

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Vayishlach

Mergers and Boundaries

וַיָּבֹא יַעֲקֹב שְׁלֹם עִיר שְׁכֶם אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן בְּבֹאוֹ מִפְּדַן אֲרָם וַיַּחֲנֶה אֶת פְּנֵי הָעִיר.

Yaakov arrived complete at the city of Shechem which is in the Land of Canaan, upon his arriving from Paddan-Aram, and he encamped before the city. (33:18)

For Each Father, a Mitzvah

The *pshat* meaning of the word “וַיַּחֲנֶה” is simply that Yaakov encamped. However, the Midrash¹ explains this as a reference to a halachah of Shabbos known as “*techum*”. Each person has their “domain” on Shabbos, an area of two thousand *amos* in every direction, beyond which they may not walk. When the *pasuk* says Yaakov “encamped before the city,” it is referring to him measuring the distance around his encampment in order to establish his *techum* for Shabbos.

The Meshech Chochmah is most intrigued by the following question: There is a tradition that the Avos kept all the mitzvos, beginning with the first of the Avos – Avraham. If Avraham kept all the mitzvos, including the halachos of Shabbos, then presumably he observed *techum* Shabbos as well. Why, then, does the Torah specifically associate this mitzvah with Yaakov?

In this regard, it interesting to note that Avraham himself has his a halachah of Shabbos associated with him. When Chazal state that Avraham kept all the mitzvos even before

¹ Bereishis Rabbah sec. 11.

they were given, it expresses this by saying, “Avraham kept the entire Torah, even *eiruv tavshilin*.”² As we know, *eiruv tavshilin* is a *derabannan* enactment which enables one to cook on Yom Tov for Shabbos when Yom Tov is on Friday. It turns out that while both Avos kept both halachos, Avraham has a special connection with *eiruv tavshilin*, while Yaakov has a special connection with *techum* Shabbos.

What is the nature of these connections?

Avraham – Spreading the Word

An aspect which features very prominently in the life of Avraham is his efforts in spreading awareness of Hashem’s existence, and the life that should be led in accordance with this awareness. Even before arriving in the Land of Canaan, Avraham had developed a following; these were “the souls that he made in Charan,” who travelled with him. Indeed, his efforts in teaching people while still in Charan are reckoned by the Gemara³ as inaugurating the “two thousand years of Torah.” Why did Avraham feel it was so important to spread the word of God?

Although the simple answer is that the more people who know about Hashem, the better, nonetheless we see that this was something Avraham specifically among the Avos was involved in. Why?

The Meshech Chochmah explains. The mandate of the nation of Israel is to serve as a setting where the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, can reside. Avraham understood that this function could only be achieved by a community and not by an individual – great though he may be. Indeed, we find in this respect that the Gemara⁴ states that the *Shechinah* does not reside among less than twenty-two thousand people of Yisrael. Additionally, the 600,000 people who received the Torah were all considered necessary for that event, as they represent the cross-spectrum of personalities, all of which are necessary to house together the *Shechinah*. Therefore, since Avraham was a lone individual, he saw it as a matter of high priority to assemble around him a group that could function as the “*Shechinah* community.”⁵

Moreover, Avraham’s experiences with his first son, Yishmael, only served to intensify his outreach efforts. The *pasuk* toward the end of *Parshas Vayeira*⁶ informs us that Avraham set up an inn (“*eshel*”) in Be’er Sheva, where he “proclaimed the Name of Hashem.” The

2 Yoma 28b.

3 *Avodah Zarah* 9a. The first two thousand years of the world are referred to as “years of emptiness,” i.e., devoid of Torah. The transitional year of two-thousand occurred when Avraham was fifty two years old – still in Charan – and had begun teaching Torah.

4 *Yevamos* 64a [based on the *pasuk* in Bamidbar 10:36, “שׁוֹבָה ה' רַבּוֹת אֶלְפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.”]

5 The Meshech Chochmah goes so far as to say that this is what led Avraham specifically to go down to Egypt when there was famine in Canaan, as opposed to any other place. Egypt was then the center of wisdom and knowledge of supernatural forces, and Avraham wanted to engage the people there in dialogue and draw them close to knowledge of Hashem!

6 *Bereishis* 21:33.

Gemara elaborates that after wayfarers had enjoyed his hospitality and came to thank him, Avraham directed their thanks to Hashem. The Meshech Chochmah points out something most intriguing. We have never heard of Avraham setting up an inn prior to this stage. Why does he choose to do so now? The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, is in the preceding verses. Most of *perek* 21 of Bereishis discusses Yishmael's untoward behavior which led to him having to be sent away. These events served to impress upon Avraham the fact that he could not rely on his children alone to preserve and develop the community of Israel. Thus, as a result of his experience with Yishmael – his outreach efforts intensified and that is why he set up an inn at this stage!

