

Parashat Vayatzte, 5779, 2018:

To Build Ladders to Heaven

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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, and the Pittsburgh *Kedoshim*, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, Yitzhak Moshe Aleksander ben Chayeh Sarah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the famous words, “And Jacob left Beersheba, and he went to Haran.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 28:10, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Jacob’s departure is a direct response to his mother Rebecca’s wishes, and his father Isaac’s earlier two-fold statement:

And Rebecca said to Isaac, “I am disgusted with my life because of the daughters of Heth. If Jacob takes a wife of the daughters of Heth like these, from the daughters of the land, [Canaan] of what use is life to me?” (27:46, brackets my own)

And Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and he commanded him and said to him, “You shall not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Padan Aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother’s father, and take yourself from there a wife of the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother.” (28:1-2)

Jacob fulfills his filial responsibility with alacrity, and arrives “at the place and lodged there because the sun had set, and he took some of the stones of the place and placed [them] at his head, and he lay down in that place.” In a celebrated gloss in his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-105) identifies the place cited in this verse as Mount Moriah, the location of both *Akeidat Yitzhak* (the Binding of Isaac) and the future *Beit HaMikdash* (Holy Temple). Little wonder, then, that the following miracle took place:

And he dreamt, and behold! a ladder set up on the ground (*sulam mutzav artzah*) and its top reached to heaven (*v’rosho magiya od hashamaimah*); and behold, angels of G-d were ascending and descending upon it. And behold, the L-rd was standing over him, and He said, “I am the L-rd, the G-d of Abraham your father, and the G-d of Isaac; the land upon

which you are lying, to you I will give it and to your children.” (28:12-13, emendations my own)

It must be noted that our verse contains the sole instance in Tanach of the term “*sulam*.”

Such an unusual word naturally captured the exegetical imaginations of Torah commentators throughout the ages. Thus, we find the following *Gematria*-based (numerical-based) interpretation of Jacob’s dream by the great Mishnaic period thinker, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai:

“And he dreamt:” Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: “[The Almighty] showed him [Jacob] Mount Sinai. [What indication do we have in the verse that this is so?] The letter *samech* in *Sinai* equals 60, the first and last *yud*(s) equal 10, and the *nune* is equivalent to 50. This adds up to 130 – the exact same numerical value of the word “*sulam*.” In addition, in our verse, we find the expression, “*mutzav artzah v’rosho magiya od hashamaimah*,” [in regards to the *sulam*,] and in reference to Mount Sinai we find, “...and the mountain burned with fire up to the midst of the heavens (*hashamayim*).” (*Sefer Devarim* 4:11, passage source, *Midrash Tanchuma*, Solomon Buber edition, Parashat Vayatzte VII, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, for Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, based upon the relevant numerical equivalents of the Hebrew letters and the linguistic parallels within the verses that he quotes, the *sulam* is Jacob’s prophetic on-ramp to a vision of the future Revelation at Mount Sinai. We are not surprised, therefore, when Jacob proclaims: “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of heaven.” (28:17)

Like Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, the 14th century Torah scholar Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (“the Tur”) was a master of using *Gematria* to elucidate the Torah’s meaning. In his *Commentary on the Torah*, he notes that the word “*sulam*” is also the numerical equivalent of *kol* (130, voice), and joins this observation with a citation from the first volume of the *Zohar*, section 266: “The voice of the righteous (*tzaddikim*) in prayer is the ladder upon which the angels ascend.” Shortly thereafter he states: “Everyone, therefore, who has true intention (*kavanah*) and heartfelt dedication in their prayers has a ladder with complete

rungs upon which the angels will be able to ascend [to Heaven].” According to the Tur’s interpretation of the *Zohar*, it appears that *tzaddikim*, by definition, have the ability to imbue their *tefilah* (prayer) with deep-level *kavanah*. Moreover, their prayers are so powerful and of such great import to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed Be He) that they serve as a vehicle whereupon the angels can travel to heaven.

We are neither prophets like Jacob, nor *tzaddikim* like those referenced in the *Zohar*. Nonetheless, with Hashem’s help and our most heartfelt desire, we can invest our *tefilot* with *kavanah* and a sense of awe and wonder that we, too, are ever standing before the Holy One blessed be He. When we do so, may we, too, build ladders upon which “the angels will be able to ascend [to Heaven].” *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.