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**Yom Yerushalayim**

**The *Akeida* and God's Choice of Jerusalem**

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Jerusalem is mentioned twice in the Torah, both times in *Sefer Bereishit*. In both instances Avraham is at the center of the events, on a quest, as it were, for the essence of Yerushalayim. The first time is when he meets Malki-Tzekek, king of Shalem; in this encounter, Yerushalayim is revealed to him as the city of justice (*tzedek*) and peace (*shalom*). The second time is where he offers the ram which God had “seen to” for Him; this time, Yerushalayim is revealed to him as the city of seeing (*re'iyah*) and of awe (*yira*). These two events encapsulate the two aspects of Yeru-shalayim: *yira* and *shalom*, awe and peace.

Avraham's encounter with Malki-Tzedek should be read in conjunction with his encounter with the king of Sedom, since they are juxtaposed in the text. The king of Sedom emerges to meet Avraham in the Valley of Shaveh, which is the Kings' Valley, but before he says anything, Malki-Tzedek arrives on the scene. And thus these two kings stand before Avraham as he returns from battle – one seeking to bless him in the Name of the Most High God, Possessor of heaven and earth, while the other comes to propose an exchange of people for goods. Thus, the occasion demanded that Avraham make a choice between two opposites: between Bera and Malki-Tzedek, between Sedom and Yerushalayim.

Avraham chooses in favor of Yerushalayim. He gives a tithe to the priest of the Most High God – and, in the Name of the Most High God, refuses to enrich himself by means of the king of Sedom. He is a true model of the principle that “one who tithes (*me'aser*) will become rich (*yit'asher*).” But his choice has ramifications beyond the laws of human life and property. His oath before the king of Sedom is an oath of allegiance to Yerushalayim: face to face with Bera, king of Sedom, he calls for justice (*tzedek*) and seeks the peace of Yerushalayim.

From this perspective, the next unit that mentions Sedom (*Bereishit* 18-19) is similar to the first (*Bereishit* 14), except that this time Avraham is in Chevron, and the contrast to Sedom is not the '*tzedek-shalom*' pair, but rather '*tzedaka-mishpat*.'

This unit, too, should be read within its context. Sara has just laughed upon hearing the news of the son that she will bear, and the message-bearers have already

arisen to look out over Sedom. Before the city's verdict is sealed, God testifies to Avraham's legacy:

“For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice (*tzedaka*) and judgment (*mishpat*).” (*Bereishit* 18:19)

In Avraham's household, judgment will not be perverted, and justice will not be replaced by an outcry over injustice. In Sedom, on the other hand, an act of justice and benevolence leads to a cry that rises to the heavens. Hence, the man of justice (*tzedaka*) is called upon to witness the judgment of the city of outcry (*tza'aka*):

“And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sedom and Amora is great, and because their sin is very grievous, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it” (*Bereishit* 18:20-21).

However, it turns out that Avraham is not only a '*ba'al tzedaka*' – a 'man of justice,' but also an '*ohav tzedek*' – someone who seeks to find the good in others and to view them in a positive way. He therefore seeks to mitigate the harsh decree, whether through an appeal to *tzedaka* – “Will You then destroy the righteous with the wicked? That the righteous (*tzaddik*) should be as the wicked?” – or through an appeal to *mishpat*: “Shall the Judge of all the earth not execute *mishpat*?”

But even Avraham's endeavors cannot save the wicked people of Sedom. One of the city's inhabitants is Lot, and according to the midrash, “on that day he was appointed as a judge.” The people of Sedom respond with attacks on this man who “came to sojourn and presumes to judge (*va-yishpot shafot*).” And just as justice (*mishpat*) has taken a step backwards, so *tzedaka* (righteousness) has been transformed into a cry (*tza'aka*): “The cry of them has grown great before the face of God” (*Bereishit* 19:13), in a place where someone who sounds a moral voice of rebukes “seems as one who jests (*metzachek*)” (*Bereishit* 19:14).

And so Avraham later looks out from Chevron over Sedom, which is destroyed for its sins. His children will perform *tzedaka*, and God will “make laughter (*tzechok*) for him,” while Sedom is laid waste before his eyes, in punishment for the “*tze'aka*” and the “*metzachakim*.” Thus Avraham's choice of Yerushalayim is reaffirmed: the riches of Bera, king of Sedom, are lost, while Avraham will forever be linked with Malki-Tzedek of Shalem.

