by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

Yaakov's Prayer

It's a well known idea that when the Torah says (B'reishit 28:11) that Yaakov "encountered the place", it means that he prayed.

HAMAKOM, "The Place", is one of the names of God, who is in every place. (HAMAKOM can also be understood as the holy site of the Beit HaMikdash).

What was the nature of Yaakov's prayer?

The essence of his words is, "If God will be with me and guard me, then He will be my God" (28:20).

It appears to be selfish: if God looks after me, then I will accept Him as my God. There is an implication: but if He doesn't look after me and guard me, then He will not be my God.

Before giving a serious answer, let me recall an incident.

A bridegroom told me that he would not come to the synagogue service on the Shabbat before his wedding because Shabbat was his busiest day and he would lose a lot of money if he had to close the shop. Only if God promised to make up the money would he come for an Aufruf.

I couldn't make that promise on God's behalf, though I did persuade the young man that his bride was worth it and he should come to shule for her sake.

Think about his argument: "If God does something for me, I will do something for God; but if God doesn't cooperate, neither will I". Is that what Yaakov was also saying?

Maybe the rabbis are registering a protest against the making-a-bargain theory when they say that what Yaakov was doing was praying.

Note what precedes Yaakov's words. Before he speaks God says, "I am with you and I will guard you" (verse 15), and Yaakov responds, "Surely the Lord is in this place!" (verse 16).

He doesn't need to talk about HaShem being his God: he has found this already. Nor does he need to make a bargain ("If God will be with me...") - he already has God's promise.

So what is Yaakov really saying?

His "if" is not conditional, but a prayer: "Please, God, may it be thus, that You will be with me, guard me and be my God."

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Lifting the Feet

Though the translation reads, "And Yaakov proceeded on his way", the Hebrew words are VAYISA YA'AKOV RAGLAV - literally, "And Yaakov lifted up his feet."

According to the sages of the Midrash, the verse means the same as the English phrase, "there was spring in his step."

Having been buoyed and reassured by his dream and God's promise of protection, Yaakov was in a state of exhilaration.

No longer was he afraid of what the future might bring. No longer was he apprehensive that disaster was around the corner. No longer did he fear the worst.

A different explanation is suggested by a close examination of the verb NASA, "to lift up".

It is often used in relation to parts of the body. It frequently accompanies a reference to the eyes, e.g. "Avraham lifted up his eyes" (22:4). It comes together with the voice, e.g. "Eisav lifted up his voice" (27:38). It even comes with the heart, e.g. "Let us lift up our heart" (Eicha 3:41).

In this latter sense it is the origin of the long-running British hymn-singing program, "Lift up your hearts".

There is, of course, a mood of elation in this use of lifting up the heart, even though the original text probably meant something more sombre, i.e. "Let us think seriously", since the heart in Biblical psychology generally indicates the mind and not necessarily the emotions.

What all these instances of the verb NASA indicate may therefore be that "to lift up" is a more or less idiomatic way of describing a part of the body starting to function. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH