

E Pluribus Unum
by Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

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Parshat Vayetze

“How awesome is this place!” Jacob exclaims. “It is none other than the House of G*d; it is the Gate of Heaven!” (Genesis 28:17)

Jacob has just had his dream-vision – the ladder connecting earth and heaven, with angels going (first) up and (then) down. Rabbi Yehudah Halevi interpreted Jacob’s exclamation as an expression of the unique holiness of the land of Israel. To him, the meaning of Jacob’s words is that the Land of Israel is the place through which the Divine Presence flows into the material world. Jacob, according to this viewpoint, discovers that the land in and of itself is holy. According to Yehudah Halevi (*Kuzari*, Chapter 2), “that land was the cause of the jealousy between Jacob and Esau; in that land, without a doubt, are the places which were found worthy to be called the Gate of Heaven.” The dispute between Jacob and Esau over the birthright is thus a dispute over the Holy Land, for control over this land implies (or enables) a special relationship with G*d.

But there is another interpretation.

As our master and teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, teaches us, the first instance of declared holiness in the Torah (Genesis 2:3) is a reference not to a place, but to a time period and an action – **G*d blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, in that it was on this day that G*d paused after all the work which G*d created to function.** And the tradition tells us that the first instance in the Torah of any concept constitutes the paradigm of that concept. Hence, holiness is a function not of place but of time and of action.

It is the fact of Jacob’s dream that hallows the place where he slept. And the holiness is confirmed for him.

Before his vision, before he lies down to sleep, Jacob (Genesis 28:11) **took some of the stones of the place and placed them under his head** as a pillow. (Have you ever tried to use stones as a pillow? But that is a subject for another time.) After he awakens, however, the text tells us (Genesis 28:18) that **he took the stone** [singular] **that he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar, pouring oil on it.**"

Before his vision, Jacob sees the stones as separate, as plural; after his vision, he realizes that they are in fact not separate, that they are one. And this it is that confirms his vision and that confirms his realization of the holiness of the place *at that moment*.

Jacob had understood heaven and earth as two separate realms, quite distinct from each other. (Indeed, we so often have that same perception ourselves.) But then Jacob has a vision in a dream (Genesis 28:12), and he sees in his vision a ladder standing on the ground, with its top reaching toward heaven, and messengers of G*d were going up and down upon it.

The dream-vision teaches him – for the ladder provides a connection – that heaven and earth are, in fact, not separate. And, once he has reached that realization, that awareness, he awakens from his sleep to exclaim, **How awesome is this place! It is none other than the House of G*d; it is the Gate of Heaven!**

At first, Jacob is asleep, spiritually asleep, and he perceives the separations. Through his dream-vision, he awakens to the oneness, the unification. Then, when he is spiritually awake, he is able to see the stones which he had placed under his head as one stone, and he is able to understand that heaven and earth are not, in truth, separate, and he is able to exclaim, **How awesome is this place! It is none other than the House of G*d; it is the Gate of Heaven!**

May we all come soon to our spiritual awakening and to the realization of the one-ness of heaven and earth, the one-ness of all Creation.

Shabbat Shalom.