

The “Ups and Downs” of Others are Our Own

R. Yaakov Bieler
Parashat VaYetzeh, 5769
Shabbat Chesed

Among the many volumes found in our home is one that is part of Joanie’s collection of cook books, entitled The Challah Book: Recipes, History and Traditions.¹ One of the most fascinating sections in the book is a survey of different traditional forms in which *Challah* have been made marking various occasions in Jewish communities across the globe. These exotic shapes include: a three-ring *Challa* for *Shabbat Teshuva*,² symbolizing the intertwined *Ruach* (spirit), *Nefesh* (life) and *Neshama* (soul);³ the Hand *Challa*, associated with *Hoshana Rabba* when we reach out to God, hoping that our final judgment will be a positive one;⁴ and the Moroccan *Purim* bread, featuring a whole hard-boiled egg sticking out of its center.⁵ With regard to the latter, the author writes, “The egg, portraying Haman’s evil eye, is plucked from the bread and eaten together with it in an exuberant celebration of the defeat of the villain.”^{6 7}

A fourth intriguingly distinct *Challa* is the Ladder *Challa*, of Ukrainian origin, made for *Shavuot* due to the mathematical equivalence between the words “Sinai”⁸ and “*Sulam*”⁹ (ladder). An alternate symbolic association for this *Challa* is the meal consumed on the eve of *Yom HaKippurim*, when we wish our prayers over the course of the next day to ascend directly to Heaven, in effect to “storm the Heavens.”¹⁰ Yet, it would appear that such a *Challa* could also reflect the central image in *Parashat VaYetze*, the holy ladder of Yaakov’s dream:¹¹

¹ Freda Reider, *Ktav*, 1987.

² The *Shabbat* between *Rosh HaShana* and *Yom HaKippurim*.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 47-8, 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16, 50, 52.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷ The gory cannibalistic connotations of this custom parallels the Hebrew term for the triangular delicacy traditionally eaten on Purim:

“There are two possible origins of the name. The most popular theory is that the name *hamantash*, is a reference to Haman (also known as Homen), the villain of Purim, as described in the Book of Esther. A more likely source of the name is a corruption of the Yiddish word *montashn* or the German word *mohntaschen*, both meaning poppyseed-filled pouches. Over time, this name was transformed to hamantashen, likely by association with Haman. In Israel, they are called *Oznei Haman*, Hebrew for "Haman's ears" where children are taught these tasty pastries are the ears of Haman that fell off at his execution.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homentash>

⁸ “*Samech*” (60)+”*Yud*” (10)+”*Nun*” (50)+”*Yud*” (10)=130.

⁹ “*Samech*” (60)+”*Lamed*” (30)+ “*Mem*” (40)=130. (“*Sulam*” is written “*Chaser*” (lit. lacking) without the “*Vav*” that it sometimes would contain, in order to make this equation balanced.)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 63.

¹¹ It probably would be meaningful and memorable if each Shabbat, some sort of symbolism for that week’s *Parasha* could be inserted in one way or another into the Shabbat meals.

Beraishit 28:12

And he dreamt. And behold a **ladder** standing on the ground and its head reaching to Heaven. And behold Angels of God climbing and descending by means of it.

Interpreting the contents of dreams in general,¹² let alone prophetic dreams that are not accompanied by an authoritative explanation—as with the dreams associated with Yosef¹³ —is not a simple enterprise. And even if some general explanation for the significance of the dream or vision is given,¹⁴ we are still left to only hypothesize about the meaning of the particular elements that comprise each of these experiences. Consequently, commentators suggest various explanations for what the ladder and the spiritual entities going up and down it in Yaakov’s dream, represent.¹⁵

A unique interpretation is for the ladder and those ascending and descending upon it, arises from a particular Midrash:

VaYikra Rabba 8:1

(On *VaYikra* 6:13 “‘Zeh’ (this) is the sacrifice of Aharon and his sons that they offered on the day that he was anointed: A tenth of an *Eipha* of finely milled flour, a perpetual offering, half in the morning and half in the evening.”

R. Levi would open his commentary by citing (*Tehillim* 75:8) “Because God Judges, ‘Zeh’ (this one) He Causes to descend, and ‘Zeh’ (this one) He Causes to rise.”—A Roman woman from the aristocracy asked R. Yose *bar* Chalafta: For how many days did the Holy One, Blessed Be He Create His world? He said to her: Over the course of six days, as it is said, (*Shemot* 31:17) “For six days did God Make the Heavens and the earth.” She said to him: And from that time until the present, what does He Sit and Do? He said to her: He Makes marital matches...

(There follows an account of how the noblewoman tried to demonstrate how such an activity was not difficult and therefore unworthy of God’s Efforts, but she ended up failing miserably, substantiating the Rabbi’s contention that this was a task indeed worthy of God.)

¹² See *Kohelet* 5:2-6 as well as *Berachot* 55b-57b.

¹³ *Beraishit* 37:5-9; 40:5-19; 41:1-36.

