

PARSHAS VAYEITZEI - THE GATE OF PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

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The Gate of Peaceful Coexistence¹

He [Yaakov] became frightened and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d and this is the gate to the heavens."... He named that place Beis-el. However, Luz was the city's name originally.

The plain sense of the text locates it at the place of Yaakov's dream. At the time, it was only a "place," i.e. an empty expanse that adjoined the city of Luz. In time, Luz expanded, eventually spilling over to the Beis-el area, which then lent its name to the entire enlarged city.

Chazal, however, see "this place" as the beis ha-mikdosh. Yaakov saw the ladder that joined Heaven and earth standing on Har ha-Moriah. There is good reason for this. The phrase "this is none other" ordinarily should point to a diminution of value. It implies, "I had thought that this place was exalted beyond comprehension. Now, however, I understand that it is not as holy as I had thought." But such an explanation of the text is unsatisfactory according to the plain sense of the text, because in fact Yaakov now realized that "this place" was far greater than he had believed! He had seen it, i.e. the empty expanse later called Beis-el as devoid of any significance. After experiencing his prophetic dream there, he knew it to be more important than he had thought before.

Alternatively, we might see the pasuk as Yaakov's reaction to his own fright. "The reason for my fright is that I had stayed in the 'house of G-d.' If so, however, the pasuk should have read, "This, i.e. my fright reaction, is none other than from the house of G-d."

If we read the pesukim according to Chazal's suggestion, however, the difficulty is resolved. Yaakov knew quite well that the beis ha-mikdosh was the interface between Heaven and earth. He understood that Divine Providence emanated through it to the rest of the world. Yaakov also knew that this hashgacha depended upon different manifestations of Man's spiritual output. He was indeed surprised and shocked to realize that in his experience, the beis ha-mikdosh - and therefore the kind of Divine Providence reflected in his own life - would take on the role of a house.

Yaakov was surprised because this revelation to him was quite different from the notion of

Providence evidenced in the lives of Avraham and Yitzchok. The former had called it a mountain; the latter termed it a field. Avraham learned about Har Ha-Bayis as a mountain of triumph, symbolizing Divine assistance in fighting G-d's enemies. It implies firmly standing one's ground, and engaging the enemy in direct confrontation. Yitzchok saw it as a field, representing the source of nourishment and parnasah of His people.

Yaakov learned of a different position, almost the opposite of Avraham's. He would now find out about hashgacha granting a house, or secure domicile while dwelling in the midst of many foreign peoples. Seen in sharper focus, the house represented the ways of shalom, of peace. Rather than engage enemies in struggles for power and dominance, Yaakov's way of peaceful coexistence avoided the struggle, and stressed non-threatening coexistence. Triumph is tabled; opposing parties each go their own way.

Yaakov saw the opening of this house not as a "door," but as a "gate." Doors are meant to allow in individuals who are given permission to enter. A sha'ar or gate invites in the greater public. The Providential gifts known to Avraham and Yitzchok served restricted clientele. Victory in battle comes in the merit of those who study Torah; parnasah depends on our avodah - our service of Hashem through prayer. Specialists in Torah and in avodah amount to a small part of the population. Yaakov's gift, the Providential blessing of peace and tranquility, is linked to his specialty: widespread performance of acts of chesed. Alone among the three types of blessing tied to the lives of the Avos, chesed paves an access road travelled by the many. All human beings - Jew and non-Jew alike can merit the bracha of peace through participating in chesed, although every Jew has a particular proclivity for this method.

Yaakov realized that his role in securing Divine Providence had wider application than the others, because he was denied his prophetic vision all the years he spent with Shem and Ever in an environment of Torah. Only now, far from the holiness of Torah, did he learn that he would be able to secure peace through acts of chesed. From this point on, we see him toiling on behalf of other. We find him working to keep the peace within his small clan, even as he is forced to move from place to place.

We, his descendants, are meant to see the similarity to our own condition of wandering in Exile. We, too, are meant to emulate his lifestyle, and focus on chesed and shalom with everyone. This is our survival strategy for galus.

1. Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Bereishis 28:19
