



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayitzei

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 9, 2013
Vayitzei

Ladder Thinking



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Are we victims of circumstances, bound to earth by our personal destinies? Is there a way to reach heaven while keeping our feet firmly planted on the ground? Or are we doomed to the daily struggle for survival with no relief in sight? Are we forever trapped in a life of unbearable resignation and quiet desperation?

An ancient dream of a mysterious ladder to heaven – described in this week’s Torah reading – contains the secret of breaking out of our pedestrian lives to dream great dreams ... and, above all, to see these dreams fulfilled.

Imagine it:

You go to sleep. You begin to dream. A ladder appears ...

Don’t worry, this ladder does not mean you have to change a light bulb or paint the ceiling – though your wife may disagree. This ladder means you are about to discover how you can climb from earth to heaven, and from heaven to earth.

And along the way you will discover that a rung can make a right, and that being a good Jew isn’t dependent on how much kishke you eat or how religious you consider yourself to be.

A good Jew is someone who is constantly, perpetually, continually climbing upward.

This is the ladder of the law.

LADDERAL THINKING, LADDERAL MOVEMENT

1. Two Conversations (Joke)

The First:

Woman: "Rabbi, my son is completely *meshugeh*, he has gone crazy! He has begun to eat kosher, celebrate the Shabbat, and pray three times a day! Oy vey, what should I do?"

Rabbi: "My good lady, what's so bad about that? I too eat kosher, celebrate the Shabbat, and pray three times a day."

Woman: "Yes Rabbi. But you get paid to do it. My son, *nebach*, actually means it!"

The Second:

Man: "Rabbi please help me, I beg of you. My daughter has gone off the deep end, she has completely lost it."

Rabbi: "I am here for you, my good man. But, tell me, how has your child lost it?"

Man: "My beautiful daughter has begun eating lobster and dating goyim!"

Rabbi: "That does not make your daughter crazy. If she had begun to eat goyim and date lobsters, now that would be crazy!"

2. What's Normal, What's Crazy

Depending on where you stand, what's normal and what's crazy differs emphatically. If you consider yourself Jewish and especially religious, it is normal for you to marry Jewish, eat only kosher, abstain from checking your email on Shabbat, study Torah, and pray. And it is crazy not to.

If, however, you consider yourself secular, it is normal for you to eat what you want to eat, date whom you want to date, and check your email whenever you like (and even sometimes when you don't like). For you it might seem pretty crazy to turn off the iPhone for an entire 25 hours. Ludicrous!

Others have still different approaches. For example, there are those dreamers, seekers or fanatics for whom it is normal to be living with their heads in the clouds. They will do everything in their power to remove themselves from this mundane earth, in order to free themselves from what they perceive as the shackles of physical existence.

In the search of transcendence or just relief from existential tension, they may even resort to unhealthy means, such as drugs or alcohol, although there are also healthy means to escape from stress of daily living – like music, art and meditation.

A cynic may even say that religion is also a drug, “an opiate of the masses.” Of course, as a rabbi, I personally believe faith and religion is a very healthy thing. But, for someone who has never experienced it, religion can appear as denial of this world or escape from reality.

And then, there are people who, in direct opposition to those who seek transcendence, embrace the other extreme. These individuals do everything in their power to remain rooted in the earth without ever tasting anything beyond.

“Don't give me no religion,” they say. “Don't give me no God. I only trust things I can see. It's way too risky walking around with your head held up in the clouds – you can't see where you're going!”

And they may have a good point. Just look at some of the people who have tried to leave the earth behind and soar to the heavens. Many a rock-and-roller has overdosed trying to “break on through to the other side,”¹ in the belief that “it is better to burn out than fade away.”²

¹ As The Doors once sang.

² Neil Young lyric quoted by singer Kurt Cobain in his suicide note.

But is it? Perhaps it is better to live a more bland life and to fade away, than it is to reach for levels best left untouched. People don't get hurt that way.

