

Beit-El

By Rav Ezra Bick

Parashat Vayishlach is dominated by two dramatic confrontations of Yaakov, once with Eisav (the person and the angel) and once with Shekhem (the person and the city). I would, however, like to discuss a short incident, which follows the two major ones, the return of Yaakov to Beit-El. This takes place basically "on the road," as Yaakov travels from Shekhem, and continues onward towards Efrata (Beit Lechem) (35,16) and Migdal Eider (35,21), finally arriving "home" at Chevron (27). While it is true that Yaakov builds both a matzeiva and an altar there, and receives a divine vision and promise, we have gotten so used to God reiterating the promise of the Land to the avot that we are likely to skip over this section without proper attention. I propose that we stop and spend some more time at this "roadstop."

After the conclusion of the Dina episode in Shekhem, God tells Yaakov to go up to Beit-El and build there an altar "to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing before Eisav your brother" (35,1). Yaakov, after first instructing his household to get rid of all idolatrous articles, travels to Beit-El and builds the altar (5-7). Subsequently, God appears to Yaakov (9-13) and then he raises a matzeiva (14), and, apparently, immediately departs, continuing his journey south in the direction of Chevron (16).

A.

A few questions and points to consider on the first half of this story (1-8):

1. Why does Yaakov decide to clean out his house from idolatry now?
2. God tells Yaakov to "rise and go up to Beit-El" (1). Yaakov calls on his family to "rise and go up to Beit-El" (3). What is the meaning of the striking phrase "rise and go up?"
3. Both God and Yaakov call his destination "Beit-El." Nonetheless, when he gets there, the Torah states, "Yaakov came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, which is Beit-El" (6). Why are we told now that the city is named Luz?
4. And, in the same verse, what is the significance of the phrase "which is in the land of Canaan?" If this were Yaakov's first stop in Canaan, this would make sense, but since Yaakov has already been in Canaan since he arrived at Shekhem, it is very strange to be identifying sites within Canaan as "in the land of Canaan." In fact, this appellation appears only when Yaakov arrived at Shekhem, his first stop (33,18) and here, but not at any of Yaakov's other stops on his way south.
5. Yaakov, in Shekhem, speaks to "his house and all who are with him" and suggests travelling to Beit-El. At Beit-El, we find "Yaakov arrived... he and all the people ('am') who are with him." Somewhere along the way, his "household" has

become his people ("am" - in the sense of "a people, a nation" and not as the plural of person).

6. Devora, the nursemaid of Rivka, dies and is buried at Beit-El. What was she doing there, and what does this have to do with the story?
7. Yaakov had sworn, when he awoke from the dream in Beit-El when he was fleeing Eisav, that the matzeiva that he had erected then would become "a house of God." In fact, he will, soon, erect a matzeiva in Beit-El and offer a libation on it. If the purpose of his journey now is to fulfill the vow, as most commentators claim, why does God tell him to build an altar? Why is that the first thing he does, and only after the subsequent vision of God does he re-erect the matzeiva?

B.

Yaakov arrives in Eretz Yisrael twice:

- a. when he comes to Shekhem - "Yaakov came whole to the city Shekhem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan Aram, and he camped opposite the city" (33,18), and
- b. once when he comes to Beit-El - "Yaakov came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, which is Beit-El" (35,6).

The expression "which is in the land of Canaan" is a clear indication that this is Yaakov's point of arrival in a new land. This is confirmed by the expression (in the first case), "when he came from Padan Aram." Yaakov entered Shekhem WHEN HE CAME FROM ARAM. Now when Yaakov arrives in Beit-El we do not have this additional phrase, but, just a few verses later, we find, "God appeared to Yaakov again, WHEN HE CAME FROM PADAN ARAM, and blessed him" (9). Since we know that this took place in Beit-El - "Yaakov called the name of the place where God spoke to him Beit-El" (15) - it turns out that this second confirmation that Beit-El is an arrival point is confirmed.

This point is, I think, greatly emphasized by the name-switch of Beit-El in the story. God tells Yaakov to go to Beit-El. Yaakov tells his family that they are going to Beit-El. Yet, when they finally get there, we are told that Yaakov has arrived in Luz - which is Beit-El. In other words, the goal is clearly Beit-El, a location saturated with kedusha, with the name that Yaakov gave it to commemorate his meeting with God and his vision of the gate of heaven. However, until Yaakov gets there, the place is actually the Canaanite city of Luz. The Torah has to tell us that this place is the same place called Beit-El beforehand; hence the phrase "Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, which is Beit-El." The conclusion is an editorial comment, for those who forgot that Luz is the same place as Beit-El and therefore are likely to be confused. But the uncommented narrative reads, "Yaakov came to Luz in the land of Canaan." In other words, before this point, Yaakov is not in the environment we associate with Eretz Yisrael, a land of holiness, a land where there is a place which is "the house of God and the gate of heaven." Despite the geographical border of Canaan, which Yaakov has crossed some time earlier on his way to Shekhem, Yaakov has

not actually returned yet to the land of his fathers. Only after Yaakov builds the altar does the narrative refer to the place as Beit-El.

The reason is that, at this point in the Biblical narrative, at least as concerns Yaakov, the Land of Israel is a reflection of the life of Yaakov. Israel is the land where the forefathers carry out the Divine design of building the Jewish nation. Yaakov has been "out on vacation" from that project for all the years that he has been in Lavan's house. He has to re-inaugurate his career and his status as an "av," and only from that point on will he be back on the course, and, as a corollary result, back in Eretz Yisrael.

The place for this inaugural is Beit-El. The reason is spelled out in the command of God: "Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled before Eisav your brother." Beit-El was the place that Yaakov LEFT Eretz Yisrael. (The midrash which states that from Beit-El Yaakov proceeded directly to Aram with "kefitzat haderekh," a miraculous warp of space, makes this true literally). The vision in the beginning of Vayeitze is Yaakov's farewell to Israel, to the land of holiness and the presence of God. The content of God's message there is that he will protect Yaakov and be with him in exile and return him home. In other words, Yaakov "dropped out" there, and that is the place that he returns to his destiny.

Yaakov understands this, and therefore cleanses his family from the dust of idolatry that might have come with them from Aram. Habits that were appropriate in Aram, leniencies that were acceptable, must be done away with before commencing the great push onward in Jewish history. It is not a question here of avoiding sin. The emphasis is, as Yaakov states, "and purify yourselves and change your clothes." Yaakov is declaring a new beginning. Both God and Yaakov therefore call this journey "rising and going up." The reference, of course, is not merely to the altitude of Beit-El. "Rise up" means to raise oneself, to stir and gather one's powers, to ascend spiritually. God is telling Yaakov to make aliya. The altar that he commands Yaakov to build there is not the fulfillment of Yaakov's vow but an altar of consecration, reminiscent of the altar that Avraham built when he entered the land of Israel (12,7 - in Avraham's case it was in Shekhem!, and later in Beit-El; 12,8).

There is one further difference between Yaakov before Beit-El and after. By accepting his destiny, by re-inaugurating his career as an "av" - and remember, Yaakov is the final av, the one who is followed by a nation and not individuals - Yaakov transforms his family from a "house" (bayit) into a "people" (am). In Aram he was the father of a family, albeit a large one. Once we see him as an av in Eretz Yisrael, he is the leader of a people. By the time he gets to Beit-El, he has become "Yaakov and the people who are with him" (v. 6).

I have answered all the questions I raised, except that about Devora, Rivka's nursemaid. I am not sure about this, but I suspect that she represents the world of Aram. I pointed out last week that Yaakov divorces himself from Aram at Galeid. Devora is the last remnant of that world. As a nursemaid, she signifies the nurturing that Rivka received in her father's house. That connection is now cut completely, that chapter in Yaakov's life closed. Yaakov is completely a man of Israel and Eretz Yisrael.

C.

The second part of our story begins when God appears to Yaakov and blesses him, changing his name. God then says:

I am Kel Shakkai, be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come out of your loins.

And the land which I gave to Avraham and to Yitzchak shall I give to you, and to your seed after you shall I give the land (35,11-12).

Does this blessing sound familiar? It is practically word-for-word the blessing which Yitzchak gave Yaakov when he left to flee to Aram, even to the name of God:

And Kel Shakkai shall bless you, and make you fruitful and multiply you, and you shall be a community of nations.

