

I DID NOT KNOW

by Rabbi Label Lam

And Yaakov awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely HASHEM is present in this place and I did not know!" And he became frightened and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d and this is the gate of the Heavens." (Breishis 28:16-17)

After experiencing in a dream state the prophetic vision of a ladder stretching from Earth to the Heavens and receiving a shower of protective blessings Yaakov wakes up to the reality of the Holiness of "The Place" and declares, "I did not know!" What did he not know? What does he mean to say? Simply we can appreciate that Yaakov was expressing his regret at the inappropriateness of his having slept there. What accounts for the fright that follows his declaration, "I did not know!"?

Now thirty something years ago I was a freshman in college returning for Thanksgiving break with an eagerness to reconnect with old high school buddies. I was immediately confronted with the terrible and shocking news that one of my closest friends and another friend and my friend's father were all killed in a car accident driving home. My mind was vaulted to another stage of existence-questioning and wondering about the meaning of it all. So when I returned to University and everyone was busy with the debauchery associated with pledging for fraternities I was still too shocked to be tempted. I espied a sign for study abroad with the word "ISRAEL" prominently on display. Even though it meant missing the baseball season I found myself that spring going for a semester in Israel.

There were some amazing and magical qualities to being in Israel but we had basically transferred the entire university culture to the kibbutz in north picking grapefruits planting sunflowers and taking classes at Haifa University. After six months, I left Israel no more attached to the land or my people than I was before. I hitchhiked across Europe that summer and did my four years at University with a sinking feeling that idealism was nowhere on display in this world. Within a year or slightly more and because of a couple of seemingly random encounters, life firmly nudged into Yeshiva Ohr Somayach in Monsey where I saw in action what I had always been looking for. By the time I was washed up upon the shores of the Yeshiva I was an exhausted and grateful swimmer. I couldn't believe it. This is what I had believed must exist someplace and I had never experienced it before. The Shabbos, the Rebbeim, the friends, the families were all amazing and beyond. This was it!

One morning at the tail end of breakfast on of the fellows in the Yeshiva asked me casually if I had ever been in Israel. (Most of the fellows at that time were returnees from Ohr Somayach Jerusalem landing back in America but I was a walk on from the streets of New York.) I told him I had been

there as a freshman in college but I was not impacted. He persisted, "Didn't you go to Jerusalem while you were there?" I told him, "Of course I went to Jerusalem!" He pressed on, "Didn't you go to the Western Wall while you were there!?" I answered him, "Of course! You think I'm gonna go to Jerusalem and not go "The Wall"?"

He didn't let up for some reason, "Did you put a prayer in The Wall?" Thinking back five years I suddenly recalled, "Yes! Yes I did!" I could remember vividly approaching that place. It was a Friday Night. Someone asked if I wanted to join them for Shabbos. I pushed him away arrogantly thinking to myself, "Religion is for weak people!" but then I moved up to the wall and scribbled on a paper carefully and thoughtfully, "G-d, please take care of my brother (who had passes away when I was six and he was four) and my friend (the one that perished in the car accident) and if you're there G-d, SHOW ME!" I planted it sincerely and delicately and swept it away from my conscience mind. Five years later I revisited that place in my memory and realized from the order of my prayer that I had always believed and even though I was asleep to the experience, I was shown. I woke up with a profound awareness that I have been at the same place Yaakov laid his head to rest and I too had been asleep to the awesome grandeur of "The Place" **I did not know!** DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.