



Yaakov's Dream By David Silverberg

The opening section of Parashat Vayetze tells of Yaakov's experiences as he leaves Canaan to escape his brother's vengeance. This narrative contains the famous description of the dream Yaakov dreamt as he slept on the roadside: "He dreamt, and behold, there was a ladder set upon the earth, its head extending to the heavens; and behold, angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Bereishit 28:12). The dream continued with God's promise that a great nation would descend from Yaakov and inherit the land of Canaan. He further guaranteed Yaakov that He would protect him along his journey and return him safely to his homeland.

The mystery surrounding the image beheld by Yaakov in this nocturnal prophetic vision, of a ladder climbed by "angels of God," has generated a vast literature throughout the wide spectrum of Jewish thought. The Torah does not make it at all obvious what purpose this image served, and we know only that it led Yaakov to the conclusion that "this can only be the house of God, and this is the gate to the heavens!" (28:17). Commentators and philosophers of all streams have endeavored to uncover the hidden message beneath the mysterious ladder, and Maimonides addresses this question in no fewer than four instances in his writings – three in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, and once in *Mishneh Torah*. This week's essay will examine the content and context of each of these four treatments, and attempt to determine their relationship to each other and to other themes in Maimonides' thought.

A Symbol of Prophecy

In the first section of the *Guide for the Perplexed* (chapter 15), Maimonides comes upon this subject almost coincidentally, amidst his lengthy exposition of various homonyms in Biblical Hebrew. In this chapter he addresses the Hebrew verb *n.tz.v.*, which generally means "stand." Maimonides asserts that in addition to this common meaning, *n.tz.v.* can also mean "continuance and permanence." He cites as an example a verse from the narrative of Yaakov's dream: "And behold, the Lord was standing [*nitzav*] over it [the ladder]..." (28:13). Unwilling to accept the straightforward reading of this word, which would attribute to the incorporeal God the position of "standing," Maimonides claims that the word *nitzav* which describes God in Yaakov's dream refers to eternity; the clause "*Ve-hinei Hashem nitzav alav*" should thus be read to mean that God "appeared as eternal and everlasting" at the top of the ladder. His novel reading of *nitzav* in this verse forces Maimonides to briefly digress onto his understanding of this prophetic image, in order to explain how God "appeared as eternal" atop the ladder. He writes:

This ladder all may climb up who wish to do so, and they must ultimately attain to a knowledge of Him who is above the summit of the ladder, because He remains upon it permanently... "Angels of God" who were going up represent the prophets. That the term "angel" was applied to prophets may clearly be seen in the following passages: "He sent an angel" (Bamidbar 20:16); "And an angel of the Lord came up from Gugal to Bochim" (Shoftim 2:1). How suggestive, too, is the expression "ascending and descending on it"! The ascent is mentioned before the descent, inasmuch as the "ascending" and arriving at a certain height of the ladder precedes the

"descending," i.e., the application of the knowledge acquired in the ascent for the training and instruction of mankind. This application is termed "descent"...

Citing precedents from Bamidbar and Shoftim, Maimonides boldly asserts that the term "angel" used in the description of Yaakov's dream refers to prophets, who "ascend" the ladder in the sense of attaining "a knowledge of Him who is above the summit of the ladder." They rise in their intellectual probing and comprehension of the divine essence, which brings them to a clear understanding of the fact that "*Hashem nitzav*" – the Almighty is constant and permanent, eternal and unchanging. After reaching this apex of philosophical understanding, the prophet then "descends," meaning, he must turn to the laymen and commoners to provide guidance and instruction based on the knowledge he had attained while on the top "rungs of the ladder."

This portrayal of the prophetic process must be seen in light of Maimonides' lengthier treatment of prophecy in the second section of the *Guide*, where he elaborates on the qualifications necessary to achieve prophecy. We cite here one segment from his description of the prerequisite credentials for prophecy (*Guide*, 2:36):

...he must in addition have studied and acquired wisdom, so that his rational faculty passes from a state of potentiality to that of actuality; his intellect must be as developed and perfect as human intellect can be... all his desires must aim at obtaining a knowledge of the hidden laws and causes that are in force in the universe; his thoughts must be engaged in lofty matters; his attention directed to the knowledge of God, the consideration of His works, and of that which he must believe in this respect.

