

# **BUILDING A JEWISH HOME**

*by Shlomo Katz*

## **Hamaayan / The Torah Spring Edited by Shlomo Katz**

### **Vayeitzei**

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Today's Learning:

Yevamot 8:6-9:1

Orach Chaim 340:11-13

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Nazir 53

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Bava Batra 18

We read in this week's parashah that Yaakov left home to marry and start a family. Along the way, he slept, and he dreamed of a ladder reaching to the heavens with angels ascending and descending on it. Upon awakening, Yaakov exclaimed, "This is none other than the abode of G-d, and I did not know." R' Elie Munk z"l (1900-1978; rabbi in Berlin and Paris) writes:

"Yaakov leaves his parents' house to found a Jewish home, and brings with him nothing more than his personality. [See Bereishit 32:11 - 'With nothing but my stick, I crossed the Jordan.'] This is what this section proclaims from the outset [i.e., that a successful Jewish home is not measured by its possessions], and all that follows revolves around founding this home. He was the one who conceived the idea of the 'House of G-d' [i.e., Yaakov was the first person to use the expression 'Bet Elokim'], meaning that the most important and closest place of Divine manifestation is the place where human souls blossom and flourish, where man contributes what he himself is, in order to

build his life and forge his activity out of it.

"G-d is not only the Creator of nature and [the] G-d of history; He is G-d within the home which men build in order to carry out His will. The vision of the ladder means that the family home must raise itself to ideal spheres and so constitute the 'chariot,' the support for the Divine Majesty on earth ('merkavah la'shechinah'). And just as the ladder reaching into the heavens was inclined so that its middle rung was above the location of the future Sanctuary, so must the home be built as a mikdash me'at / a miniature sanctuary and elevate itself up to the heights where the King of kings sits enthroned . . .

"Yaakov's first reaction to his dream was spontaneous: 'It is right here, not in the celestial heights, that G-d is to be found. . . .' [It also says, 'Va'yira' / 'He experienced fear.'] He realized the extent and gravity of the task awaiting whoever prepares to build a home where 'G-d is to dwell,' a home which is to become a 'gate to heaven,' by bringing the earthly and heavenly spheres ever closer together." (Call of the Torah p. 383)

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*"Behold! Angels of G-d were ascending and descending bo." (28:12)*

The word "bo" can mean "on it" - its literal meaning here - or, says the midrash, it can mean "through him," i.e., through Yaakov. R' Yehoshua Trunk z"l (died 1893; see page 4) explains:

We read in Tehilim (68:35), "Give might to Elokim." This means that Hashem decreed that His own ability to benefit us will be dependent on our deeds. When we perform good deeds, we, so-to-speak, give "might" to Elokim (because that is how He designed the world).

Thus, the angels of G-d ascend and descend bo - through the tzaddik. It is the deeds of those who serve Hashem that determine whether the angels will ascend or descend. (Quoted in Iturei Torah)

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*"He looked, and behold -- a well in the field! And behold, three flocks of sheep lay there beside it, for from that well they would water the flocks . . ." (29:2)*

Ramban quotes a midrash: This was a hint to Yaakov regarding his future. The well represents the Bet Hamikdash, and the three flocks represent the three pilgrimage festivals. It was during those three festivals that Yaakov's descendants would draw spiritual sustenance from the Bet Hamikdash. After the flocks were watered, i.e., after each of the three festivals, "they would put back the stone over the mouth of the well in its place" (verse 3), i.e., the source of divine inspiration would be sealed until the next festival.

R' Gedalyah Schorr z"l (1911-1979; Rosh Yeshivah of Torah Voda'ath) suggests that this midrash provides the source for the festive gathering called a "Ne'ilat Ha'chag" / "Sealing of the Holiday," which some people hold on the last evening of a festival. Before the stone is put back on the well

until the next festival, we attempt to draw some final bits of Divine inspiration from the holiday.

R' Schorr adds: The above midrash is alluded to in the yom tov shemoneh esrei, "Bestow upon us, Hashem our G-d, the blessing of Your appointed festivals . . ." Each festival leaves us with a blessing, and one is obligated to ensure that the blessing and inspiration from each festival lasts after the festival. This is also the meaning of the verse (Kohelet 7:14), "Be pleased on good days, and on bad days, reflect." The good days are the festivals. On the "bad days," the days between the festivals, one must reflect on the inspiration that he obtained during these festivals. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Arzei Ha'levanon II p. 400)

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*"Ha'atufim / The late-bearing ones went to Lavan . . ." (30:42)*

The word "ha'atufim" appears one other time in Tanach, but with a different meaning. Specifically, Eichah 2:19 says, "Your young children, ha'atufim / who swoon from hunger at every street corner."

