



## Vayetzei 2023

### Family Feuds

3 minute read | Straightforward

In the stories of the middle phase of Yakov's life, the recurring theme is internal clashes within the family. There is a constant tension between Rachel and Leah, and it spills down to their children when Yosef's brothers hate him for being Yakov's favorite.

To be sure, multiple moments mark them out as great humans. Rachel recognized her father for the scoundrel he was and gave Leah the secret code signals on what was supposed to be Rachel's wedding day so that Leah wouldn't be discovered and humiliated; Yosef saved his family from starvation when he could have taken revenge.

But as much as we hold these individuals up as our righteous and saintly ancestors and even bless and name our children after them, they seem to compete and fight rather often, vying for Yakov's attention.

Is it every man and woman for themselves?

R' Yitzchak Berkowitz cautions us against this superficial analysis.

Some things are constant, like the characteristics of Avraham, defined by his loving outreach and warm, kind heart, and God promises that Avraham's name would be the one we highlight in our prayers – **מִיָּגֵן אֲבִרְהָם**.

But past that common denominator, perfection looks different from person to person, and it doesn't follow that what's good for me will work for you. The correct perspective to understand these stories – and ourselves – is that we are all different people with different personalities and perspectives, with different responsibilities requiring different things.

The stories of Yakov's family are of people vying to leave their mark, fighting to contribute, fighting to matter, fighting to leave an impact, and it's something we should notice that our greats tend to do, raising their voices to draw out individuality and avoid homogeneity. These clashes are not about a winning ideology; they're about making sure that different voices exist.

The notion of collectivism and unity – **אֶקְדִּיחַ** – is all too often propounded to squash individuality, and we mustn't tolerate that. On the contrary, the Torah is indisputably tolerant of pluralism, the



existence of different voices. As the Lubavitcher Rebbe put it, people are not dollars. Your voice and existence are not fungible. You are not replaceable, and we need you to shine.

God creates all of us as separate individuals, born with a particular makeup and tendencies that mark us as distinct and unique elements of the universe. It is who you are to the core, but some people never become who they truly are; they conform to the tastes of others and end up wearing a mask that hides their true nature. R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that dulling your essential self to conform with others is heresy and sacrilege that profanes and squanders who we are put in this world to be.

There is a beautiful and uncommon blessing we say upon seeing a crowd of multitudes – חכם הרזים – the knower of secrets, which the Gemara explains as acknowledging God's greatness in knowing each of us in our individual hearts, despite our different faces and minds. This is a subtle but vital point – God is great not because of the glory and sheer size of the crowd, but because God can see each of us as distinct within the sea of all too forgettable faces; God can see the individual within the collective.

It is a blessing in praise of the God who creates diversity in our world, rejoicing in our different minds, opinions, and thoughts. It is a blessing over Jewish pluralism. It is one thing to tolerate our differences; it is quite another to acknowledge them as a blessing. It is one thing to love Jews because we are all Jewish; that is, the same. It is quite another to love Jews because they are different from ourselves.

Sure, we have a group identity, but there is also individuality, and everyone expresses their sparkle in their own unique way.

As much as the world has gotten smaller in a certain sense, our world is also bigger today than it's ever been, so it's not zero-sum. Opportunities are abundant all around us, and you mustn't be shy about shining in whatever way you do it best.

Our world will only sparkle when you do.

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## **There and Back Again, and Every Step Along the Way**

4 minute read | Straightforward

One of the most formative moments in Yakov's life was when he fled his parent's home after obtaining Avraham's blessing from Yitzchak. He was no longer safe around Esau, and his mother Rivka advised him to escape to her brother's house.



Yakov ran with nothing more than the clothes on his back, and he would not return home until decades later. Alone and afraid, Yakov slept one night and had a stark vision of a stairway to heaven, with angels climbing and descending over him. When he woke, he asked God to protect him, and God promised to do so.

It's a powerful story about God's presence and power transcending national boundaries, about the unique and eternal covenant between God and Avraham's descendants, and the everlasting gift of the Land of Israel. It speaks to us by acknowledging the tensions that threaten us in exile, with its all too relatable struggle of trying to build and secure our future in a hostile world.

