

הַמַּדְרָגָה THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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PROGRESSING STEP BY STEP IN THE SERVICE OF G-D

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

It is written, "And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward" (Genesis 28:12). Concerning this subject, the commentators say that the ladder symbolizes man, who is placed on earth, standing on his own two feet. By the strength that he acquires, he can reach the heights of heaven.

Let us explain this concept. If the Torah wants to make us understand that man, well attached to the earth both by his physical and terrestrial nature, is capable of soaring and acquiring a level of spirituality akin to that of the angels, why does it tell us this by showing Jacob a ladder? Why not show him that he himself can make it to the heavens? What is the exact nature of the ladder?

It should be noted that a ladder is made of rungs that allow one to ascend – or to descend – which would be impossible without these steps. This means that to attain these heights, a man is forced to put himself in danger and to take it upon himself to make an effort to climb, for the service of G-d is a progressive ascent. The one who climbs the rungs gets tired and becomes short of breath. He groans as much for the effort that he has to put in so as to continuing climbing, as for the time that it takes before reaching the goal (which is contrary to climbing down, which requires little effort or time). All this is because the goal that he aspires to – the top of the ladder – is still far away. In the same way, the one who wants to progress and attain spiritual goals should advance upwards with his own strength, progressively, and elevate himself in stages. It is precisely by a progressive elevation on the ladder of perfection that one can make it to the top. We find the following instruction several times in the Talmud: "Rabbi Pinchas Ben Yair said, 'Torah

leads to prudence, prudence leads to diligence, diligence leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to separateness, separateness leads to purity, purity leads to piety, piety leads to humility, humility leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to holiness, holiness leads to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead. And piety is the greatest quality of all' " (Shekalim 6a). In books of ethics, this teaching is called "The Ladder of Rabbi Pinchas Ben Yair," and it serves as the foundation for Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzato's book *Messilat Yesharim*, concerning which the Vilna Gaon said that there was not one superfluous word to be found therein.

The word סֵלֶם (ladder) has a numerical value of 130, which points to the 130 years that Adam separated himself from his wife Eve (Eruvin 18b) after having eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge. Adam wanted to separate himself from material things, so much was he mortified after having brought death into the world. This separation allowed him to be called "pious" (Eruvin 18b; Zohar III:76b). This teaches us that to attain the degree of piety which is the summit of the ladder (since piety is the greatest of qualities on Rabbi Pinchas Ben Yair's ladder), a man should separate himself as much as possible from the desires of this world in order to make them meaningless to him. In this way, he will be able to elevate himself ever more in the rungs of sanctification, and after having successfully climbed every rung that leads to piety, he will reach the height of perfection.

Jacob's ladder – and its secret – represents a progressive march, a step-by-step climb that allows one to attain ever greater heights, until reaching the virtue of piety and the resurrection of the dead.

Continuation page 2

We should also mention that the verse which states, “and behold, angels of G-d were ascending and descending on it” (Genesis 28:12) teaches us that abandoning the lures and temptations of this world is so difficult that, despite himself, man “ascends and descends” – there are rises and there are falls. But a man should not panic, nor should he get discouraged, for it is written right afterwards, “the L-RD was standing over him” (v.13). If a man understands that G-d is standing above him, that He is there to support him despite his falls (failures that are due to the fact that man is “on the earth,” attached to material and earthly things), he will realize that G-d will always be there to help him climb to ever higher levels and to make it to the highest rungs, allowing him to reach the very heavens.

Nevertheless, a man risks becoming discouraged and telling himself, “How is it possible that a being such as myself – a creature of flesh and blood, dust and ashes, and sunk in materialism – can climb and attain the level of an angel in heaven?” Yet this thought should not bother him or create impediments in his mind. He should realize that G-d loves him and will not abandon him, but that He demands ever more effort from him. It is clear that this is not an easy thing to achieve because the evil inclination stands on the lookout and “everyday tries to kill the righteous man” (Kiddushin 30b). The evil inclination tries to catch man in the net that it throws for him, and to make him fall to the lowest levels. A man should guard himself from these dangers, knowing that G-d watches over him and calls him to serve and honor Him with all his heart.

