakov and his descendants will rule over God's Land.
- The personal promise means that the Lord will be the God of Yaakov and of his descendants – in the personal sense, too; i.e., even outside of the Land of Israel. This is a development of great importance in the perception of faith.

Yaakov answers and says: If God will indeed protect me even outside of the land, and will fulfill His word to me, then "the Lord will be my God." Meaning, I will accept Him as my God in the absolute, personal sense, too - not only as the God of the Land, but as my God and the God of my descendants for all generations. The emphasis is on the word "my." I know that the Lord is the God of the Land, but if His word is fulfilled then He will be MY God, in the absolute sense, everywhere.

Indeed, further on in the *parasha* the Torah tells us that Yaakov discovers in Charan that God's Providence watches over him there, too – in the form of prophecy, and in the form of protection.

"Behold – I am with you" – in prophecy:

"God said to Yaakov: Return to the land of your forefathers and to your birthplace, and I shall be with you."

In this verse we find an echo of the command to Avraham, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house." To Yaakov, God adds, "And I shall be with you," which is clearly connected to the words in His original promise, "Behold – I am with you."

What about the promise of protection: "I shall guard you wherever you go..."; "and [God] gives me bread to eat and a garment to wear"?

We find explicitly in the verses:

"Your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times, but God has not allowed him to harm me. If he said, "Your wages will be the speckled ones" – then all the sheep bore speckled young; if he said, "Your wages will be your wages" – then all the sheep bore speckled. Thus God took your father's cattle and gave it to me." (*Bereishit* 31:7-9)

Then evidence of prophecy, once again:

"An angel of God said to me in a dream, 'Yaakov!' – and I said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Lift up your eyes and see: all the rams arising over the herd are streaked, speckled and grizzled – for I have seen everything that Lavan is doing to you. I am the God of Beit-El, where you anointed a monument and swore an oath to Me; now, arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birthplace.'" (11-13)

And once again – protection:

God came to Lavan the Aramean in a dream at night, and said to him: "Take heed not to speak to Yaakov either good or bad." (24)

Let us now return to Yaakov's oath:

The second part of the oath brings us back to the first principle: the territorial aspect. If indeed it turns out that God's word as I dreamed it was true, and that the vision that I experienced was a genuine one, then I shall make of this monument a House of God. In other words, the place where I dreamed about God will be like a gateway to heaven – a place of Divine service.

Attention should be paid to the fact that it is only when Yaakov comes to fulfill his promise in Beit-El, upon his return from Charan, that he commands his children and the members of his household to rid themselves of their foreign gods. These are the idols of Lavan's house, which are certainly foreign. But until this point Yaakov had not accepted the Lord as God in the absolute sense, over himself and his household. In other words, it is possible that other forms of divine worship would also take place at that site. The acceptance of the Lord as God – as he promised

in his oath – required the removal of any trace of paganism. Indeed, Yaakov does this; he goes to Beit-El and builds an altar, thereby fulfilling his promise to make Beit-El a place of Divine worship.

Yaakov is the first among the forefathers who swears, "the Lord will be my God." Why do we find no similar commitment uttered by Avraham or Yitzchak? Why does this promise arise only from Yaakov?

Avraham and Yitzchak did not face the test of exile. Admittedly, Avraham had to go to Egypt, but this was a temporary measure. Yaakov left the Land of Israel with the intention of settling in Charan. Hence, it is Yaakov who establishes the possibility of Jewish existence even outside of the Land of Israel. Later on, he himself returns to exile – to Egypt. The twenty years he spends in Charan and his seventeen final years in Egypt become, in fact, the framework of his life and the crux of his message. Yaakov's unique religious contribution is the possibility of existence in exile, and the understanding that God's Providence over him and his descendants is universal. *Eretz Yisrael* is the focal point from which he – and we – emanate, and to which we return, but the service of God and the acceptance of His Kingship are not dependent upon it.

By fulfilling his promise and oath, Yaakov makes God – for all future generations – not only the God of the Land of Israel, but also the God of *Am Yisrael*, wherever they may find themselves.

"And God will be King over all the earth; on that day God will be One, and His Name will be One."

Translated by Kaeren Fish