

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's parsha Vayeitze we read about how, on the way to Charan, Yakov Avinu stopped to rest for the night. As he slept, Yakov dreamt that he saw a ladder. The famous dream of the ladder contains some of the most inspirational spiritual lessons of the entire Torah. The verse tells us that Yakov "dreamt, and behold! A ladder was set on the earth and its top reached towards the heavens..." (Bereishis 28:12) The Sages teach us that the ladder symbolizes the position of a Jew in this world. Although we stand on the ground like the base of the ladder, we strive to reach up to the heavens, like the top of the ladder in the dream. As the verse states, "A ladder was set on the earth and its top reached towards the heavens..."

The following emotional story illustrates how one Jew climbed very high in life and in death. For the first two decades of his life, Gavriel Kadel (not his real name) lived as a secular Israeli. Born and raised in the Holy Land, Gavriel knew next to nothing about his religious heritage. And then Gavriel joined the growing throng of Israeli baalei teshuva. Fired by a deep sense of commitment to Torah and mitzvos, Gavriel joined a yeshiva and dedicated himself fully to the service of Hashem. Just one year after his return to Torah observance, Gavriel had already made tremendous strides in his learning and yiras shomayim - fear of heaven. But then Hasmogha Pratis (divine intervention) intervened. Gavriel contracted a life threatening illness, and he grew weaker as the days passed. Friends prayed for his recovery, but Hashem had other plans...

Only a short time later, Gavriel passed away. His fellow students, his Rabbeim (Rabbis), all those who had come to know and admire the enthusiastic young man were devastated by the news. But even as they tried to come to terms with their grief, the Rabbeim in the yeshiva were faced with a troubling problem. They knew that they ought to visit Gavriel's parents to console them for their loss. Yet they also knew that his parents had been angry when their son had become religious. Would the parents even want to see or speak to the Rabbeim?

Torn by the conflict, the Rabbeim finally decided to consult with a gadol. They went to speak to Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, the son and successor of the Steipler Gaon. After listening carefully to the Rabbeim, Reb Chaim said, "Tell them that in truth, their son should have passed away the year before. But because he became religious, Hashem granted him another year of life to fulfill Torah and mitzvos." The Rabbeim left Reb Chaim with feeling that they were in a sticky situation. No doubt Reb Chaim knew what he was talking about. Yet how could they go to irreligious parents and offer this as a condolence? What did such people know of the power of such a respected Torah leader? Surely they would mock the words of Reb Chaim! No, Gavriel's Rabbeim decided, they would simply have to come up with some other way of consoling the parents.

The meeting with the parents proceeded much as the Gavriel's Rabbeim had feared. "You religious Jews!" the parents said bitterly. "What did our son gain by becoming religious? Nothing! He lost everything, including his life!" With anger and accusations being hurled at them from all sides, Gavriel's Rabbeim slowly realized that none of their carefully prepared remarks were helping. Perhaps, they thought, they should simply say what Reb Chaim had suggested. "We spoke to Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky about your son," one of the Rabbeim began cautiously. "He told us that, far from costing your son his life, his newfound interest in religion actually saved his life." The parents remained silent for a moment.

Emboldened, the Rabbi continued. "In fact, Reb Chaim said that your son was actually supposed to die the year before and that it was only because he became religious that he was granted another year of life." There was a sudden gasp from his mother. "It is true!" she yelled hysterically. "Every word the Rabbi said is true!" "You are right," the father said, tears streaming down his cheeks. "We blamed you for the death of my son, but the rabbi is right. Becoming religious did save his life." The Rabbeim simply could not understand it. What had brought about this change in attitude? What was there about the message of Reb Chaim that had finally gotten through to the parents of the young man?

After she calmed down, the mother explained: "Last year, my son began thinking about keeping Shabbos, though he was not really religious yet. Exactly one year ago, on one Shabbos morning, his old group of friends drove up to the house and tried to convince him to go along for some fun. Gavriel thought about it, but he decided against joining them. They drove away, laughing and mocking Gavriel for his beliefs. Later that day, the same group of friends were involved in a car accident and all of them were killed. If Gavriel had gone along with them, he would also have been killed. It was his newfound interest in religion and keeping Shabbos that saved his life. I was not willing to admit it then, but deep down I suppose I really knew that religion was helping Gavriel, not harming him. When you told me the words of the Rabbi, I realized that you were right. Thank you. You have consoled us for our loss." Said the mother. And when Gavriel's Rabbeim left the house, they went with a new understanding of the faith and trust we must have in the guidance of our Torah leaders. (Visions of Greatness, R.Y. Weiss)

We do not know how high our spiritual ladders will take us. However, it is our obligation as conscientious Jews to always try to climb in life. Spiritual life is eternal, while our physical existence is fleeting. As the verse tells us "...because you are dust and to the dust you shall return." (Bereishis 3:19) In the end, the dust returns to its source in the ground and the soul returns to its source above. We do not know how many days have been allotted to us. Thus, we must make the smart investment in our spiritual selves.

By doing mitzvahs such as keeping Shabbos, we climb the rungs of the spiritual ladder. This idea is hinted to in the dream of Yakov. As the verse tells us "A ladder was set on the earth and its top reached towards the heavens..." The challenge of a Jew is therefore to elevate his earthy being to become more like Hashem in heaven. The ladder must stay on the ground in order to climb on it, yet the purpose of the ladder is to climb higher. So too, although we must take care of our earthy needs such as eating and sleeping, etc., our primary goal is to reach the heavens.

In conclusion, whenever we see a ladder we should stop to reflect on our position in life. (Reb Zelig Pliskin) Are we climbing higher towards our spiritual source in Heaven above? Are we using our materialism to grow closer to Hashem? If we can stay focused on climbing the spiritual ladder, we will all live happier lives. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**