

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
Parashat Hashavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

This parasha series is dedicated  
Le-zekher Nishmat HaRabanit Chana bat HaRav Yehuda Zelig zt"l.

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Dedicated in loving memory of my father,

Shimon Ben David Moshe z"l, by Craig Lubner.

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PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

Calling In Hashem's Name

By Rav Yehuda Rock

In this week's parasha we encounter, for the first time, a phenomenon that occurs with some frequency among the forefathers: calling in God's Name. Avraham calls in God's Name three times, Yitzchak once, and as we will see, it seems that Yaakov continues this tradition twice, although the Torah's wording is different in Yaakov's case. In this shiur we will attempt to understand the meaning of the phrase "He called in God's Name" and its significance.

We will begin by surveying the times that Avraham and Yitzchak called in God's Name:

Bereishit 12:8 "He built there an altar to God and called in God's Name".

" 13:3-4He went on his journeys... to the location of the altar that he had originally made there, and there Avram called in God's Name".

" 21:33He planted a tamarisk in Be'er-Sheva and called there in the Name of God, the Eternal God".

" 26:25He built there an altar and called in God's Name".

What stands out is that calling in God's Name usually occurs following the building of an altar (without going into the question of the significance of the tamarisk). Later on we will return to this point.

The classical commentators supply two explanations for calling in God's Name.

The first explanation is that calling in God's Name means calling to Him; in other words – prayer. Onkelos translates all four occurrences of calling in God's name as prayer. Likewise, Rashi on 12:8 explains: "And he prayed there for them." Similarly, the Ibn Ezra, in the first of two alternate explanations, says: "The meaning of 'He called in God's Name' is prayer".

The Torah does not tell us why and for what they were praying. Rashi (based on the Gemara in Sanhedrin 44b) attempts to fill in this gap by adding information beyond that which is given in the text of the Torah: "He foresaw that his children would fail in the sin of Akhan and prayed for them there." At least according to Rashi, it does not seem as though there is any direct connection between building the altars and praying.

The Ibn Ezra suggests a second explanation: "Calling upon people to worship God." In other words, the call is not directed at God, but rather God's Name is the content of the call, while the call is directed at people in general. The Ramban, as well, explains the phrase in a similar fashion, emphasizing the context of the building of the altar: "The correct explanation is that he would call God's Name aloud there in front of the altar, proclaiming Him to people, that He is God." The Ramban quotes a source for this explanation from Bereishit Rabba 39:16, "'He called in God's Name' – this teaches us that he caused God's Name to be called by every person. Alternatively: 'He called' – he began converting converts and bringing them under the wings of the Shekhina." Rashi on 21:33 explains the phrase in this general direction as well.

According to this explanation, the verse here is not describing a specific action by Avraham, but rather as a general course of action, campaigning for worshipping God.

Modern scholars have suggested a third explanation. These critics point to two verses from the Prophets. The first verse is from Tzefanya (3:9): "For then I will make the nations pure of speech, so that they all to call in God's Name, to worship Him together." The second verse is in Yirmiyahu (10:25): "Pour out Your anger on the nations that have not heeded You and on the tribes that have not called in Your Name." From the parallelisms in both verses, we can conclude that calling in God's Name is an expression meaning worshipping God in general. The background of this use of the phrase could possibly be prayer or other verbal expressions that employ God's Name, but in any case the phrase has already attained the general meaning of worshipping Him. This explanation of calling in God's Name works well with an earlier appearance of the phrase, in Bereishit 4:26: "And to Shet, in turn, a son was born, and he named him Enosh. It was then that calling in God's Name first began." The fact that calling in God's Name by the forefathers occurs immediately after building altars may be an indication that the specific form of worship is sacrificial.

We can understand calling in God's Name more deeply by examining the meaning of the word shem – name.

In the book of Devarim, the Temple's location is referred to as "The place where God will choose to rest His Name." The word "rest" in this sentence is a (loose) translation of le-shaken, which has the same root as the noun shekhina; shekhina literally means "dwelling," and usually refers to the Divine Presence. This noun stems from rabbinic times, while the Torah uses this root as a verb. The noun used in the Torah, as in the verse just quoted, is shem – name.

The word shem, then, beyond the basic meaning of "name" in the sense of what something or someone is called, and beyond the secondary meaning of "fame," has a tertiary meaning: that of the Divine Presence and glory. The reason is that the conceptual meaning of shekhina is a place from which God's will and glory are revealed and recognized. It is from the place of Shekhina that God's Name goes forth.

This meaning of shem was known to Chazal. Regarding the words of the people of Bavel, who when building the city and tower said, "And we will make for ourselves a name (shem)," the rabbis commented: "It is taught: Rabbi Yishmael said, there is no name (shem) but idolatry" (Bereishit Rabba 38:8), and "They said: we will not accept that He should choose for Himself the heavens and give us the earth; rather, let us make for ourselves a tower, and make an idol at its top, and put a sword in its hand, and it will appear to be battling against Him" (Ibid. 6). The rabbis understood that the word shem in general denotes a divine presence. When referring to God, it denotes His Divine Presence; in other cases, it can refer to the presence of a pagan deity. The Ramban, too, also in the context of the Bavel narrative, points out this meaning of shem: "But whoever knows the meaning of shem will understand their intention in saying, 'And we will make for ourselves a name,' and will know the extent of what they thought to do with the tower, and will understand the entire matter, for they had an evil thought"....

This use of shem appears also in the context of building an altar and sacrificing. In Shemot 20:20 it says: "You shall make for me an earthen altar and slaughter on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your flock and your cattle. Wherever I mention my shem (Name) I will come to you and bless you." The divine revelation and blessing mentioned in the second sentence of this verse are a result of the building of the altar and sacrificing mentioned in the first sentence of the verse. Chazal in Bereishit Rabba (82:2) interpreted the verse this way: "...This person who built an altar for My Name – I will reveal myself to him and bless him...." The location of the altar and the sacrifices, then, is referred to as the place where His shem is mentioned, that is, as a place of Shekhina, the Divine Presence.

We can learn from this that building an altar and sacrificing are, in essence, establishing a place of Shekhina – a place where God's Will is done and His Name is glorified and recognized.

In view of all this, we should interpret the forefathers' calling in God's Name in a similar fashion. Avraham and Yitzchak traveled from place to place and established institutions of Shekhina – altars for worshipping God, to which people would come to worship, and through which God's Name would be glorified in the world. The forefathers' calling in God's Name certainly was done by building an altar and sacrificing, in accordance with the third explanation above, but its meaning is not limited to this worship; rather, it expresses a wider meaning and effect. This meaning certainly includes the kind of presence which influences people to recognize God's glory and to come worship Him, in accordance with the second explanation above, but not (just) by verbally calling people, but by establishment and institutionalization of a place of God's worship.

So far, we have seen that both Avraham and Yitzchak traveled from place to place, built altars and called in God's Name. What about Yaakov? The precise phrase "called in God's Name" does not appear in Yaakov's narrative. The Ramban (on 12:8), in fact, believes that Yaakov was different than his fathers in this respect, and attempts to explain the difference.

However, there is something similar by Yaakov. After purchasing the field in Shekhem, Yaakov "erected an altar and called it El Elohei Yisrael" (33:20). And later, in Beit-El (35:7), "He built there an altar and called the place El Beit El." It would seem that Yaakov, like his fathers, intended the altars to be public focal points for worshipping God, and in the context of his attempt to publicize them, named them with God's Name, as though to say that here is a place of shem, a place of Shekhina.