

Parashat Vayatzte 5773, 2012

“May You Build a Ladder to the Stars”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

What is a ladder? Dictionary.com suggests the following definition: “An often portable structure consisting of two long sides crossed by parallel rungs, used to climb up and down.” In other words, a ladder is something that usually helps you to go higher and to go somewhere where you have not been. We encounter the Hebrew word for ladder, *sulam*, once in *Tanach*, in one of the opening verses of this week’s *parasha*: “And he [Yaakov] dreamt. And behold, there was a ladder (*sulam*) firmly placed upon the ground and its top reached to the heavens. And behold, angels of G-d went up and down upon it.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 28:12)

One of the classic commentators found in nearly every edition of the *Mikraot Gedolot* (Pentateuch with Classic Commentators) is the 14th century Torah scholar Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, popularly known as “the Tur” after the title of his halachic magnum opus. His Torah commentary is called *Baal HaTurim*. A master of using *Gematria* (numerical value of the Hebrew letters) to elucidate the meaning of the Torah text, he presents several different *gematriot* for the word *sulam*. All are fascinating and filled with meaning. I would like, however, to focus upon one of them.

Rabbeinu Yaakov first points out that the word “*sulam*” is the numerical equivalent of *kol* (voice). He then quotes the first volume of the *Zohar*, section 266, where the following idea is presented: “The voice of the righteous (*Tzadikim*) in prayer is the ladder upon which the angels ascend.” Shortly thereafter he continues and states: “Therefore, everyone who has true intention and heartfelt dedication (*kavanah*) in his prayers has a ladder whose rungs are complete and upon which the angels will be able to ascend.” According to the *Zohar*, it appears that *Tzadikim*, by definition, have the ability to imbue their *tefilah* (prayer) with *kavanah*. Their prayers are so powerful and so meaningful to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed Be He) that they serve as the vehicle whereupon the angels themselves can travel up to heaven. Usually we feel in our heart of hearts that we cannot achieve such lofty levels, that we can never become true *Tzadikim*. In fact, it is probably the antithesis of being a *Tzadik* to even imagine that you could ever become one. After all, such grandiose thoughts usually lead one to become a “legend in his own mind”- surely the opposite of an authentic *Tzadik*.

The Tur, however, teaches us a beautiful lesson. He teaches us that every person, and not just the *Tzadik*, has the potential and the ability to “build a ladder to the stars.” Our ladders, as long as they are composed of earnest prayers imbued with authentic *kavanah*, are no less significant and no less important than those of the *Tzadikim*. Our prayers, too, can serve as the medium whereby the angels transport themselves before *Hashem*. Even if we cannot be *Tzadikim*, we can nonetheless emulate their manner of prayer and their dedication to the Master of the Universe.

May it be His will and our most deeply felt desire that we will be able to pray to *Hashem* with complete dedication and *kavanah*. May we serve Him with all of our hearts, intellect, and being. In that way, may we, too, enable the angels of *Hashem* to travel heavenward on our ladders of prayer.

Shabbat Shalom

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