

Ascending Angels: Thoughts for Parashat Vayetsei, November 24, 2012

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By

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The 17th century English poet, Richard Lovelace, wrote these famous lines in his poem To Althea:

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage;
If I have freedom in my love
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.

As long as a person has inner freedom—to think, to love, to aspire—then the person does not feel limited by physical constraints.

This is a lovely poetic thought. But is it entirely true to actual human experience? If we indeed are placed in an unpleasant physical confinement, can our minds simply transcend our environment and dwell in spiritual freedom? If we are severely limited by physical handicaps, can we still easily attain inner serenity?

The problem goes beyond physical imprisonment; it also relates to spiritual, emotional and intellectual matters. If we feel that our options are diminishing, that our thoughts are being controlled, that our freedom of expression is being limited—are we really able to soar above like angels, ignoring the very real obstacles that weigh on our ability to function freely? If we feel isolated physically, spiritually, and emotionally, can we really feel free in our souls?

This week's Torah portion sheds light on this issue. Jacob had left his parents' home, fleeing from the murderous wrath of his brother Esau. Jacob was cut off from his family moorings; he had never been away on his own. He traveled on unfamiliar paths, with no idea how his life would unfold. At this point of crisis, he could surely have felt alone, alienated, frightened. His world was closing in on

him, and he could have felt trapped by fate.

But then he had a dream and envisioned “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” (Bereishith 28:12).

Rabbinic commentators have noted the anomaly that Jacob saw angels ascending from earth to heaven, although one would normally have thought that angels would first be descending from heaven to earth.

Perhaps the dream is alluding to how to cope with difficult situations. We first must let our dreams yearn upward; we must send our “angels” on an ascending path; we must let our minds rise above our actual setting so that we can expand our span of vision. Once we’ve done that, then the Lord sends His angels down to help us achieve our goals.

To overcome feelings that our lives are contracting, we need to have ideas, dreams and goals that are expanding. This is not always easy to accomplish—and yet it is vital that we accomplish this. Otherwise, we sink into the prison of despair. If we are not growing, we are shrinking!

We admire those who overcome physical handicaps to achieve great things. We respect those who do not let defeats or disappointments overwhelm them, but who rise and move ahead. We are inspired by those who act heroically in crisis; who continue to learn new things each day; who see life as an ongoing adventure with grand horizons.

If our “angels” are ascending, then we are growing and raising our sights. We are not allowing physical, emotional or intellectual obstacles to crush our spirits. It is not easy to feel free when we are enclosed by stone walls and iron bars; it is not easy to transcend the many pressures that would limit us and crush us. But indeed, stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.

If we can dream Jacob’s dream and let our “angels” ascend heavenward, we can attain inner freedom and wisdom. If our “angels” will aspire and rise, then the Lord will send His angels from heaven to help us on our way.

“And Jacob awoke from his dream and said: How wondrous is this place. It is nothing else but the house of the Lord, and it is the gate of heaven.”

[Angel for Shabbat](#)