The Sfas Emes notes that Yakov's journey is one we all make on a personal and national level, escaping Esau's clutches in one form or another. We must eventually leave our comfort zones, perhaps when we realize that the familiar safety and security we once knew have eroded beneath us and that we need to find someplace else.

The Torah doesn't just say where Yakov went; it emphasizes that he left Beersheva – וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעַר שְׁבַע – וַיֵּלֶךְ תְּרַנָּה. Rashi suggests that this indicates that when we leave somewhere, it loses a bit of its luster. The Kedushas Levi teaches that what makes a place sparkle is its people, so it loses a little of what made it special when they leave. The Midrash suggests that God folded up the entire Land of Israel into Yakov's pocket while he slept, illustrating that the greatness of a place is bound to the presence of great people. You contribute to the places you are a part of, and they are worse off when you leave. But your contribution goes where you go, every step along the way, and all the spaces in between.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch highlights this story as critical to understanding what it means to be an upright Jew standing in the face of the adversity of exile. If Avraham's great test was to leave his homeland – לָךְ לְךָ – then this was Yakov's, and it is more demanding than Avraham's. When God asked Avraham to set out, he set out with his family, wealth, and great renown. At this moment in Yakov's life, God had not yet spoken to him, and he was completely isolated and penniless, every bit the outsider – וַיֵּצֵא. Yakov's loneliness and despair are palpable when he asks God to be with him – he has no place, nothing, and nobody.

At the end of Yakov's life, he laments the difficulty and misery that blighted his life. Yet even in what R' Jonathan Sacks describes as the liminal space, the non-moments in between the great chapters of Yakov's life, he sees visions and grapples with angels, and God promises to keep him safe, watching over him like a parent.

R' Hirsch highlights how Yakov starts with nothing and nobody and finds himself nowhere precisely because Yakov doesn't need any of that to become who he's meant to be. He has everything he needs within him already.

Moreover, God appears to Yakov and promises to protect him precisely at this low point, before he is somewhere, before he is someone, and before he has something. Yakov has not yet undergone his



transformation to Yisrael; he is not yet the man he will become. Having just left his parents' house, he has only just begun his journey into adulthood. But precisely at that moment, at Yakov's lowest, God appears for the very first time and promises to keep him safe. The Torah tells us nothing about how Yakov earns this remarkable privilege, perhaps indicating to us that God is there at our rock bottom moment, in the darkness and without cause, with the promise that we can shine brightly once again, perhaps even more than in the good old days.

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that this theme precisely tracks the trajectory of Yakov's life story. Yakov is born not just a twin, but literally holding on to his brother's foot, and his childhood is defined by competition with Esau – his identity exists solely in relation to his brother; he must be attached to get by, which perhaps sheds some light on why Yitzchak may have doubted Yakov in his youth. Years afterward, when Yakov and Esau meet up again, Esau offers Yakov to join forces, and Yakov declines in order to travel alone with his own family – Yakov's ultimate victory over Esau comes when Yakov develops his ability to transcend competition and strife to stand on his own. Esau has no power over Yakov when Yakov can resist not only Esau's strength but can gracefully decline his diplomatic overtures as well.

The defining struggle of Yakov's life is in the enigmatic incident at the river, when Yakov battled a mysterious and shadowy figure we identify as Esau's guardian angel, and the question is posed once and for all, can Yakov stand alone? He holds his own and earns the title of Yisrael.

Yakov's story is a quest to pave his own way, build a home, and secure his family's future in a hostile and turbulent environment. But the catalyst was Yakov all along, and it was within him all along.

Taking the dream at face value, we might wonder why Yakov doesn't ever think to climb the ladder to heaven. There is simply no need to climb the ladder in this interpretation. Yakov can build his family, and they will impact the world through their actions, and he doesn't need inherited wealth or renown, and he doesn't need anybody's help. Even when he is nowhere, he doesn't need to climb the ladder to become other than who he is; who he is and where he is will do perfectly.

