



Chayei Sarah: Israel's Second City

Countries are defined by their “leading” city- the famous and prominent city which captures the nation’s hopes and imagination. Many countries also feature a “second city”, which generally serves a very different function from the primary city. Obviously, Yerushalayim is Israel’s first city, its capital, and the site of the Mikdash. It is equally obvious that Chevron is our second Biblical city. What role does Chevron play within Jewish history and how does its identity differ from Yerushalayim?

Yerushalayim is the city of G-d positioned under the Heavenly throne and pivoted around the house of Hashem. This celestial city cannot be appropriated by humans but remains “unattainable” as a divine province. Unlike Yerushalayim which was never a domain for humans, Chevron was adopted by the founders of our people as their “city” and this city hosted the origins of Jewish history.

This stark contrast between these two cities is latent within their respective names. The name Yerushalayim is based on Avraham’s otherworldly encounter with Hashem during the akeidah- ברה'י יראה. That

encounter occurred beyond human logic and beyond human terrain. Even the nickname of the mountain of “Moriah” is based upon the great “fear” or yirah produced by the encounter with Hashem. The terms Yerushalayim and Moriah each evoke an encounter with G-d beyond human space. By contrast, Chevron takes its name from the word “chaver” or friend. It is the city of our “friends” or of our founding ancestors.

The contrast between these two cities is showcased by the bookends of parshat Vayeira. In the beginning of the parsha, while residing in the Mamre plain near the city of Chevron, Avraham hosts Hashem in his tent. By the conclusion of Vayeira, Hashem hosts Avraham atop a mountain overlooking the city of G-d. In Chevron Man hosts Hashem. In Yerushalayim we are guests of G-d.

Even the topography of Chevron differs from the landscape of Yerushalayim. Tehilim chapter 125 portrays Yerushalayim as surrounded by mountains- ירושלים הרים סביב לה. Though Chevron is located in a mountainous region, the city center is pivoted upon a valley known as “Emek Chevron”. The city of G-d is outlined by soaring hilltops while Chevron is anchored to an earthy lowland.

As the city of our Avot, Chevron serves several crucial “complimentary” functions.

Launching Jewish History:

Yerushalayim cannot launch history.

This holy city is the endpoint of history, the city we are constantly traveling toward. Yerushalayim is a metaphor for the utopia we all voyage to. It will host the Messianic gathering of humanity standing unanimous in their recognition of Hashem and their appreciation of the Jews. If the journey of Man ends in Yerushalayim the history of the Jews cannot also begin there.

Instead, Jewish history is launched in Chevron. While being hosted in Mamre, in the vicinity of Chevron, Avraham is visited by angels and informed of Yitzchak's birth. His revolution will not be a passing fad or a flash in the pan. Yitzchak will succeed him, entrench his revolutionary ideas and establish a nation. Furthermore, the initial Covenant of Jewish history- the ברית בין הבתרים was crafted in the same precincts of Mamre. The seeds of Jewish history are planted in the foothills of Chevron, not in the dreamlands of Yerushalayim.

Years later, the timeline of the Covenant begins to unfold in Chevron. Yosef is dispatched from the valley of Chevron to locate his brothers. Yosef's reconnaissance mission will soon draw the entire family down to Egypt and will unleash

the saga of the ברית בין הבתרים which was originally ratified in Chevron. History was forged in Chevron and it is now being unveiled in Chevron.

Two hundred years after the descent into Egypt, Chevron jumpstarts a different stage of the original historical Covenant: the Jews are about to enter Israel and establish the kingdom of G-d in Yerushalayim. Sadly, all but two spies arrive with malicious intent. Calev, loyal to the Covenant, visits Chevron hoping to implement the historical covenant



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of this city.

Most of the seminal moments of Jewish history depicted in Bereishit occur in Chevron. Our history begins in Chevron and migrates north to Yerushalayim.

A City of Kings

The Jewish political capital must be fused to the heart of religion. Sitting in the presence of G-d in Yerushalayim regulates the authority of a Jewish king. In Yerushalayim, under the eye of Hashem, a king is subject to a higher authority. Though the monarchy must settle in Yerushalayim it cannot originate there. In this sacred city there is only one true king. In parshat Lech Lecha Avraham encounters מלכי זדק, a monarch in the city of G-d, currently called Shalem. This error of appointing a human king in Yerushalayim must be corrected. Amending this mistake, Malki Tzedek praises the G-d of Avraham who “owns Heaven and Earth”. Living under the Heavenly throne of Yerushalayim, human monarchs are visitors. Jewish monarchy must first be established elsewhere and subsequently ported to Yerushalayim. For this reason, Dovid Hamelech, our first

monarch, is crowned and serves as King for seven years in Chevron, before relocating to Yerushalayim. Only after being designated in Chevron can he relocate to Yerushalayim.

Additionally, Chevron serves as the workshop for consolidation of monarchy. Not all monarchies are peacefully secured. Even after he defeats his bitter rival Shaul, Dovid is hounded by Shaul’s general named Avner and nagged by Shaul’s son named Ish Boshet. This bloody struggle to consolidate political power cannot be staged in Yerushalayim-the city of harmony and unity. Only after he defeats his rivals and his monarchy is sturdy, can Dovid’s reign be ported to Yerushalayim.

A Sanctuary

Historically, Jewish presence in Yerushalayim was precarious. Obedience to Hashem secured the privilege of living in His city while betrayal led to harsh and tragic expulsion. During each expulsion the city of Yerushalayim itself was ravaged. Witnessing the destruction of the first Mikdash, Yirmiya the prophet doesn’t only wail about the human suffering, but bemoans the devastation of the city itself. Of course, during the destruction of the Second Temple the city wasn’t just ransacked- it was razed to the ground. Had the Avot been buried in Yerushalayim they and their gravesites would have been vandalized. Instead the Avot remain sheltered in the caves of Chevron, patiently waiting for their Covenant to be fulfilled.

The midrash depicts the horrific night of the destruction of the First Temple. Yirmiya visits Chevron as Yerushalayim is enveloped in flames and pleads with the Avot to



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intervene. While Yerushalayim is always caught in the line of fire, Chevron remains the untouched ancient home of our Avot. Multiple medieval visitors to Chevron reported the remains of Avraham's original house or of his famous "eshel" tree under which he hosted the angels. Yerushalayim has been repeatedly buried and rebuilt. Chevron remained pristine and protected.

Chevron served as an actual sanctuary or ir miklat for negligent murderers. It also served as a historic haven for the Avot to observe the course of Jewish history, and attempt to defend Yerushalayim during its darkest moments.

An Ancient Legend

An often repeated legend speaks of a famous Yom Kippur in Chevron. Typically, this underpopulated city could only muster a minyan on Shabbat and chagim when local villagers would join the indigenous residents of Chevron. One Yom Kippur, the surrounding villagers all journeyed to Yerushalayim, leaving the town of Chevron short of a minyan. The despondent residents faced the depressing prospect of a compromised Yom Kippur tefillot. Suddenly, a mysterious visitor arrived to complete the minyan. After Yom Kippur the guest was graciously invited to the chazan's home to break fast, but, inexplicably, the guest disappeared. Appearing to the chazan in a dream, the mysterious "minyan maker" revealed his identity: Avraham himself had joined the residents of Chevron that Yom Kippur. While so many were flocking to Yerushalayim, Avraham stayed behind to preserve Chevron. The second city would have a minyan this Yom Kippur! ■

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