



אבן ישראל ובית ישראל Rock of Israel, House of Israel

■ Closing Circles

The Torah portion of Vayishlach marks the passage of 34 years since Yaakov left his home – 34 years since his exalted dream of the heavenward-bound ladder, when G-d promised never to abandon him and to grant the Holy Land to his descendants. The time has now come for him to keep the vow he made following that dream: to build a house for the worship of G-d in Beit El:

וַיִּצַב יַעֲקֹב מַצֵּבָה בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱתוֹ מִצְּבַת אָבִן...
וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶת שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱתוֹ שֵׁם אֱלֹהִים בֵּית אֵל.

Yaakov set up a pillar in the place where G-d had spoken to him, a stone pillar... And he called that place where G-d had spoken to him Beit El. (B'reshit 35,14-15)

Thus is closed the first circle of events: It began with the rock upon which Yaakov laid his head to sleep on his way out of Eretz Yisrael, and ends with his placing of a rock for the House of G-d. The next circle of events is the story of the sons of Yaakov: It begins here in Vayishlach with the birth of the last of the Twelve Tribes, Binyamin, and ends in Vay'chi with Yaakov's deathbed blessing to Yosef.

The first circle is an allegory for the second. The first one shows how a physical rock becomes a house for G-d's service, and the second one is the conjoining of Yaakov's sons to found G-d's holy nation. To see how the two circles develop, let us look at Yaakov's final blessing to Yosef, in which he says the following key words:

וַיִּתְּשֵׁב בְּאִיתוֹ קִשְׁתּוֹ וַיִּפְּזוּ וַיִּרְעִי יָדָיו מִיַּדֵּי אָבִיר יַעֲקֹב מִשָּׁם רֵעָה אָבִן יִשְׂרָאֵל.

His bow stood fast, and his arms were strengthened from the hands of the Might of Yaakov - and from there, [he became] a shepherd and Stone of Israel. (49,24)

What does Yaakov mean when he blesses Yosef with the **Might of Yaakov**? And what is the **Stone of Israel**? To answer this, we must understand this verse, too, as an allegory and lesson. The allegory is Yosef's bow, drawn and ready, with his arms raised for battle against those who attack him. The lesson to be learned is that Yosef is able to stand strong and withstand his enemies even during the most difficult moments – such as when he is thrown into a pit, nearly killed by his brothers, and later banished to the dungeon for several years.

From where does Yosef draw his strength? Who watches over and protects him in the depths of his exile? The answer is found in the second part of the verse: *“from the hands of the Might of Yaakov.”* The Hebrew word for “might” here is *abir*, from the same root as *evrah*, meaning “wing.” That is, Someone above is sheltering and protecting Yosef with His wing, just like a father protects his son's head with his hands. G-d is protecting Yosef, as He did with Yaakov.

This phrase *abir Yaakov*, **the might of Yaakov**, is reminiscent of the following verse:

בְּאַבְרָתוֹ יִסֵּךְ לְךָ וְתַחַת כְּנָפָיו תִּחְסֶה צְנָה וְסִחְרָה אִמְתּוֹ.

*With His wing He will shield you, and under His wings you will
take shelter, His faithful truth will be your shield
and rampart.* (Tehillim 91,4)

It means: G-d protects the righteous man and extends His wing to protect him; a shield of “Divine truth” surrounds him on all sides. Yaakov was long ago promised this type of perfect protection, when he famously dreamt of the ladder and G-d told him, *“Behold, I am with you and will protect you wherever you go, and I will return you to this Land – for I will not abandon you..”* (B'reshit 28,15)

Armed with Divine protection every step of the way, Yaakov Avinu leaves for Haran to seek a wife and escape from Esav. G-d continues to accompany him even until he returns to Beit El, where he builds the altar and a house of G-d. Hashem appears to him there again, and informs him that his name is to be Yisrael (Israel). At that point, the rock that he placed for a pillar becomes the **Stone of Israel**, in accordance with his new name.

We now understand Yaakov's blessing to Yosef, linking Yosef's Divine protection with Yaakov's. It declares that when G-d watched over Yosef, it was a continuation of how He watched over and sheltered Yaakov - **the**

might of Yaakov - until his founding of the **Stone of Israel**, i.e., the House of Israel.

■ One Stone, or Many?

Let us focus on the first of the above circles, which began with the rock on which Yaakov rested his head. Parashat Vayetze begins with his prophetic vision featuring the wondrous ladder to the sky: *“He dreamt, and behold, there was a ladder standing upright on the ground but reaching up to the heavens...”* (28,12)

Yaakov is here introduced to the sublime value of the Land of Israel – the meeting point of Heaven and Earth, the place where G-d reveals Himself to His prophets, the sacred site of the Holy Temple. Yaakov Avinu understands that these physical rocks of Eretz Yisrael are the *“upright ladder rooted on the ground.”* These rocks will produce an altar and a home for the service of G-d and Divine inspiration. Only then, when the physical is used for the spiritual, will the ladder reach up to the heavens.

