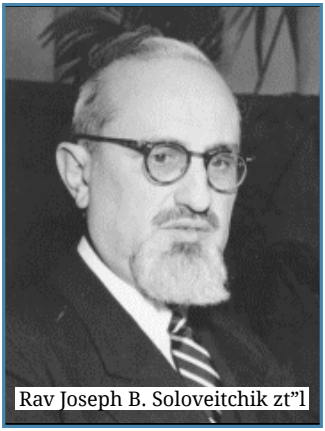


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The Gateway to Heaven

In Parshas Vayeitzei, the Torah turns its focus to the life of Yaakov Avinu. It is in this parsha that Yaakov marries Leah and Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah, and fathers twelve children. Eleven of his sons are born, as well as his daughter, Dina, born to Leah. Yaakov works for Lavan for twenty years - fourteen for his wives and six for his flocks - and at the end of these years, begins to make his way back to Canaan.


Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt"l

The parsha opens, however, with Yaakov far from successful or wealthy. He is running away, having been sent away by his mother and his father. By the command of his parents, he is running: both from the wrath of Eisav, as well as going to find a wife. As the parsha begins, Yaakov departs from Be'er Sheva, heading towards Charan. He is alone, night has fallen, and in order to sleep safely, he surrounds his head with twelve stones as a layer of protection against the forces of nature that might be.

The *pasuk* tells us that "*he encountered the place and he slept there*" (Bereishis 28:11). During this sleep, Yaakov has one of the most famous dreams in the Torah.

וַיַּחֲלֹם וְהִנֵּה סֻלָּם מֻצָּב אַרְצָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמָיְמָה וְהִנֵּה מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹקִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ - *And he dreamed, and behold! a ladder standing on the ground and its top reached to heaven; and behold, angels of G-d were ascending and descending upon it* (28:12). At the top of the ladder, Yaakov sees a vision of the *Ribbono Shel Olam,* Who tells Yaakov *that He is the G-d of his fathers, and that the land upon which Yaakov lies will be given to him and his children*. Furthermore, Hashem promises Yaakov *that his children will be like the dust of the earth, will burst forth in all directions, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through his seed*. Additionally, *Hashem promises to be with him, guard him wherever he will go, and return him back to this land* (28:13-15).

Upon waking, Yaakov immediately exclaims: אָכֵן יֵשׁ ה' בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאָנֹכִי לֹא יָדָעְתִּי,



behold, Hashem is in this place, and I did not know! (28:16). Rashi comments: **שֶׁאִם יָדַעְתִּי, לֹא יָשַׁנְתִּי בְּמָקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ כָּזֶה**, *for had I known,* ***I would not have slept in a place as holy as this***. Yaakov is afraid and he says: *how awesome is this place, this is none other than the house of G-d and* שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמָיִם, *the gateway of heaven* (28:17).

In this beautiful Torah narrative we have many layers and messages. We learn of an amazing incident in the life of our third patriarch, we journey with him through his majestic vision, we are reassured, as he is, by the Divine promise and we encounter a transcendental place on earth that is the gateway to heaven.

Additionally, Yaakov himself, when realizing the inherent sanctity of the place where he slept, immediately declares "***had I known G-d was in this place, I would not have slept***."

We can suggest that the Torah is teaching us a deep and powerful, timeless and relevant lesson. Of course, an *eved Hashem* must behave properly *at all times and in all places,* with dignity and according to the letter - and the spirit - of the law of *Torah u'mitzvos*. However, there must be a *heightened sense of awareness* of being in the presence of Hashem when we stand before Him, in His holy place, where the *Shechina* is more manifest.

Perhaps we have forgotten - or never even truly appreciated - the truism of Yaakov's words, as they apply to our day and time. Is it the case that the holy city of Yerushalayim - the center of the world, the *makom ha'Mikdash*, the place of *ha'sharas ha'Shechina* - has become a place like any other place...? R"L.

We sleep, we eat, we socialize, we see the sights, we converge on the Kotel plaza like we do at various social gatherings, we shop, walk the shuk, taste the foods, tour and fill the city with our presence. But do we recognize in Whose Presence we stand?

Of course, wherever we find ourselves, we must eat, sleep, wash, etc, and take care of our physical needs. This is certainly what Hashem wants, and expects of us. But when one is in the *inner chamber of the palace*, any person with a sense of *kavod* understands that before the King, one's behavior is different (see Ramban to Vayikra 18:24-25). *Kal v'chomer ben beno shel kal v'chomer, lifnei Melech Malchei ha'melachim, HKB"H*.

It behooves each one of us to consider our behavior, speech and actions, social interactions and appreciation (or lack of) of the holiness that permeates all of Eretz Yisrael, and especially *Yerushalayim Ir Ha'kodesh*. How would we all complete the sentence that Yaakov himself declared: "Had I known G-d was in this place, I would not have...."?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav zt'l, teaches that, "*Hashra'at ha-Shekhinah*, the reality of the Divine Presence, is a continuous process in Eretz Yisrael; it is part of the climate. Just as there are different kinds of climates, cold climates and warm

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climates, similarly there are climates completely devoid of the Divine Presence and climates very conducive to it. Just as it is natural to get up in the morning and see the sun shining or hear the rain falling, so it is natural in Eretz Yisrael to get up in the morning and find the *Shekhinah*. Just as one who walks out in the rain must get wet, and one who walks out in the sunshine must feel warm, so too, one who lives in Eretz Yisrael must feel and absorb the *ruah ha-kodesh*, must simply be saturated with *kevod Elokim*. Certain places where the prophets thousands of years ago had conversations with *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* are still endowed with the potential of *hashra'at ha-Shekhinah* for everyone.

"Those who want to can receive it, even today. Anyone who is in Eretz Yisrael and kisses the stones the prophets walked on merits to share in the Divine Presence regardless of whether he is a great rabbinic scholar or not. The gates of Heaven are open to Zion. Anything that emerges or comes down from the gates of Heaven comes down to Zion. ***There are special windows in Heaven that are only open to Zion***. (Emphasis added.) "*The eyes of the Lord, your God, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year* " (Deut.11:12)... No other land in the world can imitate this quality. All one needs to do is open oneself up to the divine flow, which is like dew or a stream coming down upon the land from Heaven" (*The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, p.308-309).

וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּת וַתַּעֲמֹד בַּחֲצַר בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּנִימִית נֹכַח בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ, *and Esther donned regal garments, and she stood in the inner court in the house of the King, opposite the King's house* (Esther 5:1).

Yaakov did not know that G-d was in this place, but we - after millennia of *mesorah*, history, destiny and experience - do know. Let us strive to behave in a way that demonstrates that in the inner chamber of the King, we don royalty and behave like a queen.

בברכת בשורות טובות ושבת שלום

Michal Horowitz is a Torah educator who lectures nationally throughout the United States, as well as internationally. Thousands of her shiur recordings are available online. She is a regular presenter for the OU Women's Initiative and the author of Abled: Living With a Disability, a Torah View (Mosaica Press). Michal lives in Woodmere, NY, with her family.

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