

OF CLIMBING LADDERS AND TUGGING ROPES

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The ladder in Yaakov's dream was no ordinary ladder.

It was a ladder that rested on the ground but which stretched all the way up to the heavens. Angels ascended and descended upon its rungs. G-d appeared to Yaakov and pledged to protect him in all his future journeys. When awakening from this vision, Yaakov affirmed his pledge to serve G-d. Upon his return, Yaakov gave self-testimony how he had observed all 613 commandments in his sojourning with Lavan.

It is impossible to ignore the potent symbolism of the "ladder".

Why the use of this symbol? Why its appearance before Yaakov on route to begetting the Jewish people?

The most outstanding feature of a ladder is its function as the vehicle of vertical movement.

In the context of Yaakov's dream, where it spanned from the ground up to the skies, this ladder comes to define the relationship between G-d and man, between heaven and earth, and between the spiritual and physical worlds. It is also the key of how to elevate what is below and to simultaneously pull down what is above. It is the link between what is above and what is below.

That, in a nutshell, captures the mechanism of a mitzvah.

The Maharal (Chiddushei Aggados, Sotah 3b) remarks how mitzvah performance can itself be characterised as a "ladder".

It is the 613 commandments of G-d on high that are executed by man on the earth below as originally given at Sinai. The word "Sinai" shares the same numerical value as Sulam, "ladder" (130). Moshe ascended the mountain to receive the divine Torah from G-d and brought it down to the Jewish people.

Mitzvah observance uplifts the Jew from his physical station and mundane existence. It guarantees man does not become too attached to his earthly body; that his physical needs are not perceived as being of paramount importance. He has an insatiable appetite for him to go above and beyond. It is the opportunity of how to relate to G-d and fulfil the aspirations of the soul to transcend his physical existence and to ascend on steps to go upwards.

A life of mitzvos means a spiritual journey to forever "climb the ladder". It entails identifying with

Torah whose roots are of the supernal world and his spiritual reward by reaching the celestial realm of the world-to-come.

The direction in which mitzvah observance is directed is: upwards. And the goal is to ascend higher and higher....

When overly involved in the demands of the physical body, a mitzvah has the remarkable, dynamic capacity like a "rope" to pull a person from the lowest pit and to raise him upwards (Maharal, Tiferes Yisrael Ch.4).

Our tradition teaches how every thought, word and action of a Jew here on Earth has the wondrous "ripple effect" to impact the worlds up above. Whatever occurs down here is, in fact, a reflection of the spiritual truth up there. But how can man, in his puny position, possibly control or shape what is above? The answer is because man is related to both of these worlds: his soul emanates in the pure, spiritual domain but amazingly descends all the way down until it enters and inhabits a body composed of a flesh and body. Thus, he is charged with the task in arranging the synthesis of upper and lower realms (Nefesh HaChaim 1:5)

What every nuance of mitzvah performance does is to "tug" the rope down here below. The awesome impact is that pulling the rope at the bottom resonates and vibrates all the way upwards into the heavenly worlds. This is alluded in the verse "The portion of G-d is His people; Yaakov is the measure (chevel) of his inheritance" (Devarim 32:9). The word chevel literally means "rope". The exclusive portion of the Jew is the mitzvos that solidify his relationship with G-d. The Jew is in tune with his spiritual source and how his conduct on Earth intrinsically relates to Heaven.

This is synonymous with our ancestor Yaakov. His image may be engraved on the Heavenly Throne up there. His portion was the spiritual world-to-come; Eisav demanded control of this transient world. Nevertheless it is Yaakov who was actively involved in sanctifying every aspect of man's existence down below so that it ascends upwards towards G-d.

This story of climbing ladders and tugging ropes continues in the mitzvah observance and in Yaakov's legacy to the Jewish people. The course material is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of "Set in Stone: The Meaning of Mitzvah Observance" (Targum/Feldheim), a writer and educator in London.