R' Yehuda He'chassid z"l (Germany; 1160-1217; author of Sefer Chassidim) writes: Because Yaakov acted towards Lavan in a way that appeared to constitute trickery - even though Yaakov's behavior was legally justified - the Bet Hamkidash was destroyed, and the Jewish people were exiled. All three sections of Tanach (the Torah, the Nevi'im / Prophets and the Ketuvim / Writings) teach that one must act in a way that is not only legal, but that appears to all observers to be straightforward. In the Torah it says (Bemidbar 32:22), "You shall be vindicated before Hashem and Israel." In the Ketuvim it says (Mishlei 3:4), "And you will find favor . . . in the eyes of G-d and man." In the Nevi'im we read (Yehoshua 22:22), "Almighty Elokim, Hashem, He knows and Israel shall know . . ." (Ta'amei Mesoret Ha'mikra)

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*"The dudaim-flowers emitted a fragrance, and at our doors are precious fruits . . ." (Shir Hashirim 7:14)*

The midrash says, "The dudaim-flowers emitted a fragrance" -- this refers to Reuven [who brought dudaim-flowers to his mother in our parashah]. "And at our doors are precious fruits" -- this refers to the Chanukah candles.

What is the connection between Reuven and Chanukah? Also, why is the Chanukah menorah placed at the door? R' Avraham Yoffen z"l (Novardok Rosh Yeshiva; died 1970) answers:

The Torah says (Bereishit 4:7), "Sin crouches at the door." All spiritual downfalls begin when one opens the door to the yetzer hara. This was the unique nature of the Greek oppression of the Jews. The Greeks did not try to force our ancestors to convert to a different religion; rather, the Greeks tried to entice the Jews to enter the halls of Greek wisdom. In this way, the Greeks hoped that their own beliefs would infiltrate into the Jewish belief system.

How did the Chashmonaim defeat the Greeks? They placed a candle - "For a mitzvah is a candle and

the Torah is light" (Mishlei 6:23) - at the door as a guard. They refused to allow even a small amount of Greek influence to affect their lifestyle.

The Torah tells us (Bereishit 35:22) that Reuven sinned, but Chazal explain (Shabbat 55b) that Reuven's sin was extremely subtle. Nevertheless, Reuven repented, for he recognized that if the door to sin is opened even a little, if a Jew lets his spiritual guard down at all, his downfall inevitably follows. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Arzei Ha'Levanon II p. 401)

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R' Chaim Elazar Wachs z"l (The "Nefesh Chayah")

R' Wachs was one of the most outstanding Torah scholars and halachic authorities among the chassidim of Poland. He was born in 1822 in Tarnograd, Lublin Province to R' Avraham Yehuda Leibush and Chaya Wachs, and was a descendant of the famous martyr, R' Yechiel Michel of Nemirov.

At the age of 18, R' Wachs married Bluma, daughter of R' Moshe Halberstam, eldest brother of R' Chaim, the "Sanzer Rav." (Throughout his life, R' Wachs considered R' Chaim Halberstam to be his foremost spiritual and halachic mentor.) In that same year, R' Wachs was appointed rabbi of his hometown, Tarnograd, one of the most distinguished rabbinical positions in all of Poland. During all of his 22 years as rabbi of Tarnograd, R' Wachs refused to accept a salary; to the contrary, he supported a yeshiva of several hundred students from his own pocket.

R' Wachs never hesitated to rebuke his congregants, but always in the most gentle way possible. When a congregant once sought his blessing for a business deal that promised a huge profit but would require twisting the truth a little bit, R' Wachs answered: "The Sages say that the luchot / tablets were engraved on both sides. This means that no matter which way you twisted them, they still said, 'You shall not steal'." To congregants who carried on Shabbat (without an eruv) he said. "You will be called to account for why you did not blow the shofar when Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat and why you did not take a lulav on the Shabbat of Sukkot." [The only reason we do not observe these mitzvot on Shabbat is the fear that people may carry a shofar or lulav outside of an eruv.]

In 1862, R' Wachs became the rabbi of Kalisz, near the German border, a community into which the Reform movement had made significant inroads. R' Wachs earned the respect of all factions in the community and reversed the trend towards reform because he always stood-up for the Torah's honor without attacking any person individually. Thus, while many Reform members of the community left Kalisz, a significant number of others returned to mitzvah observance.

R' Wachs served as president of the charity, "Kollel Polin Kuppat Rabbi Meir Ba'al Ha'nes," and was very active in supporting the growing settlement in Eretz Yisrael. (He once sold his share in Olam Haba to a wealthy Jew in exchange for two boatloads of provisions for Yerushalayim's hungry.) He

did more than oversee the collection of funds; he encouraged the charity's directors to think creatively of ways to make the poor of Eretz Yisrael more self-sufficient. In particular, he promoted the use of etrogim from Eretz Yisrael and he arranged the planting of new orchards.

R' Wachs' best known work, Nefesh Chayah, was named after his mother at her request. R' Wachs' second wife was Shifra Mirel, daughter of R' Yehoshuale Trunk, author of Yeshuot Yaakov. R' Wachs died in 1889. (Sources: Marbitzei Torah Me'olam Ha'chassidut, Vol. I, p. 232)

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Project Genesis](#) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>. Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.

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