

JACOB'S DREAM

God first reveals himself to Jacob, fleeing from his brother and birthplace, wandering at night in the desert, sleeping in the open with a stone for a pillow, through the medium of a dream.

A modern German Jewish commentator, Benno Jacob, in his work on *Genesis* divides the various dreams occurring in *Genesis* into one of two categories.

The first class comprise those in which God actually speaks to man (20, 3; 31, 24), the second class, those dreams through whose medium, God speaks to man. Examples of the latter are the dreams of Joseph, the chief butler, the chief baker and Pharaoh. The second class are usually in the form of parables, word-pictures which require elucidation.

In Jacob's dream God actually addresses Jacob. Before that, however, comes the picture which calls for our interpretation. Indeed there have been many attempts at such interpretation.

Let us quote the pictorial part of Jacob's dream, the interpretation of which has preoccupied so many expositors, writers and poets down the ages:

וְהִנֵּה סֵלֶם מְצָב אֶרְצָה וְרֵאשׁוּ מִיַּעַק הַשָּׁמַיְמָה
וְהִנֵּה מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ.
וְהִנֵּה יְיָ נֹצֵב עָלָיו — — —

And behold a ladder set upon the earth
And behold the angels of God ascending and descending
on it
And behold the Lord stood above it (28, 12, 13)

The following is one of the manifold Midrashic interpretations of the dream, occurring in *Midrash Tanhuma*:

אמר ר' שמואל בר' נחמן: "והנה מלאכי אלהים עולים ויורדים" — אלה שרי אומות העכו"ם... שהראה לו הקב"ה ליעקב אבינו שר של בבל עולה שבעים עוקים [שלבים] ויורד, ושל מדי — חמשים ושניים [ויורד], ושל יוון מאה [שלבים] ויורד, ושל אדום עולה ולא ידע כמה. באותה שעה נתיירא יעקב אבינו ואמר: שמא לזה אין לו ירידה? אמר לו הקב"ה (ירמיה ל, י): "ואתה אל תירא עבדי יעקב... ואל תחת ישראל" — כביכול אפילו רואה עולה ויושב אצלי — משם אני מורידו! שנאמר (עובדיה א, ד): "אם תגביה כנשר ואם בין כוכבים שים קנך, משם אורידך נאום ה'".

"And behold the angels of God ascending and descending": These are the princes of the heathen nations which God showed Jacob our father. The Prince of Babylon ascended seventy steps and descended, Media, fifty-two and descended, Greece, one hundred steps and descended, Edom ascended and no one knows how many! In that hour, Jacob was afraid and said: 'Peradventure, this one has no descent?' Said the Holy One blessed be He to him: 'Therefore fear thou not, O my seryant Jacob... neither be dismayed, O Israel'. Even if thou seest him, so to speak, ascend and sit by Me, thence will I bring him down! As it is stated (*Obadiah*, 1, 4): 'Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord.'

This Midrash likewise inspired Sferno's comment on the dream:

"Ascending and descending"—Indeed ultimately, having gained ascendancy, the gentile princes will go down, and the Almighty who forever stands above, will not forsake His people as He promised (*Jer. 30,11*): For I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have scattered you, but I will not make a full end of you.

According to the Midrash, Jacob's dream depicts the rise and fall of nations and their cultures on the arena of world history. What has this to do with Jacob's situation, his flight to Padan-Aram from the wrath of his brother, his mission to choose a wife and carry on the seed of Abraham and Isaac? In answer, it may be said, that the Midrash regards the dream, not as referring merely to Jacob the individual, but Jacob as the symbol of Israel, the embodiment of the wanderings of the Jewish people, as it is exiled from one country to another and witnesses the rise and fall of mighty kingdoms, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece. The author of the Midrash who lived during the period of the Roman Empire had not yet witnessed its decline and fall.

Rome and the spiritual successors that took its place in Europe

afterwards are known in medieval Rabbinic terminology by the name of "Edom." Their downfall is likewise foretold. The Jewish people apprehensive at the apparently never-ending reign of the oppressor, seeing no sign of his impending doom, cries "Per-adventure, this one has no descent"—perhaps he is never going Jacob, and the Divine message of reassurance is to be found in the message of Obadiah, the prophet of the ultimate doom of Edom.

**Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle,
and thou set thy nest among the stars,
thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord. (Ob. 1, 4)**

Jacob's ladder is taken to imply the ladder of history. The ascent of one nation on it implies the descent of its predecessor. The ladder is not an endless one, but the Lord stands at its top, as the master of history, assuring us that pride and despotism will be brought low, until His sovereignty alone is recognised at the end of days. This "latter-day" vision is described to us by Isaiah (2).

