

Shabbat Shalom.

Some years ago, when I was working for the academic publisher, we produced about 25 journals in the social sciences. So, naturally, we told a number of social science jokes. One of my favorites went: “A sociologist and an economist were walking along, and they fell into a pit. The pit was about 30 feet deep, and it had sheer sides. The sociologist began running back and forth yelling for help and predicting they’d never get out. The economist simply looked at the situation and said calmly, ‘Of course we can get out. Assume there’s a ladder.’”

Remember that. I’ll come back to it.

The Torah portion this week is Va-yetzei, which begins with Jacob fleeing from his home after stealing the blessing that should have gone to Esau, and the sidrah covers the 20 years he spends at his uncle Laban’s. The portion ends when Jacob is finally on his homeward journey.

A lot happens in those 20 years at Laban’s place – this portion is a soap opera involving real love, frustrated love, deception, conniving, lying and cheating. But I don’t want to talk about any of that. Instead, I want to look at the little bit of time in Va-yetzei which is not spent at Laban’s – the very beginning of this sidrah, what one rabbinic source described as a parenthesis to the story.

This opening parenthesis is perhaps the most well-known part of the portion. It contains Jacob’s dream, as he slept that first night on his flight from home, his head on a rock. It raises some questions about which the rabbis have been debating for more than a thousand years. The text about the dream is in Genesis 28:12, and it has been translated in a number of different ways. Everett Fox’s translation is a good one; it says: “And he dreamed: Here a ladder was set up on the earth, its top reaching the heavens and here: messengers of God were going up and down on it.”

Much of the rabbinic commentary has addressed those messengers, which other translations call “angels,” and we will eventually touch on that. Indeed, that interpretation is well enough known that you may already be familiar with some of those arguments, but even if you’re not, it’s not the main issue I want to explore. Instead, I want us to consider the ladder itself.

Rabbi David Wolpe has said that one of the ways God spends a great deal of time is by building ladders. To Wolpe, if I read him right, the ladder is a metaphor for God reaching out to us because, after all, why would God – or the angels – need something like a ladder to connect heaven and earth? Of course they wouldn’t. So it’s logical to conclude that if a ladder is needed, we human beings are the ones who need it. That made me think about the question of where and when do we need a ladder?

We can take our cue in answering that question from this sidrah and from Jacob. When did the vision of the ladder come to him? The Torah describes Jacob to us as “a man of the tents.” He wasn’t an outdoorsman or a hunter, like his brother Esau. He was a homebody – and this could well be the first night of his life that he’s spent away from home. He’s out in the open, on his own, with a rock for his pillow. If he isn’t frightened, he’s got to be at least apprehensive. He probably needs reassurance. And he gets a ladder.

The other factor in the question is where did the vision of the ladder come to him? Some rabbis maintain that the dream occurred at the border of Canaan – in other words, Jacob stopped for the night at the edge of the land promised to the line of Abraham.

It might be prudent at this juncture to review what were pretty common ideas about gods in that area of the world. In those days, the gods were gods of a specific place. The gods of Egypt were thought to be gods in Egypt, but if you left Egypt for another territory, it was the place of different gods, who ruled the land you'd just entered. And some rabbinic commentary on Jacob's dream trades on this belief, but applies it to the angels in the dream. These rabbis say the angels were said to be ascending and descending because the angels of Canaan were going up and the angels of the other land were coming down, sort of a shift change.

Be that as it may, the point is that the shift change did not apply to God. We are looking at a geography of God very different from the geographies common at the time.

And my point here is that the ladder came to Jacob at the geographical border of the land he knew, and God chose to use the ladder to assure Jacob that it didn't matter that he was going away from the Promised Land – he was not going away from God. The God his father Isaac believed in, the god who had been with his grandfather Abraham, that God was going to be with Jacob not just in Canaan, but wherever he went.

So what this part of the sidrah may be saying to us is that, just like Jacob, there are times when you and I sometimes stand at the border between the known and the unknown, and like Jacob, we may be afraid to move into new territory, whether geographical, physical or psychological. When that happens, when we recognize that we are going into something which will be completely unfamiliar to us, then we might want to emulate the economist in the joke I told at the beginning of this d'var Torah. We might want to assume there's a ladder. And that, as God did for Jacob, God is assuring us that we won't be alone in whatever we need to confront.

As David Wolpe said, "God builds ladders." There will be one at the moment and in the place we need it.