

Jacob's Ladder Revisited – An Ecstatic Dream-Work

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10 And Jacob went out from Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran. **11** And he lighted upon the place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took one of the stones of the place, and put it under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep. **12** And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold angels of God were ascending and descending on it. **13** And, behold, Hashem stood upon him/it (*nitzav alav*), and said: 'I am Hashem, the God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac. The land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed. **14** And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. And in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. **15** And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee whithersoever thou goest, and will bring thee back into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.'

(Gen. 28:10-15).

Jacob's dream has captivated the imaginations of religious and secular thinkers, scholars and laymen alike, serving as the basis for much art and *aggadah* throughout the ages. What makes it so fascinating is not only the content of the dream itself but its context, coming on the eve of Jacob's exile, followed by his exclamations of awe and his puzzling vow.

Adding to its intrigue is the fact that it is the first of only seven parable dream episodes in the Bible¹ - this, since firsts in the Bible are said to be paradigmatic of later occurrences. Curiously, explains R. Menachem Kasher, this first parable dream differs from the other parable dreams in that, unlike them, its interpretation is not found in the text.² Indeed, this apparent lack of a given explanation has provided for vast and varied interpretations of the dream.³

It is the contention of this essay, however, that this parable dream is no different than any of the other dreams in the genre; indeed, it being the first, it must be paradigmatic and have its interpretation within the text itself. Furthermore, upon recognizing that the interpretation resides within the text, a deeper understanding of the nature and intent of the dream as a whole can be gained; and with it, answers to a number of anomalies in the narrative.

The Dream's Interpretation

Nehama Leibowitz explains that while there are two distinct types of dreams – parable and direct communication – Jacob's dream is composed of both: the parable part being

¹ Torah Sheleimah (Gen. 28, maamar 70).

² Torah Sheleimah (Gen. 28, maamar 70).

³ See Sifri (Bam. 119); Torah Sheleimah (Gen. 28, maamar 69); Radak (Gen. 28:13); Kli Yakar (Gen. 38:12). It should be clear that the explanation provided in this essay in no way diminishes from the validity of the explanations that have accompanied the text for hundreds of years. Rather, this explanation comes only to expose one of the "seventy faces" of the divine text.

the ladder vision and the direct communication being the address from God.⁴ I propose that the direct communication is the response to the parable and thus serves as its implicit interpretation. That is, by understanding God's response, we learn of the meaning of the dream.

To demonstrate, reference to Freud's dream-works theory is in order. The following three principles, which find their parallel in Judaic sources, will suffice for our purposes.

First, Freud teaches that dreams express wishes and desires.⁵ We find this idea conveyed in Isaiah (29:8): "And it shall be as when a hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth, but he awaketh, and his soul is empty; or as when a thirsty man dreameth, and, behold, he drinketh, but he awaketh, and, behold, he is faint, and his soul hath desire"⁶

Second, Freud explains that the contents of a dream are things suppressed, perhaps due to one's inability to conceive of their actualization.⁷ In a similar fashion the Gemara (Ber. 55b)⁸ relates that, "One is not shown in a dream other than his innermost thoughts (*birburei libo*)."

Third, Freud holds that all the details of a dream have significance.⁹ While the Gemara (Ber. 55a)¹⁰ notes that some things are in fact insignificant, the Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim, Introduction) distinguishes between two types of dreams: those whose general message is significant while not all the details may have significance, versus those dreams whose every detail is of import. The Rambam brings Jacob's ladder dream as one whose *every* detail is significant.

Putting these three points together, Mark Solms ("Freudian Dream Theory Today", The Psychologist, Vol. 13, No. 12) summarizes Freud's theory on how one's desires and suppressed thoughts (i.e., the "latent" content of the dream) then "manifest" in the details of the dream:

The differences between the 'manifest' and the 'latent' content of dreams led Freud to infer an intervening process, by means of which the unconscious wishes could be transformed into conscious dreams. This intervening process was the so-called dream-work, which involved mechanisms such as 'displacement' (substituting representational elements for one another, e.g. your father is represented as a policeman), 'condensation' (combining multiple elements into

⁴ *Studies in Genesis* (Jerusalem: WZO, Fourth Revision), p.298.

⁵ S. Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, (ch. 1, sec. A; ch. 1, sec. C.4). (<http://www.psychwww.com/books/interp/chap01a.htm>).

