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בס"ד

Parashat Vayishlah Part IV Genesis 35

1. To Bethel

Although Yaaqob was deeply concerned with the possible repercussions from the slaughter at Shechem (Gen. 34:30), he still did not decide to depart for home, that is, to his father who lived in Hebron. (As it turned out, the people of the neighboring cities were fearful and did not pursue Yaaqob's family.) G-d appeared to him and instructed him to go to Bethel (a distance of about twenty miles south of Shechem, directly on the way to Hebron, which itself is about thirty miles south of Bethel). He was told to "dwell there" (35:1), meaning that he was to spend a period of time there.

The purpose of this instruction was obviously to have him, his household and all attached to him undergo a major spiritual uplifting. The experience would foster the proper setting for him to teach his entourage the values of the new religious outlook of serving the one G-d while providing the time and opportunity for all to internalize the message and have it become a turning point in their lives. G-d reminds him that Bethel was the site where He had appeared to him upon his departure from home, fleeing from Esav (28:12-15), and he should now construct an altar there (thus reminding him of the commitments that he made there).

On that previous occasion Yaaqob had designated his headstone as a monument at the site, commemorating the theophany he had there received, and made a conditional vow. He stated then that if G-d protected him on the journey he was embarking upon, provided his needs and returned him to his father's home safely, he would accept certain obligations upon himself including expanding the monument he had just set up into a "Bet Elokim" (an abode for G-d). Thus, in any

event, it was incumbent upon him eventually to go to Bethel in order to fulfill his vow, and indeed one wonders that he had not as yet done so, considering the solemnity of a vow and that he was back from Aram for a number of years. Why had he awaited a Divine call to fulfill his obligation?

Perhaps the cautious Yaaqob, postponing his return to his father, did not yet consider himself safely back, especially as he was not yet at his father's home; in his vow he had specifically mentioned returning safely to his father's home. So G-d informed him that it was now time to go to Bethel. It was not necessary to wait until he actually returned to his father's home; since there was no impediment to doing so, the conditions upon which the vow were based were fulfilled.

In his vow, Yaaqob had stated that upon his safe return "*vehaya Hashem li lelokim*" (28:21). Some commentators interpret that clause to mean that he would then establish Hashem as his G-d, a commitment that he will now be fulfilling, despite the absence of any mention in our passage of the Tetragrammaton. They take that clause to be the beginning of the apodosis (the "then" clause of a conditional vow), meaning, if G-d fulfills the stipulations, "then Hashem will be my G-d." Of course such an interpretation has nothing to do with Yaaqob's personal belief and trust in Hashem, from whom he received prophetic communications and to whom he was devoted in his prior phase of life also. Rather, it connotes his intention that upon his safe return he will devote his life to advocacy and promulgation of knowledge in Hashem and His ways, referring to the time when he would have the wherewithal to so comport.

Other commentators interpret “*vehaya Hashem li lelokim*” to be the last item of the protasis (the “if” clause of a conditional commitment). As the final clause of the stipulations it might be serving as a summary. Taking G-d’s name “Elokim” as derived from the word for “might,” the translation of the statement would be, “[in other words] if Hashem will be my mighty one,” in the sense of my champion and protector.

Regardless, a momentous occasion was now at hand, surely one of the spiritual peaks of his life.

Before departing from Shechem, Yaaqob prepared his household and retinue for the upcoming event. He instructed everyone to remove all “*elohe nekhar*” (alien gods) from their midst, purify themselves (probably referring to immersion in a body of water) and change their garments, symbolizing their embarking upon a major transformation in their life’s orientation and commitment. Henceforth, they must renounce idolatry and will be required to be exclusively dedicated to the one G-d.

In the previous phase of life, Yaaqob had not demanded from his entourage such loyal allegiance to the one G-d. He was on foreign ground, struggling to survive; given the deeply entrenched polytheistic ideologies of the time, he could not achieve such a major change in the orientation of others. Of course he did what he could; when Laban accused him of stealing his *terafim* (household gods), he was confident that no member of his family or household could have been guilty of such an act. This indicates that he had been teaching moral values to his people. (As it turned out, Raḥel did steal them.) And when he requested that his assemblage turn over to him their idols and idolatrous earrings that they had apparently been openly wearing up to that point they promptly did so.

One wonders: Did Raḥel surrender the *terafim* at this time? This would have brought to Yaaqob’s attention that the curse (or death sentence) that he had pronounced upon the thief, in his penitent’s overreaction to Laban’s accusation of theft, was upon his beloved wife. That would have been a devastating blow to him. Raḥel would surely have been reluctant to inform him of that fact.

The narrative informs us that “they gave to Yaaqob all the alien gods that were in their possession and the rings that were on their ears and Yaaqob buried them” (35:4). The riddance procedure could have been for all to throw the relevant items into a dug out area and they would then cover it. But the point is made that Yaaqob personally received all the items and he personally buried them. There is no mention of Raḥel handing over the *terafim*. Had she somehow gotten rid of them previously it would have been an important detail that one would think the Torah would have mentioned. If at the time of great spiritual elevation, as the experience at Bethel surely was, out of fear, shame or concern for her husband Raḥel retained them in her possession, she would have committed a sacrilegious act in the religious center Yaaqob had established. This might explain her premature death in childbirth, which is what transpires in the immediately following verses. That the text does not comment on the *terafim* one way or another may be out of respect for Raḥel.

In the Midrash (*Ber. Rabbah* 74:4, 9), Raḥel’s premature death is attributed to Yaaqob’s curse. His statement “shall not live” was described as, “Like an error that proceeds from before the ruler” (Eccl. 10:5). According to this school of thought, although Yaaqob would never have uttered the curse had he known it would apply to Raḥel, it gets fulfilled, since she did, indeed, steal the *terafim* and Yaaqob’s standing is such that in such a case G-d honors his “decrees.” It should be recalled that when Ribqah first broached the idea to Yaaqob of deceiving his father to obtain Esav’s blessing, his response was, “אולי ימשגי אבתי... and I will bring upon myself a curse...” (Gen. 27:12). As Yaaqob did the deceptive act to steal the blessing that he feared might bring a curse upon himself, in the “measure for measure” reverberations of it he placed a curse upon Raḥel who did steal the idols from her father that she apparently believed impart blessing, which ultimately may be seen as Yaaqob invoking the curse upon himself.

2. At Bethel

While at Bethel, Deborah, Ribqah’s nurse, dies, and is buried under the oak beneath Bethel; the spot was given the name, “the oak of weeping.” It should be borne in mind that Ribqah was married twenty years before Yaaqob was born. Taking age numbers in the

Torah literally *, Yaaqob was ninety-one years older than Yosef**, who was born in Yaaqob's fourteenth year by Laban, making the present time well over 117 years since Ribqah's marriage. Her nurse was sent with her from home when she was sent to marry Yishaq (24:59), although she was not previously identified by name. What was such an old woman doing with Yaaqob's entourage at Bethel? Why is her death cited while those of very important women in the narrative such as Ribqah and Leah are not?

Some commentators conjecture that Ribqah may have sent her trusted nurse to Yaaqob to inform him that the time had come that he could return home. It is also conjectured that Deborah's death signals the death of Ribqah. There is no indication in the text supporting such explanations and they do not address the main question.

Nahum Sarna suggests: "With the purging of idolatry and the arrival at Bethel, the contacts with Mesopotamia, maintained by each of the patriarchs, are finally and decisively severed. The mention of the death of Deborah thus becomes appropriate here for she was a living symbol of that connection" (JPS Commentary, Gen., p. 241). We may add that a nurse symbolizes one who nurtures and provides sustenance and is a mentor of her charge. The Mesopotamian culture within which Ribqah was nurtured – despite the excellent qualities she displayed at the well – manifested itself in her manipulation of Yaaqob to perpetrate his impersonation of his brother and deceit of his father. She behaved just as her brother later did in perpetrating the mirror image of her act. The spiritual experience at Bethel officially brought an end to this influence within the future nation. Deborah means "bee." There were great, unsurpassable, honey-like qualities that Ribqah possessed but there also was the sting.

At Bethel G-d changes Yaaqob's name to Yisrael, in accordance with what the angel had already stated, and confirms the full measure of blessings of progeny and the Promised Land to him, recognizing him as the heir of Abraham and Yishaq.

3. Going Home

After Bethel, before returning to Yishaq, Yaaqob endures two wrenching family experiences: Raḥel dies

in childbirth and his firstborn son, Reuben, engages in sexual relations with his father's concubine, Bilha.

