

# THE LOCATION OF RACHEL'S TOMB

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

I

## GENESIS OF THE PROBLEM

In our Parashah, Ya'akov is elaborating upon his deathbed request of Yoseph to bury him in the Cave of Machpelah, with Avraham, Sarah, Yitzhak, Rivkah and Leah. As a form of apologia, explaining why Yoseph's own mother - and Ya'akov's beloved, Rachel - is not buried in that hallowed spot, Ya'akov explains:

And as for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died by me in the land of Canaan in the way, when yet there was but a little way to come to Ephrath; and I buried her there in the way of Ephrath; which is Beth-Lehem. (48:7).

It is unclear what the tone of this explanation might be (see the Rishonim ad loc.) - if Ya'akov is justifying the road-side burial without even entering the town of Beit-Lechem, or if the larger issue of Rachel's absence from the Cave of Machpelah is the tacit subject here. Regardless, this verse, mirrored by an earlier verse which is part of the narrative itself, seems to pinpoint (more or less) the location of Kever Rachel:

And they journeyed from Beit-El; and there was but a little way to come to Efrat; and Rachel labored with child, and she had difficult labor. And it came to pass, when she was in difficult labor, that the midwife said to her, Fear not; you shall have this son also. And it came to pass, as her soul was departing, for she died, that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Binyamin. And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrat, which is Beit-Lechem. And Ya'akov set a pillar upon her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. (35:16-20)

For the last hundred-plus years, at least, the building commonly known as "Kever Rachel" has been regarded with the sanctity and special feelings associated with this beloved mother of Yisra'el. The beautiful Midrashim (one of which will play a critical role in our analysis) which portray her pleading on behalf of Am Yisra'el are connected with that locus.

As early as the end of the 13th century, Ramban (see his comments at B'resheet 35:16) records his own identification of the place, which is near [present-day] Beit-Lechem. To be sure, we have much earlier reports of Rachel's Tomb being in the proximity of Beit-Lechem - including a passage in the new testament dating back to the first century, and from the 4th century history of Eusibius. These

identification are almost assuredly based on older Jewish traditions.

Yet, as we will see, there are significant problems associated with locating Kever Rachel in its present-day location; locations which spring both from Rabbinic literature and from passages in the T'nakh itself.

## II

### THE FIRST CHALLENGE FROM T'NAKH: WEEPING IN RAMAH

In one of the most moving passages in all of T'nakh, Yirmiyah reports that the voice of Rachel's weeping is heard in the Binyaminite town of Ramah (approximately 10 miles north of Yerushalayim):

Thus says Hashem; A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. Thus says Hashem; Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says Hashem; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope for your future, says Hashem, that your children shall come again to their own border.

(for an elegant example of how this passage is utilized Midrashically, see Eikhah Rabbah, P'tich'ta #24).

The simple read of this text presents Rachel as being born in the town of Ramah, quite a distance from modern-day Beit Lechem - even north of Yerushalayim.

At this point, we are faced with two difficulties: a) How can the verse in Yirmiyahu be reconciled with the location described in B'resheet?

b) How can the verse in Yirmiyahu be reconciled with convention - dating back at least seven hundred years - which places Kever Rachel south of Yerushalayim?

Before attempting to resolve the problem, it is prudent to note that the Yirmiyah association with Ramah is not incidental:

The word that came to Yirmiyah from Hashem, after Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard had let him go from Ramah, when he had taken him bound in chains among all those who were carried away captive from Yerushalayim and Yehudah, who were carried away captive to Bavel. (Yirmiyah 40:1)

In other words, the captives from Yerushalayim, subsequent to the destruction, were taken away - northwards - and had a "transit stop" at the Binyaminite town of Ramah. This horrifying and desperate circumstance would be an "ideal" opportunity for the exiles to hear Rachel's weeping - and to be told of Hashem's promise to her that they would return to their borders.

Aware of the geographical tangle produced by this passage, classical commentaries have taken

several approaches to resolve it. One famous one, first found in the Targum, renders "Ramah" not as a place-name, rather as "heaven" (the literal translation of "Ramah" is "high place" - taken because the city is atop a hill). Rachel's voice is being heard in heaven, according to this take.