⁶ Interestingly, the verse notes the basic physical desires: eat, drink, sex. Eating and drinking are mentioned explicitly, while reference to sexual relations is made in the phrase, "and his soul hath desire (*shokekeal*)". The word *shokekeal* is explained by Metzudat Tzion (*ibid.*) as "desire (*taavah*), as in 'to your husband will be your desire (*teshukateich*)' (Ber. 3)."

⁷ S. Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, (ch. 7, sec. C; ch. 7, sec. E). (<http://www.psychwww.com/books/interp/chap07c.htm>; <http://www.psychwww.com/books/interp/chap07e.htm>).

⁸ So too the Zohar (Vayeshev 183a).

⁹ S. Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, (ch. 2 - <http://www.psychwww.com/books/interp/chap02.htm>).

¹⁰ So too the Zohar (Vayeshev 183a).

composite hybrids, e.g. ambition, excitement and anxiety are all represented by a single image of an ascending escalator) and ‘regression’ (converting thoughts into perceptions, e.g. a person’s importance is represented by their size).

Amazingly, the example employed by Solms to explain the dream-work mechanism of “condensation” quite closely describes Jacob’s ladder! The ladder, like an escalator, is a vehicle for ascending and descending. And while a ladder itself is a static entity, Jacob’s dream includes angels ascending and descending thus adding the dynamic motion analogous to an escalator.¹¹

Now, while Solms mentions that “ambition, excitement and anxiety are all represented by a single image of an ascending escalator”, I would like to suggest that Jacob’s ambitions are represented by the ascending angels, whereas his anxieties are given expression in the descending angels. Indeed this comes to explain why the dream relates that the angels were first ascending and then descending in that Jacob’s ambitions were first expressed then giving way to his fears. And as will be explained further on, it is precisely in this order that the divine communication addresses Jacob’s dream – first ambitions and then fears.

Ambitions

That Jacob had ambition can be seen already in the way he was born, “holding on to the heel of his brother” (Gen. 25:26). This, notes Hizkuni (ibid.), is symbolic of his ambition to assume the birthright. Such ambition, his brother Esau laments, is at the essence of the very name Jacob: “Is not he rightly named Jacob (*Yaakov*)?¹² for he hath supplanted (*veyaakveini*) me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing” (Gen. 27:36). In fact, the only stories of Jacob prior to the ladder dream are of his buying the birthright (Gen. 25:29-34) and acquiring the birthright blessing¹³ (Gen. 27). Clearly his life’s ambition was to assume the birthright mantle as heir to the Abrahamic covenant.

To this ambition, given expression in the ascending angels on the ladder, God responds. The divine address, coming on the heels of the parable, is clearly in direct response to what was expressed in the parable. As such, it serves as an implicit interpretation of the parable, reflecting, and thus revealing, the message secreted in the allegory.

The divine address begins with God introducing himself, not only by name, “I am Hashem”, but specifically as “the God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac.” While these references to the forefathers are quite anomalous¹⁴ – i.e., Abraham is not Jacob’s father, and ‘God of Isaac’ is unusual in reference to someone who is alive – they are an ideal introduction to the assurance regarding the covenant of the forefathers.¹⁵

¹¹ I would like to acknowledge my son Eitan Yisrael Navon for this insight.

¹² Ibn Ezra, Radak (ibid.) explain Esau’s cry as a statement of fact while Rashi, Rashbam, Seforno (ibid.) explain that Esau’s cry as a question: “Was it due to his character that he was so named?” In either case, the text links Jacob’s name to his ambitious nature – at least in regards to the birthright.

¹³ I refer to the blessing as “the birthright blessing” as Rashi (on Gen. 27:36) explains, “The blessing was for the firstborn.”

¹⁴ See Rashi, Hizkuni, Recanati, Kli Yakar (ibid.) who offer explanations.

¹⁵ See Radak, R. Behaye, Ohr HaChaim, Meshech Hochmah (Gen. 28:13) who explain the references to indicate that no descendant but Jacob is to assume the covenant.

God then goes on to assure to Jacob the covenantal promises He made to Abraham,¹⁶ in almost identical wording, as shown in the following table:

To Jacob (in the dream)	To Abraham (at various times)
The land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed (Gen. 28:13).	For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever (Gen. 13:15). ¹⁷
And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth (Gen. 28:14),	And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth ... (Gen. 13:16). ¹⁸
and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south (Gen. 28:14).	Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art, northward and southward and eastward and westward. (Gen. 13:14).
And in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed (Gen. 28:14).	... and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

Fears

Though Jacob remained ever ambitious, the circumstances of leaving the very land he was to inherit as well as being on the run from his brother who promised to kill him (Gen. 27:41), beset him with deep, and quite legitimate, fears. Furthermore, while the mere leaving of one’s homeland is fraught with the idle fear of the unknown, here Jacob harbored the well warranted fear of the very much known quantity: Laban.

