

## PARASHAT HASHAVUA

### PARASHAT VAYETZE

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This week's shiurim are dedicated by Abe Mezrich  
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This shiur is dedicated  
in memory of Agnes (Szore Rivka) Reiter-Kitay z"l,  
whose 10<sup>th</sup> yahrzeit will be on the 6th of Kislev.  
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#### Yaakov's Ladder By Rav Amnon Bazak

##### A. "If it will be..."

Our *parasha* begins with Yaakov's dream in Beit-El (*Bereishit* 28), in which he sees a ladder standing on the ground with the top reaching the sky. In the main part of the dream, God appears to Yaakov and makes three promises:

1. The promise of the land:

"The land upon which you lie – to you I shall give it and to your descendants" (verse 13).[\[1\]](#)

2. The promise of a multitude of descendants:

"Your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and they will spread westward and eastward, northward and southward, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants" (verse 14).

3. The promise to accompany Yaakov wherever he goes, until he returns to *Eretz Yisrael*:

"And behold, I am with you and shall guard you wherever you go, and I shall bring you back to his land, for I shall not leave you without doing that of which I have spoken to you" (verse 15).

The third promise seems to be the most important, in view of the fact that Yaakov had already received both of the first two blessings quite recently from his father, as we read just a few verses previously:

(3) "And may the Lord God bless you and cause you to be fruitful and to multiply, such that you will become a congregation of peoples,

(4) and give you the blessing of Avraham – to you and to your descendants with you, to inherit the land of your sojournings which God gave to Avraham."

Indeed, when Yaakov wakes from his dream, we find that he, too, views this final blessing as being the most noteworthy. But he goes on to take an oath that seems to imply that he is not entirely confident that this blessing will indeed be fulfilled:

(20) Yaakov swore an oath, saying: "If God will be with me and watch over me on this road which I am taking, and give me bread to eat and a garment to wear,  
(21) and I return in peace to my father's house, and the Lord will be my God,  
(22) then this stone which I have placed as a monument will be the house of God, and all that You give me I shall tithe for You."

This is a lengthy statement, and the commentators are divided as to where the condition ends and the oath begins. It is clear that verse 20 and the first part of verse 21 are the condition, since they correspond to God's promise in the dream, as shown in the table below:

<b>Yaakov's condition</b>	<b>God's promise</b>
If God will be with me	Behold, I am with you
and watch over me on this road which I am taking, and give me bread to eat and a garment to wear	and shall guard you wherever you go,
and I return in peace to my father's house	and I shall bring you back to his land

The question is how we are to understand the next part of verse 21: "and (or "then") the Lord will be my God." Rashi maintains that this, too, is part of the condition. While not explicitly mentioned in God's promise in the dream, it is hinted at, in Rashi's view, in the words "without doing (or "until I have done") that of which I have spoken to you." Rashi explains that this refers to God's promise to Avraham:

"I shall establish My covenant between Myself and you and your descendants after you, for their generations, as an eternal covenant, to be your God and for your descendants after you" (17:6).[\[2\]](#)

The oath itself begins, according to Rashi, in verse 22. If all of the above promises are fulfilled, then Yaakov will do his part; the stone which he placed as a monument will be made into a house of God, and he will tithe everything that God gives him.

Ramban, in contrast, proposes that the words, "then the Lord will be my God" is the beginning of Yaakov's oath, and what he means is not his acceptance of God (which is not dependent on anything at all), but rather his commitment to serve God in this place:

And what it means is: If I return to my father's house, I will serve the only God in the chosen land at the site of this stone, which will be a house of God for me, and there I will separate the tithes.

For the time being, we will set aside the question of the proper interpretation of the oath and address a different question: Why does Yaakov find it necessary to make any oath at all? What reason does he have to doubt or question the fulfillment of God's promise? Why must he swear an oath in order to reinforce his faith in the fulfillment of the promise?

