

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And he dreamed, and behold a ladder was implanted in the ground, and its top reached into the heavens, and behold Angels of G-d were ascending and descending upon it." [28:12]

Rav Avraham Zalmans interprets this verse homiletically, using it as a parable to describe people as they strive to perfect themselves and their natures.

He is hardly alone, of course, in using a parable of a ladder to define our existence -- we must always work to go up, say our Sages, and if a person merely tries to remain where he or she is, then gravity is going to act to pull a person down. But Rav Zalmans, a leader in the Mussar (ethical development) movement, derives three tremendous insights from this verse.

First of all, just as a ladder has many rungs which a person must use to support himself, a person attempting to improve his or her character cannot simply leap blindly. Everything comes in steps, in stages. One must learn and use the rules of ethical behavior laid out in Jewish Law, and adopt specific practices for improvement.

A person who simply says "I'm never going to gossip again!" will probably fail within days, and may well give up on the attempt. But, especially thanks to the Chofetz Chaim, we have today a shelf-full of books on the laws of gossip, practical examples, lessons for guarding speech in everyday life... you name it, Judaism has it. And thanks to the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation and others, we have programs to adopt certain hours of the day for special care in this area.

These, say Rav Avraham Zalmans, are the rungs of the ladder. What fool would ignore the rungs, and attempt to drag himself up the left-hand pole of the ladder by his hands? And how far would he get?

Second, a ladder cannot stand unless it is leaning against a high place. A person needs models, paragons of ethical conduct, and preferably people up at the next stage of the ladder who are able to guide one upwards. A person must not look down, or fear cat-calls from people below who would rather he or she not strive for such things as good character (gossips love company!). Instead, one needs to look up towards the top, relying upon the ladder and the high place upon which it leans.

And finally, if a person encounters difficulties, if he or she slips back or falls past a broken rung -- all is not lost. One must catch hold of the next rung, and start moving again. This is normal. It is even the path of those who are like Angels of G-d -- truly righteous people. They are not perfect, standing at

the top of the ladder. Rather, they go upwards, and then they even go down a bit... and then they resume.

Too often, people try to achieve perfection overnight. It doesn't work that way. It's a slow process, and slipping back is even a natural part of that. The trick is to not be discouraged, to not give up, to not slide back down. This is how we can rise above our current state, and reach our goals!