

HAAMEK DAVAR

- Dr Jacob Solomon

Vayishlach

After Ya'akov met and parted on suitable terms with Eisav:

Ya'akov arrived intact at the city of Shechem... and he encamped before the city (33:18).

Both the Gemara and the Midrash embrace detailed traditions about the particular ways in which the Avot observed the laws of Torah which were later to be revealed to Klal Yisrael on Mount Sinai, and even the laws instituted by the Rabbis within the framework of the Torah which were to become the general Jewish practice much later on. These sources pay special attention to the wording of the stories of the Avot as containing subtle hints and nuances supporting those traditions.

For example, G-d's commanding Avraham to "walk the length and breadth of this land, for I am giving it to you" (B'reishit 14:17) indicates that act as bringing the land legally into his possession so that he in turn may leave it as a legacy to his descendants (Bava Batra 119b). Another example: "...because Avraham obeyed My voice, and observed My safeguards, My commandments, My

decrees, and my Torahs" (26:5), "Torahs" referring to the Written Law and the Oral Law, including Shabbat even to the degree of Eiruv Tavshilin, the special Rabbinic-instituted practice required in order to permit preparing food on Yom Tov immediately followed by Shabbat when cooking is forbidden (Yoma 28b). The Ramban (to 26:5) explains that Avraham reached such an understanding of the Torah through G-d's inspiration; as a result of his closeness to G-d he perceived the reasons for the mitzvot, and thus, it follows, what practices would be pleasing to G-d.

Yet according to Midrashic tradition (P'sikta Rabbati 23), it was not Avraham, but Ya'akov Avinu who instituted another type of eiruv, Eiruv T'chumim. "He encamped before the city" rather than entered it because it was Erev Shabbat; he had not quite reached the city limits before it began to get dark. He therefore had to make the standard Eiruv T'chumim arrangements so that he could duly access the city on Shabbat within the Rabbinic-instituted 2,000 amot. But it did mean that he was keeping his distance from the city, from the people of Shechem.

In the light of these sources, the Meshech Chochma offers an explana-

tion of why Avraham instituted the body of the laws of Shabbat including Eiruv Tavshilin, but Eiruv T'chumim was the work of his grandson, Ya'akov Avinu. That explanation gives an insight into fundamental differences in their approaches to the outside world.

Avraham Avinu was a universalist. He saw his mission as bring his people close to G-d, whether in Charan (Sanhedrin 99b), in Egypt (stated in the Meshech Chochma), or later on in Be'er Sheva (Sota 10b). He did this by reaching out to others, showing his genuine concern for other people's welfare through his great hospitality, and subsequently bringing them closer to the Shechina. It would not have been fitting for him to institute parts of the Torah that separate people from one another, as symbolized by the laws of T'chum Shabbat. It would have been discordant within his life's work.

Indeed, the Meshech Chochma places Avraham's mission in a much wider context: bringing the right sort of individuals together. He refers to a tradition in the Gemara that views the ultimate role of G-d's chosen people's place in the Creation as those who observe the mitzvot, in order to become the resting place of the Shechina on Earth. For that to

happen, for the Shechina to be borne on Earth, there needs to be a minimum of 22,000 suitable people (Yevamot 64a, commenting on Bamidbar 10:36). Knowing that not all his children would suit that role, he spread his influence to the wider world in order to bring others towards the Shechina.

In contrast, the Meshech Chochma explains, Ya'akov Avinu's approach to bringing people to ultimately embrace the Shechina, was not universalist, but particularist in character. Unlike his grandfather, all Ya'akov's children were fundamentally righteous people. All 12 were worthy of producing generations of children within the family that would ultimately reach those numbers and thus bear the Shechina. There was no reason to go outside the family circle, but instead to strengthen the family circle. This may be well be indicated by the messages that he gave to each of his children before he died: with some he emphasized correction, with others he emphasized recognition of their individual strengths. In that way he was to power the roots of Klal Yisrael towards its ultimate destiny of bearing the Shechina.

However, this does not imply that Ya'akov's sons were perfect. The Netziv (in Harchev Davar to 34:25, an

extension of his better-known commentary, the Ha'amek Davar) explains that they had their own struggles. They made their mistakes in extreme circumstances represented by the abduction of their sister Dina by the people of Shechem, and in persistently trying situations represented by their relationships with Yosef, their father's favorite son. In both cases they were not pleased about what they did; Shimon and Levi regretted their killing of the people of Shechem (B'reishit Rabba 84:18), and the brothers recognized their guilt in the way that they treated Yosef (42:21, see also Rashi to 44:16). The Netziv sees both as part of their shortcomings and subsequently strivings towards perfection, which underlay Ya'akov's work in preparing his descendants to ultimately bear the Shechina with all its demanding requirements, as would be revealed to Am Yisrael by Moshe Rabbeinu.

And overall, the approach of the Meshech Chochma, which synthesizes the Creation, G-d, the Torah, the Oral Tradition, and the striving to perfection as one, emphasizes the ideals of two approaches well known within the Torah world today. Some groups place their emphasis of strengthening Klal Yisrael towards its ultimate destiny in the footsteps of

Avraham Avinu: attracting uncommitted Jews in order to find and experience the great practices and spiritual treasures of our way of life. Others focus more on strengthening their elites, the B'nei Torah within their own circle, who in turn will develop generations that will take further steps in leading Klal Yisrael, and ultimately the world, to complete harmony with the Creator. Both are valid, and neither excludes the other. Both have their place. ✕