This explanation is difficult to maintain within the realm of P'shat. Although we are not as concerned if it rends the attractive connection between Rachel's weeping and the "exilic transit stop" of Ch. 40, that is not enough to defeat the interpretation. There is, however, an inherent problem with explaining "Ramah" as "heaven" here. Besides the fact that such a word is never used - at least not in the prophetic canon - as a cognomen for "heaven", the vocalization doesn't fit. If "Ramah" were to mean "heaven", it would have to be written "Baramah" - "in THE heavens" (compare T'hilim 2:4 - "Yoshev BaShamayim"; indeed, even when referring to the Binayminite town, "Baramah" is the common usage). The pointing of our text - "B'Ramah" must be translated "in Ramah".

There is another way to reconcile Yirmiyah 31 with the "southern theory" of the location of Kever Rachel, one that lacks nothing in elegance and may easily be maintained as P'shat, one advanced by Ramban in B'eresheet 35:16. Note that the text doesn't say that Rachel's voice is heard "from Ramah"; rather, it is heard "in Ramah" - in other words, the exiles in Ramah are hearing her voice (from wherever it might be) weeping over their absence.

In short, the verse in Yirmiyah does nothing to establish or challenge the location of Kever Rachel.

There is, however, a Midrash which employs this passage to explain Ya'akov's choice of burial locations for his beloved Rachel which will demand a response if we are to maintain the conventional location of Kever Rachel:

Why did our father Ya'akov see fit to bury Rachel on the road to Efrat? He saw, through Divine inspiration, that the exiles will eventually pass by there; therefore, he buried her there so that she should beg God's compassion for them, as it says: "A voice is heard in Ramah..." (B'eresheet Rabbah 82:10)

The author of this Midrash seems to accept as a fait accompli that Rachel is buried somewhere north of Yerushalayim, as that is the route taken by the exiles on their way to Bavel.

We will yet return to this Midrash in our defense of the "southern theory".

Before moving on to the most difficult passage, there is another rabbinic source marshaled by those who would belittle the popular identification of the location of Kever Rachel - and it is not an easy source to elude:

R. Meir states, [Rachel] died in the her son's territory (i.e. Eretz Binyamin). (Sifri B'rakhah #11).

Remember, from the earliest passage in B'eresheet, that Rachel gave birth, died and was buried all in one spot. If she died in [what would later become] Binyaminite land (parenthetically, that means that not only was Binyamin the only son to be born in K'na'an, he was born in the territory that would be

named after him and inherited by his descendants) then she was buried there. How do we sustain a southern location with this identification - after all, doesn't Binyamin's land extend only as far south as Yerushalayim (see Yehoshua 18:16)?

We will yet return to this passage, as well as the Midrash about Rachel's placement as a sentinel for the departing exiles.

### III

## THE SECOND CHALLENGE FROM T'NAKH: "SHA'UL'S SIGNS"

### BACKGROUND

The book of Sh'mu'el is devoted to the establishment of the Israelite monarchy. After 7 chapters describing the birth and career of Sh'mu'el, the text shifts its focus to the preparation for a king. In chapter 8, the people, noting Sh'mu'el's advancing age and his sinning sons (who would, presumably, take over his role as leader), as him for a king. At the end of this chapter of "Mishpat haMelekh", Sh'mu'el sends the people home, promising them a king.

At the beginning of Chapter 9, we are introduced to Sh'aul, a Binyaminite, who lives in Giv'ah. Sh'aul, a strapping young man with a great sense of filial loyalty, is trekking through the land of Binyamin to find his father's donkeys who have strayed. At some point, his "valet" suggests that they visit the local "seer" who might be able help them find the donkeys. Sh'mu'el, in the meantime, is told by God that the awaited-king will be arriving on the morrow. When Sh'aul, seeking prophetic guidance to find his father's donkeys meets Sh'mu'el, looking for the new leader of the people, there is a soft of dialogic dissonance; Sh'aul does not believe Sh'mu'el's words: "Am I not a Binyaminite, of the smallest of the tribes of Yisra'el? and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Binyamin? Why then do you speak so to me?" (I Sh'mu'el 9:21)

After Sh'mu'el invites Sha'ul to be seated in the place of honor at the feast, he escorts the young Binyaminite and his valet out of town - and then:

Then Sh'mu'el took a vial of oil, and poured it upon his head, and kissed him, and said, Is it not because Hashem has anointed you to be captain over his inheritance? When you part from me today, then you shall find two men by K'vurat Rachel in the border of Binyamin at Zelzah; and they will say to you, The donkeys which you went to seek have been found; and, behold, your father has ceased to care about the donkeys, and has become anxious about you, saying, What shall I do about my son? Then shall you go on forward from there, and you shall come to Elon Tavor, and there you shall be found by three men going up to God to Beit-El, one carrying three kids, and another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a skin of wine; And they will greet you, and give you two loaves of bread; which you shall receive from their hands. After that you shall come to the Giv'at ha'Elokim, where the garrisons of the Philistines are; and it shall come to pass, when you have come

there to the city, that you shall meet a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a lute, and a tambourine, and a pipe, and a lyre, before them; and they shall prophesy; And the spirit of Hashem will come upon you, and you shall prophesy with them, and shall be turned into another man. (I Sh'mu'el 10:1-6)

Sh'mu'el gives Sh'aul three signs, intended to demonstrate (it would seem) the truth of his prophetic powers such that Sha'ul should accept the mantle of leadership similarly foretold.