Rashi has however a completely different approach to the text. He sticks to its plain sense. The subject of the narrative is Jacob the Patriarch on his journey to Padan-Aram, in flight from his brother. Rashi has the following question to raise regarding the words: "ascending and descending":

First they ascend and afterwards descend?

Surely, Rashi queries, the angels, the denizens of the Heavens should first have descended; the order should be the reverse. Rashi answers:

... מלאכים שליווהו בארץ אין יוצאים חוצה לארץ; ועלו לרקיע, וירדו מלאכי חוצה לארץ ללוותו.

The angels that accompanied him in the Holy Land do not go outside the Holy Land. They therefore ascended to Heaven. Then the angels of outside the Holy Land descended to accompany him.

In other words, man's experiences in his own country are not to be compared with his situation in a strange land. To make his way on foreign soil, he needed different guardians from those that protected him in his own birthplace, amidst familiar landmarks. But wherever he went, Jacob was always furnished with Divine protection.

Rashi's brief remark fits the picture described in the sidra perfectly. The angels of "outside the Holy Land" accompany Jacob throughout his tribulations, from the moment he leaves Beer-sheba (28, 10) to his return to Mahanaim (32, 3), after spending twenty years in exile. There he is again confronted by angels—the guardian angels of the Homeland:

And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. (33, 2)

These experiences are echoed by the Psalmist in reference not to Jacob the Patriarch, but to the descendants of Jacob:

כי מלאכיו יצוה לך לשמרה בכל-דרך-כיך.
על-כפיהם ישאוינה פון-תגור באבן רגלך.

**For He shall give His angels charge over thee,
to keep thee in thy ways.
They shall bear thee up in their hands,
lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.**

(Psalm, 91, 11, 12)

Questions for Further Study

1. Rambam treats of the parables and allegorical descriptions in the Bible in his introduction to his *Guide*. Here we quote the relevant remarks.

Know the figures employed by the Prophets are of two kinds: those where every single word in the parable or allegory is significant, and those where it is only that the parable as a whole is significant, the details of the descriptions being only incidental,

adding nothing significant to the idea which is being projected. They are merely ornamental or designed to conceal the idea that is being allegorically described.

An example of the first class of prophetic figures is to be found in *Genesis*: "And, behold, a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and, behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (*Genesis* 28, 12). The word "ladder" refers to one idea; "set up on the earth" to another; "and the top of it reached to heaven" to a third; "angels of God" to a fourth; "ascending" to a fifth; "descending" to a sixth; "the Lord stood above it" (verse 13) to a seventh. Every word in this figure introduces a fresh element into the idea represented by the figure.

An example of the second class of prophetic figures is found in *Proverbs* (7, 6-23): "For at the window of my house I looked through my casement, and beheld among the simple ones; I discerned among the youths a young man void of understanding, passing through the street near her corner: and he went the way to her house in the twilight, in the evening, in the black and dark night: and, behold, there met him a woman with the attire of a harlot, and subtil of heart. She is loud and stubborn; her feet abide not in her house... So she caught him, and kissed him, and with an impudent face said unto him, I have peace offerings with me, this day I paid my vows. Therefore came I forth to meet thee, diligently to seek thy face, and I have found thee. I have decked my bed with coverings of tapestry, with striped cloths of the yarn of Egypt... Come let us take our fill of love until the morning... For the goodman is not at home... he hath taken a bag of money with him, and will come home at the day appointed. With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him. He goeth after her straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter... as a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life."

The general principle expounded in all these verses is to abstain from excessive indulgence in bodily pleasures... that man shall not be entirely guided by his animal, or material nature... An adequate explanation of the figure having been given, and its meaning having been shown, do not imagine that you will find in its application a corresponding element for each part of the figure; you must not ask what is meant by "I have peace offerings with me" (verse 14); ... or what is added to the force of

ings with me" (verse 14); ... or what is added to the force of the figure by the observation "for the goodman is not at home"... For all this is merely to complete the illustration of the metaphor in its literal meaning.

Which of these two different approaches to Jacob's dream informs the comments of Midrash Tanhuma, Rashi and Sforno?

2. And, behold, the Lord stood *alav*...¹

(*Genesis* 28, 13)

On what—Jacob or the ladder? Answer in accordance with the various points of view formulated by our commentators regarding the dream as a whole.

