

Heaven

Yaakov runs for his life because his brother Esav has threatened to kill him. His mother sends him on his way back to her family in Aram (where Basra is today). On the face of it, it was to find sanctuary but also to find a wife. When Avraham wanted a wife for his son Yitzchak he sends his servant from Canaan to Aram and he finds Rivkah. Now Rivkah herself sends Yaakov back to her family. The cycles of life keep revolving.

On the way, Yaakov rests, sleeps and has a dream. Angels on a ladder go up to Heaven and come down. God appears to him and tells him that He is the God of his fathers and this land he sleeping on will one day be his and his children who will be like the dust of the earth spreading out in all directions. And in the meantime, God will protect him.

We are not told how he understood this imagery other than that he said "This is surely the House of God and the entrance to Heaven." When he wakes up he builds an altar of stones and calls it Bethel. Then he makes a vow. That if God protects him on his way supports him and enables him to return safely, he will turn this spot into a House of God and he will give tithes to God. This does sound strange. As if he is bargaining with God. But the Hebrew language is complex and what sounds like a condition could equally sound like a promise or an assertion of faith.

Some people think that this was the location of the Temple. But at this moment the Bible has not mentioned one specific place. Avraham had already set up altars in several places including Bethel and Avraham had already initiated the idea of tithes. Is this a nod to the future or the past?

Some Midrashim say the dream Jacob had involved angels of the Land of Israel going up to heaven as Jacob is about to leave the Holy Land. And angels from the Diaspora are coming down to take care of him as he enters alien territory. Others see this movement up and down as relating to the Temple. However, if often people thought deities were linked to specific territories, Torah has always envisioned God as being universal and not confined by space. Locations are things we humans need, not God. But there is another possibility.

The ladder and angels going up and down might be a metaphor for life. Human lives are constantly moving up and down, highs and lows, good and bad, life and death. So long as we have a purpose and a sense of direction we can cope with whatever we have to face. At this moment Yaakov has nothing and is feeling insecure. The ladder of life gives him hope.

When he gets to Aram as on the previous occasion, the well is where you go. It's the community center. It is also the source of life, the symbol of fertility and success. He finds Rivkah and thinks he has resolved everything. But once again he faces setbacks, one after another. Still, like Avraham his grandfather and Yitzchak his father, he perseveres and succeeds in the end. I am not sure if they persevere just because they trust in God. Although God has reassured them that eventually the dynasty will do well. That doesn't

guarantee anything in the short term. It doesn't protect them from famine, wars or other setbacks. But it does give them a sense of purpose and direction. And that in the end is the way in which religious faith helps most of all.

Yaakov leaves his parents' home and travels east back to Rivkah's family. The last person to make that same journey was Eliezer who went to find a wife for Yitzhak. But this time Yaakov knows he has to stay away because Esav wants to kill him and it will be many years before he returns. Avraham had made that journey but Yitzchak never had to move very far and he had a much easier life. Even so he too had his conflicts with local lords. All three men loved their wives and yet both had to deal with women who suffered because they could not bear children. We tend to think that Yitzhak had it easiest but perhaps the trauma he suffered when he was nearly sacrificed clouded everything good that happened.

Sometimes our difficulties are of our own making. Sometimes they are the result of external circumstances. It's strange that the Torah keeps on pointing out to us how challenging life was for those people closest to God. But the fact is that it is the struggle to overcome challenges that makes us who we are. People who have it too easy rarely achieve great things. Whenever we think we have it good, you can bet something will bring us back to earth. But it's the way we overcome the difficulties that matters. That is why Yaakov, the one who struggled most, gave his name to us as a people, Yisrael, "he who struggles with God and man." Perhaps that's why anti-Semitism never goes away. It forces us to try harder.