

Parashat Vayetze, 5784, 2023:

May We Build Ladders

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו, כל בני ישראל בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

Our *parasha* begins with the famous words, “And Ya’akov left Beersheba, and he went to Haran.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 28:10, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) His departure is a direct response to Rivka’s wishes, and Yitzchak’s earlier two-part statement:

And Rivka said to Yitzchak, “I am disgusted with my life because of the daughters of Heth. If Ya’akov 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 Yitzchak called Ya’akov 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 Betuel, your mother’s father, and take yourself from there a wife of the daughters of Lavan, your mother’s brother.” (28:1-2)

Ya’akov 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 *Har Moriah*, the location of both *Akeidat Yitzhak* and the future *Beit HaMikdash*. It is precisely in this location 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, Hashem was standing over him, and He said, “I am Hashem, the G-d of Avraham your father, and the G-d of Yitzchak; the land upon which you are lying, to you I will give it and to your children.” (28:12-13, emendations my own)

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. As such, we find the following *Gematria*-based interpretation of Ya’akov’s dream by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the famed author of the *Zohar*:

“And he dreamt:” Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: “[The Almighty] showed him [Ya’akov] *Har 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) [each] equal 10, and the *nun* 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 regard to the *sulam*,] and in reference to *Har 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 Vayetze VII, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, for Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the *sulam* is Ya’akov’s prophetic on-ramp to a vision of the future Revelation at *Har Sinai*. We are not surprised, therefore, when Ya’akov proclaims: “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” (28:17)

Like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the 14th century Torah scholar Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher 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 the numerical equivalent of *kol* (130, voice), and joins this observation with a citation from the *Zohar*, I: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 this interpretation of the *Zohar*, it appears that *tzaddikim*, by definition, have the ability to imbue their *tefilah* with deep level *kavanah*. Moreover, their

prayers are so powerful and of such great import to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* that they serve as a vehicle whereupon the angels can travel to heaven.

We are neither prophets like Ya'akov, nor *tzaddikim* like those referenced in the Zohar. Nonetheless, we can invest our *tefilot* with heartfelt *kavanah* in order to feel that we are standing before the Holy One blessed be He. Then, with the help of the Almighty, we, too, will build ladders upon which “the angels will be able to ascend [to Heaven].” *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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