

Holy Places as Resources for Leading Spiritual Lives

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Yaakov, upon awaking from his prophetic dream at the outset of Parshat VaYetze (Beraishit 28:12-15), realizes HaShem's Closeness to him, and as a result is beset by a powerful emotion. (Beraishit 28:16-17) "...And he said, 'Surely God is in this place, I did not know it.' And he was afraid and he said, 'How awesome is this place. This is nothing other than the House of God and this is the Gate of Heaven.'" Yaakov recognizes that while God is Omnipresent and therefore His Presence should be able to be found and experienced everywhere, nevertheless certain geographical locations are more conducive to such encounters than others. Yaakov therefore sets about marking the place in which he had his dream (28:18), vowing to return to it and God's intensified Presence in order to express thanksgiving to HaShem upon the successful completion of his journey (28:22).

The marked fear experienced by Yaakov as a result of his first close encounter with HaShem parallels the manner in which his forefathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, also approached God. Following the war with the kings during which, despite facing superior military odds, Avraham manages to rescue his nephew Lot, God Appears to him and offers the following guidance, (15:1) "...Do not be AFRAID, Avram, I will Protect you..." Although it is understandable for someone to be frightened while engaged in the actual fighting of a war, (1) one would think that after the war is concluded, the victor in particular would feel exhilarated and relieved. Beraishit Rabba 44: 4 suggests that Avraham's apparent concern stems from the possibility that during the course of the conflict, even though he had had the moral right to defend his own life and attempt to save Lot's, he may have killed some righteous individuals. In contrast to Beraishit Rabba's positing a cause-and-effect relationship between the war described in Beraishit 14, and Avraham's fear noted by God at the beginning of Beraishit 15, Tana D'vai Eliyahu Rabba , Chapt. 23 (2) suggests that the sensibility of "God-fearing-ness" is a general quality that distinguishes Avraham from his contemporaries. "We learn from Avraham our father, that the foundation of his actions is his fear from before the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is said, 'Do not be AFRAID Avram...' God only Says, 'Do not be afraid' to someone who is profoundly God-fearing." This Midrash suggests that experiencing "Yirat Elokim" (the fear of God) was a general condition that Avraham felt day-to-day and hour-to-hour, rather than an attitude that was precipitated by extreme events only on rare occasions. While undergoing a life-threatening situation may make one more aware of one's fears than when one goes about his/her daily routines (3) —Avraham tells

Avimelech that the reason why he lied about his relationship with Sara was that he intuitively felt (4) that (20:11) “Ein Yirat Elokim BaMakom HaZeh VeHaraguni Al Devar Ishti” (there is no FEAR of God in this place, and they will KILL me concerning the matter of my wife)—this does not mean that only under such conditions can s/he be categorized as a “Yareh Elokim” (a fearer of God).

The same source in Tana D’vai Eliyahu Rabba that insists that Avraham experienced continual fear of HaShem suggests that Yitzchak too was God-fearing. Although there is no Biblical text as in the cases of Avraham and Yaakov that directly states or indirectly implies that Yitzchak himself shared this particular religious sensibility of his father and his son, (5) the Midrash imagines that the motivation for God’s Blessing Yitzchak in Beraishit 25:11 was to reassure him of HaShem’s Involvement in his life, despite the recent passing of Avraham.

We have learned from Yitzchak that from the very beginning of his actions, he feared HaShem. Yitzchak was 75 when his father passed away. (6) He said, “Woe is me that I have not accomplished the sort of good deeds that my father engaged in. What will become of me when I stand before HaShem?” Immediately the compassion of God arose and He Spoke with him that very night, as it says (25:11) “And it was (as if it is written IMMEDIATELY) after the death of Avraham, and Hashem Blessed Yitzchak his son...”