In fact, we see that Jacob elevated himself progressively, even above the angels, as during the fight with Esau’s ministering angel (Chullin 91a). He defeated the latter and said to him, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Genesis 32:27), and the angel could not leave without Jacob’s permission: “He said to him, ‘let me go’, and the one who sends is greater than the one who is sent” (Bereshith Rabba 78:2). Furthermore it is written, “You fought against the heavenly powers and you defeated them; you fought against the earthly powers and you defeated them. The heavenly powers refer to the Esau’s angel” (ibid. 78:6).

It seems necessary for us to read the passage which states, “And you shall spread to the west and to the east, and to the north and to the

south” (Genesis 28:14), which Rashi explains as: “ ‘And you shall spread’ – you shall be powerful,” powerful in your service of G-d. Rabbi Chiya explains the verse that states, “Bless the L-RD, O His angels; the strong warriors who do his bidding” (Psalms 103:20) as follows: “ ‘His angels’ are those upright men of the earth who are, in the eyes of G-d, like heavenly beings, for they heroically overcome their desires, as a courageous man overcomes his enemies ... and henceforth who can stand by their side, other than those who are sanctified, and whom the Divine Presence never leaves?” (Zohar 190a, 108).

“The entire world receives its sustenance because of righteous men” (Zohar III:216a). When Israel walks in the ways of Torah and “your people will all be righteous” (Isaiah 60:21), all the prosperity they receive from on high is rightfully theirs, and the nations of the world also rejoice, thanks to Israel (Zohar III:147b). In such a case, the Children of Israel, who as we know have the status of the “sons of the King” (Shabbat 67a), are like the King himself, who opens the way (Pesachim 110b), going from the front and uniting everything that they undertake, for everything was created for them and their merit. This allows us to understand what G-d told Jacob: “And you shall spread” (Genesis 28:14) – you will have the strength to rise and to elevate yourself on the ladder of perfection, and this will allow you to receive that which was promised to you; “And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you” (ibid.) – all the peoples will be blessed and rejoice in the prosperity that stems from you.

It would be disastrous if the situation were otherwise, if the Jewish did not follow the ways of Torah and justice, for then the nations of the world would receive all the good destined for Israel. Thanks to upright behavior, we can dominate our own desires as much as we can dominate our enemies, and we can elevate ourselves on the ladder of perfection until we reach the virtue of piety and the resurrection. As it is written, “Who is the pious man? The one who shows himself to be pious towards his Creator” (Zohar Mishpatim 114b; Pinchas 222b). G-d stands by his side and watches over him, and He helps him to climb the rungs and to elevate himself ever higher.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

From the Maggid of Dubno

Jacob said: 'And G-d has taken away the cattle of your father, and has given them to me.' ... [Rachel and Leah answered] 'For all the riches which G-d has taken away from our father, it is ours and our children's' (Genesis 31:9,16).

It must be understood why Jacob's riches are described as "taken away" (Hebrew *הציל*; lit. "to save", "to rescue"). Jacob's response to Laban should also be noted: "What is my transgression, what is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me? ... These twenty years I have been with you, your ewes and your she-goats have not miscarried. ... That which was mangled, I did not bring to you; I used to bear the loss of it. ... I was by day consumed by heat, and frost by night. ... G-d has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, and He decided last night" (Genesis 31:36-42). This response seems to want to awaken in Laban a realization and a cognizance capable of making him change and want to draw Jacob closer to him, in a way so as not to suffer the losses mentioned. As Laban himself says, "I have learned by divination that the L-RD has blessed me on account of you" (Genesis 30:27). Now this was certainly not Jacob's intention! Moreover, we are not exactly sure where the criticism lay when Jacob stated, "G-d has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, and He decided last night" (ibid. 31:42). But what did he prove? We are forced to conclude that Jacob did not act disloyally ("And Jacob took for himself rods of fresh poplar, and of the almond and chestnut tree" [ibid. 30:37]), especially since Hashem approved of his actions ("And an angel of G-d said to me ... 'I have seen all that Laban is doing to you' " [ibid. 31:11,12]). All this demands an explanation.