3. Compare the following Midrash with the one cited in our *Studies*. Both interpret Jacob's ladder:

"ויחלום והנה סלם מצב ארצה וראשו מגיע השמימה והנה מלאכי אלהים עולים ויורדים בו" — אלו שרי אומות העולם. מלמד שהראה לו הקב"ה ליעקב שרו של בבל עולה ויורד ושל מדי עולה ויורד ושל יון עולה ויורד ושל אדום עולה ויורד. אמר הקב"ה ליעקב: יעקב, למה אין אתה עולה? באותה שעה גתיירא אבינו יעקב ואמר: כשם שיש לאלו ירידה, כך יש לי ירידה? אמר לו: אם אתה עולה, אין לך ירידה! לא האמין ולא עלה. ר"ש בן יוסינה היה דורש: (תהלים עח, עב): "בכל זאת חטאו עוד ולא האמינו בנפלאותיו". אמר לו הקב"ה: אילו עלית והאמנת (נוסח ויקרא רבה: "אילו האמנת ועלית" — ושים לב!), לא היתה לך ירידה לעולם, אלא הואיל ולא האמנת, הרי בניך משתעבדין בהללו ארבע מלכויות בעולם הזה. אמר לו יעקב: יכול לעולם? אמר לו: "אל תירא עבדי יעקב ואל תחת ישראל, כי הנני מושיעך מרחוק ואת זרעך מארץ שבים" — מגליא ומאספניא ומחברותיה. "ושב יעקב" — מבבל, "ושקט" — ממדי, "ושאנו" — מיון, "ואין מחריד" — מאדום. "ואותך לא אעשה כלה" — אלא מיסרך ביסורים בשביל לכוותך מעוונותיך ולצרף אותך.

"... behold the angels of God ascending and descending"—referring to the princes of the nations. The text teaches that the Holy One blessed be He showed Jacob the prince of Babylon ascending and descending and that of Medea, Greece and Edom (Rome) doing likewise. Said the Holy One blessed be He to Jacob: Jacob, why don't you ascend? At that moment Jacob our father was afraid. He said: Am I to suffer a descent just the same as these? He said to him: If you ascend, you shall suffer no descent. He did not believe and did not ascend.

R. Shimon b. Yosina used to expound the text (Ps. 78, 72): "For all this they sinned still and believed not His wondrous works." Said the Holy One blessed be He to him: Had you ascended and believed (Vayikra Rabbah version: "Had you believed and ascended"—note difference) you would never have experienced a descent. But since you had no faith, your children will be enslaved by these four kingdoms in this world. Said Jacob to him: For ever? He answered: "Fear not My servant Jacob and be not dismayed Israel, for I shall save thee from afar and thy seed from the land of their captivity"—from Gaul from Spain and its neighbours. "Jacob shall return" from Babylon, "and be tranquil" from Medea; "and at ease"—from Greece, "with none to make them afraid" from Edom. "And of thee I shall not completely destroy" but will chastise you with sufferings in order to quit you from your iniquities and refine you.²

(Pesikta Derav Cahana)

- (a) What is the difference in the approach of the two Midrashim?
 (b) What does the ladder symbol (without the angels) in the two?

¹ The Hebrew is ambiguous and may be translated "upon him," or: "upon it." The usual translation is: "beside him."

² For a penetrating and satisfying explanation of this Midrash see Buber's essay *Herut Ve-yi'ud* Zionist Library, Jerusalem 5720 — pp. 215-217.

JACOB'S VOW

Jacob was vouchsafed in his dream the fulfillment of all that man could desire, and particularly, a man leaving his country and father's house:

וְהִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי עֹמֵד
 וְשֹׁמְרֵי תְּהִיָּה בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֵּלֶךְ
 וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ אֶל-הָאָדָמָה הַזֹּאת
 כִּי לֹא אֶעֱזָבְךָ
 עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם-עָשִׂיתִי
 אֶת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי לְךָ.

Behold I am with thee, and will protect thee wherever thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not forsake thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. (28, 15)

On awakening in the morning he vowed a vow, the first recorded vow in the Bible:

אִם-יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי
 וְשָׁמְרֵנִי בְּדַרְךְ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ
 וְנָתַן-לִי לֶחֶם לֶאֱכֹל וּבְגָד לְלַבֵּשׁ.
 וְשָׁבַתִּי בְּשָׁלוֹם אֶל-בֵּית אָבִי -
 וְהָיָה יְיָ לִי לֵאלֹהִים.
 וְהָאֵבֶן הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַתִּי מִצֵּבָה
 יִהְיֶה בֵּית אֱלֹהִים
 וְכָל אֲשֶׁר תִּתֶּן-לִי
 עָשָׂר אֶעֱשְׂרֶנּוּ לְךָ.