As in the case of Avraham’s going to war, the Midrash suggests that a specific incident triggered Yitzchak’s awareness of his spiritual inadequacy and fears before HaShem, i.e., the death of his father. Although Yitzchak continues to be very much alive, his universe has irreversibly been altered by the passing of his role model and mentor, and one imagines that once Sara died (23:2), the individual exclusively responsible for maintaining the religious tone for the entire household had been Avraham. While it had always been taken for granted that Yitzchak would be expected to continue Avraham’s legacy—the banishing of Yishmael (21:14) as well as the sending away of Ketura’s children (25:6) constitute clear indications of whom Avraham’s intended successor was to be—the magnitude of the role that he was expected to fill did not truly dawn upon him until his father’s death. However, to assume that Yitzchak was always God-fearing and deferential to His Will is easy to imagine. Certainly his readiness to allow himself to be sacrificed by his father (22:9) reflects such a religious sensibility.

Although the same Midrashic source cited twice above, Tana D’Vai Eliyahu Rabba, views Yaakov in a similar vein as his forefathers, by stating when commenting on 28:17, “we learn from Yaakov that from the beginning of his actions he feared the Holy One, Blessed Be He, when the Tora says, ‘And he was afraid, and he said, ‘How awesome is this place’”, one could easily take issue with the assumption that “from the beginning” Yaakov evidenced such a religious attitude. Granted that the Tora first describes him as (25:27) “Ish Tam Yoshev Ohalim” (a simple man sitting in tents); nevertheless, the two seminal incidents in terms of his dealing with his twin brother Eisav, i.e., (25:31) his bartering a bowl of lentils for Eisav’s “birthright”, and (27:18 ff.) his deliberate subterfuges designed to gain for him the blessing intended for Eisav, hardly reflect an attitude of “God-fearing-ness”. Would Avraham, who rebuked Avimelech for what he considered the atmosphere of immorality pervasive in Gerar, and Yitzchak, who also complained to Avimelech about how he had been treated while sojourning in Gerar (26:27), have countenanced Yaakov’s treatment of his own brother? A close reading of 28:17 suggests not that Yaakov at this point felt a sense of “Yirat Elokim” from within, but rather only as a result of outside stimuli, namely a combination between the Revelatory Dream that he had just experienced and the special place in which he finds himself.

Following such a line of reasoning results in projecting Yaakov as someone that we can reasonably aspire to emulate to a much greater extent than either Avraham or Yitzchak. If the “Yirat Elokim” that informed the lives of Avraham and Yitzchak were inner qualities that were inherent within their particular personalities, then we might reasonably contend that either you are endowed with such spirituality or you are not. Yaakov, on the other hand, was someone who started out without being sensitive to “Yirat Elokim”, but consequently found himself in a place that inspired special thoughts and experiences, leading to the development of this type of sensibility. Consequently, our seeking out such places constitutes a true strategy for all times, places and individuals searching for Divine Inspiration and heightened awareness of God.

How might the phenomenon of a particular place causing one to engage in more intensive spiritual thoughts be understood psychologically? R. Jonathan Sacks, in his weekly essay on the Parsha, (7) cites an interpretation by Panim Yafot (R. Pinchas Horowitz) on the phrase in (28:16) “Surely God is in this place, ‘VeAnochi Lo Yadati’ (I did not know it).” The Chassidic commentator notes an apparent redundancy since the same sentiment could have been conveyed by Yaakov simply saying “Lo Yadati”, omitting the first person pronoun “VeAnochi”. The commentator therefore explains that we

come to “know God” when we deemphasize, don’t know the “I”, i.e., ourselves. When Yaakov was in his parental home, his focus was upon self-advancement, upon one-upping his twin Eisav. But when he is finally alone and exiled, there is room in his soul for reflecting upon HaShem and the manner in which he should strive to worship Him. Yaakov may have been sitting in “Ohalim” (tents) (25:27). But he was too comfortable, too self-absorbed to be able to truly appreciate what God Expected of him. He had to leave the comfort of the environment that he knew well and go elsewhere to attain the proper perspective.