The image of the prophet ascending a "ladder" that brings him to an understanding of "*Hashem nitzav*," the existence and eternity of God, is thus an accurate expression of the intellectual process required of a prophet before he can then "descend" to instruct and guide the masses.

One might question why, according to Maimonides' understanding of Yaakov's vision, the Torah would refer to prophets as *mal'akhim*, angels. Why did the Torah not employ the more common and straightforward term, *nevi'im*? The answer, perhaps, lies in the precise definition of the word *mal'akh*. Elsewhere in the *Guide* (2:6), Maimonides defines this word as "messenger," and on this basis concludes that an "angel" is any person or force through which God acts and carries out His will. In this vision, as Maimonides understands it, Yaakov is shown the function of a prophet: to act as a messenger, to ascend to lofty heights of spiritual and intellectual perfection, and then "descend" to the masses and share his knowledge with them. Quite appropriately, then, the Torah, in narrating this dream, chose the word *mal'akh*, "messenger," in reference to prophets, whose primary purpose, according to Maimonides, is to demonstrate to Yaakov the "messenger" role assigned to him as a prophet.

A Symbol of the Spheres and the Natural Elements

Maimonides returns to Yaakov's dream in the second section of the *Guide* (chapter 10), amidst his discussion of the spheres (the planets and other celestial beings) and their impact upon the natural world. Based on the astronomical beliefs of his time, Maimonides held that there were four main celestial spheres, from which forces emanate that control the natural world here on earth. Maimonides further contended that each of these four spheres exerts control over one of the four basic elements: "Thus water is set in motion by the moon-sphere, fire by the sun-sphere, air by the other planets... the sphere of the other stars, namely, the fixed stars, sets earth in motion." Maimonides also identifies "four principal properties which earthly beings derive from them [the four spheres]," as well as "four causes of the motion of every sphere."

After presenting this illustration of the physical composition of the universe, Maimonides turns his attention to the number four, which quite obviously emerges as a central motif within this arrangement. In this context he cites a passage from the *Midrash Tanchuma* stating that the ladder in Yaakov's dream contained four rungs, and notes that "all the Midrashim" speak of four angels ascending and descending the ladder. Maimonides then cites a verse from Zekharya (6:1), where the prophet describes "the four chariots that came out from between two mountains," and a later verse (6:5) that speaks of "the four spirits of the heavens." It appears that Maimonides seeks to demonstrate that the prophets and *Chazal* were well aware of the scientific importance of the number four, as the dominant number in the basic arrangement of the physical universe. He therefore draws our attention to references to the number four in these contexts dealing with physical essence of the universe.

Seemingly, then, Maimonides understood the "angels" in Yaakov's dream as representing not the prophets, but rather the four spheres, or the four basic elements of the earth influenced by the four spheres. This image, of a ladder – or hierarchy – of the natural forces with God stationed atop the ladder, would symbolize the Almighty's control over the entire universe. The natural world operates in hierarchical fashion, with forces acting upon inferior forces which themselves affect the lower elements, with the Almighty forever stationed above the entire structure, exerting exclusive control and power over the whole system. This is indeed Ibn Ezra's interpretation of this vision: "The meaning is in the form of an allegory, that nothing can avoid God; the things in the lower [spheres] are dependant upon the upper [spheres]." In any event, this interpretation stands in direct contrast to Maimonides' earlier remarks, in the first section of the *Guide*, which view the dream as a depiction of the prophetic process.

This contradiction is addressed in a letter attributed to Maimonides, sent to Rabbi Chasdai Halevi of Alexandria. This letter is published in the second volume of Rabbi Yitzchak Sheilat's collection of Maimonides' letters (p. 683), and in it Maimonides endeavors to explain how the "angels" in Yaakov's dream can symbolize both the prophets and the four basic elements of the universe. A prophet's "ascent" or "descent," he writes, results from the dominance of one force within the prophet's being over the others. A prophet ascends when the force of the element of fire dominates his being, and he descends when the element of earth overtakes his essence. Accordingly, the angels on the ladder indeed symbolize the four elements, and by extension represent as well the prophet, whose progression or regression is determined by the combating forces within his being.

