



5 places

Jacob's dream occurs at "a certain place" (Gen.28:11). The Hebrew word here is *ha-makom*. *Makom* means 'place,' and with the prefix *ha* it becomes 'THE place.' Over centuries of Jewish thought, *Hamakom* came to be one of the names of God, bringing to mind the powerful assurance that wherever I find myself in the world and in life, God's all-encompassing presence is in *that* place, and in *every* place, no matter how 'ordinary' my surrounds. Indeed the whole world is filled with the presence of God. Think of an everyday place where, like Jacob, you exclaimed: "Surely the Lord is in this place!" Five examples follow:

1. "The chapel where we were married fifty-one years ago. The chapel no longer exists (it was demolished to make way for a school), but our love and our memories do. When we drive past the school we remember the site as sacred to us."
2. "The prayer-table in our living room. To a visitor it probably looks messy, but it is a regular focal point in our household and our little ones love to 'decorate' it as only they can!"
3. "Any beautiful outdoor space. Amidst nature I am always aware of God's presence."
4. "I once shared a coffee and a conversation with a homeless man in a bus shelter. We were two human beings 'connecting' without any of the usual social pretences of this world."
5. "Prison was where I learned to pray." [A Chinese Catholic archbishop, imprisoned by the Communists for 33 years.]



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
© Light of Torah, 2011

Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial pastoral use.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Genesis 28:10—32:3

Vayetze:
'he went out'

Why reflect on Torah?

"The Church and Christians read the Old Testament in the light of the event of the dead and risen Christ... But, this detracts nothing from the value of the Old Testament in the Church and does nothing to hinder Christians from profiting discerningly from the traditions of Jewish reading."

(Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1985)

Vatican II was an historic turning point in Jewish-Christian relations. Since then, despite occasional setbacks, the Church has continued to strongly reaffirm its deep respect for the Jewish people and a commitment to ongoing dialogue.

This message must reach not only hierarchical and academic audiences but grassroots church circles as well. For its part, *Light of Torah* is committed to encouraging Torah study in Catholic parishes and homes, drawing on Jewish sources and commentators. Through this weekly series which is focused on the first five books of the bible, parishioners grow in their biblical awareness by learning from the Jewish community, from its great Torah scholars and storytelling traditions.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 28:10—32:3

Our Torah portion opens with Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, fleeing to Haran having just deceived his father and his brother and caused a great upset in the family. In Haran he will fall in love, marry and start his own family; but for now he is on a solo journey. Our discussion today will focus on Jacob's dream of a heavenly staircase or ladder. It has a powerful impact on him. Read the story in Genesis 28:10-22.

Tasting Torah

"And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (28:12).

In traditional Jewish methods of biblical interpretation, attention to every detail of the text, including the order of words, is paramount. Did you notice what might have caught the attention of the sages in the above passage? Why, they wondered, does the Torah say that the angels ascended *before* saying that they descended. If angels of God come from heaven, wouldn't we expect the text to say that they descended the ladder first, then ascended afterwards? With a prayerful imagination, ponder this question as you re-read these verses and those around it.

Touching Torah

Some rabbinic commentaries view the angels in highly symbolic terms. A simpler and even more intriguing explanation, however, is offered by Rashi, the esteemed 11th century Jewish Torah scholar. According to Rashi's explanation (which echoes the midrash), the angels of God have specific assignments. Those that operate in the Land of Israel do not leave that area. So when Jacob departed from his homeland and headed for Haran, these angels ascended to heaven first and other angels then descended to escort him outside the Land of Israel.

Depthing Torah

Perhaps our 21st century western minds register some discomfort with Rashi's explanation! But remember that our task here is to uncover spiritual meaning in the text and to appreciate the wisdom of the great tradition. In this light, surely Rashi's explanation offers a profound insight into the constancy of God's protection. Wherever our life's journey takes us—into new geographical areas, new experiences, new challenges—God sends us help, and not just 'any' help, but assistance personally tailored to our unique circumstances; and not only from angelic messengers, but from special people who enter our lives at critical moments and show us the way forward with their loving care and guidance. It is a comforting thought, and one based in our faith in God's providence, that as our lives change, divine assistance is attentively moving with us from beginning to end. How beautifully this is expressed in the Christian funeral rite where we pray for the deceased: "May the angels lead you into paradise...and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem."

Doing Torah

Catholics celebrate the feast of Guardian Angels on 2 October. Consider this feast in the light of today's Torah reflection. Share an experience of God's protection and care during your life. Name special people who have been God's messengers to you.



In John's Gospel...

The first chapter of the Gospel of John tells the story of how Nathanael came to be a disciple of Jesus. In response to Nathanael's confession of faith, Jesus says: "Very truly, I tell you, you will see **heaven opened and angels of God ascending and descending** upon the Son of Man" (1:51). Clearly this is a reference to Jacob's dream in Gen. 28:12. Familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures is essential to our bible reading as Christians.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2006); Schermann & Zlotowitz, eds., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY, 1999). Scripture: NRSV.