However, *mishpat*, *tzedek* and *shalom* are only one side of the coin that is Yerushalayim. The other side of the coin is *yira* (awe) and *re'iya* (seeing), which represent a very different sort of bond and experience. *Tzedek* and *shalom* are commandments that appeal to the intellect; they are Noahide principles too. For this reason, it is the Noahide Malki-Tzedek of Shalem who represents Yerushalayim to Avraham. *Re'iya* and *yira*, on the other hand, are foundations of Divine service. For this reason, no person can dwell on God's mountain when God chooses the place of His

Temple. Even Avraham's own servant, and even his own son, born of his handmaid, must wait with the donkey. For the Holy One, blessed be He, comes to choose Zion, and only the father and his bound son are to be there.

We might even propose that the aim of the story of the *akeida* is to clarify the sanctity of Yerushalayim. From this perspective, the narrative may be compared to the first section of *Parashat Re'eh*, which likewise deals with "the place which God will choose" (*Devarim* 12). But in *Sefer Devarim* the place is, as it were, not yet chosen; it is not yet known where the Divine Presence will rest. The verses there are merely setting down the great principle that Divine service is not to be performed at the whim of human understanding; the place of worship and the manner of sacrifice are by God's command alone.

As *Am Yisrael* approach the land to take possession of it, this message is made clear to them: The nations living in Canaan chose their own gods for themselves. For this reason they also choose the place of worship: "Upon the high mountains and atop the hills and under every leafy tree," while their manner of service is "an abomination unto the Lord, which He despises, for they burn even their sons and daughters in fire to their gods."

The Torah therefore warns *Am Yisrael* twice, lest they follow the customs of these nations: "You shall not do thus to the Lord your God" – in relation to the manner of service. For it is not for man to choose himself a god in accordance with his own desires, but rather the One God chooses for Himself a single nation. It is God Himself Who sanctifies "the place that He will choose" and the manner of service that pleases Him.

The severity of the prohibition against human sacrifices is not a function of the cruelty of the act. Had God chosen such a form of sacrifice, it would be considered a "beloved" act. However, God did not choose this, and hence it is "despised" – for where something is not chosen and wanted, it is despised. At Sinai, hatred descended to the nations – because *Am Yisrael* were chosen there, while the other nations were "overlooked" or "rejected" – and hence "despised." Yitzchak had twin sons, and what distinguishes one from the other is the sanctity of Divine choice: "Was not Esav Yaakov's brother, says the Lord. Yet I loved Yaakov, but I despised Esav..." (*Malakhi* 1:2-3).

The Torah mentions God "despising" only in two contexts. One concerns the place of worship: "You shall not set up for yourself a pillar, which the Lord your God despises" (*Devarim* 16:22), while the other concerns the manner of Divine service: "You shall not do so to the Lord your God, for every abomination to the Lord, which He despises, they have done to their gods" (*Devarim* 12:31).

Indeed, there are many different places in the land which might be worthy, in and of themselves, of serving as a resting place for the Divine Presence, and there are many ways in which a person can draw closer to God. But there is only one Temple,

one altar, “which God will choose,” and only one manner of service that is “beloved” to God.

The story of the *akeida* condenses and expresses all of this through a physical act. Let no one imagine that the religious devotion of a Jew is any less than that of the nations. They sacrifice their children to their gods – while we are prohibited and warned against following in their footsteps, lest we end up serving God after their fashion. Nevertheless, the prohibition arises not from the act itself being despised by God, or its lying beyond our psychological capability. On the contrary: had it been “beloved” to God, nothing could stop us from engaging in this form of worship. All the highest levels of devotion to God might have been achieved through the actual sacrifice of Yitzchak. His ashes, piled before God, might have raised us to the highest levels of sanctity, for we would have fulfilled the commandment of loving God “with all our hearts and with all our soul and with all our might.” However, God kept us from this act. His angel appears to Avraham and warns him against putting out his hand against the boy. At that moment it was revealed that sacrificing a son is “an abomination unto God, which He despises.” Nevertheless, Avraham had already acquired for his progeny all the great merit of the *akeida*. That merit stands in our favor to this day. For Avraham sought to carry out the *akeida* so long as that was beloved to God; he refrained and turned back only when it was made known to him that this was “an abomination unto God, which He despises.”

