

## *Jacob's Ladder*

Our Torah portion opens with Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, fleeing to Haran having just deceived his father and his brother and caused a great upset in the family. In Haran he will fall in love, marry and start his own family; but for now he is on a solo journey. Our discussion today will focus on Jacob's dream of a heavenly staircase or ladder. It has a powerful impact on him. Read the story in Gen. 28:10-22.

*"And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (28:12).*

In traditional Jewish methods of biblical interpretation, attention to every detail of the text, including the order of words, is paramount. Did you notice what might have caught the attention of the sages in the above passage? Why, they wondered, does the Torah say that the angels *ascended* before saying that they *descended*. If angels of God come from heaven, wouldn't we expect the text to say that they descended the ladder first, then ascended afterwards? With a prayerful imagination, ponder this question as you re-read these verses and those around it.

Some rabbinic commentaries view the angels in highly symbolic terms. A simpler and even more intriguing explanation, however, is offered by Rashi, the esteemed 11th century Jewish Torah scholar. According to Rashi's explanation (which echoes the midrash), the angels of God have specific assignments. Those that operate in the Land of Israel do not leave that area. So when Jacob departed from his homeland and headed for Haran, these angels ascended to heaven first and other angels then descended to escort him outside the Land of Israel.

Perhaps our 21st century western minds register some discomfort with Rashi's explanation! But remember that our task here is to uncover spiritual meaning in the text and to appreciate the wisdom of the great tradition. In this light, surely Rashi's explanation offers a profound insight into the constancy of God's protection. Wherever our life's journey takes us—into new geographical areas, new experiences, new challenges—God sends us help, and not just 'any' help, but assistance personally tailored to our unique circumstances; and not only from angelic messengers, but from special people who enter our lives at critical moments and show us the way forward with their loving care and guidance. It is a comforting thought, and one based in our faith in God's providence, that as our lives change, divine assistance is attentively moving with us from beginning to end. How beautifully this is expressed in the Christian funeral rite where we pray for the deceased: "May the angels lead you into paradise...and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem." •

### **Reflection:**

- Catholics celebrate the feast of Guardian Angels on 2 October. Consider this feast in the light of today's Torah reflection.
- Share an experience of God's protection and care during your life. Name special people who have been part of that memory.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York: Lambda, 1994); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006); Schermann & Zlotowitz, eds., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York, 1999). Scripture: NRSV.

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