The legacy of Yakov is that we have a spark within us, and we take it wherever we go. If we've been anywhere great, we are a part of what made it so, and if we did it there, we could do it anywhere. The model of Yakov's life demonstrates that we can even do it in the middle of nowhere; that humans have a generative capacity to produce and contain growth and sanctity.

As the Ropshitzer said, the holiest place isn't the Beis HaMikdash, and the holiest moment isn't Yom Kippur; it's right here, right now.

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## **Keep Chopping**



4 minute read | Straightforward

Mark Twain famously admired the Jewish People's survival through the ages. The great empires of Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome all rose and fell, yet the Jewish People endured.

What, he wondered, was the secret to Jewish immortality?

R' Jonathan Sacks suggests that for every nation and culture in history, land, not law, brought people together. People first formed settlements, then small groups, then villages, and then built towns and cities. As the groups grew, they became unstable and developed legal systems to resolve disputes and uncertainties – first the land, then the law. Unique to the Jewish People is the phenomenon that the law precedes the land, and it transforms the expected trajectory of Judaism by making it non-contingent. When a nation is exiled and dispersed, it doesn't typically survive; Judaism has spent most of its history in the diaspora – not sovereign in Israel.

And it has a lot to do with the fact that the Torah was given in the desert wilderness the fourth book of the Torah is named for – במדבר; the location of three-quarters of the Torah's stories, where the Jewish People accepted the Torah and formed a covenant with God, lived on miraculous manna and water, while sheltered under divine cloud cover.

At that moment, the Jewish People were constituted long before they ever saw the land, and so they could survive, identity intact, without it. As only R' Jonathan Sacks could put it – the law came before the land, so even when the Jews lost the land, they still had the law. Without geography, there was still history.

Pagan worship often revolves around natural life cycles and ecosystems, to which the desert wilderness is inhospitable, teaching the essential lesson that the One God exists in the emptiness too.

This understanding inverts our expectation of the exilic trope of the wandering Jew. We don't practice a majority of the Torah in exile – the laws of the Temple, the laws of the Land, the laws of government, or the laws of holiness and purity, among others. But although exile is not ideal, we can still thrive.

Our ancestor Yakov was the final prototype of the Jewish people and is the archetype for life on the run. When Yakov leaves home for the first time, Rashi comments that even with his departure, and even in his sleep, the sanctity of the land went with him – it was contingent on him, not where he found himself. He fled from home, from Lavan, from Esau, and then from Israel. Yet he transitions ever upwards, and it all happens on the go, casting off a former identity and emerging anew, foreshadowing the journey his children through the ages would have to take.



## TorahRedux

The very notion of a Mishkan – a portable temple – embodies the idea that we can create holiness on the move, and it reinforces the idea that the law before the land means that the law without the land is not lesser. If we can live with God in the middle of nowhere, we can live with God anywhere.

It's the underlying theme of the Purim story as well – in the moments we think we're most alone, God is by our side every step of the way, no less than when He seems closer. You may have to search a bit, but God doesn't vanish on us.

The law precedes the land. The model to survive, perhaps even thrive, is placed before us long before being tested – the antidote before the venom. On a far deeper level, it even precedes Creation – it comes before everything else.

None of this is to say that it's easy to persevere in difficult times – it most certainly is not. There is no shortage of moments in Jewish history where it took all people had only to scrape by, at times physically, other times spiritually, and on occasion both. There is no shortage of moments where people were lucky to make it out alive. Our circumstances can be cruel, and that pain is genuine, and we must be careful not to callously dismiss it.

Yakov's life was fraught with pain and strife, and the spectre of mortal danger loomed over his family throughout. The Jews fought Moshe and struggled to live in the wilderness from beginning to end. The Jews in the Purim story came perilously close to a genocide that was averted at the very last. If anyone says it's easy – it's assuredly not.

We don't choose our circumstances, and sometimes the odds can be stacked against us. On a national level, exile has lasted for most of our history, but again, the law precedes the land. So sure, we yearn for redemption every day, hoping for a time we can practice the Torah in its fullness; but this is where we are right now, and life today isn't worth a smidge less than it could be – so long as we're doing the best we can. If we're doing everything within our power, what more could God possibly ask of us? Perfection describes a process, not an outcome.