## **B. God's Inheritance**

It seems that what disturbed Yaakov was being distanced from the land, in complete contrast to his father. In *Parashat Toledot*, we noted the special connection between Yitzchak and *Eretz Yisrael*, as expressed in God's promise to him: "Stay in this land and I shall be with you and bless you" (26:3). This blessing seems to suggest that God is with a person specifically in *Eretz Yisrael*. The whole Torah expresses the idea that *Eretz Yisrael* is God's inheritance.

This idea may lead to the mistaken conclusion that God is to be found **only** in *Eretz Yisrael*. In the ancient world, it was commonly believed that a god was limited to a certain territory. Thus, for example, the people of Aram offered encouragement to their king, after the defeat at the hands of Achav, with the following words:

"Their God is a God of hills; therefore they were stronger than we. However, let us fight them on the plain and we shall be stronger than they." (*Melakhim I* 20:23)

Similarly, we read concerning the foreigners brought by the king of Assyria to settle *Eretz Yisrael*, who were attacked by lions:

They said to the king of Assyria, "The nations which you carried away and settled in the cities of the Shomron do not know the manner of the God of the land; therefore, He sent the lions among them, and behold – they are killing them, because they do not know the way of the God of the land." So the king of Assyria issued a command, saying, "Take one of the *kohanim* whom you exiled from there, and let them go and settle there, and let him teach them the manner of the God of the land." (*Melakhim II* 17:26-27)

This belief also influenced *Am Yisrael*. At various times people living outside of *Eretz Yisrael* were perceived as being cut off from God. It was with this concern in mind that the tribes of Gad and Reuven built an altar on their side of the Jordan:

"Is it not out of concern for something that we have done this, saying, 'Tomorrow your children will say to our children, saying, 'What part have you in the Lord God of Israel? For God has placed a border between us and you, the children of

Reuven and the children of Gad – the Jordan. You have no portion in God' – and your children will cause our children to cease fearing God." (*Yehoshua* 22:24-25)

Similarly, David says to Shaul,

"But if it is the children of men [who have turned you against me], then cursed be they before God, for they have cast me out this day from being part of God's inheritance, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.'" (*Shmuel* 126:19)<sup>[3]</sup>

Indeed, there is some complexity in the idea that *Eretz Yisrael* is God's inheritance, "a land which the Lord your God inquires after; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it" (*Devarim* 11:12), while at the same time, God rules over the entire world.<sup>[4]</sup>

In any event, it seems that this was what concerned Yaakov on his way out of the land: Would God indeed be with him, even outside of the land that He had promised to Avraham and Yitzchak? Could God's blessing to Yitzchak – "Live in this land and I shall be with you and bless you" – apply even to someone not living in "this land"? It is for this reason that God appears to Yaakov in the dream of the ladder. In this revelation, God repeats the blessings of progeny and the inheritance of the land, but the most important component of the dream is the promise, "Behold, I am with you and shall guard you wherever you go, and I shall bring you back to his land, for I shall not leave you without doing that of which I have spoken to you." God promises Yaakov that He will be with him always, even outside of the land, until all of the other promises are realized.

Indeed, Yaakov's oath concerns only this part of God's promise; he makes no oath in relation to inheritance of the land: "If God will be with me and watch over me on this road ... and I return in peace to my father's house, and [or "then"] the Lord will be my God...."

From all of the above it would seem that Rashi's approach to the condition and the oath fits better with the text – that is, the words "and the Lord will be my God" is part of the condition, its simple meaning being: "If God will continue to be with me throughout my journey, until I return to this land." Yaakov, still hesitant about this promise, which seems to run completely against the education he received from his father and grandfather concerning the special quality of *Eretz Yisrael*, swears an oath in order to reinforce the promise that God will be with him even outside of the land.

### **C. Ascending and Descending**

How is this message related to the vision of the ladder and the angels?

