

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Vayetze)

The Chassidic Rebbe of Hornostipol had a devoted attendant by the name of Reb' Dan, who served the Rebbe faithfully for over fifty years. After the Rebbe's death, the Rabbi in the village, Rav Yankel, announced that the coveted burial plot next to the Rebbe was due him inasmuch as he was the Rabbi of the town.

Reb Dan protested, saying that just as he had never left the Rebbe's side in life, he deserved to not be separated from him in death.

The dispute was brought before the Rebbe's son (Rav Avraham Twersky's grandfather), who ruled that the decision should be made by G-d, and that whoever died first was to be buried next to the Rebbe.

From that time, whenever Rav Yankel would take ill, Reb Dan would panic, and would insist that the very best specialists be brought in to treat him. He would also go to all the synagogues urging everyone to pray for Rav Yankel's speedy recovery. The thought that Rav Yankel would die first and thus win the coveted burial spot gave him no rest. And if Reb Dan took sick, Rav Yankel behaved in exactly the same way.

I heard this story from Rav Avraham Twersky, who noted that what people aspire to, and even what they envy, speaks volumes about their character.

These two men would gladly have given up years of their lives, to be buried near their Rebbe. There has and always will be envy. But what we envy says a lot about who we really are.

This week's portion, *Vayetze*, has a lot to do with what we aspire to, and what we dream of.

Escaping from the wrath of his brother Esau, Yaakov flees the land of Israel and his home, to make a new life in the far-off empire of Mesopotamia. He meets the love of his life, Rachel, ultimately marrying and settling in the home of his father-in-law Lavan.

Lavan, recognizing Yaakov's talent as a herdsman, strikes what he considers to be a clever deal. If Yaakov will manage the 'sheep-business', Lavan will give him all the newborn speckled & mottled sheep, as a reward for his efforts, keeping 'only' the regular non-speckled sheep.

Of course, every-one knows how rare mutated sheep births are, except perhaps a rather naive tent-dwelling cousin from far away....

The joke, however, is on Lavan; G-d causes all the sheep to be born with mutations, and for twenty-two years, Yaakov becomes wealthy at his father-in-law's expense.

And then one night, Yaakov has a dream. He dreams about flocks of speckled & mottled sheep filling the hills as far as his eyes can see. And then an angel comes to him from amidst the flocks, with a message:

“I have seen all that Lavan has done to you (referring to all the sheep); I am G-d, to whom you swore faith so long ago, when you left your home. Get up; it is time to go home... Return to the land of your birth.” (Genesis 31:10-13)

What is the meaning of this strange dream? Why are angels suddenly appearing from amidst the flocks? And why the sudden command to go home? This angelic message from G-d seems to appear completely out of no-where, and with little or no relationship to the narrative. What is this dream, and its accompanying message?

To understand the message of this dream one need only recall the beginning of Yaakov's journey, at the beginning of our portion.

Yaakov, running from home, stops for the night. All alone, with no possessions, having just left everything behind for an uncertain future, Yaakov dreams of ladders and angels, and G-d appears to him in his dream, and promises him he will one day return to the land of Israel to father a great nation. (Genesis 28: 11-22)

Perhaps this is precisely the point the angel is making in Yaakov's dream twenty-two years later:

‘Twenty-two years ago, you were dreaming of angels and heaven, and G-d Himself was talking to you. And now? Now you are dreaming of sheep; and when your dreams are all about sheep, its time to go home.’

Notice that in Yaakov's first dream, it is G-d himself that speaks with Yaakov. But twenty-two years later, he hears G-d's voice through an angel. Whenever an angel appears to an individual in the Torah, it is because somehow that individual has become somewhat distanced from G-d.

A perfect example of this phenomenon is the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. At the end of the story it is an angel that speaks with Abraham, perhaps because however well intentioned Avraham was, if you can lift up a knife over your son, it affects you, and distances you from G-d.

Indeed, this may be why the angel says, 'see *what Lavan has done for you*'. This comment is not referring to what Yaakov's newly acquired wealth has done for him, (wealth, after all, is from G-d, not from Lavan.) rather, the angel may be referring to what the wealth has done to Yaakov. And if Yaakov is now dreaming of sheep instead of ladders to heaven, then it is time to go home.

Rav Tzadok HaCohen of Lublin points out in his *Tzidkat Hatzaddik*, that you can learn a lot about a person from his dreams. What we dream is a reflection of who we are. It is the measure of our aspirations and goals, and of those values we hold dear and place above all else.

This, in fact, is the essence of prayer in Judaism. Did you ever wonder why our custom when we pray is to ask G-d for so many things? Doesn't G-d know what we want? Why do we need to remind Him? And what is the purpose of the Jewish custom of saying these same prayers three times a day? Did G-d already forget what I asked for just this morning?

Rav Abraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook points out in his *Olat HaRe'iyah* (his commentary on the Jewish prayer book, the Siddur), that when we pray, we are actually accessing our desires.

People make the mistake of thinking that the question I must ask myself at the end of prayers is '*did G-d hear my prayers?*' Of course, that is ridiculous. G-d hears everything, and in fact knows our prayers before we do. The real question is ***did I hear my prayers?***

Do I hear what I really want? In fact, this is the reason the Jewish custom is to say the prayers (the *shemoneh esrei*) loud enough so that I can hear my own words: precisely because I need to hear what I really want. Then I can ask myself: is this what I really want? Am I happy with what I really want? Do I really want peace? If I did, it would be on my mind all day long. Do I really care that there are so many people in the world who are sick? If so, how can my afternoon pass without even thinking about them?

The expression 'it's just a thought' could not be further from the truth. Thoughts are actually the building blocks of creation. Every aspect of civilization, indeed everything we will build in this world, will be the direct result of someone having thought it; dreamed it. And what we dream is very much a reflection of who we are, and who we really want to be.

Do we really dream of peace? Do we dream of creating an ethical world? Or are our dreams lost in the ticker tapes of stock quotes, Thanksgiving Day sales, and vacations on sandy beaches?

There was a time when we as a people had a dream. In a world lost in pagan idolatry and cruelty, we dreamed of light and brotherhood, and a world that could be better.

Perhaps, our dreams have become clouded. Maybe it really is time to go home.

Shabbat Shalom,

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