To these fears, given expression in the descending angels on the ladder, God responds, in what again serves as an implicit interpretation of the parable. God says, “And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee whithersoever thou goest, and will bring thee back into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of” (Gen. 28:15).

The first part of the verse assuages Jacob’s fears of personal security, as Rashi writes, “[God promised him this] because he was in terror of Esau and Laban.”¹⁹ The second part of the verse mollifies his concerns over the inheritance, as Rashi explains, “whatever I promised to Abraham regarding his seed was in reference to you.”²⁰ And though God had already assured him of his inheriting the covenant in the first part of the divine address, such was in response to his *ambitions*. Here, in the second part of the address, God is responding to his *fears*; and in this latter part of the sentence, He responds specifically to the fear that he is leaving the land he was to inherit.

¹⁶ Compare also the promise made to Isaac contains the same elements (Gen. 26:3-4).

¹⁷ See also Gen. (12:7), (15:7,18), (17:8).

¹⁸ See also Gen. (15:5), (17:6).

¹⁹ Gen. (28:15, s.v., I am with thee).

²⁰ Gen. (28:15, s.v., which I have spoken to thee of).

A Dream with its Interpretation

Now, while we have noted a dichotomy between the parable and the divine communication, the two are soundly interconnected as indicated by the fact that when God appears to Jacob, He appears “on the ladder”!²¹ Furthermore, the words “and behold” (*v’hinei*) are used to introduce various elements of Jacob’s dream: the ladder, the angels, God’s covenantal speech upon the ladder, God’s assuasive communication. And though we find that “God said”, the text is merely explaining how Jacob perceived the encounter in his dream-work.²²

If so, the interpretation provided by the divine address was part of the dream itself. That a dream can come with its interpretation is not a foreign concept. On the verse, “And they dreamed a dream both of them, each man his dream, in one night, each man according to the interpretation of his dream, ...” (Gen. 40:5), Rashi and Ibn Ezra explain that each one’s dream included its interpretation.²³ Similarly the Midrash (Ber. R. 89:7) explains, “Pharaoh saw the dream and its interpretation with it; he remembered the dream but forgot the interpretation he saw.”²⁴ And the Talmud (Ber. 55b) explains that three types of dreams are fulfilled, among them: “a dream which includes its interpretation.”

A Vision and a Covenant

Having understood that the divine communication provides the implicit interpretation of the parable, it is imperative to understand the nature and intent of the communication. That is, what was the nature of this divine communication, coming as it does integrated in the dream? Was it just a dream? Furthermore, beyond addressing Jacob’s ambitions and fears, what was the intent of the Abrahamic covenant in this context? Was it a true covenant?

To answer these questions, it is instructive to compare this first divine “appearance” at Jacob’s departure from the land with the divine “appearance” upon Jacob’s return to the land:

²¹ Midrash (Ber. R. 69:2) brings two opinions: God appeared on the ladder, God appeared over Jacob. The vast majority of commentators side with the first opinion. Rambam (Moreh, Intro, p7); Ramban (Gen. 28:12); R. Bechayei (Gen. 28:13) says “on the ladder” is “peshat”; Malbim (Gen. 28:13). See also Matok MiDevash on Zohar (Vayishlach 173b), p.580. Rashi (Gen. 28:13) takes the second approach of the Midrash and interprets *nitzav alav* as “watching over” Jacob, which is however, also a metaphoric interpretation as opposed to “standing before”, which is how he interprets the same words elsewhere (see Gen. 18:2). This distinction further serves to support our contention that God was not prophetically addressing Jacob in the dream.

²² See further where we show that when God “spoke” the text goes to great lengths to emphasize His actually having spoken.

²³ Rashi (ibid.) also brings the Midrash that each one dreamed the interpretation of the other’s dream – but he explains that this is not the simple (peshat) meaning of the text.

²⁴ See also R. Becheyei (Ex. 41:8).

9 And God appeared unto Jacob again,²⁵ when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. 10 And God said unto him: ‘Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name’; and He called his name Israel. 11 And God said unto him: ‘I am God Almighty [E-l Sha-dai]. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins; 12 and the land which I gave unto Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land.’

