DIVREI TORAH / VAYEITZEI

The Malachim Who Couldn't Go Home



Rav Mordechai Burg

וַיַּחֲלֹם וְהִנֵּה סֻלָּם מֻצָּב אַרְצָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמָיְמָה וְהִנֵּה מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ.

And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was standing on the earth, its top reaching the heavens, and behold, angels of Hashem were ascending and descending upon it.

BEREISHIS 28:12

AN ESSAY ON PARSHAS VAYEITZEI

Why were the malachim ascending before descending? Malachim come from Shamayim. Shouldn't they first descend and then ascend?

Rashi explains that the malachim who had accompanied Yaakov Avinu in Eretz Yisrael were returning to Shamayim, and new malachim were descending to accompany him outside Eretz Yisrael.

But the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 68:12) offers a fascinating explanation.

> ר' לוי בשם ר' שמואל בר נחמן אמר: מלאכי השרת, על ידי שגילו מסטורין של הקב"ה, נדחו ממחיצתן קל"ח שנה.

The malachim who revealed the secrets of Hashem were banished from their heavenly place for 138 years.

What secrets had they revealed?

When Hashem decided to destroy Sedom, He said, הַמְכַסֶּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה, "Shall I conceal from Avraham what I am doing?" (Bereishis 18:17). Hashem chose to reveal His plans to Avraham Avinu.

But the malachim who arrived in Sedom told Lot that the city was going to be destroyed. They had not been given permission to share this information with him.

The Midrash offers a second explanation for their punishment. The malachim declared, כִּי מַשְׁחִתִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶת הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה, "For we are destroying this place" (Bereishis 19:13). They spoke as though they were responsible for the destruction, rather than acknowledging that they were merely carrying out the will of Hashem.

For this, they were banished from their place in Shamayim.

And when did they finally return?

> היכן חזרו? כאן, עולים ויורדים, עולים ואחר כך יורדים.

Here, in Yaakov's dream, when the Torah describes the malachim ascending before descending.

The malachim who had been banished after the destruction of Sedom were finally returning to Shamayim, 138 years later.

But why did their punishment end specifically now? What does the return of these malachim have to do with Yaakov Avinu?

And perhaps there is another question worth considering. Why does the Midrash specifically mention 138 years?

The commentaries explain that this is the precise number of years between the destruction of Sedom and Yaakov's dream. But perhaps there is a remez in the number itself.

> The gematria of חלק, a part, is 138.

I wonder if this gives us some insight into the nature of the malachim's failure.

A malach is a shaliach. He has no independent mission. His entire purpose is to fulfill the will of Hashem. But when the malachim revealed information they were not authorized to reveal, they stepped outside the boundaries of their shlichus. And when they said, "We are destroying this place," they took ownership of something that belonged to Hashem.

The malachim had begun operating as though they were independent, rather than recognizing that they were part of something greater than themselves.

This is what fragmentation looks like. A part begins operating independently of the whole. It loses sight of the larger purpose that it was meant to serve.

Perhaps this is why their punishment lasted 138 years, the gematria of חלק. They had lost their proper relationship to the whole, and they could not return until that relationship was restored.

Now consider what was happening to Yaakov Avinu.

Yaakov was running away from Eisav, who wanted to kill him, and heading toward Lavan, who would spend the next twenty years deceiving him. His situation was genuinely dangerous, and he had good reason to be afraid.

The Torah tells us that Yaakov took stones and placed them around his head. Rashi explains that he was protecting himself from wild animals.

The Gemara (Chullin 91b) tells us that the stones began arguing with one another. Each stone insisted that Yaakov should rest his head on it, until Hashem made all the stones into one.

What are Chazal trying to tell us with this strange story?

When a person is afraid, different parts of his personality may respond in different ways. One part wants to run away. Another wants to fight. Another wants to control the situation so that nothing unexpected can happen. Each part believes that its way of protecting us is the right way.

These protective responses aren't necessarily bad. Often, we genuinely need them. The problem begins when they take over, and we lose the ability to respond from a deeper, more grounded place within ourselves.

The stones surrounding Yaakov's head were there to protect him. But even the stones were competing with one another, each wanting to be the one upon which Yaakov rested his head.

And then they became one.

