

# The Sleep of Jacob

By Tali Loewenthal

Sleep is a rather mysterious element in our history. Jewish people are generally thought of as restlessly active, forceful go-getters, high energy people... Large numbers of us go to bed late, get up early, or both: there are things to be done! The Parsha<sup>1</sup> provides an insight into the 'sleep' dimension of the Jewish people: both as regards our lack of sleep and also what we can achieve when we do sleep.

We start, of course, with our great ancestor Jacob. He is on a journey, and he comes to a place where he sleeps: "...and he lay down in that place." The Torah is so emphatic about the fact that he lay down to sleep that the Sages add an intriguing extra snippet of information.

We often find that parts of the narrative are skipped over in the text of the Written Torah, but are filled in by the Oral Torah, transmitted by the Sages. They tell us that after Jacob left home he spent fourteen years in the company of his illustrious ancestor Eber, a great-great grandson of Noah, studying the pathways of G-dliness. These early teachings about the Divine were so compelling that during this entire time Jacob did not actually lie down to sleep properly. He would only drowse for a while, and then continue studying.<sup>2</sup>

Hence the Torah says: "and he lay down in that place." Now, for the first time in years, Jacob really had a comfortable good night's sleep!

Jacob's sleep was in fact a amazing event, as is well known. He had a beautiful dream of a ladder, on which angels were going up and down. One explanation of this is that the angels signify G-d protecting him, wherever he goes. In the dream G-d said to him: "The land on which you are lying down, I will give to you and to your descendants."

The Sages comment: this means that G-d "folded up the whole of the Land of Israel and placed it under Jacob, in order that it should be easy for his descendants to conquer."<sup>3</sup>

Let us try to unpack this idea in terms of its component elements. The Torah regards the lives of the Patriarchs as setting the stage for the future achievements of their descendants. For this reason it sometimes provides many seemingly minor details—and sometimes leaves gaps, as we saw above.<sup>4</sup>

By the fact that Jacob slept on the spiritually compacted entire Land of Israel, neatly folded by G-d, he was preparing something important for his descendants. Of course, as we know, they would have to enter the Land of Israel and settle in it. However, this entry was planned to be completely peaceful. If the Jews had not sinned with the Spies, they would not have had to fight for the Land at all, the nations would willingly have given it.<sup>5</sup>

In order to create this future for his descendants, Jacob did not have to do anything at all, except to lie down and go to sleep. The essential mystical action of 'folding up the whole land of Israel' was performed by G-d.

What does this mean for us today? That in a profound, spiritual way, the Land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people, Jacob's descendants. The ultimate promise of Judaism is that without having to battle for it, the nations of the world will recognize that this is our right.

Does this sound a Messianic dream? Of course. Yet like many Jewish dreams, including that of Jacob in the Parshah, if you take them seriously they have a habit of coming true<sup>6</sup> !

#### FOOTNOTES

1. [Genesis 28:10-32:3](#).
2. See Rashi to 28:11.
3. Rashi to 28:13.
4. See Ramban to [Gen.12:6](#).
5. See Rashi to [Deut.1:8](#).
6. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's Likkutei Sichot vol.20, p.130-135.

#### By Tali Loewenthal

---

Dr. Tali Loewenthal is Lecturer in Jewish Spirituality at University College London, director of the Chabad Research Unit, author of *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School* and of *Hasidism Beyond Modernity: Studies in Habad Thought and History* (Littmann Library, 2020), and a frequent contributor to the Chabad.org weekly Torah reading section.

© Copyright, all rights reserved. If you enjoyed this article, we encourage you to distribute it further, provided that you comply with Chabad.org's copyright policy.