In his last will and testament, Yaaqob declared that Reuben had lost his natural right to firstborn ascendancy because of his indiscretion concerning his father's bed, an act of rashness and impulsiveness (49:3-4). There probably is a symbolic dimension to Reuben's despicable act. The Sages interpreted him as protecting his mother's dignity. Leah felt that Raḥel, her younger sister, took away her husband (Gen. 30:15). Now that Raḥel passed away, Reuben wanted to assure that Raḥel's maidservant Bilha does not now become his father's favorite (BT Shab. 55b).

However, Reuben possibly had a different intention. It is well substantiated that in many areas of the ancient Near East, sexual relations with the wife or concubine of a vanquished, deposed or deceased ruler, or one being contested, established claim to his mantle of leadership. Yaaqob was perhaps seen as withdrawing from his leadership role – particularly as manifest in the Shechem episode – and Reuben may have been intent on securing his leadership claim over the clan.

There seems to be a number of Biblical reflexes of employing sexual relations for such a purpose. Saul's son Ish Boshet may have suspected that his military chief Abner had such an intention in cohabiting with Saul's concubine after the king's death, explaining his sharp criticism of Abner about it (2 Sam. 3:7). Abshalom's sexual violations of David's concubines may reflect such an intention, although the primary reason given there was to prove his total break with his father (ibid. 16:21-22). Solomon surely assumed such an intention played a role in Adoniah's petition for Abishag after David's death. The king tells his mother, who transmitted Adoniah's request, "Rather, ask the kingdom for him" and promptly has him put to death (1 Kings 2:13-25). Since David had apparently made it known that he did not have sexual relations with Abishag, it was an ambiguous matter, as otherwise it would not be conceivable that such a request might be granted. In Nathan's rebuke to David concerning his sinning with Batsheba, G-d's statement, "I gave you your master's house and your master's wives" (2 Sam. 12:8a) seems to include a reference to this concept.

Finally, Yaaqob returns home to Yishaq in Hebron (Gen. 35:27). There is no mention of an embrace nor is a single word of dialogue or interaction between father and son recorded. Although reconciled with Esav, Yaaqob's shame in front of his father was obviously unbearable. Could the difficulty of facing his father after what he did, added to the less-than-ideal relationship that had previously existed between them, have been the cause of his reluctance to return home? Is the textual silence itself a statement reflecting on the father-son relationship? After all, Yishaq had a different vision for the national future than was now set in motion, one that included Esav, whom he loved, in some capacity. He may very well have thought that Yaaqob's usurping the blessing irretrievably upset his well-laid plans, causing a rift between the brothers than had been unnecessary and changing the course of what he thought would have been a preferable program.

In the immediately following verses we are informed of Yishaq's death*** and that Esav and Yaaqob, mentioned in that order, buried him.

Endnotes

* The evidence for allegorical interpretation of age numbers in the Torah is compelling, as brought out in our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*. Moreover,

there is a set of arithmetic patterns to the number of years the patriarchs lived: Abraham, $175 = 7 \times 5^2$; Yishaq, $180 = 5 \times 6^2$; Yaaqob, $147 = 3 \times 7^2$, the multipliers being in a 7, 5, 3 pattern while the squared digits are in 5, 6, 7 order. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to reconcile the surface details where possible, for there is meaning at all levels.

** Yosef was thirty years of age when in front of Pharaoh, just before the seven years of plenty began. In the second year of famine (nine years later), Yaaqob told Pharaoh he was one hundred thirty years of age. Thus, Yosef was then thirty-nine and Yaaqob was ninety-one years older than him.

*** The note regarding Yishaq's death (Gen. 35:28-29) should be considered out of chronological order, having occurred subsequent to the later-narrated sale of Yosef. This can be seen as follows. As pointed out in the previous note, Yaaqob was ninety-one years older than Yosef. Yishaq was sixty when Yaaqob was born, so when Yosef was sold at seventeen, Yaaqob was 108 and Yishaq 168. As the latter passed away at 180, he was alive for twelve years after the sale. Of course this opened interesting possibilities for the Midrash. Yishaq's death is mentioned where it is to close his story, as there was nothing in his last years that was significant enough to be included in the text.

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