Channeling our ancestor, the archetype of Yakov, we can shine through pain and exile – not just surviving, but perhaps even thriving.

There are times we feel lost, scared, and alone. Sometimes the only real choice we have is whether we can even keep going at all. It's real, and it's hard! But we do have the capacity – הַיְרָעִים בְּדַמְעָה בְּרִנָּה יִקְצְרוּ –

Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says we'll try again tomorrow.



## For The Record

5 minute read | Straightforward

If we try to imagine the cunning and devious Lavan’s house, it can’t have been a particularly nurturing and safe environment to grow up in. All the same, that environment produces quality individuals in the forms of Rachel and Leah. Moreover, it is where our ancestor Yakov comes into himself and where all his sons were born.

However, there is a palpable strain and tension between Rachel and Leah, which repeatedly surfaces. Yakov loved Rachel, but Lavan substituted Leah in her place at their wedding, and Rachel only married Yakov a little later. Rachel was loved but could not give Yakov children, whereas Leah, who gave Yakov his sons, was hated. One day, a young Reuven picked some flowers for his mother Leah, which the Midrash suggests might have been a fertility supplement. All the same, we recognize it for what it is, that joyful moment in a parent’s life when a child does something sweet.

Rachel asked Leah to share that moment with her, and Leah bristled at the suggestion:

וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן בְּיָמֵי קְצִיר-חֹטִים, וַיִּמְצָא דֹדָאִים בַּשָּׂדֶה, וַיָּבֵא אֹתָם, אֶל-לֵאָה אִמּוֹ; וַתֹּאמֶר רָחֵל, אֶל-לֵאָה, תִּנִּי-נָא לִי, מִדֹּדָאִי בְּנֵה. וַתֹּאמֶר לֵה, הִמְעַט קִחְתִּיךָ אֶת-אִישִׁי, וְלִקַּחְתָּ, גַּם אֶת-דֹּדָאִי בְּנִי; וַתֹּאמֶר רָחֵל, לָכֵן יִשְׁכַּב עִמָּךְ הַלַּיְלָה, תַּחַת, דֹּדָאִי בְּנֵה. וַיָּבֵא יַעֲקֹב מִן-הַשָּׂדֶה, בָּעָרֶב, – In the days of the wheat harvest, Reuven went and found flowers in the field. He brought them to Leah, his mother, and Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s flowers.” And Leah said to her, “Is it not enough that you took my husband, but now you also wish to take my son’s flowers?” So Rachel said, “Fine, he shall sleep with you tonight in return for your son’s flowers.” Yakov came from the field in the evening, and Leah went to meet him, and she said, “You shall be with me, because I have won you for my son’s flowers.” (30:14-16)

This is a very terse and complex interaction, and there is typically a lot of focus on Rachel’s grace and dignity in not destroying Leah with a fiery response. Knowing the story as we do, we know that Yakov served Lavan faithfully for seven years to marry the love of his life, Rachel, only for Lavan to cruelly substitute Leah in her place at the wedding ceremony with a phony excuse.

R’ Shalom Schwadron teaches that while it was significant enough for Rachel to want to prevent Leah from public humiliation, the ability to refrain from embarrassing her even in a private conversation between sisters shows the extent of Rachel’s greatness. R’ Mordechai Druck highlights that Rachel refused to keep the score, despite the pain she lived with.

But, admirable as that may be, how can Leah have the audacity and gall to suggest that Rachel was taking Leah’s husband when it was Leah who had taken Rachel’s husband? Leah is living Rachel’s life!



Leah is married to her love, took her place at her own wedding, and is now giving her husband the children that she herself cannot. Doesn't Leah have it precisely backward? What was she thinking?

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that Leah was saying that it was bad enough that Rachel deprived Leah of the companionship of having a husband – **הַמְעַט קָחַתָּה אֶת-אִישִׁי**; but all Leah had going for her was the kids! And now Rachel wanted to take the only thing Leah had over her by giving Yakov kids – **וְלָקַחְתָּ, גַּם אֶת-דִּוְדָאִי בְנֵי**.

