

Midrashim on the Weekly Parsha: Vayeira

Tanchuma, Vayeitze 2

אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחְמָן, אֵלּוּ שָׂרֵי אֻמּוֹת הָעוֹלָם, דְּאָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחְמָן, מְלַמֵּד שֶׁהֶרְאָה לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְּ הוּא לְאָבִינוּ יַעֲלְב שָׂרָהּ שֶׁל בָּבֶל עוֹלֶה שִׁבְעִין עוּקִים וְיוֹרֵד, וְשֶׁל מָדֵי חֲמִשִּים וּשְׁנַיִם וְיוֹרֵד, וְשֶׁל אֱדוֹם עָלָה וְלֹא יָדַע כַּמָּה. בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה נִתְיָרֵא יַעֲלְב אָבִינוּ וְאָמֵר, שֶׁמָּא לָזֶה אֵין לוֹ יְרִידָה. אָמֵר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְּ הוּא, וְאַתָּה אַל תִּירָא עַבְדִּי יַעֲלְב וְאֵל תֵּחַת יִשְׂרָאֵל (ירמיה ל, י). בִּבְיָכוֹל אֲמָלוּ אַתָּה רוֹאֵהוּ עוֹלֶה אֶצְלִי, מִשָּׁם אֲנִי מוֹרִידוֹ, שֶׁבֶּאֱמֵר: אָם תַּגִּבִּיהַ כַּנֵשֵּׁר וָאִם בֵּין כּוֹכָבִים שִׂים קַנֵּךְּ מִשָּׁם אוֹרִידָּךּ נָאָם ה' (עובדיה א, ד).

ַרַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בֶּן יוֹסִינָה הָיָה דוֹרֵשׁ, בְּכָל זֹאֹת חָטְאוּ עוֹד וְלֹא הֶאֱמִינוּ בְּנִפְלְאוֹתָיו (תהלים עח, לב). אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, אִלּוּ עָלִיתָ וְהֶאֱמַנְתָּ, לֹא הָיְתָה לְךּ יְרִידָה לְעוֹלָם. אֶלֶא הוֹאִיל וְלֹא הֶאֱמַנְתָּ, הֲרֵי בָנֶיךְּ מִשְׁתַּבְּדִין בְּהַלְּלוּ אַרְבַּע מַלְכֵיּוֹת בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה בְּמִסִּים וּבְאַרְנוֹנִיּוֹת וּבְגַלְגֵּלְיּוֹת.

Rabbi Samuel son of Nachman said, "These [angels signify] the nations of the world"; that which Rabbi Samuel son of Nachman said teaches us that: The Holy One, blessed be He, showed Jacob the ministering angel of Babylon rise up seventy rungs [of the ladder] and descend. [The ministering angel] of Media [rise up] fifty-two rungs and descend. And [the ministering angel] of Greece [rise up] a hundred rungs, and descend. And [the ministering angel] of Rome, [Jacob saw him] ascend and ascend and [Jacob] didn't know how many [rungs the angel of Rome would climb]. At that moment, Jacob, our father, was afraid, and he said, "maybe this one has no descent." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to [Jacob], "And you shall not fear, Jacob my servant" and "be not dismayed, oh Israel" (Jeremiah 30:10). Even if you see him, so to speak, rise all the way up to me, from there I will cause him to descend. As it is written (Obadiah 1:4), "Should you rise like an eagle, and place your nest between the stars, from there I will bring you down, declares the LORD."

Rabbi Samuel son of Yosina used to expand on the verse, "Nevertheless they continued to sin, and didn't have faith in [God]'s wonders" (Psalms 78:32). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to [Jacob], if you had climbed the ladder, and had faith, you would never have had a descent. But because you didn't have faith, behold, your descendants will be subjugated by all four of these empires, in this world, by taxes, oppression, and exiles.

Bereshit Rabba 76:2

וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיִּצֶר לוֹ, אָמַר רַבִּּי יְהוּדָה בְּרַבִּי עִילְאָי לֹא הִיא יִרְאָה לֹא הִיא צָרָה, אֶלָּא וַיִּירָא שֶׁלֹא יַהְרֹג, וַיִּצֶר לוֹ שֶׁלֹא יַהְרָג, וַיִּצֶר לוֹ שֶׁלֹא יַבְּרֹג וַיִּצֶר לוֹ שֶׁלֹא יַבְּרֹג וַיִּצֶר לוֹ שֶׁלֹא יַבְּרֹג וַיִּצֶר לוֹ שֶׁלֹא יַהְרָג. אָמַר אִם הוּא מִתְגַּבֵּר עָלַי, הוֹרְגִנִי, וְאִם אֲנִי מִתְגַּבֵּר עָלָיו אֲנִי הוֹרְגוֹ, הֲדָא הוּא וַיִּירָא שֶׁלֹא יַהְרֹג וַיִּצֶר לוֹ שֶׁלֹא יַהְרֹג.

Jacob was very afraid and distressed. Rabbi Yehuda son of Rabbi Ilai said, "aren't fear and distress the same? Rather, he was afraid that he would have to kill, and distressed that he may be killed. He said, 'if he gets the better of me, he will kill me, and, if I get the better of him, I will kill him.' And thus he was afraid that he would kill and distressed that he would be killed.