

Some Contemporary Interpretations of Jacob's Ladder

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I

THE WEEKLY PORTION OF VAYETZE (GEN. 28:10-32:3) OPENS WITH JACOB LEAVING HIS HOME AND SETTING OUT FOR HARAN. ALONG THE WAY HE STOPS FOR THE NIGHT AND DREAMS WHAT MAY BE the world's best known dream:

And he dreamed, 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. (GEN. 28:12)

This dream has had many interpretations in the imaginative responses to biblical texts known collectively as the rabbinic Midrash, as well as elsewhere in Jewish and Christian sermons and in secular literature. In offering the interpretations that follow, I have tried to be both contemporary in content and midrashic in form. In particular, I have made use of the rabbinic device of “prooftexts” as part of each interpretation.

For my purposes, which are serious in a light-hearted way, there are two types of prooftext. First, biblical passages may be quoted to “prove” an assertion made on other grounds, or to show that the assertion is not totally at variance with the biblical story, no matter how far-fetched the interpretation may seem. In fact, since playfulness and wit are qualities required in contemporary midrash if it isn't to be mistaken for its opposite—

fundamentalism—the more far-fetched and anachronistic the interpretation, the better. For example:

A PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION.

The dream is a projection of Jacob's emotional states. Jacob dreams about going up to heaven, then down in the opposite direction, then up to heaven and then down again, and so on. This is a dream, if there ever was one, of a manic-depressive!

Manic, as it is said in Genesis 29:20 (reporting on an extended manic episode):

And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days...

Depressive, as it is said (GEN. 47:8-9):

And Pharaoh said unto Jacob, How old art thou? And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.

The second form of proof-text functions in a different way. Here the proof-text is introduced before the interpretation, and it is in light of the meaning of the proof-text that the dream is then interpreted. Bringing out the meaning of the proof-text may require some discussion, and perhaps even the quotation of another text, introduced to clarify the meaning of the first. In rabbinic Midrash the proof-texts and supplementary texts are usually drawn from the Bible, but I feel free to place in evidence quotations from anywhere and everywhere. For example:

A SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION.

As it is said (GEN. 3:19):

unto dust shalt thou return

This is to be understood in the light of two lines from quatrain XXIV of Fitzgerald's translation of the Rubaiyat:

*Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend
Before we too into the Dust descend.*

Therefore, the dream represents our lives, in which we ascend out of the dust of non-existence up to the heaven of existence, and descend eventually back into the dust.

No more explanations are needed. The remaining interpretations will introduce proof-texts with the traditional formulas of "Another interpretation" (*davar acher*) and "As it is said."

II

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

As it is said (EX. 33:18-19):

And [Moses] said: "Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory." And [God] said: "... I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy to whom I will show mercy."

Therefore the angels ascending represent those people to whom grace and mercy have been shown. Some rise one rung, and some rise ten rungs, and some rise even higher. The angels descending represent those people to whom mercy has not been shown. Some descend one rung, and some ten rungs and some, such as those in the death camps 50 years ago or caught up in the tortures in Bosnia today, descend even more into hell "on the earth."

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

As it is said (GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN, 1:51):

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

This verse very powerfully appropriates the imagery of Jacob's dream. In a Christian interpretation of the verse, Jesus is the ladder connecting heaven and earth. My interpretation is somewhat different. The angels represent those who have ascended or descended "upon" Jesus or, in other words, by means of his life and words. And indeed the life and words of Jesus have been used by millions as a means of ascent, and by others over the centuries to justify descent to the most terrible deeds.

This interpretation can be easily generalized. Every individual influences others by words and deeds. After all, we speak of "raising"

children. Each of us is represented by the ladder. The effect on others of some of our words and acts is elevating, and the effect of some of our words and acts is depressing. And so Jacob's dream is a dream of the effects of the self on others.

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

Following the rabbis of the Midrash, who loved puns: do not only read "ascending" but also "assenting" and do not only read "descending" but also "dissenting." As it is said, by Dante in the *Inferno*, Canto iii, lines 58-60; Dante is being shown around hell, and speaks:

*After I had recognized some amongst them
I saw and knew the shadow of him who
from cowardice made the great refusal.*

Therefore the angels descending represent those individuals who in their lives made the great refusal, the great dissent. And those ascending represent the individuals who in their lives made the great affirmation, the great assent.

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

As it is said, by Yeats in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," a late poem:

*I must lie down where all the ladders start
in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.*

A rag and bone shop in Ireland in the early part of the century was one that sold decomposable material, like old rags and bones, for fertilizer, which is of course spread on the earth. The shop is "foul" because of the smell. Let us decompose or, if you prefer, deconstruct Yeats' couplet in order to show its applicability to Jacob's dream:

*"I must lie down," as it is said (GEN. 28:11),
and he lay down in that place to sleep*

"where all the ladders start," as it is said, and behold a ladder set up

"the foul rag and bone shop," as it is said, on the earth

"of the heart," as it is said (DEUT. 8:2), to know what was in your heart.

Therefore the ladder is a projection of what is in the heart, and the angels are the feelings, the emotions, that are in the heart, that in some cases raise us up toward our aspirations and in other cases drag us down in the

other direction.

Jacob's dream is a dream of the vicissitudes of the heart.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Consider Jacob's situation. This is his first night out of the parental home. The whole world is before him, and the whole of his adult life. What would a young man dream of under these conditions? Success! What else?

