

MEETING AN ANGEL

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Genesis 28:10 tells of Jacob's hasty departure from his parents' home in Beersheba. He is moving fast to escape the anger of his brother Esau, and is heading north to his mother's family in Haran. He does not know what he is going to find. On his first night out, he came upon a place [*vayifga bamakom*] where he made camp. There he dreamt about a stairway that reaches from earth to heaven, and angels are climbing up and down it. Twenty years later, when Jacob is returning to his parents' home with his wives and children, there is another incident with angels. The word "*vayifga*" occurs again, but this time with the singular form changed to the plural *vayifgu bo malachai Elohim* (32:2).

It must be nice, or at least interesting, to come across an angel now and then. Thus far, Jacob has seen them twice. There is yet an encounter to come, when he wrestles with one at the ford of the Jabbok and receives his new name Israel.

One might wonder, are angels real? Are they visible, even occasionally? Do people ever encounter them? Could that happen to one of us at some time? A midrash focuses on the words quoted above: *vayifga*, and *vayifgu*, forms of the verb "to meet," or "to encounter," or "to come upon." Jacob came upon a *makom* [place]. The midrash tells us that *Makom* is an ancient rabbinic name for God. God is, so to speak, the space or place of everything, the whole universe!

This interpretation changes the whole verse: Now it says that Jacob came upon no mere place but upon God, the Lord of all space and places.

The American writer Annie Dillard once asked why people read books. Her own answer was that often people read books because they want to be surprised or touched, in some deep and moving way; an experience of love, or wisdom, or courage. Perhaps every reader knows what she means. Just recently, I read a book like that. It was about the American Revolutionary War, with George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, and British General Thomas Gage among the characters. I try to read a few pages

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