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Date: 12/5/2003 3:08:14 AM
Subject: Netvort : parshas Vayeitzei, 5764

Rolling in Stone

By Rabbi Joshua (unsatisfiedly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

Ya'akov, fleeing from Eisav, leaves his home in the Holy Land and heads for the house of Lavan, in Charan. On the way, he stops to sleep at a location which, according to the midrash, was Mt. Moriah, the site of the future Temple. The Torah tells us that "he took from the stones of the place and he put them around his head and lay down in that place." (Bereishis 28:11). The Midrash Lekach Tov, an early medieval compilation, asks, did Ya'akov then not have any pillows or cushions to place under his head, that he needed to use stones to sleep on? The midrash answers that the stones were an allusion to the Torah, engraved on tablets of stone, that his descendants would receive. Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, in his commentary Ma'asei Hashem, notes that Ya'akov actually placed his head on the ground, not on the stones. This comment would conform with Rashi, who, citing the midrash, says that Ya'akov placed the stones around his head, in order to stave off any dangerous animals that might have come by while he slept, but actually slept on the ground. The reason Ya'akov did this, explains Rabbi Ashkenazi, was to show his love for the land, to the extent that he wanted to sleep on its earth. It was in response to this demonstration of love, he continues, that God told Ya'akov, "the land on which you are lying, to you will I give it and to your descendants" (28:13). I believe that the explanations of the midrash and Rabbi Ashkenazi for Ya'akov using the stones and dirt of Eretz Yisroel as his sleeping accommodations complement each other, and help us put the events of this week's parsha into proper perspective.

Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher, in his commentary Ba'al Haturim, notes that parshas Vayeitzei, as written in the sefer Torah, is 'closed.' In other words, there are no internal breaks - no parshiyos either pesuchos (open) or sesumos (closed) - in the entire parsha of Vayeitzei. The only other parsha in the Torah that shares this feature is parshas Miketz. Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, in his LeTorah Ulemoadim, explains that this is because parshas Vayeitzei, as reflected in the midrash and commentaries, is the parsha in which Ya'akov goes into exile, and paves the way for all future generations of Jews to survive in exile. The events of parshas Vayeitzei, then, serve as a guide for us while we are in exile.

During Ya'akov's entire sojourn in exile, he never diverted his attention from Eretz Yisroel. His experience in exile was one long uninterrupted episode of longing to return to his true home, the land which his father Yitzchok never left. Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi ends his classic book of Jewish thought, Kuzari, by saying that the time for the Jews to return to their land will come when they express their love for it, as King David wrote in Tehillim (102:14-15): "You will arise and show Zion mercy, for {there will come} the time to favor her, for the appointed time will have come. For Your servants have cherished her stones, and favored her dust." The Talmud in Kesuvos records that when certain rabbis were about to leave Eretz Yisroel, they would kiss the stones of the

northern city of Akko (Acre) to demonstrate their love for the land, as articulated in these verses. Interestingly, during Rav Kook's eight month stay in America in 1924, he carried stones from Eretz Yisroel around with him and held them in his hand while talking to people, in order to keep maintain his connection to the land while away from it. Ya'akov, by sleeping on the dust and stones of the land before leaving, similarly expressed his love for it, as a preparation for the coming years when he would have to be away from it, and in anticipation of the time when he would be able to return.

As we noted in Netvort to parshas Chayei Sarah, the Ramban writes that the mitzvos are meant to be performed mainly in Eretz Yisroel. This applies, according to the Ramban, not only to agricultural mitzvos such as terumah and ma'aser, which relate specifically to the soil of Eretz Yisroel, but even to mitzvos such as tefillin and tzitzis, which are mitzvos that relate primarily to the person. We explained, based on an essay of Rabbi Eliyohu Meir Bloch, that even though, in terms of our obligation to perform these mitzvos, there is no difference, there is nevertheless something different about. Since God's presence is more intense and evident in Eretz Yisroel, the effect that the mitzvos performed there have on a person is also greater. In parshas Vayeitzei, the Ramban writes that it was for this reason that Ya'akov was able to marry two sisters while he was in the house of Lavan, even though, according to the rabbis, he kept the entire Torah, and the Torah forbids one to marry two sisters. Ramban explains that since Ya'akov was not yet commanded to do the mitzvos, he only observed them while in Eretz Yisroel, which is the main place for mitzvos to be observed. That is why, according to the Ramban, Rachel died as Ya'akov was returning to Eretz Yisroel, so that he would not remain married to two sisters once he was back. Perhaps, then, this is what the Midrash Lekach Tov is alluding to. As we explained based on Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, Ya'akov demonstrated his love of Eretz Yisroel through its stones and dust as a means of preparation for exile. The stones served, at the same time, as an allusion to the Torah which would be given to his descendants, whose main place of observance is Eretz Yisroel.

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