

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter VIII: Vayishlach (Gen. 32:4–36:43)

Essay 12. The altar named “El, G-d of Israel”

מדרש רבה "ויקרא-לו אל אלהי ישראל", רב הונא בשם ריש לקיש אמר אפילו חזן הכנסת אינו נוטל שררה לעצמו, ואת הייט נוטל שררה לעצמו, מחר יוצאה בתך ומתענה, הדא הוא דכתיב "ותצא דינה בת-לאה" עכ"ל.

There is a **Midrash Gen. Rabbah** (79:8) on the verse, “He set up an altar there, **and called it El, G-d of Israel**” (Gen. 33:20). The midrash relates to the fact that Jacob didn’t mention his father and grandfather, by saying “G-d of Abraham, G-d of Isaac,” but instead only mentioned himself, “Israel.”

“He set up an altar there and called it El.” Reish Lakish said: He called it El, G-d of Israel. He said: You are G-d in the Upper Realms, and I am god in the lower realms. **Rav Huna in the name of Reish Lakish said: Even the synagogue officer doesn’t take dominion for himself, but you would take dominion for yourself?! Tomorrow, your daughter will go out and will be afflicted. This is as it is written, “Now Dinah, the daughter of Leah** whom she had had borne to Jacob, **went out** [to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her and afflicted her]” (Gen. 34:1–2).

- Gen. Rabbah 79:8

היפה תואר הקשה דזה תימה מה ענין זה לזה. ובאמת זה המדרש צריך ביאור למה הוצרך ליקח המשל של חזן הכנסת.

The Yafeh To’ar¹ commentary questions that this is astonishing, for what connection is there between this and that? Truthfully, this midrash needs explanation as to why it was necessary to use the parable of the synagogue officer.

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¹ Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac Ashkenazi Jaffe (d. late 16th century), rabbi of the Ashkenazi community of Constantinople. Yafeh To’ar was his commentary to the Midrash Rabbah: Genesis (Venice, 1597–1606); Exodus (Venice, 1597); and Leviticus (Constantinople, 1648).

אמנם הענין הוא פה, דכשמימיים סזן הכנסת משתדלים שיהיה אדם פשר וצדיק כדי שיזכו כל הקהל בתפלתו, כדתנו מורידים לפני התיבה זקן וכו'. ואף על פי כן אם מן השמים יענוהו בתפלתו אינו נוטל שררה לעצמו לומר שזכותו גרם, אלא יאמר שזכות הצבור גרם לו הסיוע מן השמים.

Indeed, the matter is thus: when the synagogue officer is appointed, [the people] endeavor that he will be a man who is fit and righteous, in order that the entire congregation will merit from his prayers, as we learned in a Mishnah, “They send down before the ark an elder.”² Nevertheless, if he is assisted by Heaven in his prayers, he does not claim the authority for himself by saying that his merit caused G-d to help him, but rather he will say that the merit of the congregation resulted in the assistance from Heaven.

וכאן בייעקב פשנראה אליו הקב"ה בחלום הסולם אמר לו "אני ה' אלהי אברהם אביך ואלהי יצחק" וכו' "כי לא אעזבך" וכו' "את אשר-דברתי לך", דהיינו לצרפה, כמו שפרש רש"י שם, מה שהבטחתי לאברהם וכו' לה הבטחתי ולא לעשו עכ"ל. ומעשה שה' שמרו בדרך והשיבו שלם לבית אביו לא היה לו ליעקב לעשות מזבח ולקרא עליו אלהי ישראל, דמשמע מזה שכל השמירה והעזר שהיה לו היה בזכותו בלבד, אלא היה לו לתלות זכות ההצלה והשמירה בזכות אבותיו, דומיא דסזן הכנסת ה"ל, וזו היא תמיהה גדולה על יעקב.

Here, with Jacob, when G-d appeared to him in the dream of the ladder, He said to him:

I am the L-rd, the G-d of your father Abraham and the G-d of Isaac; the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south; all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land; **I will not leave you** until I have done **what I have said to you.**

- Gen. 28:13–15

“What I have said to you” [means] “for your sake and concerning you,” as Rashi explained there on Gen. 28:15, “whatever I promised to Abraham regarding his seed, it was for you that I promised it and not for Esau.” Now that G-d has guarded him on the way and has returned him intact to the house of his father, it was not [proper] for Jacob to build an altar and to call it “G-d of Israel,” which has the meaning that all of the guarding and the help that he had was in his merit alone. Rather, he should have attributed the merit of the saving and guarding to the merit of his forefathers, Abraham and Isaac, analogous to the synagogue officer mentioned above. This was very astonishing for Jacob to have acted thus.

² Mishnah Taanit 2:2; Taanit 16a.

ואם באנו לתרץ במה שכתבו המפרשים, שחס ושלום לא היתה פונת יעקב באמרו "אלהי ישראל" לעצמו ולכבודו, דהיינו שהוא אלוה יעקב הנקרא ישראל, אלא פונתו שהוא אלוה אברהם ויצחק הנקראים אף הם ישראל, כדאמרנו במדרש רבה ריש פרשת תולדות ועיי"ש, קשה דלפי זה אין שום תפיסה על יעקב, שלא חטא כלל ולא נטל שום שררה לעצמו, ולמה הוכיחו הקב"ה, אלא נדאי צריך לומר שאף על פי שפונתו היתה לטובה עם כל זה שגג, לפי השומעים יהיו סבורים שכלפי עצמו נטל שררה. ולכן מדה כנגד מדה אמר לו מחר בתוך יוצאה ומתענה, שגם שם לפי האמת אין שום פגם רק כלפי השומעים.

Perhaps we can come to solve this by what the commentators wrote, that G-d forbid, it was not Jacob's intent by saying "the G-d of Israel" to think of himself and his honor, i.e., by ignoring his father and grandfather and intending that [the L-rd] was only the G-d of Jacob, who was called Israel. Rather, his intent was that [the L-rd] was the G-d of Abraham and Jacob, who were also called Israel, as is written in the Midrash Rabbah at the beginning of parshat Toldot, and see there.³ It is difficult, for according to this, there was no seizing possession on the part of Jacob, that he didn't sin at all, and didn't claim any authority for himself, and then why did the Holy One, Blessed be He, reprove him? Rather, it certainly needs to be said that even if his intent was for the good, he nevertheless erred unwittingly, because those who heard the name of the altar would think that he was claiming authority for himself. Therefore, as a punishment measure-for-measure, [He] said to him, "Tomorrow, your daughter will go out and will be afflicted," for also there, according to the truth, the only harm done was regarding those who heard about the incident.

והטעם שבאותו מעשה של דינה לא היה בו שום פגם לפי האמת, יובן במה שכתב ספר עמודיה שבבעה בשם האר"י זכרוננו לחיי העולם הבא ששכם בן-חמור החוי הוא הנחש הקדמוני שהסית את חנה והטיל בה זיהומא. ולכן נקרא החוי לשון חני"א, ועל ידי זה נתערבו נשמות קדושות בין הקליפות, ובתוך הקליפה של תרח היה ניצוץ הקדוש של אברהם. ותרח בא על אשתו בימי נדתה ונתגלגלו שניהם לכפרת עונם, תרח באיוב שעל ידי היסורין הוסרה ממנו זיהומת הנדה, ואשתו נתגלגלה בדינה, דהיינו ניד"ה שנהפכה לדינ"ה. וכשבא שכם על דינה שאב ממנה כל הזיהומה של נדה, והשומע סובר שנטמאה דינה, ונדרבא לפי האמת על ידי זה נטהרה ששאב ממנה כל הזיהומא של הנחש, כדכתיב "ותהי נדתה עליו". וכענין השעיר הנושא עונות ישראל, והיא נעשית נקיה, ושמעון שנתגלה לו סוד זה לפיכך לקח אותה לו לאשה ועיי"ש.

The reason that in this incident with Dinah there was truthfully no harm will be understood by what was written by the book Amudeha Shiva⁴ in the name of the Ari,⁵ may his memory live in the World-to-Come. He wrote that Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite was the original serpent that enticed Eve and infected her with moral contamination; therefore, he was called the Hivite [*ha'Chivi*] [החוי] which is the language of *chivya* [חניא] [Aramaic for "snake"].

Because of this incident with Eve, the holy souls became intermingled with the husks of impurity, and within the husk of Terah was the holy spark of his son, Abraham. Terah

³ Gen. Rabbah 61:3.

⁴ Bezalel ben Shlomo of Kobryn (1640-91), author of Amudeha Shiva ("Seven Pillars") (Lublin 1666, Prague 1674).

⁵ Likutei Torah, parshat Vayishlach.

came upon his wife in the days of her menstrual impurity, and both of them were reincarnated to atone for their sin. Terah was reincarnated as Job, for as a result of his sufferings, the moral contamination of menstrual impurity flowed out of him.

[Terah's] wife was reincarnated as Dinah: that is, the *niddah* [ניד"ה] ["menstrual impurity"] was reversed to Dinah [דינ"ה], i.e., the full spelling of the word "*niddah*" has the same letters as are in the name "Dinah." When Shechem fell upon Dinah, he drew from her all the moral contamination of menstrual impurity. One who heard of [their relationship] might have thought that Dinah was defiled; but to the contrary, the truth of this is that she was purified, for he drew from her all of the moral contamination of the snake, as it is written, "And if a man lies with her, her impurity is communicated to him" (Lev. 15:24). Like the matter of the goat that carries the sins of Israel,⁶ she became clean, and Shimon—to whom this esoteric secret had been revealed—therefore took her for himself as a wife.⁷

וּכְמוֹ שִׁיעָקֵב חָטָא בְּעֵינֵי הַשּׁוֹמְעִים גַּם דִּינָה בְּתוֹ לֹא נִטְמָאָה אֶלָּא בְּעֵינֵי הַשּׁוֹמְעִים, וְהוּא מְדָה כְּנִגְדֵי מְדָה, וְעֵינֵי לְעִיל בְּפִרְשֵׁת וַיֵּצֵא עַל פְּסוּק "וַעֲנִתָּהּ בִּי צְדָקָתִי".

Just as Jacob sinned in the eyes of those who heard of his naming of the altar after "the G-d of Israel", similarly his daughter Dinah was only defiled in the eyes of those who heard about her relationship with Shechem, and this was punishment measure-for-measure in their eyes, as the midrash explained. See above in parshat Vayetzei, essay 18, on the verse, "Let my righteousness answer for me tomorrow, when you go over my wages" (Gen. 30:33).

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⁶ Lev. 16:21–22: "Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness."

⁷ Gen. 34:26: "They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away." The verb "taking" can imply taking her as a wife.