In order to explain, let us consider the interesting connection between the *parasha* of the ladder and the *parasha* discussing the Tower of Bavel.<sup>[5]</sup> First of all, it should be noted that the words, "a ladder standing on the ground with its top reaching to the sky" (28:12) is strikingly reminiscent of what we are told about the tower: "Its top

in the sky" (11:4). Indeed, these are the only two structures in all of *Tanakh* in connection with which this expression is used. At the same time, there are also several contrasting elements in the two narratives:

1. In the plain of Shin'ar, there are no stones; instead, there are bricks: "And they had bricks for stones" (11:3). Beit-El, in contrast, offers many stones: "He took of the stones of the place and put under his head" (28:11).
2. The encounter between God and mankind in the context of the Tower follows a single direction: "God came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of man had built" (11:5). The ladder that Yaakov views in his dream shows two-way movement: "And behold, angels of God were ascending and descending it" (28:12).
3. The builders of the Tower travel from east to west: "And it was, when they journeyed from the east, that they found a valley in the land of Shin'ar" (11:2). Yaakov takes the opposite direction: "Yaakov set off on his journey and went to the land of the children of the east" (29:1).

This contrast would seem to highlight the central message of the vision of the ladder. The story of the Tower of Babel deals with people's fear of leaving their place, a fear in contradiction to God's will. The builders of the Tower wanted to remain in one place, "Lest we be scattered over the entire earth" (11:4). God brought about the opposite of what they wanted: "God scattered them from there over the entire earth, and they ceased to build the city. Therefore it was called Babel, for there God confounded (*bala*) the language of all the earth, and from there God scattered them over the entire earth" (verses 8-9). Indeed, the vision of the ladder symbolizes the complete opposite of the idea embodied in the Tower of Babel. Its purpose was to declare that a person must sometimes leave his place, and that dynamism is a fundamental element of life; even angels do not stand still in one place. At the very start of his wandering, Yaakov receives a blessing that parallels the punishment meted out to the generation of the Tower:

"Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and they will spread westward and eastward, northward and southward, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and through your descendants." (28:14)

Yaakov was made aware that leaving home and spreading in every direction is an integral part of the path of life of every person in the world, and God and His angels accompany him wherever he goes.<sup>[6]</sup>

This idea is also expressed in another point of comparison between the two narratives: the name "Babel" vs. the expression "gateway to heaven" (*sha'ar ha-shamayim*). The Torah testifies that the city of Babel was so named because "there God confounded the language of the entire earth," but it seems that this is not the source of the name but rather an explanation for a name which already existed. After all, had the place been named after this episode, it would have been more appropriate to call it "Balal." In fact, from sources in the Hagiography we know that Babel (Babylon) is in fact

“bâb-ili” – the “gateway of God.” Thus, in contrast with the false gateway to heaven of the people of Bavel, symbolizing closure and shutting up in one place, our narrative presents the true “gateway to heaven” of Beit-El, expressing dynamism and the ability to move from one place to another when necessary.

This provides a deeper understanding of the meaning of Yaakov's words upon awakening from the dream: “Yaakov awoke from his dream and he said, ‘Surely God is in this place, and I did not know’” (verse 16). Simply, what he means is, “Had I known, I would not have slept in this holy place” (Rashi). However, his words would seem to refer not only to this mistake but also to the lesson to be learned from the episode: Yaakov does not really know where God is. Just as he was surprised to find Him “in this place,” so he is destined to discover that God is to be found in many other places where he had not thought to find Him.

