



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Vayeitzei

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 13, 2010
Vayeitzei

Two Sermons

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

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Bereishit > Vayeitzei > Jacob’s Ladder

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ABSTRACT

A common question: Is it worth investing effort to reach great heights when there is a huge risk of failure?

How many of us avoid trying too hard because we fear failure? How many of us have felt that life’s disappointments have broken us to the point of no return? After falling again and again, how many of us simply don’t have the strength to try again, how many of us finally throw up our hands and say the effort to climb is not worth the pain.

Jacob’s famous dream, about which we read this week, carries a powerful lesson of hope and confidence – one which can help us overcome the fear of falling, get us to start climbing again, in order to reach a higher goal.

As well, Jacob’s courageous confrontation with his murderous brother Esau gives us a fresh perspective on the clash of civilizations swirling around us and the courage to face an uncertain future with the power of faith and the guidance of Torah.

A two-part sermon:

PART I: Courage to Climb

Part II: Courage to Face the Future

PART I: COURAGE TO CLIMB

1. Fear of Failure

A common question: Is it worth investing effort to reach great heights when there is a huge risk of failure?

How many of us avoid trying too hard because we fear failure? How many of us have felt that life's disappointments have broken us to the point of no return? After falling again and again, how many of us simply don't have the strength to try again – fearing yet another fall.

After continual failures, we finally throw up our hands and say the effort to climb is not worth the pain.

Jacob's famous dream, about which we read this week, carries a powerful lesson of hope and confidence – one which can help us overcome the fear of falling, get us to start climbing again, in order to reach a higher goal.

2. Jacob's Dream

The Torah tells us that, in a dream vision, Jacob saw a ladder standing on the ground with its top reaching up toward heaven, and God's angels were ascending and descending on it.¹

The Midrash explains this ladder in metaphorical terms. In his vision, it says, Jacob was shown the rise and fall of future empires that would rule the world. He saw the ascent and descent of the Babylonians, the Medes and the Greeks. But when it came to the Romans, Jacob only saw their ascent and no descent.

Now, let's remember that in the Talmud, Rome is called Edom, which is also the alternative name for Jacob's twin brother² – the hairy blood-thirsty Esau. So Rome was highly symbolic for Jacob, and he was frightened – perhaps the power of Rome will never wane.

¹ Genesis 28:12.

² Genesis 25:30.

And at that moment, says the Midrash, God reassured him, "Do not be afraid my servant Jacob, though the Roman Empire will rise, it will ultimately also fall."

Of course, any high school student knows that the Roman Empire did fall and that was the end of it. Today's Italy is not occupied by the Romans, who are an extinct people, but by descendants of foreign invaders – Germanic tribes such as the Lombards and Ostrogoths as well as Byzantines and Normans. Indeed, in contrast to its Roman roots – when warfare and empire building were the order of the day – today's Italy is known for its laid-back attitude and casual approach to most things. You know what FIAT stands for, don't you? "Fix It Again Tony."

In short, Jacob had nothing to fear.

After He reassured him, God invited Jacob to climb the ladder himself. But Jacob hesitated: "Just as the others ultimately descended," Jacob said, "I fear that I will too." When he said this, "suddenly, Jacob saw God standing over him," saying, "do not be afraid my servant Jacob, I promise you that, if you climb, you and your children will not fall."

But Jacob still declined, this time saying he was unworthy. Said God: "Had you trusted me and climbed you would never have fallen. But since you did not, your children will be ruled by the four empires. But do not be afraid, because at the end these empires will fall and you will finally ascend."³

3. Lessons for Us

The Midrash also teaches that everything that happened to the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) is a sign for their children – in order to teach them about the future.⁴

So, what do we learn from Jacob's ladder?

³ *Midrash Tanchuma* beginning of *Vayetzei*. Also *Vayikra Rabba* 29:2. *Shemot Rabba* 32:7. *Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer* ch. 35 (cited in Ramban on *Lech Lecha* 12:6, and *Bechaya* on *Vayetzei* 28:12). Rambam *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 7:3.

