

# BELIEVING IN OUR ABILITIES



**PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT VAYEITZEI**  
**RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN**

One of the best predictors of whether I will attain a goal or not, is if I believe that my actions can bring about the desired results. Believing in my ability to accomplish something specific will help generate a goal, boost motivation, and increase the likelihood of success. This power of believing in our own abilities was first formulated in the psychological literature by Albert Bandura and is referred to as self-efficacy. Bandura understood self-efficacy to be domain specific, meaning that we have different beliefs in our abilities, depending on the type of ability in discussion. I may have high self-efficacy for writing but low self-efficacy for calculus. Later researchers suggested that there can also be a general self-efficacy that is not domain specific. This means that I can have a general belief in my ability to accomplish tasks and overcome barriers, regardless of what type of task it may be.

As Yaakov makes his way to *Charan* he dreams of angels ascending and descending to the heavens. This vision proves impactful as he comes to the realization that G-d was present in that place (“*Achein, yesh Hashem bamakom hazeh*”), a fact that until this point, he was apparently unaware (“*ve-anochi lo yadati*”). Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropoli, perhaps bothered by the assumption that Yaakov wouldn’t have realized the presence of Hashem before the dream, rereads this *pasuk* with a message related to self-efficacy. To fully understand the point, we first need some background.

In his vision of the throne of Hashem, Yechezkel (10:14) describes seeing four faces; a cherub, a lion, an eagle, and a human. The *Gemara* in *Chullin* (91b) elaborates on Yaakov's dream and suggests that the angels were going up and down, looking at the picture of the human's face by the throne and comparing it to Yaakov's face. Seeing the resemblance, they became jealous of his presence on the throne and wanted to harm him, so Hashem had to protect Yaakov. Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropoli suggests that Yaakov was previously aware that there were creatures that could reach elevated spiritual heights. He knew that the cherub, lion, and eagle had their place by the throne of Hashem, but he was not aware that his image was there as well. It wasn't until the dream, where he saw the angels comparing the image on the throne with his face that he realized his true potential. In a brilliantly creative rereading of the *pasuk*, Rabbi Shimshon suggests that alluded to in Yaakov's word choice is the discovery of self-efficacy. Yaakov already knew the spiritual potential of "*achein*," in Hebrew spelled *Aleph – Chof – Nun*, representing the lion (*aryeh*, which begins with an *aleph*), cherub (which begins with a *chof*), and an eagle (*nesher*, which begins with a *nun*). Yet, until this dream, he was unaware of the spiritual potential of *anochi*, literally myself, and spelled *aleph – nun – chof – yud*, representing, the three from "*achein*" with the addition of the *yud* for Yaakov.

This new-found self-efficacy was not domain specific. It was not just limited to spiritual pursuits. Yaakov's new attitude pervaded all his interactions, as is clear from the very next episode regarding the shepherds by the well. In a powerful *drasha* ("The Stone on the Well – Boulder or Pebble?"), Rabbi Norman Lamm contrasts the attitude of the shepherds with that of Yaakov. When Yaakov asks the shepherds why they aren't working, they respond that there is a giant stone covering the well and until more people come to help push it off, "*lo nuchal*" – they just can't do it. They don't believe in their ability, so they don't even try. Yaakov, believing in his ability to accomplish, walks over to the stone, tries, and succeeds in removing it from the well. He believes in his ability to effect change, puts in the effort and succeeds.

How many areas of life—spiritual or otherwise—do we write-off as being too hard or not within our abilities? Perhaps if we learn this lesson from Yaakov, we can work on boosting our self-efficacy by realizing our potential, putting in the effort and increasing our chances of success and accomplishment.

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SCHIFFMAN**

[www.PsychedforTorah.com](http://www.PsychedforTorah.com)  
[PsychedforTorah@gmail.com](mailto:PsychedforTorah@gmail.com)  
[@PsychedforTorah](https://www.instagram.com/PsychedforTorah)