Perhaps Chazal are describing something about Yaakov's own inner experience. Despite the danger he was facing, Yaakov was able to bring the different parts of himself into alignment. They no longer needed to compete for control. Each part could fulfill its proper role within the larger whole.

And what did he see when he fell asleep?

A ladder connecting Shamayim and Aretz.

Yaakov was not being asked to escape his physical reality in order to connect with Hashem. The ladder was firmly planted in the ground. His human experience, with all of its fears and uncertainties, was not separate from his relationship with Hashem.

He could be fully present in this world while remaining connected to Shamayim.

This may explain an otherwise puzzling detail in the Midrash.

Bereishis Rabbah (68:12) records a disagreement between R' Chiya and R' Yanai concerning the words עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ.

> חד אמר: עולים ויורדים בסולם. וחד אמר: עולים ויורדים ביעקב.

One opinion maintains that the malachim were ascending and descending the ladder. The other understands that they were ascending and descending Yaakov himself.

The Midrash explains that the malachim ascended and saw Yaakov's image engraved above, and then descended and saw Yaakov lying asleep below.

Yaakov himself is the point of connection between Shamayim and Aretz. His heavenly identity and his earthly existence are connected.

And perhaps this is why the malachim were finally able to return to Shamayim.

The malachim had been removed from their place because they had lost their alignment with the will of Hashem. They had behaved as though their individual mission existed independently of the One Who had sent them.

Yaakov, by contrast, was living in alignment. He was a human being facing real danger, with all the emotional complexity that comes with it, but he had not lost his connection to Hashem or to himself.

At the Makom HaMikdash, where Shamayim and Aretz meet, Yaakov brought the different dimensions of his existence together. And in doing so, perhaps he also brought the malachim back into alignment.

What fascinates me about this Midrash is that Yaakov was not doing anything directly to repair the malachim. He was engaged in his own avodah. Yet something about the integration that he achieved had an impact on them.

I think we see this quite often in parenting.

Imagine a father who is anxious about his son's future. He wants his son to succeed, to learn well, to have friends, to make good decisions. These are all reasonable concerns. But his anxiety begins to take over his parenting.

When his son struggles, the father's fear immediately takes control. He becomes critical, controlling, or excessively involved. The son senses his father's anxiety and begins to experience his own struggles as something much more threatening. He may withdraw, become defensive, or feel that he is constantly disappointing his father.

The father's protective instincts are well-intentioned, but they are no longer operating in a healthy relationship with the rest of him.

Now suppose the father begins to understand what is happening within himself. He recognizes that his fear is only one part of him. He doesn't need to get rid of that part, and he certainly doesn't need to stop caring about his son. But he can learn to relate to his anxiety without allowing it to control him.

As the father becomes more internally aligned, something often begins to change in the child as well.

The son no longer has to respond to his father's anxiety. He can experience his father as a stable, grounded presence, someone who can tolerate his struggles without becoming overwhelmed by them. The child's own defensive responses may begin to settle. He has more room to think clearly, to make mistakes, and to develop confidence in his own ability to navigate life.

This is one of the remarkable things about relationships. Our emotional worlds are not nearly as separate as we imagine. When a parent lives in alignment, it becomes easier for a child to find that alignment within himself.

The same is true in marriage, in friendships, and in the relationship between a Rebbe and his talmidim. We have all experienced how one anxious or defensive person can affect the emotional atmosphere of an entire room. But the opposite is also true. A person who is genuinely grounded can have an extraordinary effect on the people around him.

And this brings us back to Yaakov Avinu.

For 138 years, the malachim had been unable to return to their proper place. They had acted as independent parts, disconnected from the larger whole. Perhaps what they needed was to encounter someone who was living differently.

Yaakov Avinu was not trying to repair them. He was dealing with his own life, his own fears, and his own relationship with Hashem.

But when Yaakov brought the different parts of himself into alignment, the impact extended beyond himself.

The malachim, who had been unable to return to their proper place for 138 years, were finally able to go home.

Perhaps we underestimate what happens when a person does the difficult work of becoming more whole. We tend to measure that work by how much better we feel or how differently we behave. We don't always consider what it makes possible for our children, our spouses, our talmidim, and the other people who share our lives.

Sometimes, the greatest thing we can do for another person is to become more aligned within ourselves.