If we consider Leah's perspective for a moment, what was she supposed to have done? Lavan was a trickster and a powerful man; do we expect that she had any choice in the matter? She did what she had to do in the moment and tried to get on with her life and make the best of it. As the Seforno puts it, why did Rachel still have to marry Yakov after that happened, sabotaging Leah so she was hated? It's all Rachel's fault!

This reading makes sense, and it fits.

R' David Fohrman suggests a compelling and explosive reading based on Midrash.

The story about the flowers is a re-enactment of the wedding night, recreating the past and healing all the hurt.

In the story of the flowers, it was Rachel's night to be with Yakov, just like the first wedding night. There, Leah was substituted in secret, but this time, Rachel brought Leah in with everyone's consent – no longer Lavan's victims. Rachel willingly gave Leah that night, letting go of years of pain, choosing to share what should have been her exclusive relationship with Yakov. Rachel hears Leah's pain and perspective, that to Leah, Rachel stood in the way of Leah's companionship, and Rachel acts on this and stops obstructing Leah.

Once Rachel does this, the Torah never describes her as jealous ever again. She has healed and given Leah permission to be in the relationship.

What's more, Leah boldly goes out to greet Yakov – **כִּי שָׁכַר שְׂכַרְתִּידָהּ**, mirroring Yakov's bargain with Lavan – **מִהַ-מִּשְׂכַּרְתִּידָהּ / שָׁכַר שְׂכַרְתִּידָהּ**. The fraud of the wedding night is undone and quite literally unveiled. Leah can present herself as she truly is, burying Yakov's resentment for good as well – the Torah never describes Leah as hated ever again.

Right after this moment of healing, God remembers Rachel and blesses her with children:

**וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים, אֶת-רָחֵל; וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֹתָהּ, וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת-רִחְמָהּ** – Hashem remembered Rachel, heard her, and opened her womb. (30:22)





Rashi explains that what God remembered was Rachel’s kindness to Leah on the night of the wedding. Rachel could have ruined the marriage but chose not to, saving her sister from humiliation, playing a vital role in ensuring that Lavan’s scheme wasn’t discovered until it was too late. But that was years ago!

God remembered Rachel now, not because of her pain, but because of her healing. When things were most challenging for her, she could hear the perspective of the sister she’d turned into her rival and dug deep to make peace.

On Tisha b’Av, we read Jeremiah’s consolation, where God listens to Rachel:

קול בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תַמְרוּרִים רַחֵל מְבַכָּה עַל־בְּנֵיהָ מֵאַנָּה לְהַנָּחֵם עַל־בְּנֵיהָ כִּי אֵינָנּוּ... מְנַעֵי קוֹלָהּ מִבְּכִי וְעֵינֶיהָ מִדְּמָעָה כִּי יֵשׁ שָׂכָר לְפַעֲלֹתֶיהָ נְאֻמ־הָ וְשָׁבוּ מֵאַרְץ אוֹיֵב – A cry is heard in Ramah; wailing, bitter weeping Rachel is weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted over her children; they are gone... “Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears! For there is a reward for your labor, declares Hashem, they shall return from the enemy’s land...” (31:15,16)

Jeremiah tells us that beyond the tears and prayers, which Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, and Moshe could provide as well, God only listens to Rachel because of something heroic she did – יֵשׁ שָׂכָר לְפַעֲלֹתֶיהָ. Even better than being sad is becoming our own hero.

In our greatest moments of pain, can we take a step back from our hurt and ask what the situation might look like from our opponent’s point of view? The ability to ask that question is nothing short of heroic, but it’s the way out of conflict.

## **Jacob’s Ladder – The World Bridge**

6 minute read | Advanced

One of the most captivating stories in the Torah is often known as Jacob’s Ladder.