Thus, two elements are revealed in the story of the *akeida*, and they are the same elements at the center of the first unit of *parashat Re'eh*: the sanctification of the place “which God will choose,” and the establishment of the manner of service that is “beloved” to God.

For three days Avraham journeys, seeking the place “which God had told him,” for he could not “offer a sacrifice at any place that he saw” (see *Devarim* 12:13). God would sanctify Mount Moriah, which He had chosen as His dwelling place. And thus, on the third day, the place is revealed, and a cloud is attached to its summit: “And Avraham lifted his eyes and he saw the place from afar” (*Bereishit* 24:7). Just as the place was chosen, so the manner of service was revealed – for it is not man who chooses the sacrifice that he sees fit, but rather “God will see to His lamb for the offering.” It is He Who chooses and He Who sees, and if God sees fit to request Yitzchak as the offering, then that sacrifice will be beloved and pleasing before Him, and every degree of sanctity that may be acquired through devotion will belong to both he who offers the sacrifice and he who is sacrificed.

But God does not choose this sacrifice, for the *akeida* is meant only to reveal the essence of God’s choice of the sacrifices. A sacrifice is desired and pleasing before God not because of its own essence, but because it is chosen. It is not “an offering, my son,” nor “the lamb for an offering,” but rather, “God will see to His lamb for an offering, my son.” At the same time, this is also the “fear of God” that is clarified through the *akeida*: the angel testifies that Avraham “fears God,” for he has not withheld his only son from Him. Indeed, only someone who says “God will see (*yir'eh*)” is truly someone who “fears (*yarei*) God.”

Only now has the moment come for the manner of service to be revealed to Avraham. Twice during the episode of the *akeida* we read that “Avraham lifted his eyes”: the first time, he discovers the chosen place; the second time, he discovers the sacrifice that is “beloved”: “And Avraham lifted his eyes and looked and behold, a ram...” (*Bereishit* 23:13). Indeed, the one who fears (*yarei*) God sees (*yir’eh*) a ram – and it is that ram that God “sees fit” and desires.

At that moment the *akeida* is over, and Avraham names the place for the two elements that are revealed in it: the choice of the place and the choice of the sacrifice. At this place God saw the sacrifice, and so the place will be called ‘*HaShem yir’eh*.’ In fact, at this place Israel will be seen by God, and God will be revealed to His people: “in the mountain the Lord will appear (*yera’eh*)” (22:14).

Jerusalem is thus revealed to Avraham at two different periods in his life. First, in the encounter with Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, it is revealed in its dimension of *tzedeck* and *shalom*. Later, at the *akeida* on Mount Moriah, it is revealed in its dimensions of *re’iya* and *yira*. This ‘deed of the fathers is a sign for later generations’: the building of Jerusalem by David and Shlomo is likewise accomplished in two stages. King David conquers the city and sanctifies Mount Moriah, but it is his son, Shlomo, who merits to build the Temple. These two kings represent the two aspects of Yerushalayim. David represents *re’iya*, while Shlomo represents *shalom*. Jerusalem could only be whole through the combination.

David is the chosen king, just as Yerushalayim is the chosen city. It is with him in mind that the Torah declares, “You shall surely appoint a king over you, whom the Lord your God shall choose” (*Devarim* 17:15). He is the shepherd (*ro’eh*) anointed by the seer (*roeh*), and it is him who God has “seen to” to be king. Seven times the text in *Sefer Shmuel* (I 16) emphasizes that David’s appointment is dependent upon *re’iya*, along with three places that mention “choice.” Shmuel is told explicitly what the essence of Divine *re’iya* is: “Do not look upon his countenance... for it is not as a man sees; for a man sees the outward appearance, but the Lord sees the heart” (*Shmuel* I 16:7). This is what God tells him as he sees Eliav (16:6), for God has already “seen to” a king from among the sons of Yishai: the one who is “ruddy (*admoni*) with fine eyes, and good looking (*tov ro’i*)” (16:12).

