

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Vayetzei

Foundations of the Beis Hamikdash

וַיִּשְׁכֶּם יַעֲקֹב בְּבֹקֶר וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר שָׂם מִרְאֵשֵׁיתוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתָהּ מִצְבֵּה וַיִּצַק שָׁמֶן עַל רֹאשָׁהּ

Yaakov arose early in the morning, he took the stone that he placed around his head and set it up as a pillar, and he poured oil, on its top. (28:18)

THE TIMING OF YAAKOV'S RESPONSE

Having experienced the awesome encounter with Hashem in a dream and having received Hashem's assurance of protection until his safe return to the Land of Israel, Yaakov responds the next morning by setting up a stone as a form of altar (known as *matzeivah*), and pouring oil over it.

Commenting on this pasuk, the Meshech Chochmah writes: "He did not set up (the *matzeivah*) in the night, for we do not build the Beis Hamikdash at night."

The Meshech Chochmah's unspoken question here may be inferred from his answer. The Torah has already described how Yaakov woke up in the middle of the night, aware of the profundity of the Divine encounter he has just experienced, as well as the exalted sanctity of the location where this all took place – the future Temple Mount.¹ We may wonder, therefore, why he did not immediately follow this by setting up the *matzeivah* and pouring oil on it, waiting instead until morning. To this, the Meshech Chochmah replies by citing the ruling of the Gemara² that building the Beis Hamikdash does not take place at night.

The question, of course, is: In what way is Yaakov setting up this *matzeivah* to be considered as an act of building the Beis Hamikdash? Although this took place on what would later become the temple Mount, we are not aware of this stone eventually becoming part of the structure of the Beis Hamikdash. As far as we can tell, setting up this *matzeivah* was a self-contained act, similar to the numerous altars which Avraham and Yitzchak had each set up on previous occasions!

¹ See *pesukim 16-17*.

² *Shavuos 15b*.

But the Meshech Chochmah is telling us that there was more to it than that. To understand how this is so, we need to discuss an idea which runs through the lives of the Avos, known as “*Maaseh Avos siman l’banim*.”

MAASEH AVOS – SYMBOLS THAT ENABLE

The Midrash³ informs us that all of the key events and experiences of the Jewish people were already pre-experienced by the Avos. A classic example of this principle is Avraham’s sojourn in Egypt on account of the famine in the Land of Canaan, which served as a pre-experience for the Jewish people’s exile there. Indeed, it is with reference to this episode the Midrash⁴ introduces us to the concept of *Maaseh Avos*, stating, “Said the Holy One, Blessed is He, to Avraham, go and pave the way before your descendants”.

This idea has subsequently been summed up in the phrase “*Maaseh Avos siman l’banim* – the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the sons.” However, this colloquial rendition of this concept risks potentially missing the meaning of what these pre-experiences were for. The word “*siman*” means a sign, and can at most provide direction or illumination. *Maaseh Avos* does more than that. Ultimately, the acts of the Avos *enabled* the experiences of the sons and allowed them to happen. Indeed, the aforementioned Midrash does not say that Hashem told Avraham to *illuminate* the way before his sons, but rather to *pave* the way – enabling it to be traversed later on.

Why should the way of the sons need to be paved for them?

Frequently throughout Tanach, we find that prophecies and miracles are accompanied by some sort of trigger act. The role of these acts is to serve as a form of interface between the spiritual realm and the physical world, a catalyst which harnesses the energy of the miracle and allows for its fulfillment. There is no miracle in human history greater than the existence, survival and success of the Jewish people themselves. The monumental series of miracles which make up Jewish history require trigger acts to allow them to happen. These are the deeds of the fathers! Their pre-experiences on an individual level allowed for the subsequent miraculous experiences of their descendants on a national level.

It is furthermore clear from the Midrash quoted above that the Avos themselves were aware of the enabling role of their actions for future generations, for we see that Hashem specifically told Avraham to pave the way for his descendants. This brings us back to the *matzeivah* Yaakov set up on the Temple Mount. Chazal⁵ identify this act as *Maaseh Avos* for the future building of the Beis Hamikdash. As we have seen, *Maaseh Avos* is not merely symbolic in nature. Yaakov’s act served to allow for the Beis Hamikdash to be built. It is incredible to consider in this regard, that in setting up his *matzeivah* in the capacity of *Maaseh Avos*, Yaakov was in fact laying the foundations for the Beis Hamikdash and, as such, it constituted the first act of its construction! Building the Beis Hamikdash, the Meshech Chochmah reminds us, is not something which takes place at night. Therefore, Yaakov waited until it was morning – and commenced building!

3 *Bereishis Rabbah* 40:1.

4 *Bereishis Rabbah* *ibid*.

5 *Sifrei Devarim*.

BEGINNING AT HOME

A most appropriate way to conclude this discussion concerning the Avos and their preparations for building the Beis Hamikdash is by referring to a stunning chiddush of the Meshech Chochmah regarding the Avos themselves. It begins by comparing two pesukim in Parshas Chayei Sarah which describe Eliezer bowing down in thanks to Hashem. Upon discovering the girl who passed the test is none other than Avraham's family, the pasuk relates, "וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ לַיהוָה" – He bowed down before Hashem."⁶ Later on, upon hearing Rivkah's family give their consent to the match, it says, "וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה לַיהוָה" – He bowed down *on the ground* before Hashem."⁷ Why is the ground mentioned in connection with Eliezer's second bowing, but not the first?

The Meshech Chochmah answers: We have a tradition from Chazal that the Avos kept the mitzvos of the Torah even though they had not yet been given. The Meshech Chochmah explains that this idea can be extended to Eliezer as well, for the Gemara elsewhere⁸ describes him as a devoted disciple and conduit for the Torah of his master Avraham.

One of the prohibitions of the Torah is that of not bowing down on *even maskis* – stone flooring, outside the Beis Hamikdash.⁹ Therefore, since the first time Eliezer bowed down he was outdoors by the well, there was no reason for him not to bow down directly on the ground. However, the second time he bowed down was when he was already in the house of Rivkah's family, therefore, he needed to find ground which was not floored before bowing down due to concern for the prohibition of *even maskis*!

This is truly an incredible response to the Torah's subtle differentiation in describing the two acts of bowing. But the Meshech Chochmah hasn't finished. He proceeds to ask: Why did we never hear of anyone being careful about this matter in the Avos' own homes? Why is only expressed in someone else's house?

The answer, says Meshech Chochmah, lies in something the Midrash¹⁰ informs us concerning the Avos: "הַאֲבוֹת הֵן הֵן הַמְרַכְבֵּה" – The Avos are themselves the chariot." This means that the Avos provided a realm for the Divine Presence to reside in this world. This was something which would later exist solely in the Beis Hamikdash, but the Avos achieved it in their own homes. In other words, the Midrash is informing us that the homes of the Avos *attained the status of the Beis Hamikdash*, a domain where, as we have noted, the prohibition of *even maskis* does not apply! It is for this reason we only hear of Eliezer's care in this regard when he is someone else's house – for in that location it became an issue!

What better qualifications could there be to lay the foundations for the Beis Hamikdash on behalf of the future Jewish People than to have already attained it in one's home?

6 Bereishis 24:26.

7 Ibid. pasuk 52.

8 Yoma 28b.

9 See Vayikra 26:1.

10 Bereishis Rabbah 47:8.