Jacob dreamed of climbing the ladder of success, of getting to the top, of rising to the highest position, of storming the heavens themselves. And he had many fantasies along these lines, each represented by an angel. This accounts for the first half of the dream.

But Jacob was a pampered child, and had lived a very sheltered and secure life up to that time. So he must have had his fears. Thoughts of success must have immediately triggered fears of failure, of falling down on the job, or, as the dream-work so elegantly visualized it, of descending the ladder of success. This accounts for the second half of the dream, which is Jacob's dream of the hopes and fears associated with making it.

ANOTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Consider Jacob's situation. This is his first night out of the parental home. The whole world is before him, and the whole of his adult life. What would a young man dream of under these conditions? Love! What else?

He dreamed that he would meet the woman of his dreams and be transported to heaven. This accounts for the first half of the dream.

And now we come to a serious interpretive difficulty. If this is Jacob's dream of love, what are we to make of the second half of the dream under this interpretation? We are in need of assistance from a prooftext. Let us take Yeats' lines:

All true love must die,

Alter at the best

Into some lesser thing.

Prove that I lie.

(*"Words For Music Perhaps,"* section X)

The last line quoted is the refrain of this sweet lyric. With the prooftext in mind we can look carefully at such evidence as exists concerning

Jacob's love for Rachel in the later years of their marriage.

Rachel's death is described in the following terms (GEN. 35:17-19):

And it came to pass, when she was in hard labour that the midwife said unto her, Fear not; thou shalt have this son also. And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing, (for she died) that she called his name Ben-oni [that is, son of my sorrow]: but his father called him Benjamin [that is, son of the right hand]. And Rachel died, and was buried on the way to Ephrath...

Now let us do some arithmetic. Jacob was 130 when he was introduced to Pharaoh, and we know that at the time Benjamin was still young, surely no more than 20. So Jacob must have been 110 at a minimum when he got Rachel pregnant for the second time. This is an impressive feat, and many readers can identify fully with Jacob's pride in the continued vigor of his "right hand."

So Jacob brushed aside Rachel's last poignant wish to have the child named in remembrance of her death throes, a wish uttered with her dying breath. Instead, Jacob named the child to commemorate his right hand or, to be pedantically accurate, the right hand in general. And Jacob buried Rachel by the side of the road, and moved on.

If we assume that there was indeed a certain loss of love in the marriage, then the second half of the dream can be interpreted as a decline from the heavenly intensity of true love to what Yeats called "some lesser thing," and the dream is then Jacob's dream of love.

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

As it is said (PSALMS 24:3-4):

Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord? and who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart.

So the angels ascending represent those with clean hands and a pure heart. And what about those descending? A proof-text, from the New Testament. As it is said (EPHESIANS 4:10):

He that descended is the same also that ascended.

Therefore the dream teaches us that even if you have clean hands and a pure heart you will eventually descend from your heaven and join the rest of us here on earth.

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

As it is said (PSALMS 39:13):

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my cry; Keep not silence at my tears; For I am a stranger with Thee, A sojourner, as all my fathers were.

Therefore the dream teaches us that even if we rise up to heaven, so to speak, in our lives, the stay will be brief, a sojourn before we descend again, for we are strangers there.

Jacob's dream was of the transience of our elevations, our ascents, the transience of our moments of joy and happiness.

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

As it is said (PSALMS 139:8):

If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there; If I make my bed in the netherworld, behold, Thou art there.

So the dream teaches us that in both our ascents and descents we are in the same circumstances, that even in our descents we are still on a ladder connecting our heaven and earth: we are still in contact with whatever permitted us to ascend.

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

As it is said, by Kafka, in perhaps the greatest parable of the twentieth century:

He is a free and secure citizen of the world, for he is fettered to a chain which is long enough to give him the freedom of all earthly space, and yet only so long that nothing can drag him past the frontiers of the world. But simultaneously he is a free and secure citizen of Heaven as well, for he is also fettered by a similarly designed heavenly chain. So if he heads, say, for the earth, his heavenly collar throttles him, and if he heads for Heaven, his earthly one does the same. And yet all the possibilities are his, and he feels it; more, he actually refuses to account for the deadlock by an error in the original fettering. (Kafka, Parables and Paradoxes, Schocken Books, 1975)

Therefore Jacob's dream teaches us that if we head for heaven we will eventually feel stifled in that rarified atmosphere, and descend back to earth again in order to breathe. And if we go too far toward the mud we won't be able to live with ourselves.

And so the dream teaches us that our spiritual double binds are due to our original fettering, and not to our parents, for example, or the limitations of current political arrangements in civil society. We feel free, and are free, but we are constructed to reverse ourselves if we move too far in either spiritual direction.

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

As it is said, in the midrashic work *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 23:2:

The Holy One said: "Jacob, climb thou also." ...But Jacob ...did not climb up.

The consequences of such passive refusal are to be understood in the light of the following passage from Shakespeare (JULIUS CAESAR, IV, iii, 49-53):

There is a tide in the affairs of men,

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;

Omitted, all the voyage of their life

Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

"Omitted" is a passive refusal. This teaches us that if we are ever invited in our lives to ascend some Jacob's ladder, we should accept.

ANOTHER INTERPRETATION

And he dreamed, 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.

In the spirit of Torah for its own sake, the dream may be understood in the light of the following line from one of Yeats' last poems:

It was the dream itself enchanted me.

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