3. Battle of Life

This is much more than a mere study of two extremes. This is the battle we wage every second of our lives – the battle between the sacred and the mundane.

Right now, we are all sitting here in shul, because it's Shabbat. Today, this is normal for us. Tomorrow, we might be doing something very different – working, shopping, changing diapers, mowing the lawn – and that will be normal for us then.

But this is the question: Are we meant to reach for the heavens, for the clouds, shunning physical existence, or are we meant to live practically, in accordance with our physical reality, rather than chasing after ethereal dreams that sometimes pierce our hearts?

In broader strokes the question is: Are we bound by our personal destinies? Are we trapped in a life that is like a bubble with a glass ceiling? Or are we meant to break on through to the other side?

And considering what happened to those who tried to break the bonds of existence but did not live to tell about it – people in our times like Morrison, Rothko, Hendrix and Joplin – is there a way to reach heaven while keeping our feet firmly planted on the ground?

Are we doomed to the daily struggle for survival with no relief in sight? To a life of unbearable resignation and quiet desperation?

This question is addressed in this week's Torah reading.

4. Parshat Vayeitzei: Ladder Company

One of the most visual depictions in all the Torah – indeed, in all of literature – occurs in this week’s Torah reading, *Parshat Vayeitzei*.

Jacob, the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, is running away from the murderous threats of his brother Esau. Evidently, Jacob and Esau did not grow up in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. But that’s a different story.

In time, Jacob will become the forefather of the Jewish people. He will be given a second name Israel, and all of his descendants – a.k.a. you and I – will be known as the Children of Israel. And also Jacob’s homeland, and the homeland of his children will be known as *Eretz Yisrael*, the holy Land of Israel.

Before all of this, however, Jacob finds himself on the road to Charan. He stops on a mountaintop to rest for the night, before he continues his travels.

As Jacob falls asleep, he begins to dream. The Torah provides a vivid description:

And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder situated on the ground and its head touching heaven; and behold, angels of God were ascending and descending upon it.³

Jacob had a dream of a ladder. The ladder’s legs were situated on the ground and the ladder’s head reached heaven. Angels were going up and down this ladder.

The Torah goes on to tell us that, in the dream, God promised Jacob that the land upon which he was then sleeping would be his land and the land of all his children. And his children would be many, and they would live under God’s protection.

And then Jacob woke up from the dream.

Okay, back to reality.

Or wait: Maybe the dream was reality?

³Genesis 28:12.

5. Climb For The Perplexed

Usually, when we find ourselves climbing ladders, it is for a dull chore. Either to change a light bulb, paint a ceiling, or clean out the gutter. Usually, what we find on top of the ladder is not an exciting revelation – unless finding a bat's nest in the rafters is an exciting revelation.

But that did not prove to be the case with Jacob.

The Torah says that Jacob saw a ladder that, on one end, was established and entrenched in the ground and, on the other end, was reaching and touching heaven. The following verse continues:

And behold, God was standing above him...

The Hebrew word the Torah uses for “standing” is *nitzav*, which shares its root with *yatzav*, meaning “established/erected,” and *matzav*, meaning “situation,” and *matzeivah*, meaning “monument.”

Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish philosopher, in his most famous work, *Guide for the Perplexed*, creates a direct correlation between both the words “standing” and “established.” As follows:

[The verse reads,] “And behold, God was standing upon him...” Eternally established does God stand above him, meaning, on the ladder whose first end was in heaven and whose last was in earth. And upon it ascend all those who will ascend, until they grasp He Who is upon it for certain, as we just said, He stands for all eternity upon the head of the ladder.⁴

Maimonides says that on top of this ladder in Jacob's dream, God is standing. But not just standing – God is established, erected, a monument for all eternity.

Jacob's ladder, in other words, was climbing to grasp and experience nothing less than the Eternal, the Divine.

⁴Moreh Nevuchim, 1:15.

6. What's This Have to Do with Me?

That's nice, you might say, but what does this have to do with me? How can I, as a mortal being, access this ladder to the eternal? How can mortality experience immortality?

