VAYETZE: Tell Me What You Dream Of, and I'll Tell You Who You Are

Our Parashah spans twenty years in the life of Yaakov Avinu. Twenty years between two very different dreams that tell the story of a profound transformation.

The first dream is the more familiar one. Yaakov leaves the Land of Israel and dreams of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending upon it.

It is a deeply spiritual dream. The angels represent those who carry out a Divine mission, and Yaakov himself is potentially one of them! His mission, as a descendant of Abraham, is to become a "human angel." The angels ascend and then descend: they rise toward God, listen to His word, and learn His Torah, but they do not remain in heaven. They return to earth to share His teachings so that everyone can understand them and live by them. This is also the Divine mission of Abraham and his descendants: to connect heaven and earth.

Our dreams often reflect what occupies our minds during the day: our passions, our desires, and the realities of our daily lives.

Yaakov's dream did not come out of nowhere. We are what we dream, and we dream what we are. Yaakov had grown up surrounded by "human angels": his father, his mother, his grandfather Abraham, and his teachers, Shem and Eber. These were people who had dedicated their lives to fulfilling God's will. Growing up in such an environment, it was only natural for Yaakov to dream of angels.

TWENTY YEARS A SLAVE

But Yaakov’s life changes dramatically.

He is forced to flee his home and seek refuge with his uncle Laban. There, he spends his days working tirelessly, enduring Laban’s deception and mistreatment. At the end of those years, when he finally decides to leave, Yaakov confronts Laban:

“For twenty years I was with you. Your sheep and goats did not miscarry, and I never ate the rams of your flock. I never brought you an animal torn apart by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself, and you demanded payment from me. You held me responsible for anything stolen, whether by day or by night. By day I was consumed by the heat, and by night by the frost. And sleep fled from my eyes” (Genesis 31:38–40).

Those were twenty difficult years during which Yaakov devoted his energy to caring for Laban’s livestock. From morning until night, his life revolved around sheep: feeding them, protecting them, caring for their young, and increasing the size of the flocks. Yaakov was immersed in a world dominated by material concerns, where sheep had come to occupy nearly every corner of his inner life.

THE SECOND DREAM

At the end of those twenty years, Yaakov dreams again. This time, he sees animals: sheep and goats mating, males and females, and offspring born with stripes, spots, and patches (Genesis 31:10).

What a contrast! In his first dream, Yaakov envisioned his mission of connecting with heaven. In his second, he sees animals reproducing to increase his wealth.

In those days, livestock also served as a form of payment, much like money. A debt could be paid with sheep, and a person’s wealth was measured by the size of his flocks. Yaakov’s new dream belongs entirely to this consuming world of financial prosperity. It is an utterly earthly dream.

Material. Practical. A dream that reflects Laban's mission, a man whose life was driven by ambition, more than Yaakov's own mission as someone called to become a human angel.

In this second dream, an angel appears and speaks to Yaakov in God's name, saying something extraordinary:

"Ra'iti et kol asher Laban oseh lakh" – "For I have seen everything that Laban is doing to you" (Genesis 31:12).

On the most immediate level, these words refer to the injustices and deceptions Yaakov suffered at Laban's hands. But perhaps they also carry a deeper message. As if the angel, speaking in God's name, were saying:

Yaakov, I see what these twenty years with Laban have done to you. You have changed. And that change is reflected in your dreams. You no longer see a ladder with angels; now you see a watering well, with sheep mating and multiplying. Your dreams are now filled with material ambitions. You have traded Abraham's dreams for Laban's dreams.

After working for Laban for so long, Yaakov had unknowingly begun to dream Laban's dreams.

WHAT DR. FREUD DID NOT TEACH YOU

Then comes a direct and unmistakable command: "Now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth" (Genesis 31:13).

This is not merely a geographical return. It is also a spiritual homecoming. Yaakov must return home to recover the dreams of the young man who left twenty years earlier. He must remember that sheep are a means, not an ultimate goal. That work and financial success should serve a higher purpose.

And his return brings about an extraordinary change. At the end of the Parashah, as Yaakov leaves Laban's house behind, angels once again come out to meet him, at Machanayim (Genesis

32:2–3). At the beginning of the Parashah, the angels appeared in his dream; now they come to welcome him. As though they had been waiting for him for twenty years.

Yaakov’s lesson is also a lesson for us, his descendants. On the one hand, we inevitably have to take care of our sheep. We need to work, earn money, support our families, and provide for our needs. The Torah never asks us to abandon our sheep.

But on the other hand, we cannot allow our sheep to take over our lives and eventually invade our dreams.

Our mission is not to escape the material world, but to become those human angels who bring the teachings of heaven down to earth. The sheep help us make a living. But the ladder reminds us what we are living for: to connect heaven and earth.

And if one day we discover that our dreams have become filled with nothing but business, profits, and material concerns, it will be time to wake up, remember who we are, find our way back, and dream of angels once again.