And He shall give you the blessing of Avraham, to you and your seed with you, to inherit the land you inhabit, which God gave to Avraham (28,3-4).

It is as though the twenty years that Yaakov spent in Aram (and fourteen more, according to Chazal, that he spent in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever) are merely a dream. God picks up EXACTLY where the story left off when Yaakov left. The birkat Avraham, Yaakov's career as an av, has been in suspended animation, frozen in time. Yaakov is now returning to the point where he left, both geographically (Beit-El), and spiritually. Yaakov's years in Aram should be placed in parentheses.

In fact, that is what Yaakov does. He places those years within parentheses, a matzeiva on each end. When he left for Aram he raised a matzeiva and prayed for protection on his journey out of Eretz Yisrael, in other words, on his exit from national history. When he returned, when he realized that he had completely returned "from Padan Aram," had reached "the land of Canaan," and had resumed his role as forefather, where not children but "nations and community of nations will come from him," he then erected another matzeiva, in the same place, at the same point, thereby bracketing the years of personal development and drawing the straight line from his blessing at the hands of his father so many years before and the continuation of the role implicit in those blessings now. The two matzeivot are brackets around the years that Yaakov's career was suspended, the years that he was out of Eretz Yisrael.

God is giving Yaakov a new name, and granting him the exact same blessing that Yitzchak had given him years earlier. The blessing is the continuation of the blessing of Avraham (and indeed is quite similar to God's blessing to Avraham when He changed Avram's name - 17,5-6 - "I shall multiply you exceedingly and make nations of you; and kings will come out of you"). The entire episode is based on the idea that this point, Beit-El, the place where Yaakov took his leave of Eretz Yisrael, is the place where he can return to his role as an av. This is on the one hand the place which serves as the entry-point to Eretz Yisrael for Yaakov, when we consider him in his historical role (rather than as an individual) - that is what we saw in the first half of the story - and, on the other hand, the place where God confirms his new identity, as Yisrael, father of a nation. That this revelation of God is not connected to Yaakov's circumstances after the incident in Shekhem, but to

his return from Aram to Eretz Yisrael is quite explicit in the description the Torah gives. "God appeared to Yaakov AGAIN when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him" (35,9). This revelation is dated "when Yaakov comes from Padan Aram," although we know he has been in Shekhem for some time. But even more explicit – God is appearing to Yaakov AGAIN – a clear reference to the dream of the ladder. This revelation continues that one.

This explains a curious phrase that repeats itself three times at the end of our story. -

God ascended from him, at the PLACE HE SPOKE WITH HIM.

And Yaakov erected a monument, AT THE PLACE HE SPOKE WITH HIM...

Yaakov called the place WHERE GOD SPOKE TO HIM THERE Beit-El.

(35,13-15)

Rashi (13 – in printed Chumashim the comment appears on v.14, but it should be on v.13) comments "I do not know what this is teaching us." I would like to suggest that the emphasized phrase does not refer to the place where God spoke to him NOW, but to where He spoke to him 35 years before, on the night of the dream of the ladder. The first verse states that God ascended from the spot where He had spoken before; in other words, this now is the conclusion of that prior revelation. Everything that took place in the while can be skipped, or blocked out. Similarly, Yaakov erects the new monument not in the spot where God spoke now, to commemorate a special occasion, but in the spot that God spoke THEN, as a parallel to the previous monument. The name Beit-El, we already know, refers to the first revelation, which has been continued now as though there were no interruption, and that is why Yaakov reconfirms the name of the place. The whole purpose of the story is to bring us, literally, to the point where we left off at the beginning of Parashat Toldot. We are back at "the place He spoke to him."

Further study:

1. Rachel dies shortly after this incident. One opinion in Chazal says that in Eretz Yisrael, the prohibition of marrying two sisters came into effect. Why, then, did she die now?
2. According to Chazal, Rivka died at the same time as Devora (see Ramban). Is there any connection between Rivka dying and the revelation to Yaakov?
3. There are three points of separation between Yaakov and Aram; Galeid, which, as I pointed out last week is "on the mountain," Shekhem, where Yaakov buys a field, and Beit-El, the house of God. This should remind you of a famous midrash....

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