¹⁴ See e.g., *Beraishit* 15:9-20. While it is clear from the text that what is happening is that a covenant is being entered into by God and Avraham regarding the inheritance of the land of Israel as well as the exile and redemption of the Jewish people, we are not told what the symbolism of the various animals, the birds that are split, the walking between the pieces, etc. specifically connote.

¹⁵ E.g., *RaShI* on *Beraishit* 28:12—A changing of the angelic guard from those who accompanied Yaakov within Israel to those who will protect him outside of Israel.

raMBaN, *Ibid.*, quoting *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* 36, to the effect that the angels represented the various kingdoms which will exile and subjugate the Jewish people down through their history.

Ibn Ezra, *Ibid.*, suggests that the angels represent Yaakov’s prayers ascending to Heaven, with the Divine Answer being sent down via other angels along the conduit of the “ladder.”

Said R. Berechya: In the following manner did R. Yose bar Chalafta answer her: The Holy One, Blessed Be He, Sits and Makes “ladders” by which He Causes this one to rise, and Causes that one to descend, as it is said, (*Tehillim* 75:8)... And the Rabbis interpret the verse (*Tehillim* 75:8) as referring to Aharon: The term “Zeh” is associated with Aharon’s descent in status, (*Shemot* 32:24) “And I threw it (the golden jewelry contributed by the people) into the fire and ‘HaZeh’ (this) Calf emerged;” and by means of the term “Zeh” he rose, (*VaYikra* 6:13) “‘Zeh’ (this) is the sacrifice of Aharon and his sons...”

Consequently, not only do successes and failures occur to different individuals simultaneously, i.e., the figure of individuals climbing and descending various “ladders” orchestrated by God (R. Berechya’s interpretation,) and in certain situations, it might very well be that the success of one person is literally predicated on the failure of another and vice versa,¹⁶ but the example of Aharon illustrates that “ups and downs” can happen to the same person over the course of his lifetime.¹⁷ Perhaps this is why the ladder imagery is shown to Yaakov as he embarks on a journey fraught with uncertainty and danger. Until this point, this eventual patriarch has led a fairly secure and predictable life, an “*Ish Tam Yosheiv Ohalim*”¹⁸ (a simple man dwelling in tents), living with his parents and fiercely protected by his mother. But from now on, there will be dramatic ups and downs in Yaakov’s life, and it is important for him to realize that just as his high points may only be temporary,¹⁹ so too his low points are not necessarily forever.²⁰

¹⁶ *Sanhedrin* 4:1 distinguishes between trials involving monetary matters in contrast to those that could result in an individual’s execution (e.g., do you begin deliberations by inviting those in favor of innocence to speak first [monetary no; capital yes]; how many constitute a majority to render a judicial decision [monetary always 1; capital 1 for acquittal, 2 for conviction]; can a trial be reopened (monetary always; capital only to reverse conviction into acquittal but not the opposite); can judges who originally took one position then argue the opposite position [monetary always; capital only those who originally argued for conviction can reverse their positions, but not those who argued for conviction]; etc. The standard explanation for these inequities is that in a case where someone’s life is at stake, the distinction between guilt and innocence is clear-cut, and Jewish law prefers to render an innocent verdict than a guilty one. However in monetary matters, it is hard to characterize one side as the potential winner or loser, because whatever the result, the gain of one directly entails the loss of the other. Even in a case that has been arbitrated and it has been decided to divide equally what is being contested, from a strictly “*Din*” point of view, one person comes away with more than he should have received while his opposite number ends up with less than was his due.

¹⁷ The “ladder” image is another expression of the theme of constant flux and change discussed in last week’s *Dvar Tora* entitled, “Change in the Blink of an Eye” at <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Toldot5769.htm>

¹⁸ *Beraishit* 25:27.

¹⁹ See *RaShI* on *Beraishit* 33:18; yet Yaakov’s “*Shleimut*” is rapidly followed by the disaster of Dina (*Ibid.*, 34) and Yosef’s disappearance (*Ibid.*, 37.) See *RaShI* on *Ibid.*, 37:1, who suggests that these calamities come about specifically because Yaakov desired to remain in his state of “*Shalva*” (peace and tranquility) apparently a condition that is denied to even a *Tzaddik*, let alone others of lesser standing.

²⁰ While it takes more than two decades, Yaakov eventually is reunited with Yosef and lives to see his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menashe.

Such a pattern of good and bad fortune suggests a certain symmetry in life and the world. While some who are disposed to a fatalistic perspective regarding the manner in which the world is constructed and its business conducted would posit that this type of balance precludes the possibility of intrinsic change either for the good or the bad within a particular individual ²¹--once your trajectory begins, it cannot be reversed, the specific example of Aharon in the Midrash cited above again serves to reject such an approach.

However, it is important to note that when each of us inevitably undergoes these reversals of fortune, we do not do so in a vacuum, irrespective of what is transpiring around us. Consider how this idea is articulated in the following Talmudic passage:

Temura 16a

(*Mishlei* 29:13) “The poor man and the man of wealth meet together, the Lord Enlightens both of their eyes.”

