PARASHA OF THE WEEK / 07

Vayetzei

ויצא

Bring the ladder home

21 November 2026 · 11 Kislev 5787 · Genesis 28:10–32:3

A beautiful moment can lift us. The harder question is what we bring back into the life waiting below.

THE STORY, BEFORE WE SIT DOWN

Jacob leaves Beersheba for Haran, away from Esau's anger and toward his mother's family. At night he sleeps with a stone near his head and dreams of a ladder rooted in the earth, reaching heaven, with angels ascending and descending. God promises him descendants, the land, protection and a return. Jacob wakes in awe, sets up the stone as a pillar, names the place Bethel and makes a vow. [1]

At a well in Haran he meets Rachel. He agrees to work seven years for her father, Laban, in order to marry her; Laban gives him Leah instead. After the wedding week, Jacob also marries Rachel and undertakes another seven years of service. This becomes a painful family story: Leah longs to be loved, Rachel longs for children, and both sisters struggle to find their place.

Leah, Rachel and their maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah become the mothers of Jacob's children. Eleven sons are born in this parasha, along with Dinah; Benjamin's birth comes later. When Rachel gives birth to Joseph, Jacob asks to leave. He remains to work for a share of the flocks, grows prosperous and eventually departs with his household after God tells him to return.

Laban pursues them. Rachel has taken her father's household idols, without Jacob's knowledge; Laban searches but does not find them. Jacob confronts him about years of difficult service. They establish a boundary and a covenant, then part. As Jacob continues, angels meet him again. The journey that began with a solitary sleeper now carries an entire family into an uncertain future.

A LETTER FOR THIS SHABBAT

The place you almost missed

A revelation on the road

There is something tender about where the dream happens. Jacob has not arrived. He has no settled home, no family of his own, no clear picture of what tomorrow will ask of him. Yet God addresses him here. The promise of presence comes before Jacob has built the life we know him for. He does not have to become impressive before he can be accompanied.

When Jacob wakes, his discovery is that God was in this place and he had not known it (28:16). The place has not become holy because Jacob finally noticed. What changes is his awareness. That distinction matters around our own tables. A life can contain care, obligation and possibility long before we learn to see them. Familiarity sometimes hides the very things we most need to notice.

A ladder with its feet on the earth

Rabbeinu Bahya, the medieval Sephardic commentator, connects the ladder to the Temple and to prayer: Jacob recognizes a meeting point between the human and the divine. His commentary offers several layers of interpretation; it does not reduce the dream to one simple code. For our letter, the important thread is connection. Heaven and earth can meet. [2]

The mystical tradition also reads the ladder as an image of prayer. In *The Ladder*, Rabbi J. Immanuel Schochet describes prayer as a gradual ascent of the soul toward God. We begin where we actually are and move, step by step, toward greater attention and devotion. This is a spiritual interpretation of the dream, not its only meaning. [3]

Put simply: the first rung need not be an extraordinary feeling. It might be one blessing said with attention, one honest sentence addressed to God, or a moment of quiet before opening the siddur. We do not have to pretend that the mind is already still. A ladder is useful precisely because its beginning is within reach.

And its feet remain on the ground. Our practical reading of that image is that prayer should help us inhabit our responsibilities more faithfully. It can give us a clearer heart with which to return to a child, a difficult conversation or the work that still needs doing. A few attentive words can be a real beginning, even when they do not resolve everything.

A LETTER FOR THIS SHABBAT

What happens after the dream?

An awakening asks for a response

In his published video transcript, *How Do You Respond to Your Dreams?*, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis contrasts Jacob's response to his dream with Pharaoh's return to sleep after his first dream. His question is what we do with inspiration once it reaches us. Jacob responds with commitment. [4]

For us, the question can be wonderfully concrete. After a moving Shabbat meal, whom will I call? After praying for patience, where will I practice it? After feeling grateful for what I have, what will I share? These are small questions, but they give a large feeling somewhere to live. Inspiration becomes durable when it acquires a place in the calendar, the household or the way we speak.

The long middle of the story

The Torah does not leave Jacob beneath an open heaven. It follows him into years of family tension, disappointment and labor. When he finally confronts Laban, he describes guarding the flocks through heat, cold and lost sleep. The dream has not made the work disappear. The man who saw angels must still answer for the animals entrusted to him. [5]

We should not turn this into a claim that every hardship is good, or that faith requires accepting mistreatment. Jacob protests, leaves and negotiates a boundary. The parasha contains both endurance and departure. Spiritual life includes the courage to protect a family and to say that a damaging arrangement cannot continue.

This makes the ladder a useful image for an ordinary week. We reach upward when we remember what matters; we bring that remembrance downward when we act on it. That movement is our application of the image, not a quotation from the commentators. A moment of prayer may lead to more careful work. Gratitude may become generosity. A wish for peace may become a necessary, respectful boundary.

One rung for the coming week

Choose one moment that already exists in your day: before the first message, before a meal or when you come home. Attach one small practice to it. Pause for a blessing. Put the phone down and listen. Thank someone specifically. Keep the step modest enough to repeat. The point is not to manufacture a perfect week; it is to give your best intention a reliable way into this one.

At the table tonight, perhaps the invitation is simply this: notice a place you have been passing through without seeing it. A person. A meal. A responsibility. Jacob's ladder begins on the earth. So can ours. Shabbat shalom.

A conversation for the table

Begin with the story. Why might the Torah place Jacob's dream before the difficult years with Laban? What could he carry from that night into those years?

Make room for different answers. When has an ordinary place suddenly felt meaningful to you? Children might name a small moment when they felt cared for or noticed.

Bring it into the week. What is one intention you would like to turn into a repeatable action? Let each person choose their own rung; there is no need to give someone else an assignment.

SOURCES & READING NOTES

[1] The Torah narrative

Genesis 28:10–32:3; especially 28:12–22. Overview and original close reading; verse numbering follows the Hebrew Bible.

Genesis 28–32 · Sefaria

[2] Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher

Commentary on Genesis 28:12. Sephardic interpretive context: the ladder, the Temple and prayer.

Rabbeinu Bahya · Genesis 28:12

[3] J. Immanuel Schochet

"The Ladder," in Deep Calling Unto Deep, Kehot / Chabad.org. A mystical understanding of prayer as ascent.

The Ladder · Chabad.org

[4] Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

"How Do You Respond to Your Dreams?" Published video transcript, Vayetzei, 5 December 2024. Briefly paraphrased.

Published video transcript · PDF

[5] Jacob's years of service

Genesis 31:38–42; departure and boundary in 31:43–54. The letter's everyday applications are original reflections.

Genesis 31:38–42 · Sefaria

[6] Calendar & regional readings

Vayetzei, 11 Kislev 5787, Israel and Diaspora. Haftarah: Sephardic Hosea 11:7–12:12; Ashkenazi 12:13–14:10.

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An original Kavaná letter. Sources and published transcript consulted 15 November 2026. Mystical interpretations are identified as interpretations; practical examples are the letter's own. Follow your community's reading custom.

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