(Gen. 35:9-12).

Here, in this second appearance, we find three of the four elements promised in the first appearance: multitude of people (compare Gen. 28:14 to 35:11), inheritance of the land (compare Gen. 28:13 v 35:12), perpetuation of the land to offspring (compare Gen. 28:13 v 35:12). Only the promise that “all the families of the earth be blessed” is missing; a point which was not a formal part of the Abrahamic covenant.

Rashi (Ex. 6:4) notes that it is these very verses (Gen 35:11-12) in this later appearance that actually confirm the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob. And indeed we find that the wording in the confirmation to Jacob is the same very wording used when God made the actual covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:1-8). Interestingly, to further emphasize the similarity, both covenantal speeches are accompanied by a name change.

1 And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him: ‘I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be thou wholehearted. 2 And I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.’ 3 And Abram fell on his face; and God talked with him, saying: 4 ‘As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made thee. 6 And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.²⁶ 7 And I will establish My covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after thee throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee. 8 And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land of thy sojournings,²⁷ all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.’

(Gen. 17:1-8).

Yet, if God brings Jacob into the covenant when he returns to the land, what then is the significance of the covenantal communication upon Jacob’s departure? To understand, let us contrast Jacob’s reaction to each encounter.

²⁵ Rashi, Radak, Seforno (ibid.) note that the first “appearance” occurred when Jacob was running away from Esau (i.e., in the ladder dream). By introducing this appearance with reference specifically to the ladder-dream appearance, the text is calling for us to compare and contrast the two events.

²⁶ Compare to Gen. 35:11.

²⁷ Compare to Gen. 35:12.

Following the Dream (Gen. 28:16-19)	Following the Name Change (Gen. 35:14-15)
	13 And God went up from him in the place where He spoke with him.
16 And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said: ‘Surely the Lord (Hashem) is in this place; and I knew it not.’	
17 And he was afraid, and said: ‘How full of awe is this place! this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’	
18 And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it	14 And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He spoke with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink-offering thereon, and poured oil thereon.
19 And he called the name of that place Beth-el, ...”	15 And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him, Beth-el.”

Looking at the two verses which find their parallel in both episodes (18-19 v. 14-15) we note that in each case Jacob sets up a pillar of stone and anoints it with oil, and in each case Jacob calls the place Beth-el. In the second instance he also anoints the pillar with a drink-offering,²⁸ which Seforno (Gen. 35:14) explains was in order to fulfill his prior vow of making it a House of God following the ladder appearance. Most striking here is that the text following the name change repeatedly states that God “spoke” with Jacob. Could this not serve to emphasize that, while the second encounter constituted a clear “spoken”²⁹ *prophecy*, the first encounter was a dream-based *appearance* – a vision?³⁰

That is, the total dream-work was part the making of Jacob’s ambitions and fears and part the making of a dreamy divine appearance. And while Jacob was clearly aware that his dream contained a divine appearance, as evidenced by his exclamations of wonder upon awakening (Gen. 28:16-17), nevertheless, it was an *appearance* which retained the ethereal quality of a dream – a vision, but not prophecy.³¹ It was enough to evoke a deep emotional awareness, but not to convey absolute ideas. It was enough to engender a deeply committed relationship, but not to establish an authentic covenant. It was experiential not intellectual, ecstatic not rational.

²⁸ Radak says wine. Ibn Ezra says wine or water. Keter Yonatan says both wine and water.

²⁹ I do not here mean to imply that God “speaks”, for as noted by Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim, part I, ch. 65), such is merely anthropomorphism where the intent is only that God communicates to man. Nevertheless there is a qualitative difference between a vision lacking “speech” and a prophecy denoted by “speech”.

³⁰ Indeed, Rashi (Gen. 35:13) writes “I don’t know what this comes to teach us”. Perhaps the lesson is that the message in this encounter was a verbal prophecy, in contradistinction to the message in the dream encounter which was purely a vision.

³¹ See Ramban (Ex. 6:2); Malbim (Gen. 28:13).

This then explains the stark contrast in Jacob's reaction to the two encounters. That is, though both included reference to the covenant, one was followed exuberantly by overwhelming awe while the other was followed soberly by simple acts of acknowledgement.

