

Parashat Vayatzte 5778, 2017:

“And Jacob Left Be’er Sheva”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Chaya Mindel bat Leah Basha, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The name “Be’er Sheva” appears a total of nine times in *Sefer Bereishit*, and serves as the opening verse of our *parasha*: “And Jacob left Be’er Sheva and went to Haran.” (28:10) The nine-fold repetition of Be’er Sheva suggests that it was an unusually important place during the time of the *Avot* (the Patriarchs, i.e. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). Indeed, each of the Patriarchs lived in Be’er Sheva at different points in their lives. Moreover, Be’er Sheva was clearly a place of extraordinary *kedushah* (holiness), since it is the context for the sole instance in *Tanach* of the term, “*A-le Olam*”: “And he (Abraham) planted an *eishel* [a grove or an inn] in Be’er Sheva, and he called there in the name of the L-rd, the G-d of the World (*A-le Olam*).” (21:33, this, and the following Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*).

In his commentary on this verse, Rashi (1040-1105), based upon *Talmud Bavli*, *Sotah* 10a, suggests that the *eishel* in Be’er Sheva provided Abraham with the opportunity to publicize the existence of Hashem to all mankind:

By means of that “*eishel*,” the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, was called “G-d of the Entire World.” After they [the wayfarers] would eat and drink, he would say to them, “Bless the One of Whose [food] you have eaten. Do you think that you have eaten of my [food]? [You have eaten of the food] of the One Who spoke and the world came into being!”

Be’er Sheva, therefore, emerges as a precursor to Jerusalem and the Holy Temple, for it was from

this hallowed ground that the *Avot* were able to teach the world about the existence of “the One Who spoke and the world came into being.” My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” to his students and disciples, expanded upon this idea and noted: “Be’er Sheva was rooted in a wellspring of *kedushah*. It was a fulcrum for offerings to G-d and a conduit for the Divine Presence.” (This, and the following quotations, are from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah*,” Rabbi Avishai C. David, editor, pages 74-75) As such, Be’er Sheva was the center of pre-Sinaitic Torah and prophecy, and the nucleus of many of the beliefs and practices associated with Judaism until our present historical moment.

Now that we are familiar with ancient Be’er Sheva’s unique spiritual standing, we are in a much better position to understand why the first *pasuk* (verse) of our *parasha* emphasizes that Jacob left Be’er Sheva, instead of simply stating, “and Jacob went to Haran,” as we find in an earlier verse: “And Jacob listened to his father and his mother, and he went to Padan Aram [i.e. Haran].” (28:7) According to the Rav: “And Jacob left Be’er Sheva, denotes that Jacob was severed somehow from Be’er Sheva... uprooted by forces beyond his control, compelled to leave a place he loved... a place to which he had become bonded.” Moreover, and quite significantly, “Jacob and Be’er Sheva had merged into one symbiotic entity, and now Jacob had to leave... and wander.”

What was the nature of the symbiotic relationship that obtained between Jacob and Be’er Sheva?

Rav Soloveitchik suggests the following analysis:

Be’er Sheva... was the first home of the covenantal community, the center of spiritual life for the adherents of Abraham’s teaching. When Jacob left Be’er Sheva, he pulled away from this spiritual center. Perhaps he was frightened that if he left the home of his father and grandfather and the center of their teaching, he would also lose his role as leader and teacher of the covenantal community.

Moreover, as much as Jacob needed Be'er Sheva, Be'er Sheva needed Jacob. As the Rav notes in a comment that echoes and explicates *Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit* (68:6): "...when Jacob left, Be'er Sheva lost its glory. Once Jacob had gone, Be'er Sheva resembled Mount Sinai when the shofar sounded and the sanctity of the mount dissipated." Hence, according to Rav Soloveitchik, Jacob's departure from Be'er Sheva had a two-fold effect: it created fear and anxiety in his psyche as to whether or not he would continue to be the "leader and teacher of the covenantal community," and it diminished Be'er Sheva's spiritual import for evermore. Based upon Hashem's endless beneficence, however, its *kedushah* was not lost for all time, and instead, "found its home in the place that Jacob encountered on his journey from Be'er Sheva: the holy city of Jerusalem."

Armed with the Rav's penetrating analysis, the phrase, "and Jacob left Be'er Sheva," undeniably takes on new and powerful meaning, for Jacob did far more than physically leave Be'er Sheva. In reality, absent Jacob, Be'er Sheva was transformed into just one more place on the map of ancient Israel and ceased to be the spiritual center of the nascent Jewish people.

With Hashem's help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the coming of *Mashiach*, and the transference of Be'er Sheva's ancient *kedushah* to the rebuilt *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) in Jerusalem, soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.