



Jacob's Journey: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Va-yetze*

Genesis 28:10 - 32:3

Journeys fill the Torah portion *Parashat Va-yetze*. Jacob leaves his home and family. He travels north to stay for a time with his uncle. He anticipates it will be a few years; yet it stretches out to twenty. There he will grow and develop, adding to his name and stature. He will establish a family, and experience many trials and tribulations.

That, however, is all ahead of him; it is part of the unknown future as he embarks on this fateful period in his life. As he sets out, Jacob rightfully worries about what lies ahead. He is aware that he is entering new, and for him, unexplored territory.

It is easy to relate to Jacob's anxiety. When we take on a new job, role, relationship, course of treatment, or other challenge, we often feel we are in the dark, in the wilderness; and like Jacob, we are in an uncomfortable place.

Early on his journey, in his solitude at night Jacob dreams of a ladder/stairway reaching to heaven, with God's angels descending and ascending. God tells Jacob, "Remember, I am with you and I will protect you" (Gen 28:15.)

One midrashic tradition suggests that these were angels who accompany people wherever they went, in the land of Israel, and elsewhere (*Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 68.12). These angels provide protection for people on their journey, in their time of weakness and defenselessness. Further, the idea that God is accessible that God cares, can be of great comfort. "I am with you and I will protect you."

The next day Jacob acknowledges that he is in an awesome place: "*Mah norah ha-makom hazeh . . . How awesome is this place!*" and he had been unaware of it. Yet, when he reached out in his dream, in his subconscious prayer, God responded.

In Jacob's dream angels descended and ascended. Those that descended would be with him on journeys; those that ascended became Jacob's links to God: they carried his thoughts and his prayers to God, the *Makom*, the Place/Source of Being. Sometimes these ascending angels are like the literal or figurative tears that we shed; for as the *Zohar* relates, when "prayerful tears ascend before the Ruler, no gate can withstand them, and they are never turned away empty" (*Zohar, Hayeh Sarah*, 2.132b).

As God pays attention to the broken heart (Ps 147:3), so likewise God has promised that as we turn to the Place/Source of Being, so does the divine turn to us (Mal 3:7; Zech 1:3).

There are times when we embark on new ventures or experiences, and we are anxious about what the future holds. Being human we have self-doubts, or we feel very alone in a given situation. Like Jacob, we feel we are on a difficult journey with an uncertain future. In the moment, we feel ourselves in the dark and in the wilderness. God's Presence, nevertheless, can be near, and our thoughts and tears will be heard and seen. When we reach out, may we experience God's protecting presence with us.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi David J. Zucker, PhD, BCC, author of *The Torah: An Introduction for Christians and Jews* (Paulist Press; www.davidjzucker.org), and former Director of Chaplaincy Care at Shalom Cares, a senior continuum of care center, in Aurora, Colorado. It is brought to you by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties). More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