The difficulty, from our perspective, lies in the first sign - Kever Rachel is clearly placed in the land of Binyamin. The attached map clearly marks Sha'ul's journey home from Ramah; he will walk due south, ending well north of Yerushalayim. This verse seems to militate against identifying Kever Rachel as being in the district of Beit-Lechem, south of Yerushalayim.

It should be noted that there are a number of scholars who, ignoring most of the historic evidence cited above (they may argue that local traditions were based on an errant reading of text), favor the "northern theory" and maintain that Rachel was, indeed, buried north of Yerushalayim. How they interpret the two passages in B'resheet is a matter for a different shiur - one which we hope to present at a later date.

If we are to remain faithful to the strict reading of the verses in B'resheet and to the historic evidence (and conventional belief), we must address the passage in Sh'mu'el, as well as the two Midrashim cited above, all of which seem to strongly challenge the present-day location of Kever Rachel.

#### IV

#### ELITZUR'S SOLUTION: LITERARY ANALYSIS PROVIDES GEOGRAPHICAL ACCURACY

My teacher and friend, Dr. Yoel Elitzur (Sinai #92, Fall 1982, pp. 35-45) points out several difficulties in the "signs" given to Sha'ul, the resolution of which not only maintains the popular location of Kever Rachel, but also provides added insight into the significance of that special place. The rest of this essay is a synopsis of Dr. Elitzur's article.

There is one particular textual problem in the geographic marker used for the first "sign" - When you part from me today, then you shall find two men by K'vurat Rachel in the border of Binyamin at Zelzah.

1) If the location of Kever Rachel was known at the time, why add the other geographic landmarks (the border of Binyamin, Zelzah)? If, conversely, the location of Kever Rachel was not well-known at the time (or to Sha'ul), why incorporate it at all?

There are several general problems which emanate from these six verses: Whereas many commentaries have understood them to be "wonders", in the sense presented above (to wit, three such odd things will happen exactly as the prophet foretold, thus fortifying his prophecy about the

monarchy). This is difficult on several accounts:

2) The word "Ot", as opposed to "Mophet", generally means "indicator"; i.e. a wondrous event which has an inherent or symbolic connection to the event it purports to confirm. 3) The signs are not presented as ancillary to Sh'mu'el's anointing of Sha'ul; they flow directly from his declaration and seem to be a part of the consecration of the new king. 4) The overabundance of details (geographical and other) which are found in this foretelling of Sha'ul's walk home is highly unusual and does not fit the common style of the T'nakh narrative.

V

## THE LITERARY ANALYSIS

In order to understand the literary structure of the three signs, we will first analyze the last two - and return to our point of departure - Kever Rachel.

Each sign shares some components:

A: Location (Elon Tavor, Giv'ah);

B: Number of people (3, group)

C: Description of people (going up to Beit El one with...and one with...and one with..., coming down from the altar with a lute and a tambourine and a pipe and a lyre)

D: Interaction with them (and they will greet you, and give you two loaves of bread; which you shall receive from their hands, And the spirit of Hashem will come upon you, and you shall prophesy with them)

We would expect the first sign to follow this pattern, but it seems to deviate; instead of there being a brief notation about the location where Sha'ul would meet them, there is an overwhelming amount of information in that regard (by K'vurat Rachel in the border of Binyamin at Zelzah); yet there is no description given of these men, unlike the pilgrims and prophets described in the second and third "Otot", respectively.

Without fully solving the "component imbalance" of the first sign (which we will do forthwith), a pattern begins to emerge which demonstrates the significance of these signs and their sequence.

Note that each sign is introduced by Sha'ul's progress - When you part from me today...then shall you go on forward from there...after that you shall come to...

First he meets 2, then 3, then a whole group of people.

First "you shall find", then "you shall be found" and then "you shall encounter"

First "they will say to you" (Sha'ul is passive), then "you shall receive from their hands" (Sha'ul is active) then "you shall prophesy with them" (total enjoining).

