



Where the Odyssey Begins

Lech Lecha is always an inspiring Parsha, for after all, this is where the odyssey begins:

ויצאו ללכת ארצה כנען ויבואו ארצה כנען

“They left to go to the land of Canaan – and they came to the land of Canaan.”

Unlike so many who have good intentions, Avraham actually takes leave of his homeland with all his family, possessions, and “souls that he acquired in Haran,” in order to seek out “the land which I shall show you.”

When reaching Eretz Yisrael – Eretz Canaan – Avraham travels southwards and passes “the site of Shechem until the Terebinth of Moreh.” Surprisingly, the narrative adds that (at that time) the Canaanite was already in the land. It seems that from a legal perspective the Canaanites still had ownership of the territory but just the awareness of that tenuous situation should have been enough to deter Avraham.

The Canaanites were idol worshippers; they were the epitome of depravity. Why would Avraham wish to settle among them? And how could we understand

that of all the places where Hashem could have appeared to Avraham, Hakadosh Baruch Hu chooses Shechem, that bastion of evil?

For at this juncture, Hashem appears to Avraham to confirm that this is the land that he will give to his seed. Surely, Yerushalayim would have been a more suitable place to make such an assertion. Now the Oak of Mamre suddenly takes on a special meaning when it is realized that at that very place, the Canaanites worshiped those trees!

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A closer look at the text, however, clarifies matters. The Torah narrative talks of the “place of Shechem,” not of the city itself. That is to say that, in consonance with our commentators and findings reflected in ancient Egyptian texts, it appears that Shechem as a city did not actually exist in Avraham’s time. Shechem would be established later by Chamor who would name the place after his son. Thus, later, “Yaakov comes ‘intact’ at the city of Shechem which is in the land of Canaan” (Bereishit 33:18).

So what is the meaning of “the site of Shechem”? Shechem, it seems, embodies the entire spectrum of moral and ethical potential.

On the one hand, the city will be the prototype of Canaanite corruption, idol worship, and evil practices. Shechem is where Yosef will find his brothers planning his demise. Moreover, our sages recount that so horrific was the degeneracy of the place that at “the site of Shechem,” Avraham prayed for the protection of his descendants who would later fight there for the honor of their sister Dina who was ravished by Canaanite prince, Shechem.

Shechem is where Yeruchavam was anointed king in place of Shlomo, but in his foolishness caused the division of the kingdom. Thus is Shechem the subject of one of David Hamelech’s laments as he envisions the ruined Shechem returning to the people (Tehillim 60):

*“God spoke in His holiness that I would exult;
That I would divide Shechem.’
... Who will bring me into the fortified city?
... Has Thou, O God, cast us off?
... Give us help against the adversary
For vain is the help of man.”*

On the other hand, Shechem was the place where was situated the Terebinth of Moreh, where *Moreh* signifies teaching and the Torah. Here Avraham prophesies that Bnei Yisrael will accept the Covenant with Hashem at mounts Eval and Gerizim. Here Yaakov made the second purchase of land in Eretz Yisrael and established Hashem as the “God of Israel.”

Shechem was both a city of refuge and a Levite city. Traditionally, Yosef was buried

close to the city. And here, under Joshua’s tutelage, the people *renewed* the Covenant.

Notably, at the end of that ceremony, Joshua takes a large stone and sets it up “under the oak near the holy place of the Lord” (Yehoshua 24:26). It is as if Joshua is telling us that eventually good will vanquish evil: The malevolence that is Canaan will eventually be buried.

Hashem chose this place specifically because Shechem symbolizes the extremes to which humanity can reach. No wonder that here the people had to choose between the blessing and the curse – Because in Shechem one could reach to the lowest depths or the highest realms.

Shechem, ironically, can be both a “city of refuge” and a Levite city: Like life, it is what we make of it. ■

Shabbat Shalom!

Menachem Persoff

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