It must be noted, however, that the authorship and authenticity of this letter, at least in its present form, are suspect. Rabbi Yosef Kapach, in his commentary to the *Guide* (1:15), refers us to this letter but writes that he refuses to cite it in his commentary, because he is convinced that its text has been corrupted. Besides its general ambiguity in both content and style, Rabbi Kapach points to the fact that neither the questioner nor the responder makes mention of Maimonides' comments in *Mishneh Torah* (which we will discuss later), where he presents yet a third interpretation of Yaakov's dream. In a letter clarifying his position with regard to Yaakov's dream, we would expect Maimonides to present a comprehensive explanation of his view that addresses all the seemingly conflicting passages in his writings. The mysterious omission of any reference to *Mishneh Torah* in the current text of this letter led Rabbi Kapach to conclude that the original letter differed significantly from its present form.

What more, Rabbi Sheilat, in his introduction to this letter, raises and supports the contention that it is a forgery, and was not written by Maimonides at all. Among his bases for suspicion is the alleged recipient's claim at the beginning of the letter that Maimonides had given strict instructions not to show anybody the precise text of his responses to the questions posed, and to instead write them in his own words. It is hard to imagine, Rabbi Sheilat argues, that Maimonides would allow the publication of his responses but not in their original formulation. More likely, the forger realized that his formulation and style will differ significantly from Maimonides', and he therefore attempted to cover over this discrepancy with this claim.

We might add that the attempted resolution to the contradiction between the two passages in the *Guide* does not accommodate Maimonides' wording. According to the theory advanced in this alleged letter, the "angels" in truth symbolize the four elements, and they symbolize the prophets only by extension, inasmuch as the prophet's "motion" along the ladder results from the forces exerted by the elements within him. However, in the first section of the *Guide* Maimonides writes explicitly that the word *mal'akh* in the context of Yaakov's dream means "prophet." Thus, the association between *mal'akhim* and prophets – according to the passage in the first section of the *Guide* – evolves not from the role of the natural elements within the prophet's internal being, but rather from the direct translation of the word *mal'akhim* in this context.

Assuming this letter is either a corruption or a forgery, we might simply explain, as does Don Isaac Abarbanel, in his commentary to the *Guide* (1:15), that Maimonides accepted multiple interpretations to the dream. There is no need to endeavor reconciling the two passages, because Maimonides accepted both readings of these verses as equally valid interpretations.

In truth, however, there is perhaps no contradiction at all between these two passages in the *Guide*. In the first section, Maimonides addresses Yaakov's dream frontally, presenting his interpretation of these verses. In the second section, however, Maimonides is not discussing Yaakov's dream at all. As we mentioned earlier, his intent is simply to demonstrate that the Sages and, before them, the prophets, pointed to the number four as a central numeric theme within the physical makeup of the universe. To that end, he invokes *Chazal's* reading of Yaakov's dream as symbolic of the four spheres or four basic elements. But Maimonides is not necessarily bound to this interpretation of the ladder and angels; his point is simply that the Sages understood the profound importance and centrality of the number four. He likely approaches these Midrashic passages as homiletics, rather than the primary reading of the verses describing Yaakov's dream. Therefore, his citation of these Midrashim in no way contradicts his earlier comments where he presents his own interpretation of Yaakov's dream.

A Symbol of Israel's Exile

It would appear, however, that we must nevertheless resort to Abarbanel's assumption – that Maimonides accepted multiple readings of Yaakov's dream – in light of his comments in *Mishneh Torah*. In *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* (7:3), Maimonides discusses the nature of prophetic visions and mentions that prophets would behold an allegorical vision and immediately understand its meaning. Among the examples he brings is Yaakov's vision of the ladder: "...such as the ladder that our patriarch Yaakov saw with angels ascending and descending on it, which was an allegory for the empires and their subjugation [of Israel]." Maimonides here refers to one of the more well-known interpretations of Yaakov's dream, which sees the angels ascending and descending the ladder as symbolic of the empires that rose to power, subjected Israel to exile and oppression, and then declined. This reading appears in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (chapter 35) and the *Midrash Tanchuma* (Parashat Vayetze, 2), and is mentioned in the commentaries of Nachmanides and Seforno. Nachmanides comments that according to this reading, Yaakov's vision of the ladder parallels the prophecy of *berit bein ha-betarim* (Bereishit, chapter 15), in which Yaakov's grandfather, Avraham, was shown the future subjugation of his descendants and assured of their ultimate redemption.