We now see that we are not dealing with "wonders" (Moph'tim), rather with signs which are indicative of the spiritual ascendance and progress of Sha'ul. We also understand that the signs are part of the anointing of Sha'ul. Sha'ul grows from a "donkey-seeker" to a man imbued with God's spirit. The final phrase - and [you] shall be turned into another man - is not part of the third sign; rather, it is the goal and summation of the entire process.

## VI

### BACK TO KEVER RACHEL: SOLVING THE FIRST SIGN

As noted above, the first sign seems to deviate from the pattern of details found in the other two - there is too much geographic detail (and, in any case, the mention of Kever Rachel seems to be of no help or else should be sufficient) and no description of the 2 people he will meet there.

The Tosefta in Sota provides an answer which seems, prima facie, to be a "weak" defense of the southern theory:

...rather, [Sh'mu'el] said to him: Now, as I am speaking to you, they are at K'vurat Rachel. You are walking and they are coming and you will find them at the border of Binyamin at Zelzah. (Tosefta Sotah 11:7)

Having concluded our literary analysis, we see that this statement is not merely a defense of the popular location of Kever Rachel; it is also an astute observation about the three signs. The mention of K'vurat Rachel in the first sign is not a "geographic marker" - rather, it is the description of the two men, as follows:

Sign	Number	Location	Description	Interaction
1	2	Zelzah	At K'vurat Rachel	They will tell you...
2	3	Elon Tavor	Ascending to Beit-El	You will take from them
3	Group	Giv'ah	Descending from the altar	You will join them

The current presence of these men at K'vurat Rachel is not a way for him to find them - for they won't be there (south of Yerushalayim) when Sha'ul meets them; rather, they will be coming north, from K'vurat Rachel, and Sha'ul will meet them at Zelzah.

We can now place the final piece into the puzzle of the signs of Sha'ul: The progression is not only in number of people met, not only in the level of Sha'ul's interaction with them, but also in the quality of the spiritual experience in which they are engaged. The final, ultimate experience is prophecy; a pilgrimage to a Sanctuary is also a spiritual experience, although one that falls short of prophecy. The visit to Kever Rachel, while not on a par with a visit to an altar, also has religious and spiritual implications and dimensions.

We now understand the great attention paid to detail in these verses; each component serves to fill out the sequential growth of Sha'ul, until his spirit is captivated by prophecy.

Kever Rachel is, as indicated in B'resheet, a few miles north of Beit- Lechem; the challenge verse from Yirmiyah was rather easily answered. The more difficult challenge, from the prophecy of Sha'ul's return home, was not only resolved, but we gained a deeper appreciation of the relationship between the three signs given Sha'ul and his development into the first Melekh Yisra'el.

## VII

### POSTSCRIPT

As noted above, there are two Midrashim which seem to support the "northern theory" - and R. Me'ir's statement that Rachel was buried in her son's territory and Ya'akov's decision to bury Rachel on the road to be a sentinel for the exiles who would pass by.

R. Me'ir's statement, when examined closely, is not an attempt to "relocate" Kever Rachel north of Yerushalayim; rather, it is an "expansion" of Binaymin's borders to include the area of Beit-Lechem. The dispute in the Sifri is not about the location of Kever Rachel; it is about the location (in which tribe's territory) of the Beit haMikdash.

The second Midrash would seem to present a problem; as noted above, the exiles to Bavel were taken northward from Yerushalayim on their way to Bavel.

The Ba'alei haMidrash who flourished in the shadow of the destruction of the 2nd Beit haMikdash often utilized verses referring to the first exile and destruction (586 BCE) as references to the persecutions of their own times. See, inter alia, the Petich'ta of Eikhah Rabbah.

Jerome, the early Church father and historian, writes (commentary to Yirmiyah 31) that after the quashing of the rebellion associated with Bar- Kosiba, the captives were taken by order of Hadrian, to the great fair north of Hevron; where they were sold as slaves. Perhaps the Midrash in question is alluding to this tragedy - for, indeed, they passed by Kever Rachel on the way to being sold into slavery.

How remarkable is it, then, that the P'sikta (2:3) has a slightly different version of our Midrash:

I buried her there. Why? It was known to Ya'akov, that ultimately the Beit haMikdash would be destroyed and his children would go into exile, and they would go to the patriarchs [in Hevron] begging them to pray for them, and they won't help them. Once they will be on the road, they will come and embrace Kever Rachel and she will stand and beg God's compassion...

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Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Institute of the Yeshiva of Los Angeles.