



Leadership Dreaming • Parshat Vayetze

Avimelekh, king of Gerar, had the very first dream in the Torah (Gen. 20:3). The second occurs in our Torah reading *Vayetze*. Jacob had a powerfully symbolic dream: “...a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and messengers of God were going up and down on it” (Gen. 28:12). The dream established a connection between heaven and earth at a time of immense vulnerability for Jacob. He tricked his father for Esau’s blessing and had to leave his family home under the threat of death. It was a time for nightmares, not majestic dreams. We can only truly understand this dream if we travel with Jacob *after* the dream.

As the narrative progressed and the dream unfolded, it is God’s voice that Jacob heard beckoning to him: “Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Gen. 28:14-15). The gift of protection was exactly what Jacob needed. In his despair and his loneliness, he needed an intimate connection with God and assurance of his very survival. When he woke from his sleep, Jacob realized that something remarkable had happened, even if he did not understand all its contours: “Surely God is present in this place, and I did not know!” (Gen. 28:16).

Israeli novelist Meir Shalev writes in *Beginnings*,

his book of biblical firsts, that Jacob was bestowed with a guarantee of protection that even Abraham had not received. Jacob responded with wonder but also with conditions. “Jacob then made a vow, saying, ‘If God remains with me, protecting me on this journey that I am making, and giving me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and I return safe to my father’s house— God shall be my God’” (Gen. 28:20-21). Jacob’s reaction is puzzling and a seeming insult to God’s magnanimity. God will only be Jacob’s God if he provides food, clothing, and safe passage for him? We have a word for this: *hutzpa!*

The classic commentaries all feel a need to explain Jacob’s bold vow. Rashi, citing a midrash, relates Jacob’s speech to a verse in Psalms: “For I will not forsake you” (Ps. 37:25). One who has to beg for bread is called forsaken. Jacob was asking for external signs of love, nourishment, and care. Nahmanides focuses on the word “if” that begins Jacob’s vow. It does not indicate doubt, he writes, but future fulfillment: “when the condition is satisfied, then the deed will be fulfilled.” The sixteenth century Italian exegete, R. Ovadia Sforno, offers a brilliant reading. Jacob asked God to provide these basic needs to relieve Jacob from prosaic pressures. Then, and only then, could he focus attention on the greater purpose God laid out for him.

With these conditions, Jacob makes, in Shalev’s words, emendations to his own dream. It was not enough to be protected. Jacob wanted his material needs met. It was not enough to return. Jacob must

return “*b’shalom*,” in peace. Jacob was willing to take on a historic mission and the continuity of his family’s purpose but only if, Shalev observes, “his personal needs in the here and now” were accommodated because he had “pressing problems of his own.”

Now back to the dream. Angels going up and down a ladder vertically represent the relationship Jacob tried to establish with God horizontally: one of symmetry. Jacob’s vow emerged from his understanding of a covenantal commitment. True partnership is the result of both sides articulating needs and having them met. God demanded much of Abraham and Isaac personally but neither of them made great demands on God. Jacob, with his requests, created a more intimate partnership of mutual obligation.

In his book, *The Home We Build Together*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes the intimacy of a covenant: “Those bound by a covenant, voluntarily undertake to share a fate. They choose to link their destinies together. They accept responsibilities to and for one another.” Perhaps this is why we as a nation are referred to as Israel, the children of Jacob. Abraham was a knight of faith. Isaac was almost sacrificed for that faith. It was Jacob who wanted that faith to be bound up in the mutuality of a relationship.

Jacob’s dream in our sedra was his most famous one but not his only one. Later, in Genesis 31, Jacob was tending his flocks when an angel – perhaps one of the angels on the ladder – appeared to him and called out: “Jacob!” Jacob responded with “*hineni*,” I am here. The angel had been watching Jacob these long years and saw the way Jacob suffered in his father-in-law’s home. Jacob’s dream of heaven and earth morphed, over time, into a dream about sheep. Incrementally, Jacob’s life became one of a physical rather than spiritual existence. Before it changed Jacob, the angel set him free: “...I have noted all that Laban has been doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now, arise and leave this land and return to your

native land” (Gen. 31:13).

It was time to fulfill the words of Jacob’s first dream that spoke to God’s sheltering love – “I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land.” Jacob was to go back to his land. Jacob now had food and clothing. But he needed a reminder to make good on the vow made long ago as a result of a dream. It was finally time to go home.

In *Leaders: Dreaming Matters*, Susanne Biro, of the Forbes Coaches Council, writes that “Inside each of us is a negative internal voice that narrates, judges and critiques what we do.” But there is also a dreaming voice that fills us with longing, inspiration, and ambition. “Mastering the ability to dream,” she argues, “is the essence of truly great leadership.” It is our dreams that stimulate our energies and our ability to focus on larger, higher ambitions. Sharing those big dreams catalyzes the excitement of others.

Leaders cannot afford to let go of dreams because dreams represent the part of us we often admire most. “The dream,” Sigmund Freud contends in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “is the liberation of the spirit from the pressure of external nature, a detachment of the soul from the fetters of matter.” Jacob asked God to relieve him of the fetters of matter. Then Laban chained Jacob to material servitude. An angel finally liberated him. And all because of a spiritual dream not forgotten.

What dream are you holding onto that awaits realization?