

Parashat Vayatzte, 5780, 2019:

And Ya'akov Encountered Hashem

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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, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The beginning of our *parasha* describes the first steps that Ya'akov took on his journey to Haran in order to escape the wrath of his brother, Eisav, and find a fitting wife from his mother's family: "And Jacob left Beer Sheba, and he went to Haran. *Vayifga ba'makom* (And he arrived at the place) and lodged there because the sun had set..." (*Sefer Bereishit* 28:10-11, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The expression, "*vayifga ba'makom*," is difficult to understand at face value, since there is as of yet no referent for "the place" in the Torah's text. We are fortunate that Rashi's *Commentary on the Torah* summarizes various Talmudic and Midrashic statements that discuss both words in our phrase, and thereby advance our understanding of these terms. Rashi begins by suggesting the following interpretation of "*vayifga*:"

Our Rabbis interpreted it as an expression of prayer, as in, "And you, pray not on behalf of this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer, and *v'al tifga bi* — do not entreat Me for I will not hear you." (*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 7:16)

Herein, Rashi explains that the terms *vayifga* and *tefilah* are functionally equivalent. Therefore, he would read this section of our phrase as, "And he **prayed** in the place." In addition to his interpretation of *vayifga* as prayer, Rashi focuses upon the meaning of *makom* in our verse and

suggests, “The Torah does not mention which place; however, [it refers to] the place mentioned elsewhere, namely, Mount Moriah, concerning which it is said, ‘And he saw the place from afar.’” (See *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 88a) In sum, Rashi’s reading of this part of our *pasuk* would look like this: “And Jacob left Beer Sheba, and he went to Haran. And he **prayed on Mount Moriah** and lodged there because the sun had set...”

In contrast to Rashi’s approach suggesting *makom* as scriptural code for Mount Moriah, a number of midrashic sources interpret our term as an alternative name for Hashem, rather than a physical place. By way of illustration:

Rav Huna said in the name of Rabbi Ami: “Why did the Torah use a nickname for the Holy One blessed be He [in our verse] and call Him “*makom*” [instead of one of His more usual proper names]? The reason is, He is the place (*makom*) of the world, whereas His world is not His place. (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah*, Parashat Vayatzte 68:9, translation and brackets my own)

This midrash identifies the word, “*makom*,” as an appellation of Hashem, based upon the statement, “He is the place (*makom*) of the world, whereas His world is not His place.” As this rationale may be difficult to comprehend, Rabbi Yossi bar Halafta focuses upon its explanation in the continuation of the midrash:

Rabbi Yossi bar Halafta said: “We do not know from here [Rav Huna’s statement] why exactly the Holy One blessed be He is the place of His world instead of thinking His world is His place. Yet we have a clear answer from another verse: ‘... Behold, there is a *makom* — place — **with Me**, and you shall stand on the rock.’ (*Sefer Shemot* 33:21) This teaches us that the Holy One blessed be He is the *makom olamo* — the ‘place’ wherein His world exists — rather than *olamo m’komo* — the place wherein He exists.”

Based upon our midrash, we have an entirely different way to read our phrase, namely, “And Jacob left Beer Sheba, and he went to Haran. And there he met the Holy One blessed be He and lodged there because the sun had set...” In addition, this interpretation sheds new light upon Ya’akov’s famous declaration, “*Mah nora hamakom hazeh*” — “How awesome is this place” — that can

now be understood as his proclamation that he had encountered HaMakom in all His manifest glory.

We can further extend our midrash's insight to a well-known verse from *Sefer Yeshiyahu* that we recite during every *Kedushah*: “*Kadosh kadosh kadosh Hashem tzivakot m'lo kol ha'aretz k'vodo*” — “Holy, holy, holy is the L-rd of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.” (6:3) A cursory reading suggests that Hashem's glory is in and of this world; yet, with the midrash's guidance, we now realize that everything including His glory, exists and can only exist within Hamakom. I believe this is one reason we joyfully sing, “*baruch Hamakom baruch hu*” — “blessed be *Hamakom* blessed be He” — during the recitation of the *Haggadah*, for it is at this exalted moment, perhaps more than any other, that we come closest to apprehending the omnipresence of our Creator and Redeemer.

With the Holy One's help, and our fervent desire, may our new-found understanding of *Hamakom* lead us to appreciate the magnificent wonders and beauty of our world, as we ever recognize *hakol bo* — everything is within Him. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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

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