



5778 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Vayetzei / פרשת ויצא

Envisioning Yerushalayim

When Yaakov arrives in Charan after fleeing from Esav the Torah describes his interactions with the shepherds of the East. However, even before these human encounters, the first item he gazes upon is a well:¹

And he looked, and behold! a well in the field, and behold! three flocks of sheep lying beside it, because from that well they would water the flocks, and a huge rock was upon the mouth of the well.

Why was this well so important to highlight? What is the meaning behind the fact that this well is the first item that Yaakov thinks about in his new location?

The midrash sees the well as a symbol of something much deeper:²

Another explanation. “And he looked, and behold! a well in the field...” (Genesis 29:2) This refers to Zion. “...and behold! three flocks of sheep...” (ibid.) This refers to the three pilgrimage festivals. “...because from that well they would water the flocks...” (ibid.) Because from there they would draw the holy spirit.

When Yaakov saw the well, he saw it a symbol for Yerushalayim and the unique connection to God that his descendants would experience there.

When contemplated in the context of Yaakov’s life, this midrash teaches an important lesson. Up until this point, Yaakov had spent his entire life surrounded by the sanctity of the Land of Israel. In addition, he was sequestered in the tents of Torah and then the study-hall of Shem and Ever. This

¹ Bereishit 29:2.

² Bereishit Rabbah 70:8



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is the first time that *Va-Yetzei Yaakov* – that Yaakov leaves his sanctified and secluded upbringing and ventures into the lands beyond. Thus, Yaakov’s first moments and encounters teach us how to live as Jews in a foreign land.

This midrash underscores the need to keep Yerushalayim on one’s mind. While for the standard observer all Yaakov encountered was an ordinary well, he experienced it as something altogether different. Yaakov, however, with half his mind in Yerushalayim used the well as a springboard to imagine Yerushalayim and the ideal life therein.

It is important to emphasize that this midrashic reading does not negate the simple meaning of the text. Yaakov indeed saw the well as a well, encouraged the shepherds to develop a better work ethic and tended to the sheep of Rachel. Associating the well with Yerushalayim does not mean to leave in a dream-world or to not be active in contemporary society. But the dream of Yerushalayim creates a context in which our daily activities and our work to advance and better our current homes are a means to reaching the ideal Yerushalayim.

Similarly, it is incumbent upon us as well, no matter where we live, to set up mental “markers”³ to remind ourselves of Yerushalayim through our daily encounters. Through this we can always remember where our goal is to be and create a spiritual framework through which to see our daily activities.

³ Yirmiyahu 31:20.