#### **D. Epilogue**

Many years after his return to *Eretz Yisrael*, Yaakov is forced to leave once again. After two years of famine, Yosef invites him to go down to Egypt where Yosef is able to provide for him. Yaakov sets off on his journey, but on the way he stops in Be'er Sheva, the familiar southern border of *Eretz Yisrael*:[\[7\]](#)

Yisrael journeyed with all that he had, and he came to Be'er Sheva, and he offered sacrifices to the God of his father, Yitzchak. (46:1)

Why did Yaakov offer these sacrifices in Be'er Sheva? Radak explains:

He said this because Yitzchak, his father, had wanted to go down to Egypt because of the famine, but God told him, “Do not go down to Egypt” (26:2), so [Yaakov] offers sacrifices in Be'er Sheva, which is in the land of Canaan. Before leaving the land, he wanted to know what God wanted – would He prevent him [from leaving] as He had prevented his father, Yitzchak, or not. He offered sacrifices in order that a spirit of prophecy would come to him.

Despite his desperate longing to see Yosef, his beloved, long-lost son, and to solve the problem of the famine, Yaakov was still not capable of leaving the land without explicit approval from God. The doubt still lingers in his heart: is God's blessing that He will be with him until He restores him to the land still valid, or was the promise valid only for the time when it was given?

God reveals Himself to Yaakov and sets his mind at rest:

God said to Yisrael in a night vision, and He said, “Yaakov, Yaakov.” And Yaakov said, “Here I am.” And He said, “I am the Lord God of your father; do not fear going down to Egypt, for I shall make you into a great nation there. I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall also bring you up from there.” (46:2-4)

For a second time, Yaakov receives a promise that God will be with him even outside of *Eretz Yisrael*. Just as He was with him during his temporary stay in Charan, so He will continue to be with him during his stay in Egypt.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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[1] All references are to *Bereishit* chapter 28, unless stated otherwise.

[2] In commenting on verse 15, Rashi says, "'I have spoken to you' – for you (for your benefit), and about you: That which I promised Avraham concerning descendants was meant concerning you, not concerning Esav." In explaining verse 21, Rashi says, "'And the Lord will be my God' – that His Name will be carried by me from beginning to end, that no disqualification be found among my descendants, as it is written (verse 15), 'Of which I have spoken to (of) you.' And this promise was made to Avraham, as it is written, 'to be your God and for your descendants after you.'"

[3] Further expression of the same sentiment can be heard in the words of the people of Jerusalem to those exiled to Babylon, as described in the prophecy of Yechezkel: "Concerning whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, 'Get yourselves away from God; this land is given to us for an inheritance'" (*Yechezkel* 11:15).

[4] *Chazal* note the problematic nature of Divine service outside of *Eretz Yisrael*. The following well-known *sugya* in *Massekhet Kebuvot* (110b) is based, inter alia, on the verse cited above from *Shmuel I*:

A person should always live in *Eretz Yisrael*, even in a city inhabited mostly by idolaters, and should not live outside of the land, even in a city inhabited mostly by Jews. For anyone who lives in *Eretz Yisrael* is compared to one who has a God, while anyone who lives outside the land is comparable to one who has no God, as it is written: "To give you the land of Canaan to be your God" (*Vayikra* 25:38). Does this mean that anyone who does not live in the land has no God? [Surely not.] Rather, it teaches us that anyone who lives outside the land is considered as though he served idols. Hence, concerning David the text says, "For they have cast me out this day from being part of God's inheritance, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.'" For who said to David, "Go, serve other gods"? Rather, it is meant to teach that anyone who lives outside of the land is considered as though he served idols.

[5] Concerning this parallel, see Y. Zakovitz, *Mikraot be-Eretz ha-Mar'ot* (Tel Aviv, 1995), pp. 60-62.

[6] The well-known *midrash* (with its source in *Bereishit Rabba*, *parasha* 68), teaching that the ascending angels were those of *Eretz Yisrael* while the descending angels were those appointed over the other countries fits well with this idea. There are special angels that belong to *Eretz Yisrael*, but there are angels outside of *Eretz Yisrael* as well, expressing God's Presence there.

[7] As in the well-known expression, "From Dan to Be'er Sheva," which appears many times in *Tanakh* as a shorthand for the borders of the land.