

PARASHAS VAYEITZEI

Asleep on Hallowed Ground

If the image of Jacob's ladder was not the most spectacular prophetic vision ever, it certainly comes close. In his dream, Jacob saw a ladder planted firmly on the ground yet reaching all the way into the heavens, and as he watched in utter fascination, he saw angels ascending and descending the ladder.

Then he wakes up, and lo and behold, it was all a dream. Jacob is shaken, and he reacts rather strangely. How can it be, he laments, that I am in the presence of the Almighty and did not even know it? No expressions of transcendent joy. No ecstatic expansion of the mind as a result of his sublime prophecy. Just chagrin. Why?

Our Sages tell us that he was mortified that he had actually slept in such a holy place. But even this does not fully answer the question. After all, what is so terrible about sleeping on hallowed ground? And if it was really such a terrible transgression, why did the Almighty reward him with this prophetic dream?

The commentators explain that Jacob was disappointed because he had missed an extraordinary opportunity. Had he known that he stood on hallowed ground, had he known he was actually standing in the presence of the Almighty, he would have concentrated on having an even more intense prophetic encounter with Him. But he had been completely oblivious to his surroundings. Indeed, he had gone to sleep!

He could have risen to incredible spiritual levels. He could have attained the most profound prophetic insights. He could have penetrated the deepest secrets of the universe. But he went to sleep. He did have a phenomenal prophetic vision in his dream, but that was where it stopped. So much potential unfulfilled. Such a great opportunity lost. It is little wonder that Jacob awoke disappointed.

A young man came to study in the academy of a great sage. He listened to the sage expound his thoughts and was amazed at their profound wisdom. He bent over the revered texts and pored over every single words in awe. A feeling of humility swept through his soul.

"Oh, what a nothing I am," he muttered under his breath. "What a miserable ignorant nothing."

The sage overheard his words and called him closer.

"Young man," he said, "why do you consider yourself a nothing?"

"Because I am weak, a slave to my physical needs and desires."

"I see. And why did you come here?"

"To learn from you."

"If you wish to stay here and be successful," said the sage, "then you cannot consider yourself a nothing. After all, if you are truly nothing, how can you possibly retain wisdom? No, my young friend. Humility is a very good trait, but know your own worth. Know the sublimity of your soul and give it what it deserves."

In our own lives, we sometimes fall asleep on hallowed ground. Driven down by the pressures of everyday life, we can easily fall into the trap of deprecating our own worth. We consider our shortcomings and our failures, and we tell ourselves we have no business setting our sights very high. But this is a serious mistake. Never sell yourself short. You are hallowed ground. You possess a holy soul that is a spark of the divine. You are endowed with incredible spiritual treasures and resources. You have a kind nature and a generous spirit. Most important of all, you are a descendant of the patriarchs, a custodian of the holy Torah here on this world. Your potential is incalculable. You have it within your grasp to reach for the sublime. Don't fall asleep on the job. Don't wake up disappointed after it is too late. Open your eyes and experience the exhilaration of fulfillment.