The Zohar teaches⁵ that Jacob's ladder is a metaphor for prayer, with the four rungs corresponding to the four steps in prayer and to the four mystical worlds.

This is the key message of this story and the point of the ladder in Jacob's dream.

As Jacob hit the road, both literally and figuratively, beginning his journey and the journey of the Jewish people to transform this physical world, a spiritual desert, into a divine reality and a Promised Land, God came to him in a dream to convey the secret of life. God came to reveal to him how to build a link, a connection, that unites the "crazy" extremes of existence – the extremes of this earthly plane with the extremes of the lofty heavens.

And the secret is this: By planting our legs firmly on the ground, we can touch heaven, and live to tell about it!

7. Chassidic Story

One of the most practical ways of doing this is illustrated beautifully by the following Chassidic story:

The 18th founder of the Chassidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov, would pray for many hours every day. His disciples, who had long concluded their own prayers, would form a circle around him to listen to the melody of his prayers and feast their eyes on the spectacle of a soul soaring in meditative attachment to its Maker. It was an unspoken rule amongst them that no one abandoned his post until their master had concluded his prayers.

⁵ Zohar I 266b. III 306a. Tikkunei Zohar 45. See Bereishis Rabba 21:4.

One day, a great fatigue and hunger befell them. One by one, they slipped home for a bite and a few moments rest, certain that their Master's prayers would continue for several hours more. But when they returned, they found that he had finished praying while they were gone.

"Tell us, Rebbe," they asked him, "why did you conclude your prayers so early today?"

The Baal Shem Tov answered them with a parable:

Once, a group of people was journeying through a forest. Their leader, who was blessed with keen eyesight, spotted a beautiful bird perched atop a tall tree.

"Come," he said to his companions, "I wish to capture this beautiful bird, so that we may delight in her song and gaze upon her wondrous beauty."

"But how can you reach this bird?" asked they. "The tree is so high and we are on the ground?"

"If you each climb up onto the shoulders of your fellow," their leader explained, "I will climb onto the shoulders of the topmost man and reach for the treasure that beckons to us from the heights."

And so they did. Together, they formed a ladder reaching from the earth toward the heavens, to raise their leader to his aspired goal. But they soon wearied of the exercise and went off to eat and rest, and the man who had sighted the bird tumbled to the ground.

The ladder connecting heaven and earth – our mundane lives and our spiritual lives – is built upon a community. No one climbs alone. If but one individual, one rung, one element pulls away, then the entire pyramid falls and we lose touch with the goal.

And prayer helps us build this ladder – for when we pray, we stop once, twice, three times a day (or, maybe even just once a week) to remember and acknowledge our divine purpose on this earth.

And this is true of our personal lives as well – each and every element is a rung, a part of a great ladder, and if we realize it, then we can reach the greatest heights.

8. Looking Up (Story)

But life is so hard, at times. We face so many challenges – we get so bogged down by our responsibilities and burdens, our pasts and habits – that we never think about touching heaven. Earth is our normal; heaven is our crazy!

But does it have to be? Another Chassidic story says no – it's all a matter of attitude:

Looking out the window one day, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi noticed his young grandchild, the seven-year-old Menachem Mendel, playing in the yard with his friends. The children had leaned a tall pole against a building and were competing with each other as to who could climb the highest. The Rebbe noticed that the young Mendel was the only one who reached the top of the pole, while all the others retreated well before the halfway mark.

Later, he asked his grandson: “Tell me, Mendeleh, how did you succeed in climbing higher than all your friends?”

The child replied: “Everyone kept on looking down to see how high they have climbed, and so they fell back in fright. But I looked only up, to see how much higher I still had to go.”

9. If Life is a Ladder

Not to overdramatize the point, but this story might convey one of the deepest concepts in all of Judaism.

If life is a ladder, then who would you consider to be closer to heaven – the individual standing on the uppermost rung, or the person standing one rung from the bottom?