And just as David is chosen through *re’iya*, so he merits to sanctify Mount Moriah. Like Avraham, he perceives God’s angel there: “And David lifted his eyes and he saw the angel of God” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 21:16). Like Avraham, he builds an altar there for an offering, and God answers him with fire. And “when David saw (*bi-re’ot David*) that God had answered him” (21:8), the place and the altar became sanctified. With the same language by which the king was chosen, the place of the Temple is sanctified: the same person concerning whom Shmuel is told, “Arise, anoint him, for this is he (*ki zeh hu*)” (*Shmuel* I 16:13), later says, “This is (*zeh hu*) the house of the Lord God, and this is the altar of the burnt offering for Israel” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 22:1).

However, David did not merit to complete the building, for Yerushalayim is not just the city of *re'iyah*, but also the city of *shalom*. David of the “fine eyes” and the “*to'v ro'i*” has shed much blood, and therefore the endeavor requires a man of peace who will join the man whom “God has seen to.”

David conveys to his son a message that echoes with blood (*dam*), rest, and peace: it is not a “ruddy one” (*admoni*) but rather a “peaceful one” (*shlomo*) who will join the man who is “*to'v ro'i*” in order to complete the building of Yerushalayim:

“And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: You have shed blood abundantly, and have made great wars; you shall not build a house to My Name, because you have shed much blood upon the earth in My sight. Behold, a son shall be born to you, who shall be a man of tranquility, and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about, for his name shall be Shlomo, and I will give peace and quietness to Israel in his days.” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 22:8)

And so it is that in describing the building of the Temple, the text repeats these elements of *re'iyah* and *shalom*, alluding to the respective contributions of each of these two kings, each in accordance with his unique role:

“Then Shlomo began to build the house of the Lord in Yerushalayim, on Mount Moriah, which the Lord appeared (*nir'eh*) to David, his father...” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 3:1)

From this point onwards, anyone entering Yerushalayim would feel its sanctity emanating from both sources: the source of seeing and light, and the river of peace, for on Mount Moriah God is revealed (*yera'eh*) to His people. That place is called ‘*harel*’ and ‘*ariel*,’ and there *Am Yisrael* go to see God. There the *Kohen Gadol* stands with the *urim ve-tumim*, and they are blessed with the light of God’s countenance. And as they come to see, so they come to be seen, and along with seeing (*re'iyah*) there is awe (*yir'a*). When all of Israel come to show themselves before God, they also learn the awe of God. From Mount Moriah there shall emerge light, and God will instruct the nations as to His ways, while the house of Yaakov will pass before them in God’s light.

Mount Moriah is at the top of the mountains, and a sukka of peace is spread over Yerushalayim. The King to Whom peace belongs, desires Yerushalayim as His abode. There is “peace within its walls and tranquility in its palaces,” “those who love her” will speak peace within her. The daughter of Zion will rejoice and Yerushalayim will sing when its king comes, speaking words of peace. The honor of this house will be great, and peace will be granted in this place. Along with *shalom* there will be *mishpat* and *tzedek*. For “there are set thrones of justice, the thrones of the house of David.” The throne of David will be established eternally in peace, supported with *mishpat* and *tzedaka*. The gates of Yerushalayim are opened, and a righteous nation, maintaining its loyal faith, enters. A branch from the root of Yishai will perform judgment among the nations and give rebuke to the peoples. For Malki-Tzedek has, from time immemorial, been the king of Shalem, and Avi-Ad Sar Shalom will forever reign there.

This, then, is the earthly Yerushalayim, arranged to correspond with the heavenly Yerushalayim. *Re'iya* and *shalom* are perfectly melded within it. The priestly blessing starts with the illumination (*he'ara*) of God's countenance, and concludes with the granting of *shalom*. The offering of the pilgrim celebrants is the "sacrifice upon seeing (*olat re'iya*)," and the *chagiga* peace offering (*shalmei chagiga*). The song of ascents that they sing is wholly one that honors Yerushalayim, beginning with *yira* and *re'iya*, and concluding with *shalom*:

"Happy is everyone who fears (*yarei*) the Lord, who walks in His ways...  
Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears (*yerei*) the Lord.  
The Lord shall bless you from Zion, and you shall see (*u-re'eh*) the good of Yerushalayim all the days of your life.  
And you shall see (*u-re'eh*) your children's children –  
Peace (*shalom*) upon Israel." (*Tehillim* 128)