In the Land of Israel, the spiritual world sanctifies the material, like a soul does for the body. This is why Yaakov takes the rock that had been under his head and turns it into a sanctified altar: *“Yaakov took the stone that he had put under his head, and made it into a pillar, and poured oil atop it.”* (verse 18)

We might have expected that in the future, as well, the altar would be built upon one stone – but the Torah forbids this:

וְלֹא תִקֵּים לָךְ מִצֵּבָה אֲשֶׁר שָׂנֵא ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

Do not build yourself a pillar of the type that G-d hates. (D'varim 16,22)

As Rashi explains, the Torah means to prohibit the building of a one-stone altar; our altars must be made of many stones. This cries out for clarification: Why is it that our Forefathers devoutly built altars out of one stone, yet later the Torah downright forbids this practice?

■ The Fighting Stones

How many stones did Yaakov use for his pillow? וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאֶבֶן, *“Yaakov took the stone he had put under his head, and made it into a pillar”* (B'reshit 28,18). Clearly, there was only one stone. But a few verses earlier, the Torah told us וַיִּקַּח מֵאֶבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם, *“Yaakov took from among the stones of the place and placed [them] under his head”* (verse 11). The Talmud (Hullin 91b) understands this to

mean that he took not one, but several rocks “*from among the stones*”!. So which is it: Did he take one stone, or several?

The Gemara itself reconciles the two verses:

R. Yitzchak said: This indicates that all the rocks gathered together in one place, with each one saying, ‘Let the righteous man rest his head upon me!’ It was then taught: They all combined into one rock.

This explanation is very puzzling. Did the Sages really mean to say that the rocks talked, argued, and physically joined together? Would it not be easier to explain that Yaakov took only one stone to begin with? We could then read verse 11 as follows: “*Yaakov took [a stone] from the stones of the place and placed [it] under his head.*”

To understand our Sages’ teaching, we must find a key – and it is provided for us in the Medrash, which brings us to the second circle: The sons of Yaakov.

■ The Father and the Sons

The Medrash teaches:

Yaakov took 12 stones and placed them under his head - a sign that 12 tribes would emanate from him. And they all became one stone - a sign that they would unite into one nation in the Land of Israel. (Pirkei D’Rebbi Eliezer, chapter 35)

This tells us that the “argument” among the rocks was simply an allegorical expression of the future dispute between Yaakov’s sons. Yosef’s brothers felt that they, and not him, must be the ones to continue the path of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and thus merit the Divine blessing and the gift of the Land of Israel. This was the essential reason for the brothers’ hatred and jealousy of Yosef - for they saw his dreams, his words, and his very presence as a threat to one day rule over them!

According to this, the actual “jelling of the rocks” happened later in Egypt when all the brothers united together into one entity, under Yosef’s leadership. Yosef was the one who united his brothers into one entity.

From Parashat Vayishlach up until the end of the Book of B’reshit, we see that the house that Yaakov built and named the House of G-d is far more than just a house of rocks. It is rather the House of Yaakov, the House of Israel. This is a family whose entire lineage bears the shining light of G-d

upon them. The Twelve Tribes of Israel form the spiritual sanctuary, the skeletal framework, of the Nation of Israel, which is to be called the Nation of G-d. These “rocks,” under the leadership of Yosef, are the same rocks as those of the great house upon which G-d’s Name is called.

The connection between “rocks” for building (*avanim*) and “sons” (*banim*) can be found in the words of Chazal on the following famous verse: וְכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמוֹדֵי ה', *“All your sons will be knowledgeable of Hashem.”* (Yeshayahu 54,13)

The Sages extrapolate as follows: “Read [the second word] not *banayich*, your sons, but rather *bonayich*, those who build you.” The Children of Israel represent the lesson of the ladder in Yaakov’s dream: *“rooted on the ground, with its top in the heavens”* (B’reshit 28,12). When Yaakov sees the angels ascending, he is actually seeing his own descendants standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, rising up and reaching the level of prophets who see G-d clearly.

In addition, Yaakov sees in his dream the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and the Priests walking up and down the ramp to the large altar, just like angels of G-d. We learn this from the Medrash (B’reshit Rabba 68,12):

Bar Kapara taught: “Behold, there was a ladder” – this refers to the ramp; “standing upright on the ground” – this refers to the altar; “and its head reaching up to the heavens” – this refers to the sacrifices.