When the student asks of his teacher, “Teach me *Tora!*” If he teaches him, the Lord Enlightens the eyes of both; and if not, (*Ibid.*, 22:2) “The rich and poor meet together, The Lord is the Maker of them all”—He Who Made this one wise can Make him a fool, and He Who has Made this one a fool can Make him wise...

²¹ William Blake, “The Tyger” (*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th edition, ed. Ferguson, Salter, Stallworthy, W.W.Norton & Co., New York, 2005, p. 743.

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?...

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Chagiga 15a

After his apostasy, *Acher* (Elisha *ben Avuya*) asked R. Meir a question, saying to him: What is the meaning of the verse (*Kohelet* 7:14) “God Made even the one as well as the other”? He replied: It means that for everything that God Created, He Created also its counterpart. He Created mountains, and Created hills; He Created Seas and Created rivers. He said to him: R. Akiva your teacher, did not explain it in this manner, but as follows—He Created righteous and Created wicked. He Created the Garden of Eden and Created *Gehinnom*. Everyone has two portions, one in the Garden of Eden and one in *Gehinnom*. The righteous man, being meritorious, takes his own portions and his fellow’s portion in the Garden of Eden. The wicked man, being guilty, takes his own portion and his fellow’s portion in *Gehinnom*.

Just as Blake’s tiger and lamb cannot change who and what they are, according to *Acher*, individuals are not able to change the moral orientation with which they have been endowed. Their words suggest that there is a balance and synergy between good and evil that can be observed in the natural and human realm. While this is a clever strategy to avoid responsibility and accountability on the part of human beings, it would appear to be overridden by R. Chananya’s interpretation of *Devarim* 10:12, “Everything is in God’s Hands except for the fear of Heaven, i.e., whether an individual is righteous or sinful.”

Likewise you say, (*Mishlei* 29:13)...When the poor man goes to the wealthy man and says, "Assist me!" If he assists him it is well, but if not, (*Ibid.*, 22:2)...He Who Made this one rich, can Make him poor, and He Who Made this one poor can Make him rich.

Applying the metaphor of the "ladder" to the Talmud's sentiment, it is natural for each of us to be very preoccupied while we are going up or down our own individual paths; however that does not mean that we can't or mustn't reach out to help someone else who might be encountering difficulty during the course of his personal journey. Just because he may be on a different "ladder," and unfortunately finding himself slipping ever lower, desperately looking to regain his balance and orientation before "completely falling off" does not allow us to pretend that we are oblivious to him.²² *Chofetz Chayim*²³ articulates how in fact our lives become interdependent once we are made aware of another's difficult plight:

This is a case where an individual whose hand is extended, and by means of a loan that you would make to him, you can strengthen him to the point where he will not fall and then have to rely on charity. And engaging in such an act is much more significant than the typical act of kindness, because by means of this action one fulfills to a greater extent what the verse states, (*VaYikra* 25:35) "And when your brother becomes impoverished and extends his hand '*Imach*' (with you), and you grasp it/him, a sojourner and inhabitant, and he can live '*Imach*' (with you.)" The verse's employment of "*Imach*"²⁴ is explained by the passage in Temura (see above)... Consequently when such a person comes to you (or you become aware of his situation) you should imagine it as if your own hand is now extended as well. Should you not assist him, your own position will become destabilized, Heaven Forbid. However, if you do extend your hand towards him and assist him to regain his balance, then both of you will live and find stability...

The recognition that another's problems are literally my own, reflects an emulation of a Divine Attribute, as manifested, according to Rabbinic interpretation, in the Revelation experienced by Moshe at the Burning Bush. Explaining why God Chose to Appear to Moshe from the midst of a bramble bush, *RaShI* on *Shemot* 3:2, op. cit. *Mitoch HaSneh* basing himself on *Shemot Rabba* 2:2, writes:

²² See Devarim 22:1-4.

²³ *Ahavat Chesed, Yerushalayim*, 5764, p. 253.

²⁴ "*Imach*" is superfluous in the verse in question since it could have easily stated "And when your brother becomes impoverished and extends his hand—and you grasp it/him..." Therefore *Chafetz Chaim* posits that the addition of this prepositional pronoun suggests that in fact both benefactor and recipient become bound together in a common cause and a common fate as soon as one becomes aware of the other.

And not another shrub, because (*Tehillim* 91:15) "...I am with him in trouble..."

This particular interpretation of the phrase in *Tehillim* is rather radical due to its extremely anthropomorphic implications. A simple reading of the verse leads us to understand that God is Near to whoever is in trouble; to posit that He Endeavors to literally share the difficult experience itself is disconcerting from the point of view of God's Omnipotence and transcendence of physical limitations. The graphic and shocking representation of the Divine Ensconcing Himself, as it were, within the "painful" "narrow" confines of a lowly bramble bush in order to communicate powerful empathy for the Jewish people during their difficulties, suggests to the reader that he must strive to do the same, even as he concentrates on his own traversing of the "ladder" of his life.