In *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides adopts this reading without any hesitation, apparently reflecting his acceptance of multiple interpretations of this prophetic vision. It is generally assumed that *Mishneh Torah* was intended for a much broader audience than the *Guide*, and it is therefore readily understandable why in *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides adopts the analogy to the enemy empires, whereas in the *Guide* he prefers the philosophical interpretation. The rise and fall of great empires is a far more accessible and tangible phenomenon than the intellectual progression of the prophets, and would very easily be understood and appreciated by the average reader. For this reason, it would seem, Maimonides chose the former reading of Yaakov's dream when writing

Mishneh Torah, and preferred the more philosophical concept in composing the *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Introduction to the *Guide*

Finally, Maimonides addresses Yaakov's dream also in his introduction to the *Guide*, as an example of the metaphoric style employed in prophecy. He begins this discussion by distinguishing between two types of similes used by the prophets:

...first, where every word which occurs in the simile represents a certain idea; and secondly, where the simile, as a whole, represents a general idea, but has a great many points which have no reference to that idea; they are simply required to give the simile its proper form and order.

Somewhat surprisingly, Maimonides enlists the description of Yaakov's dream as the prototype of the first category, of metaphors presented in a manner such that each particular word directly contributes to the analogy:

An example of the first class of prophetic figures is to be found in Genesis: "And, behold, a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and, behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it." The word "ladder" refers to one idea; "set up on the earth" to another; "and the top of it reached to heaven" to a third; "angels of God" to a fourth; "ascending" to a fifth; "descending" to a sixth; "the Lord stood above it" to a seventh. Every word in this figure introduces a fresh element into the idea represented by the figure.

Maimonides (for some reason) does not identify for us these seven "ideas" symbolized by the various terms in these verses. Abarbanel, both in his commentary to the Torah and his commentary to the *Guide* (1:15), takes great pains to explain the seven references in light of the dream's interpretation that Maimonides cites in the second section, whereby it refers to the spheres and/or elements of the universe. Abarbanel endeavors to show how the seven terms listed by Maimonides correspond to seven aspects of the physical universe. By contrast, Esti Eizenman, writing in the journal *Akdamut* (vol. 6, 5759), contends that Maimonides refers here to the approach he develops in the first section of the *Guide*, where he interprets Yaakov's dream as an allegorical illustration of the prophetic process.

In light of our earlier contention, that in the first section Maimonides puts forth his own interpretation of the dream, whereas in the second section he merely draws upon *Chazal's* reference to the number four, without embracing their reading of the dream, then clearly the allusion to prophecy emerges as Maimonides' primary interpretation. Hence, we would expect that in his introduction to the *Guide* it is this reading that he has in mind. Indeed, of the seven references listed by Maimonides in the introduction, six are quite easily identifiable in light of his comments in the first section, where he establishes the vision's symbolic correspondence to prophecy. The "ladder" clearly represents the scale measuring a prophet's intellectual progression. The phrase, "and the top of it reached to the heaven" is explicitly understood by Maimonides as a reference to the prophet's comprehension of God's eternity. "Angels of God," of course, refers to the prophets, while "ascending" speaks of their intellectual achievement and "descending" corresponds to their return to the people to guide and teach. "The Lord stood above it," the phrase which led Maimonides to address this prophecy in the first place, is a reference to the Almighty's eternity.

What remains unclear is the idea expressed by the phrase "set up on the earth," referring to the "ladder." There is plenty of room for speculation as to the precise analogy intended by this phrase. Assuming that the "ladder" symbolizes the prophet's intellectual journey which leads him to a

philosophical understanding of God's eternity, then the ladder's position "set up on the earth" might refer to the need to begin this process with study and training in basic, elementary knowledge. In the first section of the *Guide* (chapter 34), Maimonides elaborates on the dangers of beginning a student's training with metaphysics, devoting a lengthy chapter to explicating the potential risks involved. Conceivably, then, he may have understood the phrase "set up on the earth" as alluding to this critical precept, namely, that the "ascent to the heavens" can begin only once the individual has been "set up on the earth," meaning, after he has acquired a firm basis and thorough understanding of the more basic scientific and philosophical truths.

Quite possibly, then, the seven references Maimonides identifies within the Torah's description of Yaakov's dream directly correspond to the meaning of the dream as he sets forth in the first section of the *Guide*, as an illustration of the prophetic process, the interpretation which we suggested represents his primary and preferred reading of this dream.