

Departure. Let's just linger on this scene. What does this scene look like? This is not the son going off to college and the jubilant parents waving goodbye from the door as he drives away. This is a catastrophe. There is urgency. Stealth. Catharsis. Jacob moves quickly. There is no time for pleasantries or extensive preparation. His father is blind and comports himself as an old man. His mother has to confront the terrible consequences of

וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעַר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חָרָה:  
*Jacob went out from Be'er-Sheva and  
 went toward Harran. Gen. 28:10*

her actions, her loneliness, and her loss. Resolute and determined that things will work out for him, and that *she will send for him* when things calm down,<sup>1</sup> we wonder with her whether or not she will see him again. We wonder what she says when he leaves, whether or not she will accompany him a few paces before a final embrace and his last glance back. When she goes back to the tent, her life is in ruins. We wonder how she goes on.

**וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב** Jacob inverts his grandfather's journey. Abraham leaves at God's command *to the land that God will show him*. Jacob leaves at his mother's command, to the land that he will have to find by himself. Abraham leaves a younger brother, Nachor, who becomes a head of a clan. Jacob leaves an older brother, Esau, who becomes a head of a gang. Abraham journeys with his wife, his nephew and a retinue of servants and flocks. Jacob journeys by himself. What does he have? Nothing. Except words. His father's blessing. His brother's birthright. His mother's anguished promise. Compare this moment to the scene where Abraham ejects Hagar and Ishmael from his household. Even in that terrible rupture, Abraham gives her provisions of bread and water for what he thinks will be a short journey.<sup>2</sup> Here, there is not even a

hint of a morsel of food. Preparing provisions or receiving them from others upon a departure is a universal custom. Joseph will give his brothers **צֶדֶה לְלֶךְךָ** - *food for the journey* on two occasions.<sup>3</sup> But note: when Israel leaves Egypt in the middle of the night, it was such a surprise that all they had was their unbaked dough, and they, like Jacob here, did not make provisions for the way.<sup>4</sup> Why is there no mention of provisions here? To emphasize the upheaval in Jacob's life. Having been dependent on his parents for everything, he now has to fend for himself. Having been promised a future, he has to rely on God in the present. This is the moment he will constantly think of when he longs for home. And it's the moment that he will remember when he asks God to protect him from his brother when he returns to Canaan years from now.<sup>5</sup>

Rashi gives us another way of understanding the impact of Jacob's departure. While it is intensely personal, this departure takes place

שְׁבִימֵן אֲשֶׁר צָדִיק בְּעִיר, הוּא הוֹדָה הוּא זִינָה הוּא הִדְרָה; יָצָא מִשָּׁם, פָּנָה הוֹדָה פָּנָה זִינָה פָּנָה הִדְרָה.  
*When a tzaddik is present in a city, he is he is its  
 glory, he is its radiance, he is its beauty. When he  
 leaves there, the glory departs, the radiance departs,  
 the beauty departs. Rashi on Gen. 28:10*

within a social context. Like all larger-than-life personalities, Jacob's departure leaves a void for everyone around him.

<sup>1</sup> Gen. 27:43-45. *So now, my son, listen to my voice: arise and flee to Lavan my brother in Harran, and stay with him for some days, until your brother's fury has turned away, until his anger turns away from you and he forgets what you did to him. Then I will send and have you taken from there*— for should I be bereaved of you both in a single day?  
<sup>2</sup> Gen. 21:14.  
<sup>3</sup> Gen. 42:25, 45:21.  
<sup>4</sup> Exod. 12:39. Interesting: Jacob runs away from Esau with nothing and emerges in servitude; Israel runs

away from Egypt with nothing, except unbaked matzah dough, and emerges in freedom.  
<sup>5</sup> Gen. 32:10-11 *Then Yaakov said: God of my father Avraham, God of my father Yitzhak, O God, who said to me: Return to your land, to your kindred, and I will deal well with you! — too small am I for all the loyalty and faithfulness that you have shown your servant. For with [only] my rod did I cross this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.*

וַיִּחְלֶם  
 וַהֲנִיחַ סֶלֶם מֵאֶרֶץ  
 אֶרֶץ  
 וְרָאִשׁוּ מַנְיָעֵי  
 הַשָּׁמַיִם  
 וַהֲנִיחַ  
 מִלְאָכָיו אֵלֵיהֶם  
 עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ:  
**And he dreamt:  
 here, a *sullam* was set up  
 on the earth,  
 its top reaching  
 the heavens,  
 and here,  
 messengers of God  
 were going up and down  
 on it.**  
**Gen. 28:12**

What is a *sullam*? This is the only occurrence of this word in the entire Bible. It has been understood to be a ladder or a stairway to heaven. Both of those are compelling interpretations and artists who have tried to depict this scene have used both ideas. Take this 15th century painting from the French School of Avignon. This



depicts a conventional ladder. Angels do not depend on the laws of physics, so the impossibility of this depiction is irrelevant. It's all a dream anyway, and in

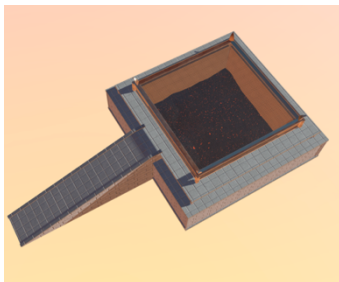
dreams anything can happen. In this second painting by William Blake (1805) we have a more ornate spiral staircase. Evidently, he was the first to introduce that image into artistic depictions of the *sullam*. Spiral staircases were not uncommon from antiquity throughout the Middle Ages, and it is quite likely that Blake saw many exquisite examples of them in England. Would he have engaged with philologists who knew Hebrew? Possibly. Some scholars believe that a *sullam*



ought to be understood as a ziggurat like the one depicted here. The ziggurat was a structure that was common in ancient Mesopotamia and consisted of several ramps that ascend to a series of staged platforms where rituals and worship would have been conducted. Considering that the Torah emerges from that world, it's possible that the dream is culturally appropriating a common structure and



Hebraizing it in the same way that Mesopotamian stories such as the Gilgamesh Epic or law codes like Hammurabi were adapted and transformed to conform to a biblical sensibility. But on the left, is an image that is often overlooked in the commentaries: the bronze altar of the Temple. In this schematic drawing, the large square altar is accessed by a ramp, called a *kevesh*. In a typical sacrifice, the kohanim would slaughter the animal in an adjacent zone to the altar, skin it and section it, and then a procession of kohanim would *ascend and descend* the *kevesh* to the altar carrying the sections to place them on the fire. That is depicted in this picture on the right.



A midrash: Bar Kappara taught: There is no dream without an interpretation. And here there was a *sullam*. That is the *kevesh*-altar ramp. Set up on the earth. That is the altar (because Exodus 20:20 says:) you shall make an altar of earth for Me. Its top reaching the heavens: these are the sacrifices whose odor reaches the heavens. And here, messengers of God: these are the high priests were going up and down on it for they were going up and down on the *kevesh*/ramp. Bereishit Rabbah 68:12

Ladders and stairways are lovely mystical images, and the ziggurat is intriguing. But Bar Kappara has plausibility. The altar is the nexus of heaven and earth. In the dream the angels are empty-handed. All they have is themselves. And words. Jacob can't build an altar; he has no animal to sacrifice. He's got nothing. Except desire, will, ingenuity, ambition, determination, inner strength, hope, faith, trust in God. He has himself. And words. Instead of a sacrifice, he can make a promise of self. In the end, when you have nothing else, that's the only thing you can give. Shabbat Shalom!