The Torah tells how Yakov fled from his enraged murderous brother Esau to the house of his uncle Lavan, in far off Haran. Along the way, and in between places, Yakov put his head down for some rest and had a vivid prophetic dream:

וַיַּחְלֵם וְהִנֵּה סֻלָּם מְצָב אַרְצָה וְרֵאשׁוֹ מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְהִנֵּה מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ – He had a dream; a ladder was planted on the ground, and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. (28:12)

While no one really knows what Heaven is, Heaven is universally understood to be a shorthand for the place where God, angels, and souls reside, the highest and holiest place, perhaps even paradise. In stark contrast, Earth is the plane of existence humans live on, and in a sense, a negative reflection, void of all those things; a low and profane place, not the place of God, angels, or souls.

We exist here, and the Creator is not here with us; our environment is artificial and synthetic, perhaps a simulation, even, and only the Creator's domain is real. Our world is a profane space, a formidable and meaningless expanse that is fundamentally unreal; our time on Earth is fleeting and ultimately somewhat futile and meaningless – הַבֵּל הַבְּלִים הַכֹּל הַבֵּל.

It follows that perhaps we can only find the Creator beyond the canvas; and in this worldview, affliction, fasting, and negation of the physical and the self make sense. If this seems extreme, note that it is coherent, consistent, and even reasonably popular, both historically as well as today; it is worth taking seriously even if only to understand why we ought to ultimately reject it.

If the domain of this world is indeed inferior, and Yakov was presented with a ladder to the highest plane of existence literally at his feet, an obvious question presents itself.

Why wouldn't Yakov try to climb the ladder?

The answer is that he didn't have to, and it's revealing when we consider why that might be and what the ladder represents.

Jacob's Ladder is a universal motif with many counterparts in mythology. It is known as an axis mundi – also called the cosmic axis, world axis, cosmic bridge, world bridge, cosmic pillar, world pillar, the center of the world, or world tree; and they universally serve as a connection between Heaven and Earth, a bridge between higher and lower realms. The axis mundi is almost always a center point, where blessings from higher realms descend to lower realms and disseminate to all.

A bridge and ladder function in the same way, except that a bridge is for lateral movement, and a ladder is for vertical movement. There are two separate domains, and there is no way to move from one to the other; they are separated with distinct boundaries that cannot be crossed. A bridge or ladder crosses the gap, linking the domains so the disparate parts can interact.

The cosmic bridge works in the same way, expressing contact and correspondence between higher and lower realms – מַצֵּב אֲרֻצָּה וְרֵאשׁוּ מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה. In Jacob's Ladder, angels ascend and descend – וְהִגִּה מִלְאָכִי אֱלֹהִים עֲלֵימָם וְיִרְדּוּ בֵּן – overtly symbolizing a kind of transfer, a reciprocal interaction and exchange of energy where Heaven comes to Earth, and Earth is elevated to Heaven.

Our sages identify the location of Yakov's dream disparately as Mount Sinai, Mount Moriah, the Land of Israel, or imagining a diagonally aligned ladder, some combination of these. Still, the effect is the same – the cosmic bridge is at one of these spiritual centers, a place where Heaven and Earth can



meet and blessing comes into the world. Legend has it that beneath the Beis HaMikdash on Mount Moriah, possibly the Dome of the Rock and the site of the Akeida, lies the Foundation Stone – אבן השתייה – the focal point and source of creation, itself tying intimately into the imagery of a source of blessing, connection, and expansiveness.

The motif of a world bridge is recursive – once you know how to spot it, you see it everywhere. Our sages note how Sinai has the same numerical value as Jacob’s ladder – סלם / סיני – suggesting that the Torah is a kind of world bridge. The Midrash indicates that the sacrificial offerings were a world bridge; the altar is described as “of the earth” – מִזְבֵּחַ אֶדְמָה – and legend has it that the smokestack wouldn’t diffuse into the air; it rose in a straight line, straight up to the sky – a world bridge. Many have noted that the expression for prayer and voice also has the same numerical value as Jacob’s ladder – סולם / קול.

Our sages suggest that our homes and marriages are reflections of the Beis HaMikdash – both are called בית, and both are a spiritual center and foundation – and so, like the Beis HaMikdash, are themselves reflections of a world bridge.