⁴ *Midrash Tanchuma Lech Lecha* 9. *Bereishit Rabba* 40:6. Indeed, the Patriarchs were shown what would happen to their descendants. See Ramban and *Bechaya* *ibid*.

Throughout the journey of our lives, especially as we embark on a new voyage, we will be shown a ladder. As we are ready to undertake a new challenge, we will be presented with an opportunity to climb to higher places.

But, at the same time, we will also see how others have climbed and fallen on the ladder of history. Because every ladder has two directions: up and down.

Therein lie the critical lessons for us:

- When we see our enemies, gloating in their power with no relief in sight for us, we must remember that our day will come.
- No matter how difficult it may be, we must never be afraid to climb, even if it means the risk of falling.

4. State of Spiritual Sleep

Of course, this is easier said than done.

Why? Because we are often spiritually “asleep” – just as Jacob was asleep when he had his dream – and when we are asleep we are unaware of God’s presence.

When Jacob woke up, he was upset. He said, “Surely God was in this place and I did not know it.”⁵

In this state of spiritual sleep – with its limited consciousness – we do not have the confidence or the strength to overcome challenges. We thus become part of the problem instead of the solution. But then we wake and, suddenly, we see God standing over us – just as Jacob “suddenly saw God standing over him.”⁶ And this reminds us to not be afraid, for God said to Jacob, “I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go and bring you back to this land. I will not turn aside from you until I have fully kept this promise to you.”⁷

⁵ Genesis 28:16.

⁶ Genesis 28:13.

⁷ Genesis 28:15.

And let us remember that, just as it happened to Jacob, even when we are asleep, we are often shown a vision – a dream of a ladder – upon which the powers of history have been climbing and descending from the beginning of time. And we are invited to climb that ladder.

By showing us – or shall we say, by showing the Jacob within each of us – this vision, God is preparing us for what is come and is giving all of us the tools we need to face the future challenges. One thing is sure – no matter what happens, if we hold onto God's promise, we will prevail.

The message for each of us today is clear: To face the battles of life we must first fortify our inner life. We must build a strong core within to handle with confidence any force or enemy from without.

As we face enemies – known or unknown, and especially the worst enemy of all, the psychological enemy called fear and uncertainty – we must build an inner security, by waking up and connecting to the Divine.

That alone will give us the power to climb and to climb ever higher.

[Now, since we all have a Jacob aspect to us, even when we are invited to climb by God, our first reaction is to decline. The ground seems safer than a rickety ladder. But the Torah is there to give us courage.]

PART II: COURAGE TO FACE THE FUTURE

5. A New Perspective

Today, we can all sense that there is something happening out there that is unfathomably larger than any one of us – or even all of us together – can comprehend. When civilizations clash and events reach and affect a critical mass, it is simply impossible to predict or even project what will happen next.

At a time when conventional paradigms don't work, we have no other choice but to step back and look for a new perspective, and it always helps to look into history and connect the dots. For Jews, this means delving into the Torah, a document that has been traveling with us for thousands of years.

And in it we do find all the seeds for the characters and players of today:

- Abraham – the father of many nations
- Ishmael – Abraham's son, the progenitor of the Arab/Muslim people.
- Jacob – Abraham's grandson also known as Israel, the progenitor of the Jews
- Esau – Jacob's twin brother also known as Edom, the progenitor of the Western/Christian world

At the end of last week's Torah reading, we learned that Esau – significantly – married Ishmael's daughter, thereby multiplying the forces he intended to bring to bear against Jacob. Knowing he was not ready to face his brother's wrath and might, Jacob fled to Haran.

In Haran, Jacob married his two cousins – Leah (a marriage arranged by subterfuge) and his beloved Rachel. He built a family of twelve sons (who would become the twelve tribes of Israel) and spent twenty years working for his nefarious father-in-law, Laban. Finally, Jacob left Haran for home, at last ready to face Esau and lay claim to the land of his birth – Canaan.

