

never too late to dream great dreams and work to make them a reality. We all know such people in our communities who are living testaments to that simple truth.

Our congregations and communities are the result of our collective dreams. We dream that our congregations will be more than synagogues, that they will be sacred communities:

- *Learning communities*, where every child knows the sweetness of Torah and every adult devotes a portion of his or her week to serious study of Jewish texts.
- *Spiritual communities*, where *tefillah* is participatory and uplifting, and where we share a spiritual journey together.
- *Welcoming communities* to all Jews from age 2 to 120; where the youngest children are our delight; our teenagers are encouraged to question; our singles, young couples, and young families can find a place in which they can establish themselves; empty nesters can continue to grow in wisdom; and our elders can be our teachers.
- *Caring communities* where our “greatest passion is compassion” (Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel), communities rich in *gemilut hasadim* (acts of loving-kindness), where we show hospitality to visitors and newcomers; where we take time to visit the sick and to comfort those who mourn; and where we devote ourselves to *tikkun olam*, repairing our fractured world.

As we build our communities, we will undoubtedly become embroiled in more mundane and pressing matters—matters of budgets and bylaws and building funds. And that’s okay—those are important matters that should be attended to—as long as we don’t confuse them with our dreams. As long as we don’t measure our success by our achievement of a balanced budget rather than the creation of learning, spiritual, welcoming, and caring communities. As long as we don’t dream of big numbers and imposing edifices and spotted goats, rather than Torah study and *gemilut hasadim* and stairways to heaven, so that, like Beth El, our synagogues and communities can be—and always will be—places where Heaven and Earth can touch.

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## Parashat Va-yetzei 5775

## פרשת ויצא תשע"ה

### Reclaiming Our Dreams

By Marc Gary, executive vice chancellor and chief operating officer, JTS

This week’s parashah, Vayetzei, covers a critical 20-year period in the life of our patriarch Jacob: the two decades that Jacob spends outside the Land of Israel, in Haran, in the house of his conniving uncle, Laban. They are years of treachery, deceit, exploitation, and fear. They are pivotal years in Jacob’s life—years in which Jacob confronts who he is and sees in Laban what he will become if he doesn’t pull back from the abyss. In the words of Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, this is “the night of [Jacob’s] soul.” And, as if to drive this point home, the parashah begins with the setting of the sun and the onset of night, and ends with sunrise and the beginning of a new day.

The parashah is bracketed by two dreams. The first dream—the dream of a stairway or ladder connecting heaven and earth—is widely known and celebrated. It has been the subject of numerous commentaries and interpretations, artistic expressions, literary illusions, and even a song by Led Zeppelin (“Stairway to Heaven”). The second dream, in contrast, has been almost completely ignored. But it is the second dream, I believe, that provides the clearest window into Jacob’s troubled psyche; explains why he makes a critical decision in his life and, by extension, the life of the Jewish people; and offers a crucial lesson for us today individually and as members of Jewish communities.

To understand the significance of the second dream, however, we must remind ourselves of Jacob’s first dream. You will recall that Jacob is on the way to Haran, fleeing from Esau after Jacob stole both Esau’s birthright and their father’s blessing. Jacob grows tired and stops to rest at a location referred to only as “Hamakom” (“the place”), perhaps as an indication of its desolation. He takes a rock, puts it under his head as a pillow, and falls into a deep sleep. And the Torah tells us:

He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky and the angels of God were going up and down it . . . And the Lord was standing beside him (*alav*) and He said, . . . “Remember, I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land.” (Gen. 28:12–15)

Then Jacob wakes up and with a wonderful expression of awe, proclaims, “Surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it! . . . That is the gateway to heaven.” (Gen. 28:16–17). Appropriately, Jacob names the place Beth El (the Abode of God).

The biblical commentators have had a field day with this episode in Jacob’s life. There are explanations and midrashim almost beyond number. I will mention only two of them to give you an idea of their scope and breadth. The first, found in Midrash Tanhuma, a collection of homilies, infuses the dream with geopolitical significance. According to this midrash, the angels ascending and descending the ladder were not angels at all, but rather princes of the heathen empires: Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and so forth. All of these empires will rise and then descend into the oblivion of history, but God assures Jacob that this will not be his fate or the fate of his descendants. God will protect them and bring them back to the Land of Israel (Tanhuma C, Vayetzei, 2). Jacob’s ladder, then, is the ladder of history. The ascent of one nation follows the descent of another, but the ladder is not endless or purposeless; God stands on top of it (*alav*) as the “Master of History.” To paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., the arc of history is long, but it bends toward the freedom, survival, and ultimate triumph of the Jewish people.

Rashi takes a more personal, almost intimate view. He asks why the angels ascend first and then descend. One would think that angels, as heavenly beings, would first descend from heaven and then ascend back up there. Rashi concludes that the Torah is teaching us that there were angels who traveled with and protected Jacob while he was in the Land of Israel. But as Jacob prepared to leave his homeland and journey outside of Israel, he needed different angels to protect him. Confronting a new situation, Jacob required the aid of different guardians. This interpretation particularly resonates with those of us who have watched our grown children leave home for college, new jobs, or other adventures. We understand that we can no longer protect our children; we must pray for different guardians to keep them safe as they make their way in the world. But now let us turn to the second dream. It is 20 years later. Jacob has been living in Haran as a part of Laban’s household and he has learned the true meaning of treachery. First, he worked as a virtual slave for Laban for seven years in order to marry Rachel, only to find on his wedding day that he has been tricked into marrying Leah. Jacob must toil for seven more years to earn Rachel’s hand. Even after that, Jacob continues to be exploited by Laban, taking care of Laban’s flocks while he makes his uncle wealthy. The Torah tells us that Laban adjusted his wages 10 times—and I can guarantee that he wasn’t giving Jacob a raise. Finally, Jacob insists on getting a piece of the action for himself. He cuts a deal with Laban: Jacob will keep the speckled and spotted goats—which

were quite rare—and Laban can keep all the others. Laban agrees, but either through God’s beneficence, folkloric magic, or a combination of the two, Jacob is successful and ends up with a large flock of speckled and spotted goats.

And then Jacob has a dream, which he relates to Rachel and Leah with these words:

Once at the mating time of the flocks, I had a dream in which I saw that the he-goats mating with the flocks were streaked, speckled, and mottled. And in the dream an angel of God said to me, “Jacob!” “Here,” I answered. And he said, “Note well that all the he-goats which are mating with the flock are streaked, speckled, and mottled; for I have noted all that Laban has been doing to you. I am the God of Beth El, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now arise and leave this land and return to your native land.” (Gen. 31:10–13).

This appears to be one of the great non sequiturs in the Bible. It is as if you are in bed with your spouse and he or she wakes up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat and says, “I know you have grown up in this town and lived here for 20 years, but tomorrow we have to leave.” “Why?” you ask. And your spouse responds: “I had a dream. I dreamed of speckled goats. Now start packing!”

What was the angel in Jacob’s dream really saying? In my view, the angel was telling Jacob, “You remember Beth El, don’t you Jacob? You remember where you dreamed of a stairway to heaven? Now what do you dream about? Spotted goats that make you wealthy. You are dreaming of your bank account; you are dreaming of the stock market. You have forgotten how to truly dream. Worse, you have betrayed your dreams! You cannot stay in this place. Go back to where you can dream great dreams again!”

Like Jacob, we all dream great dreams in our youth when we begin life’s journey in earnest. We dream of building a better world, easing suffering, creating new communities, finding God. But often those dreams slip away and are replaced with dreams of stock market bonanzas and BMWs—speckled goats. The parashah teaches us that when we cease to dream of stairways to heaven and instead become obsessed with material goods, we must take drastic steps. We must leave that place—spiritually, if not physically—and return to where we can dream again.

And this is true throughout our lives. The prophet Joel says: “Your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions” (Joel 3:1). It is