In this regard, Yaakov was following in the footsteps of his mother Rivka, according to the commentary of RaMBaN. When she needed some insight into what was happening to her in terms of her difficult pregnancy, she did not ask her husband Yitzchak, or simply remain in her family tent and prayed, but rather (25:22) “VaTelech LiDrosh Et HaShem” (she went to inquire of HaShem). RaShI suggests that she went to the legendary Yeshiva of Shem VeEver (8) in order to receive a Revelation from the two Roshei Yeshiva (the heads of the Yeshiva) concerning the two nation builders struggling in her womb (25:23). Gil Student (9) notes that RaMBaN disagrees with RaShI and insists that rather than inquiring of a prophet, Rivka was seeking out an appropriate place to pray. While prayer can be offered anywhere, once again, some places are simply more inspiring than others. Such an understanding additionally confirms the Halachic position cited below in Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 90:18, that prayers offered in a public Beit Midrash are more likely to be effective than those recited even in a large congregational synagogue.

But where might we find such places today as the site of Yaakov’s dream and the Yeshiva to which Rivka went? Traditional commentaries, based upon Yaakov’s utterances in (28:16) “HaShem BaMakom HaZeh”; (28:17, 22) “Beit Elokim”; and (28:17) “Sha’ar HaShamayim”, posit that Yaakov dreamt his dream in the place where the Beit HaMikdash would eventually be constructed. (10) Not only does such an interpretation promote offering prayers today as close to Har HaBayit (the Temple Mount) in Jerusalem, as possible, (11) but in the event that one only rarely, if ever, is able to pray at that holy site, the approach suggests how important it is to pray in a synagogue or Beit Midrash, referred to in Megilla 29a, based upon Yechezkel 11:16, as “Mikdash Me’at” (a lesser manifestation of the Temple). The premise entails assuming that not only do these buildings constitute manifestations of the Temple, but that the ground upon which they rest is holy as well. (12)

The importance of praying in a holy place is formulated Halachically in Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 90:9, 18.

An individual should strive to pray in a synagogue with the “Tzibbur” (congregation). And if s/he is under duress and cannot come to the synagogue, then s/he should try to pray at the same time as when the “Tzibbur” is praying. Similarly if s/he is under duress and cannot pray at the time when the “Tzibbur” is praying, and s/he is praying by him/herself, nevertheless s/he should pray in a SYNAGOGUE.

Mishna Berura #33.

Because it is a place that permanently is associated with holiness, and his/her prayer will be accepted more readily when offered in such a place...

A permanent Beit Midrash (place for Tora study) is more holy than a synagogue. Consequently it is a greater religious fulfillment to pray in such a location than in a synagogue. This is assuming that he can pray with at least ten other people.

Mishna Berura #54

... This assumes that the Beit Midrash is the place in which the person praying always studies, and having to go to a synagogue, even if there are more people there, and the principle (Mishlei 14:28) “BeRov Am Hadrat Melech” (the greater the number of people engaged in honoring the King, the more honor accrues to Him), would cause a disruption in his/her learning. However, if this is not the case, then “BeRov Am Hadrat Melech” is the dominant principle that should determine where an individual prays. (Mishna Berura goes on to state that if the Beit Midrash has in it a Minyan of people who are constantly learning Tora, then this place becomes more holy than even a synagogue that has within it large numbers of worshippers.)

The unique spiritual interaction between Beit Keneset and worshipper is encapsulated in one of the verses that is traditionally recited just as one walks into shul before s/he begins to pray. (Tehillim 5:8) “And I, as a result of Your great Mercy, come into Your House; I bow down towards Your Holy Sanctuary Be’Yiratecha (in Your Fear/in fear of You).” A series of Kabbalistic glosses on the verse, understand the lives of the three forefathers as being alluded to in the verse’s tri-part phrases: “Your great Mercy”—a reference to Avraham, a man

of mercy and great kindness; “Your Holy Sanctuary”—a reference to Yitzchak who was bound on the alter in the Holy Place (the Akeida was to have taken place on Har HaBayit as well—see 22:14); “In fear of You”—this is a reference to Yaakov, who said, “How awesome is this place.” There is an implicit assumption that as soon as one walks into a synagogue’s sanctuary or a Beit Midrash, that a feeling of Yirat HaShem will come over him/her, that one is sobered by beginning to think of his/her relationship with God before s/he even utters a single word, that even when one returns to one’s home, profession, social interactions, and/or recreational activities, that having spent time in God’s Precincts, in a holy place associated with Him, that the awareness of His Presence, Concern, and High Standards, will inspire us to live lives that justify His having Chosen us to serve as his (Shemot 19:5-6) “Am Segula” and “Mamlechet Kohanim” (treasured people and kingdom of priests).