6. Two Archetypes

The two key claimants to Canaan – Esau and Jacob – represent “two nations” in a perpetual struggle. In cosmic terms, they embody the battle between matter and spirit, between body and soul, between the mundane and the Godly. In historical terms, they embody the battle between science and religion, modern culture and faith, the secular and the spiritual. In personal terms, they embody the battle between selfishness and dedication to a higher calling.

The battle between Esau and Jacob lays the ground for all the battles to come in future generations. By understanding this conflict and how it is dealt with, we can learn how we should act when facing our own challenges, our own version of their confrontation.

The battle lines between Esau and Jacob were drawn in last week's Torah reading, when we learned that Jacob deceived his father in order to get Esau's blessings. This sent Esau into a murderous rage.

But before Esau could act, Jacob fled to Haran, where he prepared himself for the final and inevitable confrontation with Esau.

7. Time of Preparation

What do we learn from this?

Spirit and matter are diametrically opposed to each other. Before we can be ready to confront the harsh material world, we must bolster and strengthen ourselves by building a nurturing oasis, a secure launch pad – in Jacob's case, a home and family – which will give us the confidence to achieve all our goals.

A soaring bird must have a secure nest – a true home, where he or she can feel completely comfortable. Thus, a healthy childhood is the time in most of our lives when we feel nurtured and protected. It allows us to build strength and develop resources, both defensive and offensive tools to go out into a difficult adult, material world and transform it into a home for the Divine.

8. Haran

Before Jacob could face Esau, he built his home in Haran. No small feat, mind you. Haran was a corrupt, Godless place. The name "Haran" actually means the "wrath of God." Laban, Jacob's father in law, was an artist of deceit and deception. Jacob did not have an easy time. Nevertheless, he prevailed – with the help of his two loyal wives, he created a powerful and nurturing domain.

Jewish mysticism teaches that there are stages in refining one's self and the world. We see this in the Jacob story. In stage one, Jacob took on the task of dealing with Laban in Haran, and only then was he ready for stage two – the challenge of Esau.

Jacob's work in tending Laban's flocks of sheep represents the building of the spiritual cosmic order, the structure and building blocks that gave him the tools to then enter and transform the material universe and confront Esau.⁸ The same applies to us. We, too, must confront the Esau of our lives.

Indeed, Jacob's journey to Haran signifies the beginning of each of our journeys into the real world. Following Esau's attempt to join forces with Ishmael against Isaac and Jacob by marrying Ishmael's daughter, Jacob escaped to build a home and fortify himself in order to be able to face the Esau battles ahead.

When Jacob left Canaan (later to be known as the Land of Israel) to travel to Haran, God showed him a vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder. He showed him the rise and fall of nations to come, how they would climb and dominate the world, and then fall – a similar vision to the one God showed his grandfather Abraham.⁹ And when He did so, God told him not to be afraid. "I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go and bring you back to this land. I will not turn aside from you until I have fulfilled this promise to you."¹⁰

⁸See Maamar *Im Lovon Garti – Ohr HaTorah Vayishlach* 231a, 5742. Also see *Vayishlach* 5666 and 5673.

⁹Bechaya and Ramban on *Vayetzei*, 28:12.

¹⁰ Genesis 28:15.

By showing Jacob this vision God was preparing him (as he prepared Abraham) for what was to come, and gave him – and all of us – the tools to face these challenges and prevail.

9. Message for Us

The message for each of us today is clear:

To face the battles of life, we must first fortify our inner life. We must build a strong inner core – a home and family that provides us with the security and confidence to handle any force or enemy from without. Such a strong inner core is a true shelter from all of life's storms – a safe house – and it begins in the soul.

