

Comments of Different Chumashim on “Jacob’s Ladder”
Havurat Shabbat Study Sheet – Parashat Vayeitzei 5768

[Jacob] had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. (Genesis 28:12)

Plaut: Ladder, or “ramp” or “stairway.” The sulam of Jacob’s dream reflects an ancient belief in a cosmic bond between heaven and earth.

Related comment: “A stairway was set upon the ground” (*Genesis* 28:13) There is nothing straighter than an inclined ladder, for if it stands straight up, it cannot be used. And nothing is more whole than a broken heart. Therefore, if it is inclined, even if it is set upon the ground, it is the only means for reaching the heavens. And similarly, “a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (*Psalms* 51:17), and nothing could be more whole than that. (Schechter Institute Commentary, quoting Menachem Mendel Taub, *Kol Menachem*, p. 118)

Etz Hayim: a stairway: We ascend toward God one step at a time, making one small change in our lives and stabilizing it before we take another step. Sometimes we slip and miss a step, falling back, but we recover and keep climbing. Most people do not leap toward God in one great burst of enthusiasm.

Related comment: Of all the patriarchs, then, Jacob is the most human, suffering ups and downs, living through successful accomplishment and suffering tragedy. He is the most human, the most like us. And we are called the People Israel because his are precisely the most human of tasks with which we are to engage: How to live with one another, how to love, how to raise families, how to create community. That is the stuff of Jewish law, the halakha, the path which we are to create in order to build a life that aims toward God. (Rabbi Ed Feld, JTS Commentary)

ArtScroll: Symbolism of Jacob’s dream [includes]...Mount Sinai. The ladder alludes to Sinai, since the words Sinai and Sulam have the numerical value of 130; the angels represent Moses and Aaron; and God stood atop the ladder just as He stood atop Sinai to give the Torah (Midrash). Accordingly, the Torah, given at Sinai and taught by sages such as Moses and Aaron, is the bridge from heaven to earth.

Related comment: Rabbi Berachya said in the name of Rabbi Helbo and Rabbi Shmuel ben Yosinah: This teaches us that the Holy One showed Jacob the prince of Babylonia ascend and descend, and of Media ascend and descend, and of Greece ascend and descend, and of Edom ascend and descend. The Holy One said to Jacob: Jacob, why do you not ascend? At that moment, our father Jacob became frightened, and he answered: Just as those must descend, so I too must descend! The Holy One said to him: If you ascend, you will not descend. But he did not believe, and did not ascend. (*Tanhuma, VaYetzei* 2, in Schechter Institute Commentary)