

The Parsha in Practice

Yaakov's Stone

Yaakov was alone. He set out from his parents' home in Beer Sheva due to the threat of Esav's retribution and now was traveling to the home of Lavan in Charan, where his mother had advised he take refuge - and maybe marry - until the fury of Esav would subside.

The pasuk describes how:

וַיִּפְגַּע בְּמָקוֹם וַיִּלֶן שָׁם כִּי-בָא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשֶׂם מִרְאֲשֵׁתוֹ וַיִּשְׁכַּב בְּמָקוֹם הַהוּא:

He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.

We know that in this moment of loneliness and fear, Yaakov has a dream in which G-d appears to him and reassures him that the path he is on will be safe and that he will yet return to the land of "Israel" that he is now escaping.

In the backdrop of this important moment is the story of a stone. The pasuk mentions how Yaakov takes **מֵאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם** on which to sleep and the commentaries debate what this means. Did he take one stone to rest on? Were there many? When he arises the next morning, the verse is clear that there is only one stone there and that stone had developed great meaning to Yaakov as he set it up as a symbolic pillar, as the pasuk describes:

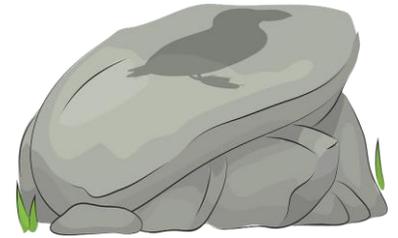
וַיִּשְׁלֹם יַעֲקֹב בְּבֹקֶר וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָאֲבָן אֲשֶׁר־שָׂם מִרְאֲשֵׁתוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתָהּ מַצְבֵּה וַיִּצַק שָׁמֶן עַל־רֹאשָׁהּ:

Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

Then, after renaming the place:

וַיְדַר יַעֲקֹב נֶדֶר לֵאמֹר אִם־יָאֲלֵקִים עִמָּדִי וְשָׁמְרֵנִי בְּדַרְדָּר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ וְנִתְּנֵלִי לְחֶם לֶאֱכֹל וּבְגָד לְלַבֵּשׁ: וְשָׁבְתִי בְּשָׁלוֹם אֶל־בֵּית אָבִי וְהָיָה ה' לִי לְאֱלֹקִים: וְהָאֲבָן הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמְתִי מַצְבֵּה יְהִיָּה בַּיִת אֱלֹקִים וְכָל אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנֵלִי עֲשֶׂר אֲעֲשֶׂרְנֹו לָךְ:

Jacob then made a vow, saying, "If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the LORD shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You."



This stone would become the checkpoint for whether Yaakov would maintain the covenant that G-d had made with Yaakov. Why does this stone become the symbol for Yaakov's previous night's dream and future ambitions?

The story of these stones is unclear. While Rashbam explains that he had taken one stone to sleep on and awoke with that same stone, Rashi claims that the language **מֵאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם** implies that he had taken many stones and awoke with them fused into one. Rashi explains (based on Chulin 91b) that the stones had "argued" over which would hold the righteous Yaakov's head and so they were fused together to avoid dispute. Another tradition teaches that the symbolism in the fusing stones was that unlike his father and grandfather who had children who ranged widely in their beliefs and behavior, Yaakov's children would all be uniformly true to Yaakov's tradition.

None of these explanations truly give meaning to why Yaakov would react so strongly to the stone when he awoke. Perhaps we can consider another direction. Traditionally, the location of this overnight event was what would become known as the Har Habayit, the Temple mount, the future location of the Beit Hamikdash. This Temple was the **בַּיִת אֱלֹקִים** that

Yaakov predicted would be the future of this location.

What was its past? For that we need to look back some chapters to the story of the Akeida. According to most, the Akeida took place in this very spot. Yaakov was lying down to sleep in the precise location that his father and grandfather, Yitzchak and Avraham, had both established themselves as faithful "Jews" like no other had or ever would. The moment of the Akeida would serve to become the model of religious sacrifice, would animate millennia of debate relating to the lengths required of worship and would become the foundation of so much of Jewish liturgy, the sacrificial service, and the all-important Rosh Hashana prayers and Torah readings.

Midrashim suggest that the stones that Yaakov was surrounded by were the very stones of the alter on which Yitzchak was tied! It was on these stones that - on this night - he rested and awoke upon.

Perhaps Yaakov was more than just alone in this moment, he was uncertain. True, he knew of his holy lineage, and he had - through great difficulty - received the blessings of his father, but was he, himself worthy?

His forbearers had the Akeida in which to prove themselves. He had simply been an *Ish Tam*; living, learning, and remaining untested in the sheltered tents of his home. Was he really worthy of being the third link in this powerful chain?

And so as he travels, he stops at this important spot, rich with family history and perhaps was tinged with his own sense of inadequacy. He looks around, considers this place, and curls up with a stone from that alter in whose shadow he lived and lies down for a fitful sleep. And he dreams.

In that dream Yaakov has his first communication with G-d, who refers to Himself as the G-d of his ancestors who will now be transitioning the promises made to them into the next generation and that:

הָאֲרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲתָהּ שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנַנָּה וְלִזְרֻעֶךָ

The ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring.

This is a dream of reassurances. Don't worry Yaakov. This location isn't only the place associated with the great and overwhelming sacrifice of your Avraham

and Yitzchak. It is a place which will value your efforts as well.

We find that following the Akeida, G-d tells Avraham about how his future descendants will multiply a) as the stars of the sky and b) the sand on the shore. Rounding out these multiplier metaphors, in this moment G-d tells Yaakov that his descendants will be כְּעֶפְר הָאֲרֶץ, like the dust of the earth.

The stars and the sand are stunning, but mostly useless. Stars are too distant to provide light and warmth and the sand, while beautiful, is devoid of nutrients and useful only for its weight, not its worth. The dust and dirt of the earth is quite different. It can be cultivated; it can be the bed in which we plant what we eat and what we see and enjoy. It is the setting in which practical things get done.

Yaakov is at the spot of the Akeida and feels insecure that he has not been faced with that great test. In that dream it becomes clear that there are different versions of self-sacrifice. Not all tests have the "star-power" or the elegant "beauty" of the Akeida. But Yaakov had been studying for all his life for another sort of test. These would be the "down-to-earth" and day-to-day tests that most lives are made of. His life would be of one at work in the world, of managing career and family. It would consist of navigating the ethical and religious dilemmas that a boss like Lavan and a brother like Esav would generate. It will be the story most of his descendants would share, living practical lives, remembering that not all heroes wear capes.

The promise within this dream and the metaphor it relates are that his smaller consistent sacrifices are just as significant and that his descendants, as numerous as the dust of the earth, will succeed in integrating their G-dliness into the "down to earth" as well as the grandiose.

And so Yaakov awakens and takes that very stone and establishes it as a pillar and symbol that Akeidas and sacrifices come in many shapes and sizes. In doing so he reminds us all that the alter of the great Akeida is made of these many small stones we pile up one at a time.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach