

Dear Chavraya,

When Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched with Rev. Martin Luther King from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, he said upon his return, "I felt like my legs were praying." In that simple awestruck insight of having experienced a great spiritual moment in the quest for civil rights, Heschel expressed the breadth of what it means to serve God. The worlds of spirit and of people are two parts of the holy, one inseparable from the other. Human needs are God's needs.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayetze*, heaven and earth are joined through the well-known image of Jacob's ladder. *Vayetze Ya'akov mi'b'er Shavah/Ya'akov went out from B'er Shava....* Lying down to sleep along the way, Ya'akov dreamed, and behold! *A ladder, set up toward the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven/v'hinei sulam mutzav artza v'rosho magia hashamayma.* A simple grammatical device, the adding of the letter *hey* to a place name, indicates direction, going toward that place. A "directional" *hey* added to both *eretz/earth* and *shamayim/heaven* creates an ambiguity; in which direction is the ladder in fact pointing? It appears that the ladder is pointing at one and the same time toward both heaven and earth.

In a stirring example of beautifully rich and bold interpretation of Torah, the Slonimer Rebbe, a modern Chassidic leader who died in recent years in Jerusalem, writes of Ya'akov's going forth as a journey of engagement with the world, from which he had previously been sheltered. For the Slonimer, the ladder becomes a symbol of what the nature of that engagement is meant to be. Through God's teaching to Ya'akov, the Slonimer directs the meaning of the ladder to each one of us: *It is to show him (Ya'akov) that the essence of God's will is for the Jew to engage with matters of this world, and from out of this to discover the way by which to be holy/dedicated to God.... The matter of the ladder teaches that a Jew establishes a way of holy service in her or his own world through (by engaging with) the issues of this (wider) world.... Thus one is able to engage in all the issues of this world, and thereby draw close to the Divine.*

Even as Ya'akov would learn from his journey that his "legs were praying," we also learn from his encounter with God at night that the evening is a time of prayer. The rabbis deduced the three times of daily prayer, *shachris*, *mincha*, and *ma'ariv*, prayers of morning, afternoon, and evening, from Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. So we learn that prayer takes many forms. Taking time to pause along the way of each day's journey, the soul finds its breath and is restored, strengthened to continue the journey. As with Shabbos itself, through these daily moments of "Shabbos" pause, purpose is crystallized and vision restored. Through prayer of heart and lips we remember what God seeks of us, and then we go forth as Jacob did, and as Heschel and King did, to engage the needs of this world, to pray with our legs.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor