

Rabbi Shlomo Farhi

THE FIRST STEP ON THE LADDER

Gratitude as the
Gateway to All Growth





The First Step on the Ladder: Gratitude as the Gateway to All Growth

1. The Ladder That Shouldn't Exist

Yaakov falls asleep and sees a vision:

“Behold, a ladder standing on the earth, and its head reaching the heavens. And behold — angels of God are going up and down bo.”

Everyone talks about the angels.

Everyone talks about the ladder.

But the obvious question is always ignored:

Why do angels — who have six wings — need a ladder?

These are celestial beings! They fly. They soar. They don't wait for rungs.

Unless...

Unless this ladder isn't for them.

2. “Bo”: Not On It — In Him

The Torah says the angels were going up and down bo.

Not on it.

Not on the ladder.

In him.

Chazal explain:

The rising and falling isn't happening on the ladder — it's happening because of Yaakov, inside Yaakov, through Yaakov.

Yaakov is the ladder.

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Meaning:

The spiritual ascent of the Jewish people — the possibility of climbing from earth to heaven — is rooted in the merit, the blueprint, the spiritual DNA of our father Yaakov.

He didn't need the ladder.

The angels didn't need the ladder.

We needed the ladder.

Generations who would not be malachim.

Generations who would be tired, flawed, overwhelmed, imperfect — who couldn't fly if their lives depended on it.

For them, Hashem built the first fire escape.

3. When the Torah Hides the Backstory — It's for Us

Why does the Torah introduce Avraham with no origin story?

Why does Yitzchak bless Yaakov while thinking he's Esav?

Why does Yitzchak smell the clothing of a rebel, Yosef Meshisa, and say:

"This smells like Gan Eden."

None of these things the Avot needed.

They already earned blessing.

They already earned holiness.

Their resume was impeccable.

But the Torah is designing a pathway for their descendants:

Your struggles matter.

Your brokenness matters.

Your rebellion doesn't delete your portion.

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Your distance does not disqualify you.

Avraham's blessing belongs not just to Avraham the hero, but to every Jew — even the one who hasn't yet chosen.

Yitzchak's blessing goes not just to the pure Yaakov, but even to the Jew who feels more like Esav.

Because:

Hashem must leave a door open for the one who can't fly.

And that is the ladder.

4. When the Ladder Is Missing

On the day this derasha was delivered, Hong Kong's fires were raging.

Tower after tower burning —

flames jumping from building to building —

water unable to reach high enough —

ladders tragically too short.

People trapped.

People jumping.

A haunting scene.

And my wife turned to me and said:

“How can there be buildings this high without a plan to reach everyone?”

A ladder too short is a betrayal.

A fire escape that doesn't reach the top floors is a death sentence.

Suddenly Yaakov's dream hits differently.

Hashem's ladder reaches all the way up —

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because Hashem refuses to leave the highest, darkest, most unreachable floors without rescue.

If you can't fly — climb.

If you can't climb — take one step.

If today you can barely lift your foot — then just face the ladder.

The angels go up and down in him — because Yaakov represents the Jew who keeps trying even when wings are broken.

5. Thanksgiving, America, and the First Rung of the Ladder

Thanksgiving is often reduced to one question:

Turkey—yes or no?

Is it chukat hagoyim?

Is it innocent?

Do you like turkey?

Do you hate turkey?

Everyone has an opinion.

Everyone has a posek.

But the Torah's question is vastly bigger:

Are you capable of Hakarat HaTov — recognizing the good?

Because without gratitude, there is no Judaism.

We are called Yehudim — from Yehuda:

“This time I thank Hashem.”

The very first words a Jew says in the morning:

Modeh ani.

“I am grateful.”

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Before Torah.

Before Shema.

Before anything.

And whether you eat turkey or skip it entirely, one thing is absolutely undeniable:

This country — with all its flaws — gave the Jewish people a refuge, a home, the freedom to build shuls and yeshivot, eruvim and mikva'ot, communities and futures.

We were not begging to enter many countries during the Holocaust.

But we were begging to enter this one.

You don't need to celebrate Thanksgiving.

But you need to be grateful.

If not with turkey, then with tone.

If not with ritual, then with respect.

Hakarat HaTov is not optional.

It is the first rung on the ladder.

6. The Secret of Ve'ahavta L'Re'acha

Rabbi Akiva says:

“Love your fellow as yourself — this is the great principle of the Torah.”

What does that have to do with ladders, angels, and gratitude?

Everything.

Because the Ramban explains:

You cannot love someone as much as yourself — that's impossible.

But you can love someone in the same way you love yourself.

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Meaning:

If you want success for yourself,
want success for them.

If you want blessing for yourself,
want blessing for them.

If you want to rise —
don't resent someone else's rise.

Jealousy is anti-gratitude.

Gratitude kills jealousy.

And once you stop seeing yourself as the center of the universe, you can finally place God at the center.

The ladder begins with gratitude...

and continues with love...

and ends at the heavens.

7. Why Yaakov Turned Back

Yaakov passes the site of the Akeidah...

and suddenly stops.

"How could I pass this place without thanking Hashem?"

He goes back — just to say thank you.

And what does he receive?

The ladder.

Because:

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The ladder to heaven is built on the ground of gratitude.

It is not a coincidence that his dream appears only after Yaakov turns back to give thanks.

The first rung is Modeh Ani.

The first step is Hakarat HaTov.

The first movement toward God is appreciation.

Without that — you cannot climb.

With that — even the lowest, most rebellious soul can ascend.

That is the gift Yaakov bequeathed to us all.

THE TAKEAWAY

There is a ladder for you.

Even if you feel wingless.

Even if you feel unworthy.

Even if you feel stuck on the ground floor while the building burns.

The angels ascend in you.

Your potential pulls them upward.

Your gratitude opens the gateway.

Your humility invites blessing.

Your love expands the universe.

Just take a step.

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SHABBAT-TABLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is the “first step” you need to take on your own spiritual ladder this week?

Where can you begin?

What area of your life could transform if you practiced deeper Hakarat HaTov?

To whom do you owe unspoken gratitude?

Do you ever feel like the angels in your life are climbing in you?

What “rising” or “falling” do you experience inside?

Which blessing or opportunity do you take for granted — and how can you express thanks for it?

How does the Ramban’s definition of Ve’ahavta change the way you look at jealousy, success, and generosity?
