

## What do we do with visions?

Drash on Vayetzei for Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, CA

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When this week's parsha begins, our ancestor Yaakov has just fled from his family, and is on his way to Charan to seek his fortune. Stopping to rest for the night, he lays his head on a stone and falls asleep.

Many of us spend much of our lives waiting for a vision. We want to know that G!d is watching over us and has a plan for us. We long for peak experiences where the veil between our world and the next thins, or even tears. We discuss dreams and plumb them for hidden truths, or hints about our future. We go on long retreats, or medicine journeys. We crave meaning.

Yaakov has such a vision.

וַיַּחֲלֵם וְהִנֵּה סֹלֶם מַצְבֵּב אֶרְצָה וְרֵאשׁוֹ מִגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהִנֵּה מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בָּהּ

“A ladder was standing on the ground, and its top reached up toward heaven. G!d’s angels were going up and down on it.” I’ll read that again: “a ladder was standing on the ground, and its top reached up toward heaven. G!d’s angels were going up and down on it.”

Imagine that! What a vision! There are a lot of ideas in our tradition about what this ladder looks like and what it represents. Some say the width of the staircase was four-thirds that of the world. Others say it had seven steps, representing the days of the week with Shabbat at the top, or 12, representing twelve historical eons. The idea I find the most compelling is that there were four steps in Yaakov’s ladder.

Four is an important number in Judaism. **Anyone want to call out associations with the number four?**

16th and 17th century Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz wrote that the four steps in Yaakov's ladder represented the four worlds of Kabbalah: Action, feeling, thought, spirit. These four worlds also correspond to levels of Torah interpretation—Pshat, Remez, Drash, and Sod, meaning the plain meaning, the allegorical meaning, the comparative meaning, and the secret, or mystical, meaning.

So in this sense, Yaakov's dream is a visualization of the primary spiritual practice in Judaism—Torah study. Yaakov sees that the journey starts where he is—the ground, the literal, the obvious—and reaches to heaven—the mystical, inner spirit.

But that isn't the end of the vision. HaShem appears, and promises Yaakov that the land on which he sleeps will be owned by him and his descendents. Not only that, but HaShem will look after him on his journey. Then Yaakov wakes up.

Put yourself in Yaakov's position. **What would you do with such a vision?**

This is a guarantee of divine providence and protection, an affirmation of your importance to G!d himself/herself/themselves. A blank check. Would you quit your job? Play the lottery? Analyze it with your psychotherapist? Would you tell everyone how important you are?

Yaakov doesn't do any of those things. What he does instead is very interesting. He wakes up, trembling, and says, , "Surely יהוה is present in this place, and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven."

He marks the spot of the vision by erecting and anointing a stone pillar. Then, he makes a **conditional** vow, saying *if* this G!d watches over me on this journey *if* he keeps His promises, he will be my G!d. It's a very level headed response. Then he continues on his way.

20th century rabbi Aryeh Kaplan says something very interesting about visions. In his book on Jewish meditation, Kaplan says that experienced meditators often experience intense visions. However, he says, the visions should be held lightly. At most, the beginning of spiritual consciousness. “In the Kabbalah literature, there are warnings even to advanced meditators not to give credence to visions... Indeed, acting on the basis of images seen while in a meditative state is considered to be extremely dangerous and detrimental to one’s spiritual development.”

Why is it dangerous? Because in dwelling at the top of the ladder, the esoteric *sod*, we can forget the plain, everyday, commonsense world of the exoteric *pshat*. I work in mental health, and I can tell you that people who get too wrapped up in the spiritual to the detriment of their physical and emotional wellbeing are liable to be hospitalized. The goal is integration.

There’s an amazing Talmudic story about not getting stuck at the top of the ladder. We were just talking about the four levels of Torah interpretation—Pshat, Remez, Drash, and Sod. Together, these spell out Pardes. The term Pardes comes from the same word as the English word Paradise. Originally in Persian it meant a walled garden or orchard. In Jewish tradition, the word Pardes is associated not only with Torah study but a heavenly spiritual realm.

Here’s the story: The second century was a time of great conflict between Jews and the Roman Empire. Four rabbis, great spiritual masters of their day, joined forces and, through mediation upon the divine name, reached this realm of Pardes in order to wage spiritual battle against Rome. So to speak, they ascended Yaakov’s ladder, to protect their people. One of them died. One of them went crazy. One of them left Judaism. Only one, Rabbi Akiva, “went in peace and returned in peace.” It’s said that this is because although Akiva was a great spiritual master, he was grounded in *this world*. He was involved and invested in his family and community, so he didn’t lose sight of what the original purpose of going to Pardes had been.

In Judaism, the highest spiritual goal we have, in the words of Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok, is "to rectify the physical world by acting as the vessels through which HaShem will channel his *shefa* (spiritual energy) onto the earth. "We are on this earth for a purpose, a purpose that must be achieved."

In other words, the *sod* can't contradict or nullify the *pshat*. As Reb Nachman said, "Just as a person has to strive to reach the highest level, he has to keep himself from falling even to the lowest level!" If we spend all of our attention on spiritual growth, we neglect our fundamental responsibility to use that growth to nurture those around us.

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Maimonides wrote that the angels on the ladder represented our prophets, and they were going up *and then* down because once you've arrived at a certain height of the ladder, you must apply the knowledge you find there for the training and instruction of the world. On the flip side, Reb Nachman taught that even the lowest spiritual depths are experienced to bring us higher.

Okay, time to come in for a landing.

What happens after Yaakov goes on his way? He meets Rachel, and Leah, and Laban. He has marriages, and children, and *tsuris*, troubles. But G!d keeps his promises, and through references later in the text we know that the vision is marked indelibly in his mind as he makes his fortune and major decisions in his life.

In other words, the peak experience he has in the beginning of his adventure permeates his life, but not in any obvious way. It does its work inside of him until eventually—more than 20 years later, he is spiritually mature enough to wrestle with an angel of God and to be re-named Israel. But that's a story for next week.