

## Vayeitze | Why is it important to have a vision?

Everyone needs a vision. We all need a vision to give us direction and inspiration in life. Life can't just be about surviving. It has to be about the goals and the aspirations and the big picture that we are striving for. There are too many challenges and opportunities in the path of life not to have clarity of vision. In this week's parsha, Vayeitzei, we read about a great vision that was given to our forefather, Yaakov (Jacob), and it is a vision which sustains us to this very day.

Yaakov was embarking on a journey, leaving home and venturing out into a hostile world, with many dangerous challenges lying in wait. He was fleeing from the vengeful anger of his brother, Eisav (Esau), and his destination was Avraham's family, who lived in Haran - a family led by Lavan, a man known for his deceptive and unscrupulous behaviour. And so Yaakov encountered many different and difficult challenges throughout his life, but in this week's portion, he is given a gift from G-d - the gift of a vision that sustained him throughout his life.

One night, on his journey to Haran, he lay down and had the famous prophetic vision we call 'Jacob's Ladder'. The ladder rests on the ground and reaches into the heavens, and there are angels ascending and descending. G-d appears to Yaakov in the vision and promises to look after him on his journey ahead, and to return him back to the land of Israel, and to his heritage.

The commentators on the Chumash share different perspectives on what the ladder and the angels going up and down signify. Common to all of them, however, is the idea that the ladder is a bridge between heaven and earth. And this is the great Divine vision of the Torah and the mission statement of the Jewish people - to connect heaven and earth, to infuse the physical world with holiness and spirituality, and so elevate all of creation.

Rashi says the angels represented G-d's Divine protection. The angels going up the ladder were the angels that had protected Yaakov within the land of Israel, and the angels coming down the ladder were their replacements now that Yaakov was leaving Israel and the first set of angels had completed their task.

Angels are bursts of spiritual energy that G-d has created so He can interact with the world. They are not independent beings. They do not have free choice. They are mere extensions of G-d's will being expressed in this world. What emerges from Rashi is the idea that throughout our life's journey, we are accompanied by angels, emissaries of G-d, and that G-d is looking after us in everything that we do.

A key message being relayed to Yaakov was that he was not venturing out into the world on his own - that, though he was likely wracked with fear and anxiety about what lay ahead, G-d would accompany him every step of the way.

And, of course, the fear and anxiety wasn't unfounded. Yaakov underwent tremendous pain and hardship: the deception of Lavan; the loss of his beloved wife, Rachel; the separation from his beloved son, Yosef; and many other severely challenging experiences. And yet, throughout, this vision - this pledge that G-d would be with him at all times - sustained him, and gave him the strength to withstand all of the difficulties and challenges that lay ahead.

This vision can sustain us through our own difficulties and challenges. As King David famously said: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for you are with me.' (Psalm 23) He does not say: 'I fear no evil because no harm can befall me,' but rather: 'I fear no evil because You are with me.' Everything that happens to us is from G-d and is therefore ultimately for the good, even if we cannot see it at the time, and there is great comfort in knowing that G-d is with us and looking after us throughout our life's journey.

This is all from a personal perspective. The Midrash of Rav Eliezer ben Hurkenus, on the other hand, probes the national significance of the angels on the ladder. He teaches that the ascending and descending angels symbolise the rise and fall of the great

empires of the world that would oppress and seek to destroy the nation of Israel. Yaakov was being shown that the Jewish people would undergo great challenges and distress, as one kingdom after another – the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, and others – came to subjugate them. And yet, somehow, through the incredible Divine miracles of Jewish history, we survived, and that was the message to Yaakov – that no matter what forces of destruction would come against his descendants, G-d would be with them and would ensure the survival of the Jewish people.

Indeed, this is one of the great miracles of human history. No other nation in history has endured as much hardship through exile, dispersion and persecution as the Jewish people. And what has sustained us throughout is this vision of ‘Jacob’s Ladder’ – G-d’s pledge that He would be with us, always.

There is another Midrash that explains that the ladder symbolised Mount Sinai. In fact, the gematria – the numerological value – of the Hebrew word for ‘ladder’ and ‘Sinai’ are identical. The Midrash says the angels themselves symbolise Moshe (Moses) and Aharon (Aaron), who ascended and descended Mount Sinai at the time of the giving of the Torah.

This further reinforces the idea of the ladder as a bridge between heaven and earth. Many of the mitzvahs of the Torah relate to the physical world. There’s the famous Midrash that describes how ‘G-d looked into the Torah and created the world’, that the Torah is the blueprint of creation. Indeed, most of the precepts of the Torah are fulfilled through the physical world – lulav and etrog, tefillin, challahs – these are all physical objects. Simply by utilising them within the framework of the Torah’s instructions, we infuse them with a cosmic significance. We elevate the physical world and connect it with the upper world, G-d’s eternal world.

Similarly, the Torah is also about elevating our physical lives, our physical bodies, and transforming them into vessels of G-dliness and spirituality. The relationship between a man and a woman, for example, or the act of raising children, or the process of eating. All of these are governed by Divine parameters laid out in the Torah that enable us to elevate them beyond the biological and transform them into something truly transcendent. To connect heaven and earth.

There’s a third Midrash that says the ladder represents the altar in the Temple, and the angels going up and down represent the Kohanim, the priests, who would serve in the Temple (and ascend and descend the altar). In other words, the ladder represents the service of G-d – through prayer and mitzvot and the daily activities we dedicate to our Creator – so our lives themselves become an active act of service.

These last two Midrashim are connected. It’s about receiving the Torah, which connects heaven and earth, and living a life that connects heaven and earth. Through the Torah and through acts of service, our lives become filled with meaning. We become more than physical beings eking out an existence, we become elevated, spiritual beings, connected to our Creator.

So this then becomes the overarching vision that sustained Yaakov and has continued to sustain us through all of our generations – that G-d is with us every step of the way, and there is a way to uplift our lives and connect heaven and earth. What is so powerful is that, according to our sages, Yaakov was shown this vision after he’d already arrived in Haran. The Talmud explains that Yaakov had mistakenly passed over the holy place where Avraham had brought his son Yitzchak on the altar, and that he hadn’t stopped to pray. Yaakov felt such a yearning, such a sense of lost opportunity, that a great miracle was performed, and that holy site was miraculously transported to Yaakov, whereupon he had his vision.

Rav Moshe Feinstein says the message here is that even though he had left the holiness of his parents’ home and was now in a place of spiritual desolation, through maintaining a loyalty and a devotion to the vision that was given to him, he would be able to achieve that holiness and that connection. The holy place came to him – and so the message was that he could take the vision with him and implement wherever he went.

People often believe themselves to be limited by their circumstances. But what we see here is that having a vision – a great, lofty Divine vision that we dedicate ourselves to – can enable us to transcend those circumstances. It can inspire us and guide us and transform the world in which we find ourselves.

This is the vision that Jacob took with him on all his journeys; the same lofty, life-affirming, transformative vision that has accompanied the Jewish people on all of our journeys, both national and personal. It is the vision that makes us who we are, and has held us all together throughout the generations.