

<sup>10</sup>Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. <sup>11</sup>He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. <sup>12</sup>He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. <sup>13</sup>And the LORD was standing beside him

10 ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע וילך חרנה:  
11 ויפגע במקום וילן שם כירבא השמש  
ויקח מאבני המקום וישם מראשתיו  
וישכב במקום ההוא: 12 ויהלם והנה  
סלם מצב ארצה וראשו מגיע השמימה  
והנה מלאכי אלהים עלים וירדים בו:  
13 והנה יהוה נצב עליו ויאמר אני יהוה

### JACOB'S ENCOUNTER WITH GOD (28:10–22)

Jacob has embarked on a long, perilous journey that will take him from Beer-sheba in southern Canaan to Haran in northern Mesopotamia.

#### THE DREAM REVELATION (vv. 11–15)

**10. Jacob left Beer-sheba** We are given no details about anything that happened to Jacob in the course of his trek; we are told only of his encounter with God.

**11. He came upon a certain place** Jacob stops at an unnamed "place" because it is impossible to travel in this region after sunset. The Hebrew word for "place" (*makom*) frequently has the connotation of "a sacred site" in later interpretations, but to Jacob it is a place with no

tradition of holiness, and he treats it with indifference.

**12. He had a dream** While Jacob sleeps, he has a dream revelation.

**a stairway** The Hebrew term "*sullam*" is related to the Akkadian word "*similtu*," which means "ladder" or "steps." *Sullam* could, therefore, be a ladder or a stairway ramp. The image of a ladder ascending to heaven is also known from Egyptian and Hittite sources.

**angels of God** They play no role in the dream and probably reflect the notion of angelic beings who patrol the earth and report back to God.

**13. beside him** Or "it," the stairway.

## CHAPTER 28

In this *parashah*, Jacob leaves home to spend the next 20 years at the home of his mother's brother Laban (whom we met briefly in chapter 24). He marries two wives and fathers several children there. Jacob's journey begins with a setting sun and concludes (Gen. 32:27) with a rising sun. This has prompted one contemporary commentator to consider the 20 years at Laban's house as a "dark night of the soul," years spent struggling with the dark forces represented by Laban's treachery and Jacob's confronting his own attraction to deceit (Zornberg). When the Sages attribute to Jacob the institution of the evening prayer (*Ma-ariv*), they may be crediting him as the first person able to find God in the midst of darkness.

**10. Jacob left Beer-Sheba** Why does the Torah, ordinarily so sparing of words, include this detail? When a good person leaves a com-

munity, it is no longer the same place (Gen. R. 68:6).

**12. a stairway** We ascend toward God one step at a time, making one small change in our lives and stabilizing it before we take another step. Sometimes we slip and miss a step, falling back, but we recover and keep climbing. Most people do not leap toward God in one great burst of enthusiasm.

**angels of God were going up and down on it** From this we learn that one set of angels was leaving Jacob and a different set would accompany him outside the Land (Gen. R. 68:12). Jews have different concerns and different priorities outside the Land than they do when living in it. We need different "angels" to guide us (Mordecai Kaplan).

**13.** We can speculate that Jacob was a frightened young man, away from home for the first time and embarrassed by the circumstances that forced him to leave. To have God appear

and He said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. <sup>14</sup>Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. <sup>15</sup>Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

<sup>16</sup>Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!" <sup>17</sup>Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to

אלהי אברהם אביך ואלהי יצחק הארץ אשר אתה שוכב עליה לך אתוננה ולזרעך: <sup>14</sup>והיה זרעך בעפר הארץ ופרצת ימה וקדמה וצפנה ונגבה ונברכו בך כל משפחות האדמה ובזרעך: <sup>15</sup>והנה אנכי עמך ושמרתך בכל אשר תלך והשבתיך אל האדמה הזאת כי לא אעזבך עד אשר אם עשיתי את אשר דברתי לך: <sup>16</sup>ויקץ יעקב מעקב משנתו ויאמר אכן יש יהוה במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי: <sup>17</sup>ויירא ויאמר מה נורא המקום הזה אין זה כי אם בית אלהים וזה שער

***I am the LORD*** For this self-identifying formula, see Comment to 15:7. The use of the divine name *YHVH* has special importance here, because it serves to disengage the revelation from any connection with El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon, whose name is a component of Bethel, the name soon to be given to the place.

***Abraham . . . Isaac*** The revelation confirms Jacob as the heir to the divine promises made to his father and grandfather.

***the ground on which you are lying*** Just as he is about to leave the Land, his title to it is affirmed.

**14. Your descendants** The wording of these divine promises shows a clear affinity with the promises made to Abraham in 13:14–17.

**15. I am with you** The national promises

that project into the distant future end on a personal note directed to Jacob.

#### BETHEL (vv. 16–19)

The next morning Jacob gives the site a name and makes a vow to God. The sanctuary at Bethel was of major importance in the later history of Israel.

**17. Shaken** Jacob is profoundly affected by the overwhelming mystery of the encounter with God.

**abode of God** The site where He has manifested His presence. The building or consecration of a sanctuary is not mentioned.

**the gateway to heaven** The place where the angels ascend to and descend from heaven. The notion that such "gateways" existed was widespread. One of the titles of the high priest of

reassuringly, promising him a successful journey and a safe return home, must have been what Jacob needed most at that moment. Years later, at the end of his life (48:3), this is one of only two incidents that Jacob recalls, cherishing the memory that when he was young and afraid, God assured him that he would achieve great things in his life.

**16. and I did not know it** How often do we find ourselves in the presence of God, not only in synagogue sanctuaries but at crucial mo-

ments of our lives or in the midst of natural beauty, and remain unaware of it?

**17. Shaken** We tend to speak casually of coming into God's presence. Jacob's response here reminds us that to truly encounter God in our lives is a soul-shattering experience. We are shaken to the core of our souls, and we are never the same person afterward. Jacob's encounter changes him from a frightened young man to a man prepared to take responsibility for his life.