The dream encounter was an awesome vision, not a prophetic discourse. There were no words spoken to Jacob in the dream, only an awe-inspiring feeling conveyed. The text of the Torah records the "communication" between God and Jacob by the only means it has: words. And which words did it use to explain to its readers that God affirmed Jacob's covenantal ambition? The words its readers are familiar with: the very same words God used to *promise* the covenant to Abraham, but not to *establish* it.³² In contrast, the divine encounter upon Jacob's return to the land was the genuine confirmation of the covenant; as Rashi (on Ex. 6:3) explains that God established the covenant with patriarchs only using the name E-l Sha-dai (as in Gen. 35 and as opposed to Gen. 28).

Indeed, whereas the name E-l Sha-dai was used upon Jacob's return, the name Hashem was used in his dream: "And, behold, Hashem stood upon it and said: 'I am Hashem'." R. Joseph Schneersohn explains that the name Hashem expresses, "G-d in His Essence-state ... refer[ring] to God the Infinite, transcending creation and nature, supra-spatial and supra-temporal, precluding any existence outside Himself as an infringement on true Infinity."³³ By employing the name "Hashem" the text is conveying the notion that Jacob's vision was of "God in His Essence-state." And subsequently when Jacob awoke and exclaimed, "Hashem is in this place", he was giving expression to the marvel that he had beheld a vision of "God in His Essence-state." A vision, but not a prophecy.³⁴

The Zohar (Vayeshev 183a) explains, "There is a gradual series of intimations by which deeper knowledge is conveyed to men: dreams forming one grade, vision another grade, and prophecy a third grade." As such, upon leaving the land, Jacob dreamed a dream which consisted of the first two grades: the parable "dream"³⁵ and the divine "vision". Upon returning to the land, he achieved the third grade of communication: "prophecy."

Each served the well-timed divine purposes, the first: a dream and a vision, an "appearance"; the second, a prophecy that God "spoke". The goal of the first encounter was not to enter into a covenant on the eve of Jacob's exile; that was reserved for the second encounter upon his return to the land when such became relevant. Rather, it was to serve as an encounter that would affirm his ambitions, assuage his fears, and most importantly inspire an unshakeable relationship to which he would be forever beholden.³⁶

³² The promises made in Gen. 13:14-17 were just that: promises.

³³ *Kuntres Toras HaChassidus* [NY: Kehot, 1974], p.15. See also Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim, Part I, ch. 61), "[The Tetragrammaton] denotes God Himself..."

³⁴ See fn. 31.

³⁵ Here the Zohar indicates that even the dream grade is a communication from on high whereas we stated that it was Jacob's own "dream-work". The two approaches are reconcilable in that the Zohar (Vayeshev 183a) also states that "God reveals to the soul ... things which correspond to man's own thoughts." As such, man's dream-work is a combination of his own thoughts being reflected back to him from on high.

³⁶ On the power of the divine encounter see R. E. Berkovits, *God, Man and History* [Jerusalem: Shalem, 2007], pp. 17-18, 48-50.

The Vow

This approach to the dream encounter also serves to answer the puzzling vow that Jacob made upon awakening from his ladder dream:

20 ... And Jacob vowed a vow, saying: 'If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, **21** so that I come back to my father's house in peace, and shall the Lord be my God, **22** then this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that Thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto Thee.

(Gen. 28:20-22).³⁷

The vow begs the immediate question: how could Jacob say, "If God will be with me" when God just told him, "And, Behold, I am with you" (Gen. 28:15)? In so vowing, is Jacob not displaying a blatant lack of faith?³⁸ Many solutions have been offered;³⁹ however, the question simply disappears if the divine address was not a prophetic communication but rather a vision integrated into Jacob's dream. In this case, upon awakening, the vision served Jacob, a genuinely religious personality, as impetus to pray that what he had seen indeed be fulfilled. His prayer took the form of a vow, for the use of a vow is said to be efficacious in times of trouble.⁴⁰

If this is true, then the conditions of the vow should find direct correspondence to the divine promises conveyed in the dream. And in fact this is precisely what Rashi (Gen. 28:20-21) demonstrates, matching the dream promises to the vow conditions.⁴¹ So where many question how Jacob could vow "if God will be with me" – we now understand that

³⁷ Translated according to Rashi (especially "... *and* shall the Lord be my God, *then* this stone ...").

³⁸ Some have tried to remove the question by explaining the "if" to be "when", but clearly this is untenable as Rashi (Ex. 20:22) explains that there are only three instances when such a translation is possible, and this is not one of them.

³⁹ The midrashim (Ber. R. [Vilna] 70:4; Ber. R. [Theodore-Albek] 76:8) provide various theological responses, which we, again, do not deny. Rather, our goal is to reveal another facet of the text.

⁴⁰ "It is meritorious to vow [in a time of trouble]" (Ber. R. 70:1). See also Torah Temimah (Gen. 28:20, n. 20).

⁴¹

Vow	Vision (w/Rashi)
(Gen. 28:20): "If God will be with me"	"And behold, I am with you."
"And keep me"	"And I will keep you wherever you go."
"And give me bread to eat"	"I will not forsake you." For one who must search for bread is considered "abandoned," as it is said, "I have never seen a righteous man forsaken and his children searching for bread."
(Gen. 28:21): "And if I come back"	"And I will bring you back to [this] land."
"And the Lord will be my God"	In that His Name shall be upon me from beginning to end – that He may not find anyone unfit among my descendants as it is said: "I will do that which I have spoken to you."

Jacob made the statement in the hope that the dream notion, “And behold, I am with you”, would be true; and so too with the other vow conditions.

Furthermore, God did not find Jacob’s vow the least bit “impious” as can be inferred from His reference to get Jacob to act on it: “I am the God of Beth-el, where thou didst anoint a pillar, where thou didst vow a vow unto Me. Now arise, get thee out from this land, and return unto the land of thy nativity” (Gen. 31:13). Interestingly, God does not reference His own promises in the dream but only the encounter, “I am the God of Beth-el”. This, once again, demonstrates that the dream’s divine address, as a transmission of words, was not of import but rather the relationship created by the experience – a relationship that became reflected in the vow.

Conclusion

By employing modern dream interpretation to understand Jacob’s ladder, we have been able to unravel a tightly wound mystery, and in so doing, resolve numerous anomalies in the narrative as a whole. We learned that there are three primary levels of communication between God and man: dream, vision and prophecy, all of which Jacob merited as necessitated by his circumstances.

The parable dream served to clarify, for Jacob, his condition on the eve of exile. This was seen by understanding that the interpretation of the dream was in the divine communication. God’s affirmations of the covenantal promises made to Abraham implicitly served to interpret the first element of the dream – the ascending angels – which was an expression of his ambition for the covenant. God’s promises of protection implicitly served to interpret the second element of the dream – the descending angels – which was an expression of his fears. Consequently, this first of parable dreams fits the paradigm of all such dreams that find their interpretation in the text.

As an aside, by so interpreting the dream, we saw that Jacob’s dream expressed his ambitions which gave way to his fears, and as such the mystery of why the angels ascended before descending is explained.

The divine communication in the dream was on the level of a vision; one which served a two-fold purpose. As an ecstatic vision of God in His essence-state, Jacob was initiated into a relationship to which he would be ever beholden and ever long to renew.⁴² As a medium through which God conveyed to Jacob that his ambitions would be achieved and his fears would be treated, the vision imparted a message of existential import. For, in the words of Nietzsche: “He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*.”⁴³ On the threshold of a difficult exile, the message of the vision gave Jacob that “why”.

Additionally, by understanding that the vision was not an explicit verbal communication, we were able to explain that Jacob’s vow was not making conditions of God’s promises, but on the contrary, was simply praying that the message conveyed would be made true.

⁴² On post-encounter psychology see R. E. Berkovits, *God, Man and History* [Jerusalem: Shalem, 2007], p. 48.

⁴³ As part of his explanation of logotherapy, Victor Frankl (*Man’s Search for Meaning* [NY: WSP, 1985], p.126) quotes Nietzsche to emphasize that it is meaning in man’s life that enables him to live the best and survive the worst.

As for prophecy, this level of communication was imperative in order to bring Jacob into the covenant upon his return to the land. We saw that, whereas his dream-based vision was recorded in the words paralleling the covenantal *promises* to Abraham, the prophecy in which God “spoke” to him employed the words God used in making the *covenant* with Abraham. The strange threefold repetition that “God spoke” to Jacob served to emphasize the different nature of the two appearances. That is, though all interaction with the divine is of a non-physical nature, the emphasis on speech indicates a more direct and clear communication than a “vision” – which by its very name connotes something non-verbal.

The story of Jacob’s exile, demarcated by the “bookend” divine appearances upon his departure and return, put into relief Jacob’s personality, purpose and life mission. Upon leaving the land, God initiated a relationship that imbued him with the spiritual and psychological fortitude to withstand the pressures of a trying exile; and upon arriving back in the land, God established the promised covenant, bequeathing to him and his seed the land he so longed for, and now once again tread on.