More esoterically, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge also present two aspects of this imagery. Each is said to stand at the center of paradise from which four rivers flow that nourish the whole world; a cosmic bridge at the center that is the source of all blessing. Some abstract representations of the Kabbalistic Sefiros even merge the Tree of Life concept with the human body as a cosmic pillar bridging Heaven and Earth.

As R’ Chaim Volozhin explains, humans should not think that we are confined by our mundane composition, because the world bridge of Jacob’s ladder is firmly rooted on Earth; yet it reaches Heaven just the same – מַצֵּב אֶרְצָה וְרֵאשׁוֹ מֵגִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה. In the same way, our souls interface with this world but can touch the Heavens, and humans can become a world tree as well, grounded firmly in the reality of this world, perhaps even the Underworld, and yet whose branches can touch the sky. This interlaces multiple world bridges – that our souls are a world bridge, that Torah and prayers are a world bridge, and that they can all interact.

While our sages are at pains to identify the site of Jacob’s Ladder, we should remember that although Yakov slept in a physical place, his vision was prophetic; there was no physical ladder in the three-dimensional space we occupy, which is to say there is no “there” there; the actual place is indeterminate, liminal space, the space between spaces, or quite simply, nowhere. It almost doesn’t matter at all!

Yakov’s dream predates Mount Sinai, Mount Moriah, the Torah, Beis HaMikdash, his own home and marriage, and even his own maturity; perhaps suggesting that even before realizing any of those things, the ladder symbolized a continuous, constant connection with the divine powers of the unconscious, the unknown depths of Yakov’s psyche that transcended space and time – and that this link was not limited to any one of those things.



The question of climbing the ladder is predicated on the perspective that this world is devoid of meaning within the internal parameters of creation, and finding God means escaping the void. One of the Baal Shem Tov's revolutionary teachings, as propounded by the Toldos Yakov Yosef, is that humans can transcend the limiting parameters of creation, not by abstaining from and negating physicality, but by seeing the parameters of creation from the Creator's perspective. God is sometimes known as המקום – the Omnipresent, or the place of all things; that the world is a part of God and within God. From this vantage point, there is no “outside” to escape to, no “simulation” to escape from.

Our reality is fully saturated with God's existence and presence, and everything that exists reflects that it is fundamentally connected to God in a substantive and real way; this world is absolutely the arena of God, every bit as much as Heaven, and to the extent that we are here for a reason, this is the arena we are supposed to be in.

There is no need to climb the ladder to a holy place; because this world is the holy place! Our world is fundamentally meaningful and is, in fact our only interface to the Creator.

What Jacob's Ladder reveals then, is not simply that there is a world bridge somewhere, but so much more. It reveals that world bridges exist; that bridged once is bridged forever; that a world bridge can exist anywhere; and that humans can generate them.

We should remind ourselves that even though the ladder was located in a dreamworld, Yakov's location within the dream still has him lying on the floor; yet God could stand over Yakov as he lay there and speak to him. While not the literal interpretation of the story, this fits neatly and tightly into Yakov's exact words in the story – ויאמר אכן יש ה' במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי ויירא ויאמר מה-נורא המקום הזה אין זה כי – ויאמר אכן יש ה' במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי ויירא ויאמר מה-נורא המקום הזה אין זה כי – that this realm is also the domain of the divine and that it can serve as a cosmic gateway.

As the Kotzker taught, Heavens is Heaven for God, but the Earth is given to humans – השמים שמים לה' – ויהארוץ נתן לבני-אדם – that is, humans can build a Heaven on Earth; where “ascent” into the spiritual world is an opportunity for internal growth and service, and “descent” is re-entering and engaging with the material world bringing blessings and transforming it for the better.

The gap between Heaven and Earth is infinitely wide yet paper-thin. The ladder is our quest to develop insights and perfect ourselves in order to move beyond the current microcosmic realm of Earth and to engage with the transcendent grand Heavenly macrocosmic order.

There is no need to go to Heaven when we are fully capable of bringing Heaven to Earth.



## TorahRedux

*I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.*

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.*

Neli

**PS** - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

**Redux:** *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.