



Jacob's Ladder (2009)

Genesis 28:12-13, 16
finished size 5 ½" × 10"

In the Genesis story, Jacob escapes to Haran from Isaac and Rebecca's house, fleeing his anguished brother, Esau, who has just lost his birthright. Exhausted, Jacob falls asleep on a rock, and lo, a ladder extends to the Heavens, with angels rising and descending from it. Along the left edge of the embroidery design, we read, "He dreamt; a ladder was set on the ground and its top reached the sky ... and the Lord was standing beside him" (Genesis 28: 12-13). Along the ladder appear the words "Angels of the Lord were going up and down on it" (Genesis 28:12).

Biblical interpretation is rich in parsing out the movement along the ladder. The Midrash (*Breishit Rabbah* 68:12) carefully notes the order of this movement, concluding that angels accompanied Jacob in the Land of Israel, as they must rise to Heaven first before others descend. Later sources focus on the steps of spiritual journey implied by the movement along the ladder. R. Schneur Zalman of Liady, first rebbe of Chabad Hasidism, perceives a constant spiritual progression, rung to rung (*Tanya, Likkutei Amarim*). The embroidery conveys this movement with a sampler of stitches in the sky, rising along with the ladder.

The strange episode of Jacob's dream ends with Jacob's startled observation, "Yesh Adonai bamakom hazeh, ve'anokhi lo yadati. The Lord was in this place, and I did not know it" (Genesis 28:16).

I embroidered this phrase into the rock, Jacob's pillow. It is a fascinating remark. *Makom* means place, and the word appears six times in this brief story. In fact, *HaMakom*, The Place, is one of the names Jews give God. Often, though, God is named with a time reference: *Vatik Yamim*, Ancient One, or *Adon Olam*, Eternal One. One can even detect the flow of time in the enigmatic Name "Ehyeh asher Ehyeh" (perhaps, "I will be what I will become") that God uses as an introduction to Moses at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3:14).

But Jacob's experience in Genesis 28 confuses me. Why does he say of God's presence at the rock, "ve'anokhi lo yadati," meaning, "I did not know it"? Was he unaware of God's presence in that place?

I am surprised, because Jacob strikes me as a person more adept at interpreting space than time. In fact, he has trouble with timing.

- At his birth, despite efforts at grabbing Esau's heel, he fails to become the firstborn twin.
- When he marries, he's stymied because of the timing of Leah's and Rachel's births.
- In old age, his time is filled with bitterness despite his many gifts in life.
- He endures long years without Joseph, describing himself as someone living on earth but whose spirit has gone down to *She'ol*.

Indeed, time is hard on Jacob. In contrast, Jacob enjoys great success in the physical and material world.

- Jacob uses porridge to buy Esau's birthright.
- He uses animal skins to fake Esau's appearance to receive his father's blessing.
- Unlike Isaac, his father, Jacob can roll stones off the mouths of wells to impress his intended.
- Unlike his forebears, Jacob is a prolific father of many.

But at the rock, in this special place, Jacob cries "*ve'anokhi lo yadati*," unaware of an experience linked to the physical world. Even a person as physically connected as Jacob has a real problem: how can you experience God's presence connected to space? How is God *bamakom*, in a place?

I love images of God that connect to timelessness. But an image of God in the context of space is also revealing, though difficult. The Midrash *Breishit Rabbah* 68:9 says, for example, "The Holy One, Blessed is God, is the place of the world, but God's world is not God's place." Perhaps this means that God envelops the world, but the world does not exhaust

God. God is infinite in space, too, as well as in time. Maybe Jacob's experience is this: We experience the flow of time, so we have a sense that time is limitless in the universe. But that is not our experience of space, so it's hard to imagine how God can be in physical space and yet not bound by it.

And so this verse, "*yesh Adonai bamakom hazeh ve'anokhi lo yadati*," is potent with images that ask us to extend our ability to perceive God.