Each one of us must have a place inside where we feel completely comfortable, at peace – a central place where we are one with our calling and our purpose. It is a place where we are at peace with God, at peace with our soul, and at peace with the mission for which we were uniquely chosen and sent to earth.

When we allow God to enter that inner space, we will hear Him telling us, "I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go." No matter the challenge, no matter the enemy, no matter the battle, when we connect to God, we have the power to overcome and conquer anything and everything.

Jacob's vision promises us that the nations that dominate the ladder will ultimately fall. But, in the meantime, if we lack faith and trust in God, then we become enslaved and victimized by these dominating nations and forces around us. Those who prevail, will be those who climb the ladder toward God. With faith in God, we can conquer all, and climb that ladder and never descend.¹¹

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¹¹See *Vayikra Rabba* 29:2.



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ABSTRACT

Watch a beautiful sunset. Listen to a stirring symphony. Smell a delicate fragrance. Taste a delectable wine. Touch the soft cheek of a child. Those are our five senses at work – taking in and experiencing the aesthetics of our universe. But what else enters through our sensory doors? How stimulated – or over-stimulated – are we by the multitude of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches inundating our daily interactions? And what impact does it have on us?

Are we products, perhaps even victims, of the forces seducing our senses? Take television: Does anyone know the far-reaching effects that visual stimulation has on our psyches? How much is it de-sensitizing us, so that we can no longer see with the eyes of our soul and experience the more sublime aspects of our lives – the miracles in the everyday, the extraordinary in the ordinary, the divine in the mundane?

This week’s Torah reading tells of Jacob falling asleep in an ordinary place (or so he thought) and dreaming of something extraordinary – a ladder going up from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending, at the top of which he sees God. When he wakes up, he says, “God was truly in this place, but I did not know it.”

What does it mean to see God – to understand the Divine is right in front of us? And why is this so hard to discern that even the Patriarch Jacob missed it at first?

Why do we not see the Divine all around us? Why do we not see wonder in the commonplace? Why is ordinary *so ordinary* to us?

Because we have become complacent. We have lost our sense of adventure, our sense of enchantment at the mysteries brimming beneath and within every fiber of existence. We have allowed our youthful curiosity and enthusiasm to stop or slow down. But we can regain it.

We can look at a flower and – as the poet William Blake put it – see “heaven.” We can listen to a bird sing and hear the music of angels. We can gently caress the hand of our beloved and touch eternity.

HOW TO SEE THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY

1. Seven Wonders

Junior High students in Chicago were asked to list what they considered to be today’s Seven Wonders of the World. After some study and debate, the following received the most votes:

- Great Pyramids in Egypt
- Taj Mahal in India
- Stonehenge in England
- Coliseum in Rome
- Statue of Liberty in New York
- Eiffel Tower in Paris
- Great Wall of China

While gathering the votes, the teacher noted that one student, a quiet girl, hadn't turned in her paper yet. So she asked the girl if she was having trouble with her list. The girl shyly replied, "Yes, a little. I couldn't quite make up my mind because there were so many." The teacher said, "Well, tell us what you have, and maybe we can help."

The girl hesitated, then read, "I think the Seven Wonders of the World are:

-to touch

-to taste

-to see

-to hear

-to feel

-to laugh

-to love."

2. The Example of Jacob

That introduces today's topic: how to see wonder in the things we take for granted, how to see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

The hero of this week's Torah is a human being like us. He falls asleep in an ordinary place (or so he thought), and he has a dream of something extraordinary – a ladder going up from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending, at the top of which he sees God. When he wakes up, he says, "God was truly in this place, but I did not know it."¹

What does it mean to see God – to understand the Divine is right in front of us? And why is this so hard to discern that even the Patriarch Jacob missed it at first?

Why do we not see the Divine all around us? Why do we not see wonder in the commonplace? Why is ordinary *so ordinary* to us?

⁵ Genesis 28:10-16.

