

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Vayetzei

Foundations of the Beis Hamikdash

וַיִּשְׁכֶּם יַעֲקֹב בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר שָׁם מִרְאֲשֵׁתוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתָהּ מַצֵּבָה וַיִּצַק שָׁמֶן
עַל רֹאשָׁהּ

Yaakov arose early in the morning, he took the stone that he placed around his head and set it up as a pillar, and he poured oil on its top. (28:18)

The Timing of Yaakov's Response

Having experienced the awesome encounter with Hashem in a dream, and having received Hashem's assurance of protection until his safe return to the Land of Israel, Yaakov responds the next morning by setting up a stone as a form of altar (known as *matzeivah*), and pouring oil over it. Commenting on this *pasuk*, the Meshech Chochmah writes:

“He did not set up (the *matzeivah*) in the night, for we do not build the Beis Hamikdash at night.”

The Meshech Chochmah's unspoken question here may be inferred from his answer. The Torah has already described how Yaakov woke up in the middle of the night, aware of the profundity of the Divine encounter he has just experienced, as well as the exalted sanctity of the location where this all took place – the future Temple Mount.¹ We may wonder, therefore, why he did not immediately follow this by setting up the *matzeivah* and pouring oil on it, waiting instead until morning. To this, the Meshech Chochmah replies by citing

¹ See *pesukim* 16-17.

the ruling of the Gemara² that building the Beis Hamikdash does not take place at night.

The ensuing question, however, is: In what way is Yaakov setting up this *matzeivah* to be considered as an act of building the Beis Hamikdash? Although this took place on what would later become the temple Mount, we are not aware of this stone eventually becoming part of the structure of the Beis Hamikdash. As far as we can tell, setting up this *matzeivah* was a self-contained act, similar to the numerous altars which Avraham and Yitzchak had each set up on previous occasions!

Perhaps the Meshech Chochmah's intent in describing this as an act of building the Beis Hamikdash can be understood in a different way.

Maaseh Avos – Symbols that Enable

The Midrash³ informs us that all of the key events and experiences of the Jewish people were already pre-experienced by the *Avos*. A classic example of this principle is Avraham's sojourn in Egypt on account of the famine in the Land of Canaan, which served as a pre-experience for the Jewish people's exile there. Indeed, it is with reference to this episode the Midrash⁴ introduces us to the concept of *Maaseh Avos*, stating, "Said the Holy One, Blessed is He, to Avraham, go and pave the way before your descendants".

This idea has subsequently been summed up in the phrase "*Maaseh Avos siman l'banim* – the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the sons." However, this colloquial rendition of this concept risks potentially missing the meaning of what these pre-experiences were for. The word "siman" means a sign, and can at most provide direction or illumination. *Maaseh Avos* does more than that. Ultimately, the acts of the *Avos* **enabled** the experiences of the sons and allowed them to happen. Indeed, the aforementioned Midrash does not say that Hashem told Avraham to illuminate the way before his sons, but rather to pave the way – enabling it to be traversed later on.

Why should the way of the sons need to be paved for them?

Frequently throughout *Tanach*, we find that prophecies and miracles are accompanied by some sort of trigger act. The role of these acts is to serve as a form of interface between the spiritual realm and the physical world, a catalyst which harnesses the energy of the miracle and allows for its fulfillment. There is no miracle in human history greater than the existence, survival and success of the Jewish people themselves. The monumental series of miracles which make up Jewish history require trigger acts to allow them to happen. These are the deeds of the fathers! Their pre-experiences on an individual level allowed for the subsequent miraculous experiences of their descendants on a national level.

It is furthermore clear from the Midrash quoted above that the *Avos* themselves were

2 *Shevuos* 15b.

3 *Bereishis Rabbah* 40:1.

4 *Bereishis Rabbah* *ibid*.

aware of the enabling role of their actions for future generations, for we see that Hashem specifically told Avraham to pave the way for his descendants. This brings us back to the *matzeivah* Yaakov set up on the Temple Mount. Chazal⁵ identify this act as *Maaseh Avos* for the future building of the Beis Hamikdash. As we have seen, *Maaseh Avos* is not merely symbolic in nature. Yaakov's act served to allow for the Beis Hamikdash to be built. In other words, in setting up his *matzeivah* in the capacity of *Maaseh Avos*, Yaakov was in fact laying the conceptual foundations for the Beis Hamikdash and, as such, it constituted the first act of its construction. As such, it needed to comply with the parameters of that mitzvah. Building the Beis Hamikdash, the Meshech Chochmah reminds us, is not something which takes place at night. Therefore, Yaakov waited until it was morning – and commenced building!

5 *Sifrei* Devarim.