Shabbat Shalom and may we have the strength, motivation and opportunity to spend as much time in prayer and study in holy places as possible, thereby drawing spiritual strength and sustenance to worship HaShem as we should.

(1) Devarim 20:5-8 lists four categories of individuals who are not required to participate in an optional war (an expansionist campaign as opposed to defending the country when it is being attacked): a) a person who has built a house but has not as yet begun to live in it, b) someone who has planted a vineyard but who to date has not begun to enjoy its fruits, c) an individual who has become engaged to be married, but has not taken the final steps to complete the marriage process, and d), a confirmation that warfare is typically frightening, “HaYareh VeRach HaLeivav” (one who is fearful and soft-hearted).

(2) When this Midrash is quoted in Tora Shleima (ed. R. Menachem Kasher, p. 629) Chapt. 25 rather than Chapt. 23 is given as an alternate origin of the Midrash.

(3) RaShI, interpreting Devarim 20:8 in light of the Mishna in Sota 44a, cites two interpretations for the phrase, “HaYareh VeRach HaLeivav”: R. Akiva contends that the Tora is literally describing an individual who is frightened by violence and potential bodily harm and even death; R. Yosi HaGalili insists that this fourth category is concerned with a person who has a guilty conscience, FEARING that within the context of a war, God will Mete out punishments to him arising from past malfeasance, i.e., “Yirat Elokim”!

(4) RaShI claims that Avraham reached this conclusion due to the questions that he was asked upon his first arriving in Gerar. While it could be claimed that this constitutes more objective evidence than a mere “feeling”, nevertheless, the questions were obviously interpreted by Avraham from a particular point of view and expectations regarding how a newly-arrived visitor deserves to be treated.

(5) In 31:42, while Yaakov is berating Lavan for having unduly mistreated him, he refers to HaShem as “Pachad Yitzchak” (the terror of Yitzchak). Should we assume that a son’s perspective of a father’s faith is objective to the point that it can be relied upon as objective fact?

(6) According to 21:5 and 25:7, Avraham was 100 at Yitzchak’s birth and 175 at his death, making Yitzchak 75 at the time of his father’s demise.

(7) <http://www.shulinthewood.com/index.htm?home.htm>

(8) See <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Noach.html>

(9) <http://www.aishdas.org/mesukim/5764/toledos.pdf>

(10) RaMBaN, who wrote his commentary on the Tora in Israel after having been exiled from Spain as a result of his polemical debate with Pablo Christiani, and therefore was far more familiar with the actual places in the land than his medieval contemporaries, strives to reconcile the geographical problems that such an interpretation raises in his notes on 28:17.

(11) Although realizing that the both the First and Second Temples have been destroyed could serve to suggest that praying in such a place will serve to depress rather than inspire spiritual feelings, on the one hand, it is appropriate to confront the shortcomings that led to the Temples' destruction at the time of prayer in order to assume the proper posture towards HaShem, the object of our prayers (i.e., if we have not attempted to alleviate our own "Sinat Chinam" [needless hatred]—the cause for the destruction of the Second Temple according to Yoma 9b—and on the other, Yaakov was inspired by a place that only in the FUTURE would be the site of the Temples, suggesting that the place itself independent of any structure built upon it, is the catalyst for spirituality.

(12) Megilla 28b, by stating that synagogues outside of Israel are built "Al T'nai" (conditionally) and therefore once they are destroyed, people need not treat the sites with the type of dignity necessitated when the structures were standing, could still be interpreted to mean that when the synagogues are standing, there is not only holiness as a result of the building, but the site as well. The difference between Israel and Chutz LaAretz (outside of Israel) is when the synagogue has been unfortunately destroyed: in Israel, the site retains holiness, which is not the case in Chutz LaAretz.