3. The Gorilla Experiment

A famous psychological experiment provides a clue. You must know the one I am speaking about:

Subjects are shown a video, about a minute long, of two teams, one in white shirts, the other in black shirts, moving around and passing basketballs to one another. They are asked to count the number of passes made by the team wearing white, a seemingly simple task. Halfway through the video, a woman wearing a full-body gorilla suit walks slowly to the middle of the screen, pounds her chest, and then walks out of the frame. If you are just watching the video, it's the most obvious thing in the world. But when asked to count the passes, about half the people miss it.

This experiment, published in 1999 by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, is a striking demonstration of the zero-sum nature of attention. When you direct your mental spotlight to the basketball passes, it leaves the rest of the world in darkness. Even when you are looking straight at the gorilla, you frequently don't see it, because it's not what you're looking for.

The lesson: One way to see the extraordinary in the ordinary is to stop focusing so much on your own objectives, tasks and needs, and instead, to be sensitive to others. That allows you to get beyond your own myopic vision and see the majesty of life, to experience its magic.

4. Miracle of Life

A New York obstetrician shared the driving sentiment that makes his work so gratifying:

"I work in the 8th floor delivery room of New York Hospital, which is situated right above the bustling FDR East River Drive. Often I deliver a child in the silence of the night. At other times, in middle of the madness of the New York rush hour. As we are about to deliver a newborn baby into this world and I hear the noise below, I often think to myself about the glaring contrast: Here people are rushing, rushing, busy, busy, busy. Where are

they rushing to? Some are rushing home from work, others to dinner or a show. Most are rushing just to rush. Horns are honking, brakes screeching, tempers flaring. Simultaneously, up her on the 8th floor, we are delivering a new life into the world. Though this is the greatest miracle of all – the miracle of the beginning of a new life – nevertheless in this delivery room there is no bumper to bumper traffic. It is quiet. The only ones present are the mother, myself, and the attending nurse. And I think – while a busy world is rushing to whatever it finds important – I have the sacred honor and privilege to be witness and part of delivering a new soul in silence and quietude. That brings me to tears. That makes my work worthwhile.”

The greatest gift of all is to be able to see the miracles in your daily life. When you wake up in the morning and look at your children and family, and when you consider your own well being, there are miracles happening. In everyday encounters, there are messages ... there are answers to questions ... there are solutions to dilemmas. Opening yourself up to that deeper spiritual reality allows the miraculous in the moment, the extraordinary in the ordinary – indeed, the divine – to reveal itself.

A miracle may pass you by because you have your eyes closed, or you may not have allowed yourself to experience it. So pay attention. You do not know whom you may meet, and what kind of message you’ll get if you listen. Like beautiful music drowned out by extracurricular loud noise, every soul releases a subtle, gentle melody, but you need to shut off the external turbulence to hear it.

5. The Skeptic’s View

A colleague related to me that he had a skeptic attending his classes. One day, this guy said: “So tell me. Holy people like Jacob, could they fly?” His question was sarcastic; it was obviously meant to poke fun. So my colleague answered him, “I’ve never seen a holy person fly, but frankly, for a person like that, it’s as miraculous to walk on this earth as it is to fly.”

By-the-way, remember what Douglas Adams said in *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*? “There is an art ... to flying. The knack lies in learning how to throw yourself at the ground and miss.”

With or without flight, existence is a miracle. Birth is a miracle. The fact that we breathe is a miracle. Anyone who walks into a hospital and sees someone struggling to breathe has to appreciate the miracle of health.

The greatest miracle of all is healthy life itself. Just consider this: What are the odds that the 75 trillion – you heard that right, trillion – cells in the human body should all work together as one symmetrical unit?! All it takes is one mutant cell to wreak havoc God forbid. So 75 trillion coordinated cells – is that not a miracle?

I would submit that the fact that healthy children are born, though it happens every day, thank God, does not make it any less miraculous. As the Baal Shem Tov powerfully declared: “The difference between a miracle and a natural occurrence is only frequency.”

If the sun were to rise once in our lifetimes, you’d have TV crews and photographers coming to record this astonishing phenomenon. (Witness people’s fascination with the solar eclipse). It would be seen as a miracle. But since the sun rises every morning, we get accustomed to it. It loses its novelty and our attention. Instead, we are looking around for the next rush of excitement.

A miracle is seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary, and not allowing the routine to obfuscate the miracle within. It is recognizing that just because the miracle repeats itself doesn’t make it less of a miracle.

6. The Enemy Called Monotony

Why the craving for excitement?

One of our greatest enemies is monotony. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so do we humans. Many of our problems originate from the wearing effects of boredom and routine. At some point, repeating the same activity again and again dulls our spirits, and we become desperate for something, *anything*, that will relieve our tedium and fill the hungry vacuum

- whether it be healthy or not. We need that rush of excitement, that chase, that high ... to make us feel alive again.

This begs a fundamental question: Why should our lives be monotonous in the first place? Everything in existence is in a perpetual state of change and movement. We begin our lives in a state of constant enchantment. Observe young children unceasingly crawling about exploring everything they encounter. Their unwavering curiosity, their constant movement ... never resting in one place, excited and stimulated by the simplest things ... is life playing itself out in its most natural form: as raw energy.

One of the fascinating discoveries we all make as children is when we look into a microscope for the first time and see on a glass slide the microorganisms slithering about in a seemingly inanimate drop of pond water.

The fascination is due to the discovery of vibrancy in a place that seems devoid of any life. The same is true when we first learn of the vast ecosystem of life teeming beneath the otherwise benign water of the ocean surface. Or the unfathomable multitudes of stars, solar systems, black holes and dark matter in outer space. Or the 75 trillion vibrating cells within the human body. Or the complexity and symmetry of nature, connecting every organism, every mineral, plant and animal. Or the layers upon layers of microscopic particles shaping every detail of existence. Or the elegant DNA of the human genome.

Life is dynamic. Like electricity, every part of life is pulsating with energy. No two moments are alike, everything alive is always in constant flux - constantly moving and changing.

So when did we lose our sense of adventure, our sense of enchantment at the mysteries brimming beneath and within every fiber of existence? When did our curiosity and enthusiasm stop or slow down? When did monotony set in? When did a form of "death" set in, stifling the dynamic energy brimming within?

When we began getting locked into the surface level of our lives, forgetting about the forces within that shape every aspect of our lives, our existence and our universe. The cruel reality of material life is that, as

we get consumed with the crass materialism of our lives, a hard crust develops. It gets tougher with each passing day, and it conceals the vibrant life within. At some point our *outer lives* take complete control, and we are left with an increased sense of despair and weakened hope for rejuvenation.

7. Seduction of the Senses

If you were to shut off your senses – if you were to close your eyes and mouth, plug up your ears and nose – so that you could not see, hear, taste, touch or smell, what you be left with? That thought might initially be terrifying; you might think you’d disappear. But in truth none of those senses are necessary for survival, or for that matter for anything that you need internally. Because you don’t need eyes to see yourself, you don’t need ears to hear yourself, and you don’t need taste, touch or smell to experience yourself.

These five senses, which so dominate our lives, are about interacting with things outside of ourselves. With eyes we can see each other. And, of course our senses play an important role. But when our senses seduce us and we lose sight of the inner forces of our lives, then the external and the outer take control and desensitize the “inner” and “real” that is beyond our senses.

We live in a world that is hyper-stimulating our senses. If it’s not television, then it’s the Internet, or I-pods. Ads in all shapes and forms inundate us. Every one of our senses is being assaulted all the time. Now, we may say that we accept or even welcome these assaults. We are consenting adults, so to speak. But the bottom line is that our senses are over-stimulated.

And the more over-stimulated we are, the less sensitive we are to the inner self. The less likely we are to see with the eyes of our soul. The less likely we are see the divine out there – the extraordinary in the ordinary.

If we look with the eyes of the body, certain things are true. If we look with the eyes of the soul other things are true. It all depends on the tools that we are using

An analogy is given of a fisherman who spread his net over the seven seas and caught many different species of fish. He began documenting all the fish he collected – their shapes, colors, sizes. And then he came up with a great revelation: There are no fish in the sea that are less than half an inch long.

Now the obvious reason was because the strings of his net were half-an-inch apart, and all the fish that were smaller evaded capture. So his conclusion was only correct as far as his tools went – but it was a false conclusion because his tools were limited.

8. Seeing with the Eyes of the Soul

When we observe the world around us, the people, events and experiences of our lives, what should we be looking for? When we are seeking a loving relationship – or standing before a person we love – how do we assure that we are looking at the important things that matter and not at superficial externals? And how do we attain such perspective when we are swamped with the endless flow of information assaulting our senses, numbing and distorting our priorities?

How do we imitate Jacob, how do we see the divine in the mundane?

When the Kotzker Rebbe was asked: “Where is God?” He replied: “Wherever you let Him in?”

To see the Divine is to see the essence of all reality and to recognize that this essence is beyond all our perceived reality. As the Midrash says, “He is the space/place of the universe, but the universe is not His space.”² In some ways it means seeing the forest from the trees, the roots from the symptoms, the causes from the effects.

Jacob did two critical things to reach a point that he was able to see the Divine, to the point that God appeared to him in a vision.

First, as the Torah tells us, he left his home, his comfort zone – as his grandfather Abraham did before him – and embarked on a journey toward transcendence. Second, he dedicated his life (and passed on his

² Midrash, Bereshit Raba, 61: "Why is it that we use 'place' (*makom*) as a name of God? It is because God is the place of the world but the world is not His place."

legacy to his children and generations to come) to look beyond the seductive distractions of surface life and see what lies within, to search for the essence of things, rather than react to their symptoms.

Notwithstanding the conventions of the time, Jacob did not respond to the pressures around him; he was not enticed by the sights and sound of the physical universe the way his twin brother Esau was ... Jacob looked beyond and within them for a higher presence.

Once Jacob demonstrated his commitment and did his part piercing through the outer layers and peering deep inside for the deeper reality, then the higher and inner reality reciprocated. That's when God appeared to him in a vision. And the essential forces that shape all of existence – far beyond those that Jacob could have ever discovered on his own accord – were revealed to him.

9. It is Possible

The great 13th century sage Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (also known as Ramban or Nachmanides) states a critical axiom:

Know this fundamental principle: All the journeys and events that happened with the Patriarchs [Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] come to teach us about the future ... There is nothing that happened to them that would later not occur with their children/descendants.³

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob paved the way for us to have a similar experience: to see the inner forces that shape our outer realities.

But in order to see in this special way, we have to commit to the same two things that they committed to:

1) We must travel away from our own trappings and remove the immediate pressures that block us from seeing what lies within. This includes controlling the flow of images, sounds, tastes, and sensations which clutter our life.

³ Ramban, *Lech Lecha* 12:6.

2) We need to focus on the inner forces and the purpose of it all. Too often we get so consumed with the tools – earning a living, shopping, preparing – that we are left with no time, energy and space for the purpose of all these tools. Sometimes we may even forget that there is a purpose, like embarking on a journey and then forgetting the destination.

Once we demonstrate our commitment to this approach, new doors will open up from within. And then – and only then – will we begin to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Every detail of our life will begin to burst with enormous energy, as we learn to savor every sight, every sound, every taste, every touch, every smell.

We can look at a flower and – as the poet William Blake put it – see “heaven.” We can listen to a bird sing and hear the music of angels. We can gently caress the hand of our beloved and touch eternity.

To see the world in a grain of sand
And heaven in a flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

May the sights, sounds and sensations of infinity be ours today. Amen.