



GEULAS YISRAEL

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The Ladder of History

Ya'akov's nighttime dream ranks as one of the most dramatic episodes in all Sefer Bereishit. "Jacobs's ladder" has become a cross-cultural icon spanning diverse religions and races. Stationed on Earth, this "bridge to Heaven" embodies the desire of the religious spirit to obtain Heaven. Beyond its general religious symbolism, the ladder depicts memorable encounters between Hashem and His chosen nation on Earth. The ladder conjures the epic events at Sinai as a human audience was stationed underneath a fiery mountain "hovering" in Heaven. The ladder also portrays the Beit Hamikdash and the korbanot which lifted Jewish hearts to Heaven and to Hashem.

The Midrash asserts an entirely different symbolism to the ladder: it captures the seminal drama of Jewish history. Angels climbing a ladder represent famous empires which rose to prominence throughout history. Four great empires in particular- Babylonia, Persia, Greece and

Rome- would, in turn, dominate civilization. The concept of these four empires or the "arba malchiyot" is fundamental to both human and Jewish history and would one day be featured in both the dream of Nebuchadnezzar and the prophecy of Daniel. The dream and the prophecy were each presented at a crucial juncture of history, after the first Mikdash was destroyed, as history was hanging in the balance. The Jews would now face exile and suffer persecution at the hands of these empires. These dreams and prophecies – delivered at a crucial historical juncture- highlight the Jewish role in the unfolding struggle of history.

Hundreds of years earlier, as Ya'akov rested upon a mountain in Yerushalayim, the concept of four empires was first presented. More than any of our Avot, Ya'akov's tumultuous life symbolizes the travails and wanderings of Jewish history. Ya'akov is forced to flee the land of Israel from his murderous brother. Toward the end of his life, he will be drawn down to Egypt as a "pawn" in a larger historical narrative of Jewish exile. His "ladder" is really a "lesson"- about his own exile and the ongoing

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historical struggle of his descendants. On the cusp of departing from Israel, the history of his people is foreshadowed.

Ya'akov doesn't just witness angels mounting a ladder, he also becomes alarmed by the heights they ascend to. He lies upon that lonely mountain watching angels soar so high that they disappear from view. Connecting the dots, he soon realizes that formidable empires will not just visit our planet, but come to dominate it. Their success will be so astonishing that they will seem invulnerable. They will rise so high that it will seem futile to oppose them. Initially Ya'akov is scared by the rise of the angels.

Soon though, he watches these angels march down the ladder and return to Earth. Watching their descent, he realizes that as indestructible as human empires may seem, they are all vulnerable. Nothing of human construction is eternal – everything passes. Empires may dominate for centuries or even for a millennium, but, ultimately, they will fade.

As Jews, we often face petrifying “juggernauts” which appear to be undefeatable. History is a ladder. What rises will fall. What goes up ultimately returns to Earth. Only Hashem remains stationed at the top of the ladder.

Growing up as a child, under the intimidating specter of the Soviet Union, I could not imagine a world without this global menace. Communism had captured half of the world and seemed indomitable. No one could imagine the fall of Communism

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and no one dared defy this mighty superpower. No one, of course, aside from a few Jews locked in prison cells for the crime of requesting a ticket to their homeland. In 1986, Natan Sharansky walked across the Glienicke Bridge in a suburb of Berlin, and a few years later, the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union was dismembered. An empire built to last for centuries crumbled in a few years. Empires and rulers may walk up the ladder and reach stratospheric heights. Whoever walks up will ultimately plunge down the ladder. Generally, the way down is much faster than the way up.

Ya'akov watches this cavalcade of angels,

is initially frightened, and ultimately becomes reassured. And then, he receives an invitation from Hashem to join the highway of history and mount the ladder. As the guardians of humanity, Jews are meant to defend the world from religious decline and moral collapse. Each of these great empires advances civilization but also poses grave moral challenges to humanity. Jews aren't meant to merely survive these empires, but to defeat their moral challenges. It is not enough for Ya'akov to wait patiently beneath the ladder for the empires to plummet. He is asked to walk alongside the angels and "protect" history. He was invited up the ladder.

Worried that if he mounts the ladder perhaps the Jewish people would also tumble off the ladder, he declines the invitation. Perhaps, he worries, Jews are subject to the same cycles of history as the rest of humanity. Perhaps they too will rise and fall throughout the revolutions of history. Despite Hashem assuring him that the Jews are immune to historical volatility, Ya'akov remains in place.

It takes great faith to walk the ladder of history. It takes courage and emunah to withstand the intimidation of would-be super empires. It also takes great confidence in Jewish future to outlast the fluctuations of Jewish history and to assert our eternal destiny. We have begun to ascend that ladder. One rung at a time. ■

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