Yaakov – Protecting the House

Within two generations, the situation had changed completely. Yaakov had emerged as the forefather all of whose children were part of Hashem's program, and from whom the future House of Israel could be built. At this stage, there was no longer any need to emphasize bringing others in. On the contrary, Yaakov's focus now became that of protecting his family from outside influences. Thus, we find that when Yaakov went down with his entire family to Egypt, they lived in Goshen, specifically away from the general populace. Indeed, even earlier on, during the years he spent living with Lavan, we do not find Yaakov making any efforts to bring Lavan – his father in law – closer to his way of living.

Thus, it emerges that with regards to the question of how to relate to other groups and individuals, Yaakov's approach contrasted directly with that of Avraham. While in Avraham's time it was a value to bring them in, in Yaakov's time it was more important to remain distinct from them, protecting instead the developing Jewish People. This shift in approach is what is being communicated by Chazal identifying Avraham and Yaakov with the above-mentioned two specific mitzvos:

- ▷ Avraham's area of endeavor was that of "*Eruv Tavshilin*" – combining cooked dishes – offering hospitality to all, with the goal of influencing them to enter the *Shechinah* Community.
- ▷ Yaakov, in contrast, was involved in "*Techumim*" – setting boundaries – in order to protect his family from outside influences.

From the Avos to Har Sinai

Having discussed the relationship of the different Avos to the concept of "*techumim*," the Meshech Chochmah proceeds to note something unusual about the way this mitzvah was received by their descendants. As we know, Shabbos was one of the few mitzvos that were given to the Jewish People even before they stood at Har Sinai. One of our earliest encampments in the desert was in a place called Marah, where the Torah relates we were

presented with certain mitzvos, among them – Shabbos.⁷ Nonetheless, the Gemara⁸ states that we did not receive the mitzvah of *techumim* until we arrived at Har Sinai. This is rather perplexing. If we were already receiving the mitzvah of Shabbos itself at Marah, why would we not receive the aspect of *techum* there as well?

The Meshech Chochmah explain that this too relates to the idea behind *techumin*, namely, the setting up of boundaries in order to allow the existing community to host the *Shechinah*. In the fullest sense, this requires not only that the appropriate people be present, but also that the appropriate conditions apply. The *Shechinah* only rests among the Jewish people when there is unity among them. However, in all the places that the people encamped upon leaving Egypt – including Marah – they had not yet achieved this state. This is expressed in the usage of the plural form “*vayisu... vayachanu* – they journeyed... they encamped.” Which describes all of their travels in the desert. Therefore, in the absence of having attained the state where the *Shechinah* would reside among them, they were not yet commanded with the mitzvah whose essence represents protecting this state.

However, upon arriving at Har Sinai, the Jewish People succeeding in attaining this level of unity, as expressed in the usage of the singular form describing their arrival there: “*וַיָּחֹן שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל* – *Yisrael encamped there.*”⁹ Once they had achieved the state where the *Shechinah* could dwell among them, they were able to receive the mitzvah of *techum* Shabbos!

A Fitting Inheritance

The prophet Yeshaya¹⁰ describes the reward for those who keep Shabbos by saying that Hashem will grant them “*נַחֲלַת יַעֲקֹב אָבִיךָ* – *the inheritance of your father, Yaakov,*” which the Gemara¹¹ explains as referring to “*נחלה בלי מצרים* – *an inheritance without bounds.*” The Meshech Chochmah notes that the prophet’s description of Shabbos observance begins with the words “*אם תשיב משבת רגלך* – *if you withhold your feet on Shabbos,*”¹² which the Gemara¹³ explains to be a reference to observing *techum* Shabbos. It is most fitting, therefore, that the reward for such conduct is referred to as “the inheritance of Yaakov,” for this law has a special association with Yaakov. Moreover, the *midah keneged midah* (measure for measure) in this prophecy is that in response to the Jewish People setting up boundaries where appropriate, they we will be granted an inheritance that is without bounds!

7 See *Shemos* 15:25, with Rashi.

8 *Shabbos* 87b.

9 *Shemos* 19:2, see Rashi there.

10 *Yeshaya* 58:14.

11 *Shabbos* 118b, based on *Bereishis* 28:14.

12 *Pasuk* 13.

13 *Eiruvin* 52b.