VAYETSE: Anticipating Assimilation

This week's Perasha begins with the exile of Ya'aqob Abinu, our third patriarch. Ya'aqob flees the land of Israel when his brother Esav declares her intention to assassinate him. Ya'aqob then heads to Haran, a town near the Syrian border. Abraham's relatives live there: Laban, Ya'aqob's uncle, and his family. Ya'aqob does not arrive at Haran in a caravan of camels with guards and servants, as it happened when Eli'ezer, Abraham's servant, visited town. Ya'aqob comes by himself with nothing in his pockets. And also, unlike Eli'ezer, Ya'aqob is not coming for a few days. Ya'aqob goes for an indefinite time (which ended up being 20 years). On the first night of his trip, when he had not yet crossed the border of Erets Israel, Ya'aqob had a dream. He dreams of a ladder resting on the ground but reaching up to the sky. And he sees angels. Angels go up to heaven and come down from heaven. And here, we are faced with a challenge that the text of the Tora presents us with. Angels are supposed to "be in heaven," so they should descend and then ascend. Why, even in a dream, is the order reversed? Let's look at the most famous interpretation of this point, provided by Rashi.

WHAT ARE ANGELS?

First, we must know that angels in the Tora are not like angels in other religions: winged beings with haloes on their heads. To explain what angels are, let's remember that the Creator does not act "directly" on His world (there were only two exceptions to this rule: 1. The first act of Creation and 2. The Exodus from Egypt); God acts thru His "angels". That is, natural forces or instances that seem "fortuitous" to us or individuals who, knowingly or not, fulfill a Divine mission. In Tehillim (104: 4) the wind, for example, is considered an angel of the Creator since HaShem used the wind

to create rain and other events in Creation. The angels that visited Abraham and Lot were (or, according to other interpretations: looked like) human beings. What “the wind” and these human or human-like “angels” have in common is that they both “strictly carry out the will of God,” the mission for which they were conceived and created. In Hebrew, the word “angel” (mal-akh) actually means emissary, proxy, representative, an agent of HaShem who, unlike human beings, does not have freedom of choice (that is, “freedom to disobey”).

One more thing: angels are mentioned in the Tora in a particular context: Divine Protection. Again, “angels” are not independent beings, in Judaism, we do not worship “angels,” nor do we pray to “angels.” We speak of angels when we refer to Divine intervention through natural or human, miraculous events. And especially in the context of “protection”. In Ya’aqob’s case, the angels that he saw in his dream came to assure him that HaShem’s protection would continue even outside of Israel.

LIVING WITH LABAN

Once we understand that “angels” refers to Divine Protection, we can address the second question: Why do angels go up first and then come down in our patriarch’s dream? Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Rashi says the following, based on a beautiful Midrash: what Ya’aqob contemplated in his dream was “a changing of the guard” between the angels who protect Ya’aqob in the land of Israel and the angels who will protect Ya’aqob outside the land of Israel, in Haran, the territory of Laban. But why is a changing of guard necessary? At Buckingham Palace, the change of guard is done because soldiers must rest, eat, etc. But for what reason does jab need new angles? The dangers that threaten Ya’aqob in these two places are very different. In the land of Israel, Ya’aqob was threatened with death by Esav. Now in his next destination, the land of Laban, no physical threat awaits Ya’aqob. However, Ya’aqob’s values and beliefs will be in jeopardy… Ya’aqob is going to live with

an idolatrous family; he intends to marry one of Laban's daughters and be part of that pagan family. The possibility that Ya'aqob will forget everything he learned from his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham and ultimately transform himself into a full member of Laban's family is very real! This new situation, assimilation, requires a new type of Divine protection, which had not been necessary until that moment. In this dream, according to our Midrash, God shows Ya'aqob that He protected him from Esav and He will continue to protect him in terms of his physical integrity. But He is also warning Ya'aqob that unknown dangers await him in his new destiny and that he, Jacob, will have to take the threat of assimilation very seriously.

ISRAEL AND THE DIASPORA

It is incredibly similar to what happens today. The dangers to which the Jews of Israel and the Jews of the diaspora are exposed to are very different. In Israel, the fundamental threat – although it is not the only one – is physical integrity: permanent wars, intifadas, suicide attacks, etc. This was also the kind of danger that haunted Jacob in the land of Israel at the hands of Esav. On the other hand, the most harmful threat facing Jews in the diaspora today is similar to the one Ya'aqob was going to face in his new destiny: assimilation to the values of Laban and to the pagan society of Haran. This is a much more subtle challenge and much more difficult to overcome, especially since it is less visible … and sometimes it happens without us noticing.

Like Ya'aqob we Jews of the diaspora must become aware of the dangers we face and must do everything possible to educate the next generation so that the Tora remains relevant to them and they see it as the most beautiful source of inspiration and the guide of their lives.