

“Hearts and Ladders”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

A woman once asked Rabbi Jose Ben Halafta: “If creation was completed in only six days, what has God been doing since?” He answered: “God spends his time building ladders, for some to ascend, and others to descend.”

That teaching may have been the inspiration for Kotzker Rebbe, who asked his students: Who was higher, someone on the tenth rung of a ladder or someone on the twenty-fifth? When they responded that the person on the twenty-fifth was higher, Kotzker answered: Who is higher depends upon which way the person is heading.

Are we ascending or descending? On Yom Kippur we measure the trajectory of our lives. Are we moving morally forward or backward? Where are we on the ladder that God builds for each of us each day?

We know where the decision to move begins. As Yeats wrote: “Now that my ladder’s gone, I must lie down where all the ladders start, In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.” The patriarch Jacob, fleeing from home, dreamt of a ladder for the angels. It began in the “foul rag and bone shop of the heart” but it also stretched to the heavens. Between heaven and the human heart, God has offered us a ladder.