Conventional wisdom would have us say: Of course, the person standing on the uppermost rung is closer to heaven than the person standing a mere rung from the ground.

Well, conventional wisdom is, after all, conventional, and the word “conventional” shares roots with the word “convenient.”

Convenience and convention is not why we are here today. It is a lot more convenient to sleep in Shabbat morning, or play a round of golf, than to come to shul.

We are here not for conventional or convenient wisdom. We are here for divine wisdom, which is never conventional, and rarely convenient.

The question is not, “On which rung do you presently stand?” No, the question is, “Which way are you climbing?”

Are you climbing up or are you climbing down? Is today higher than yesterday and tomorrow even higher than today?

If the person on the second highest rung is climbing down and the person on the second lowest rung is climbing up, then who is doing better?

To invoke a famous cliché: It doesn’t matter so much where you start, as it does where you end.

10. Chanukah (Optional)

Chanukah is just around the corner. And every night we light the Menorah, adding every night another candle.

The question is: Are we adding a candle every single day? Are we climbing up the ladder or are we standing still?

And, as we all know, standing still is moving backwards. He who is not busy living is busy dying. Have you ever seen a candle burn? If you aren’t adding more candles than the oil is diminishing. Candles don’t stand still, they are either burning up or they are burning down.

And humans are candles. We are either burning up, climbing up, up to heaven; or we are, burning down, climbing down, down to the ground.

11. Crazy Is The New Normal (Optional)

The Torah does not define things the way we do.

We define things based on our subjective experiences and comfort zones. And whatever we are accustomed to, we consider normal, while things we are not used to we consider crazy.

The Torah defines the relationship between heaven and earth as a ladder – a ladder that has legs very firmly established and planted on the ground and a head that reaches up to the heavens.

What's normal for us is where we stand today. If I am on rung two, which entails going to synagogue every Shabbat and being nice to my spouse/coworkers every Tuesday, then rung two is my normal. And it is very crazy and scary for me to climb to rung three.

But, the Torah says that life means always looking up, motivating us to climb upward so, tentatively, I climb another rung, to rung three.

What's rung three for me? Rung three is where I find that it's normal to pray every day (not just Saturday), and it's also normal to be nice to my spouse/coworkers not only on Tuesday but also on Wednesday. In the beginning this is crazy – it is abnormal. But then suddenly rung three becomes the norm...

And on and on, climbing ever higher and higher.

12. Visualization

Jacob's ladder offers us all a simple but profound tool – how to take our lives and turn them into a perpetual journey upward into eternity, connecting heaven and earth.

Imagine it:

You go to sleep. You begin to dream. A ladder appears ...

Don't worry, this ladder does not mean you have to change a light bulb or paint the ceiling – though your wife may disagree. This ladder means

you are about to discover how you can climb from earth to heaven, and from heaven to earth.

And along the way you discover that a rung can make a right, and that being a good Jew isn't dependent on how much kishke you eat or how religious you consider yourself to be.

A good Jew is someone who is constantly, perpetually, continually climbing upward.

This is the ladder of the law.

13. Imagine...

Here is a practical way that each of us can put it to use:

Every morning close your eyes in prayer and visualize a ladder. Imagine yourself climbing it, all the while looking up. Now, choose one goal in your life, and define the next step, the next rung, that would lift you up a notch higher toward that objective.

This is also a way to excite ourselves and our children in prayer. Prayer for many is a very tedious task. Many simply offer lip service, or don't pray at all. But if we see our prayer as a ladder – helping us to ascend and fulfill our aspirations – this can infuse our prayers with passion and vitality.

My friends, the ladder is a way to incorporate into our lives the idea of always climbing higher and higher.

This is how the Torah sees life. And this is how we all should see life – as a perpetual journey upward, rung by rung, ultimately uniting the loftiness of heaven and the concreteness of earth.

This is a crazy idea. Let's you and I make it normal!

Shabbat Shalom!

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