

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Vayigash

Yaakov's Visions

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמַרְאֵת הַלַּיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב יַעֲקֹב

God spoke to Yisrael in a night vision and said: "Yaakov, Yaakov". (46:2)

DAY AND NIGHT

Receiving Divine communication through the medium of a prophetic vision was something that was experienced by each of the Avos. However, the fact that the vision took place at night is an aspect that is emphasized specifically in the case of Yaakov's visions. His first vision, experienced upon leaving home as described in the beginning of *Parshas Vayetzei*, took place in a dream during the night.¹ The vision described by our pasuk is likewise introduced as taking place at night. What is behind the timing of these visions?

The Meshech Chochmah explains that in both these situations, Yaakov is about to go into *galus* (exile). Hashem thus appears to him at night prior to these two journeys, in order to reassure him that even as he moves into a state of exile – which is characterized by night – the *Shechinah* is with him, guiding him and protecting him. This concept is expressed by the Gemara,² which states that "In every place to which the Jewish People were exiled, the *Shechinah* was exiled with them."

Thus, we see that the Av who represents this connection during the dark times of exile is Yaakov. This special association is also expressed in a pasuk in Tehillim³ that we recite regularly, which reads:

יַעֲנֶה ה' בְּיוֹם צָרָה יִשְׁבְּרֵךְ שֵׁם אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב

May Hashem answer you on the day of distress, may the Name of the God of Yaakov protect you.

¹ Bereishis 28:11-12.

² Megillah 29a

³ 20:2.

When we call out to Hashem on “the day of distress,” we are looking to invoke a connection that He first established with Yaakov and hence He is referred to in this situation as “the God of Yaakov”.

THE ORDER OF PRAYER

The Meshech Chochmah proceeds to explain that the specific experiences of Yaakov are reflected in the prayer which he instituted. The Gemara⁴ cites a tradition that the three daily prayers were originally instituted by the three Avos: Avraham instituted the morning prayer of *Shacharis*, Yitzchak instituted *Mincha* for the afternoon and Yaakov instituted *Maariv* – the evening prayer. Since so much of what Yaakov experienced is represented by night, it is only fitting that the connection with Hashem that he established through the prayer also takes place at night.

With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah refers to a parallel tradition cited by the Gemara⁵ regarding the basis of the three daily prayers: *Shacharis* and *Mincha* correspond to the daily morning and afternoon *tamid* offerings, while *Maariv* corresponds to the burning of the leftover fats and limbs of the day’s *korbanos*, which took place at night. Although the Gemara cites these two traditions as distinct explanations of the background to the daily prayers, the Meshech Chochmah explains that they are ultimately connected with each other. For there is something about the *avodah* which took place at night in the Beis HaMikdash which parallels the exile experience of the Jewish People represented by Yaakov.

PROPHECY BEGINS AT HOME

The Gemara⁶ states that, in principle, prophecy is something which can only be experienced in Eretz Yisrael. The unique and elevated nature of the land provides the conditions necessary for the special connection with Hashem that is expressed through prophecy. Having said that, the Gemara notes that there were certain individuals who experienced prophecy even while in exile. A classic example is the prophet Yechezkel, whose *sefer* begins with the words:

הָיָה הַיְהוָה דֹּבֵר ה' אֶל יְחֶזְקֵאל בֶּן בּוּזִי הַכֹּהֵן בְּאֶרֶץ כַּשְׂדִּים עַל נְהַר קְוָר

The word of Hashem came to Yechezkel son of Buzi, the Kohen, in the land of the Kasdim, by the River Kvar.⁷

The land of the Kasdim refers to Babylon. How is Yechezkel able to receive prophecy there? Have we not stated that prophecy is something that is restricted to Eretz Yisrael? The Gemara explains that the answer lies on the double expression used by the pasuk: “הָיָה הַיְהוָה” The first term refers to the prophecy he had already received in Eretz Yisrael prior to being exiled, while the second term refers to his subsequent prophecy in exile. The meaning is that having established a “prophecy connection” in Eretz Yisrael, Yechezkel was able to continue to enjoy that connection even when he was in exile.

FROM THE PROPHET TO THE PEOPLE

This idea, stated with regards to Yechezkel’s prophetic connection, is true in a general sense regarding our national connection with Hashem in exile. Exile is not a setting

4 *Berachos 26b.*

5 *Berachos ibid.*

6 *Moed Katan 25a.*

7 *Yechezkel 1:3.*

conducive to initiating a connection with the Shechinah. However, a connection established in Eretz Yisrael can be maintained even in exile.

This brings us back to the two traditions regarding the basis of the Maariv prayer. On the one hand we are told that it was instituted by Yaakov, while on the other hand, we are told that it corresponds to the burning of the fats and limbs on the Mizbeach. In fact, says the Meshech Chochmah, these two traditions converge over this idea. Korbanos themselves are not offered at night. This means that night-time has no “new” avodah. The only avodah which exists at that time is a continuation of the avodah which began during the day, i.e. burning the fats and limbs of korbanos that had been offered that day. So, too, the connection between the Shechinah and the Jewish People which continues even when they are in exile, represented by the night-time prayer instituted by Yaakov, is a function of continuing the connection which existed when we were in Eretz Yisrael.

FOUNDATIONS UPON WHICH TO BUILD

There is a pivotal message to be gleaned from this passage of Meshech Chochmah, and it is expressed by R’ Meir Simcha himself:

“There is a clear exhortation that emerges from this idea. When Yisrael keep hold of their authentic tradition and go in the ways of their forbears, then Yisrael is a strong nation, rooted in antiquity, to whom Hashem was revealed when the Beis HaMikdash was standing. This can then allow the Shechinah to continue to dwell among them even in the “night” of the exile in the diaspora. However, if they should forget the covenant of their forbears and neglect to follow in their ways, they then become a nation that is by itself, for the Shechinah does not come to reside in Chutz la’Aretz. Under these conditions, the Shechinah will depart from them and they will find themselves susceptible to subjugation and degradation, for they do not view themselves as an ancient nation who had ‘already received’ the word of Hashem.”