I believe that all these verses together find their explanation in the following Midrash: " 'I used to bear the loss of it' [Genesis 31:39] – I sinned against the lion, for the Holy One, blessed be He, had decreed that every day the lion should devour one of the animals from Laban's flock. But perhaps another shepherd would have managed to save them. It is written, 'For thus said the L-RD to me: Just as a lion or a lion cub roars over his prey and a gathering of shepherds assembles against it, it is not frightened by their voice and is not humbled by their noise' [Isaiah 31:4]." Let us now return to our question.

The Maggid of Dubno explains this Midrash with the following parable.

A renowned tailor had hired someone as his employee, but refused to pay him a salary that everyone else in the company was earning for such a job, meaning that he refused to give him the fabric left over after clothes had been made. He only agreed to give him one golden coin every month, keeping all the leftover fabric for himself. After the first month, the employee came to ask for his salary, but he was made to wait until the next month, and so on from month to month. Finally, having still not received anything by the end of the year, he brought the tailor to court and demanded all the leftovers from all the clothes that he had manufactured during the year, which was worth far more

than the amount they had initially agreed upon. The tailor told him, "Why do you want the leftovers? Didn't we agree that I would give you money?" The judge answered, "Let's admit it, even if you had agreed to pay him a ridiculously small sum of money instead of what he had the right to claim, you still didn't pay it. His reward becomes, therefore, that his rightful salary should never have ceased, and hence you are obligated to give him all the fabric leftovers, as is done in general for your employees."

Since the time that the Holy One, blessed be He, gives life to all creatures (beasts of the field, wild animals, reptiles, etc.), He provides them with their sustenance in accordance with their nature: Certain look for herbs, others for grains, still others are carnivores – such as the lion or the wolf – which have no means of survival other than to live by devouring prey, such as sheep or goats. The merit of Jacob benefited Laban to such a point that during all the time that he worked with him, nothing happened to his flocks – neither wild beasts attacked them, nor did common ailments afflict them. This is what Jacob recalled when he stated, "These twenty years I have been with you, your ewes and your she-goats have not miscarried. ... That which was mangled, I did not bring to you; I used to bear the loss of it" (Genesis 31:38,39).

As we noted earlier, the Sages have explained as follows: "I sinned against the lion, for the Holy One, blessed be He, had decreed that every day the lion should devour one of the animals from Laban's flock. This is the meal that the King has assigned him, and I, because I stood up against the lion to save the animal, sinned against it." It would have been normal for all the animals saved by Jacob's merit to be owed to him, but the fact that Laban had promised him a salary meant that Jacob did not have any other right. If Laban had kept his word, it is certain that Jacob would have kept the animals that he had saved. However Laban constantly modified the nature of Jacob's wages ("You changed my wages ten times" [v.41]), so much so that at the time, "G-d has taken away the cattle of your father and has given them to me" (v.9), which means that G-d gave Jacob all the animals that he had saved.

The same subject is being mentioned by Jacob's wives in their response: "For all the riches which G-d has taken away from our father, it is ours" (v.16). Jacob is therefore perfectly justified to tell Laban, "These twenty years I have been with you, your ewes and your she-goats have not miscarried" (v.38). Why are you so disturbed by the extent of my wealth? Make a calculation of all the animals that I saved from the day that I started to guard your flock. I saved the flock from its predators, and consequently "G-d has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, and He decided last night" (v.42). He retroactively judged the saved animals as belonging to me. This same thought prompted Jacob to show the peeled and spotted rods to the ewes. This was done with Hashem's consent, Who in this way only wanted to give him the saved animals.

IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM

Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan, the Rav of Kovno

Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spector, who was known as the Rav of all Israel, was the Rabbi of Kovno. He was born in 1817 (5577) and died in 1896 (5656). He led various communities, amongst others the city of Novardok from 1851 to 1864 (5611 to 5624). Yet his renown in the Jewish world comes essentially from the last place where he served as Rav, the city of Kovno, where he remained for more than 30 years.

He became the leader of his generation, and regardless of the domain, be it communal good or individual life, nothing was done without his advice or his consent. Questions were asked of him from all corners of the world, and a great part of his thousands of responses were compiled in his books *Beer Yitzchak*, *Nachal Yitzchak*, and *Ein Yitzchak*.

The *Natziv* (Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Judah Berlin) of Volozhin said that Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spector had merited all this because of his exception diligence in Torah study. "He is the greatest matmid [diligent one in Torah study] of our generation," said the *Natziv*, who was also known for his exceptional diligence.

Indeed, when we read the story of his life it is impossible not to marvel at the great work ethic that he demonstrated from his earliest age. To give an idea of the attention that he drew, even in the eyes of the greatest of matmidim, we shall give a few examples.

It goes without saying that from his earliest youth, Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan was plunged into study practically without any stop. Even when, for whatever reason, he had to leave the Beit Midrash, he would begin leaving the hall while still reading a book, continuing to do so until he approached the table closest to the exit. There he would lay it down open to the page that he had been studying. When returning to the Beit Midrash, he would pick the book up and once again begin studying where he left off, without the least delay.

When he arrived early at his father-in-law's for lunch and the meal was not yet ready, without losing a moment he would wash his hands and quickly eat a piece of dry bread left on the table. Even before those of the household had the time to ask him to wait for the meal, he was already off to the Beit Midrash.

At the end of Yom Kippur, he would leave synagogue running. He would then arrive home, perform Havdalah without waiting, and then eat something and run out once again to the Beit Midrash – even while the last of the faithful still hadn't had time to leave!

These are but a few examples that point to the nature of his study, which allowed him to become a great teacher in Israel.

Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan was the greatest authority of his generation. People the world over addressed themselves to him. One of the areas for which he was most sought was that of agunot (married women whose husbands had disappeared, and who could not remarry without proof that their husbands were dead), where he worked wonders. The pain of women in misery, whose husbands had disappeared without leaving a trace, shook the heart of the Rav of all Israel. In order to find a way to liberate these women in accordance with the law of the Torah, he invested all of his energy into every question brought before him, without leaving himself any time to eat or sleep. And when G-d allowed him to find a legal allowance to allow a woman to remarry, his joy was very great. In numerous cases involving agunot, the strength of his Torah demonstrated itself and everyone could see that Heaven was in agreement with him.

When he was still leading the community of Novardok, he was presented with a question concerning an agunah whose husband was presumed to have drowned in the Mediterranean ("waters without end"). He was asked to see if there existed any doubt as to whether the husband could have managed to reach the coast on the other side of the sea. He remained studying this question for days and nights, and came to the conclusion that the husband was in fact dead and that the woman had the right to remarry without hesitation.

It happened that on the following day, people found the body of a man who had been washed ashore. In carefully examining his clothes, a set of keys was found that definitely belonged to the missing man.

In another case, there was an agunah whose husband had disappeared, and the Rav of the city where this woman lived had not found a way to liberate her from her status. The question was brought before the Rav of Kovno, and he examined it for a long time. In the end he allowed the woman to remarry. When the Rav of the woman's town found out about this decision, he expressed many doubts. He even went to Kovno to challenge the decision itself. Rav Yitzchak Elchanan listened with great patience to this Rav, who himself was great in Torah, yet in the end he said, "I gave this woman complete permission, and I do not want to come back to it."

When the Rav returned back to his home, it happened that his city decided to excavate certain areas around town. During this operation, the body of a man was discovered at one of the excavation sites, and it was later identified by its clothing as being that of the missing man.