The other Sages interpreted it as referring to Mt. Sinai: “Behold, there was a ladder” – this refers to Sinai; “standing upright on the ground” – this alludes to the Israelites standing at the foot of the mountain; “and its head reaching up to the heavens” – referring to the mountain that was “burning in fire to the heart of the heavens.” (D’varim 4,11)

Now let us return to Yaakov’s blessing to Yosef with which we began: *“...from the hands of the might of Yaakov - and from there, [he became] a shepherd and Stone of Israel”* (B’reshit 49,24). From *where* did Yosef become a shepherd and Stone of Israel? The answer is: From that night, the night of the dream when G-d appeared to Yaakov as the protector and leader of the House of Israel. This is precisely as reflected in Rashi’s explanation of the word אֶבֶן, rock, as being a compound of the Hebrew words אב and בן, father and son (*even = av + ben*; *v* and *b* are the same letter), the seed of Israel.

■ The Altar of Stones

The link between the altar's stones and Yaakov's children becomes clear centuries later with the astonishing prophetic appearance of Eliyahu HaNavi (the Prophet Elijah) at Mount Carmel. To prove the truth of the G-d of Israel, he took *“twelve stones, like the number of the tribes of the sons of Yaakov...”* (Kings I 18,31). These stones that formed the altar are actually the Tribes of Israel, as we have seen, and it was therefore important that they number exactly 12.

Similarly, when Yehoshua bin Nun and the People of Israel crossed the Jordan River on their way into the Promised Land, they also took 12 rocks, as written: *“The Children of Israel... took out twelve rocks from the Jordan River according to the number of tribes of the sons of Yisrael”* (Yehoshua 4,8). From these stones they built the altar, upon them they wrote the Book of Deuteronomy on Mt. Eival (as commanded in D'varim 27), and on them they offered sacrifices.

The first monument, of one stone, represented Yaakov, who was one individual. But from then onwards in the history of the Nation of Israel, there was never again “one man,” but rather twelve tribes that together form the Nation of Israel. The turning point in this critical process was when Hashem appeared to Yaakov in Beit El and changed his name to Yisrael.

Let us return to the altar that Eliyahu HaNavi built. Fascinatingly, this very passage about the 12 stones emphasizes the name-change from Yaakov to Yisrael: Eliyahu *“took twelve stones, like the number of the tribes of the sons of Yaakov – to whom G-d spoke and said, ‘Yisrael will be your name.’”* This again highlights the development from Yaakov-the-individual to the Twelve Tribes consolidated into one nation.

It is in Parashat Vayishlach that the turning point occurs, when G-d appears to Yaakov:

לֹא יִקְרָא שְׁמֶךָ עוֹד יַעֲקֹב כִּי אָם יִשְׂרָאֵל יִהְיֶה שְׁמֶךָ
וַיִּקְרָא אֶת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

*“... you will no longer be called Yaakov; rather,
Israel will be your name.” And He called his name Israel.* (B'reshit 35,10)

The timing appears to be strange. At this point in history, there were only 11 tribes, and Rachel was still pregnant with Binyamin; why is Yaakov's name being changed now to Israel? This was still a transition period during

which Yaakov was able to build a one-rock monument and turn it into an altar, as we read four verses later: *“Yaakov set up... a stone pillar, and he poured an oil libation upon it”* (verse 14). It was this stone that Yaakov dedicated, as he had vowed beforehand, as the foundation stone of the House of G-d: *“Yaakov called that place where G-d had spoken to him Beit El.”* (verse 15)

A short time afterwards, Binyamin’s birth brings the total number of tribes to 12, though Rachel does not survive. Why did Hashem not wait until afterwards to appear to Yaakov and give him his new name? For two reasons. One is that the great sorrow that enveloped Yaakov upon the death of his beloved wife blocked his “access” to the word of G-d. Prophecy appears only amidst joy, and in fact, from here on in, the next time we see that Hashem appeared to Yaakov was only when he learned that his missing son Yosef was alive. Only then did “life” return to him, allowing him to receive the word of G-d.

The second reason why G-d changed Yaakov’s name *before* the birth of Binyamin was because this enabled Yaakov to fulfill his vow and build a one-stone monument, at the last possible time before it would no longer be permitted. Binyamin’s birth and Yaakov’s new name signaled the onset of the “nation of Israel,” from which point on, only multi-stone altars would be permitted.

■ Another Rock

When Yaakov reaches his uncle Lavan’s home in Haran, he meets up with another rock – but of a different type.

וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה בְּאֵר בְּשָׂדֵה... וְהָאֶבֶן גְּדֹלָה עַל פִּי הַבְּאֵר.

He looked and saw a well in the field...

with a large rock atop it. (29,2)

This rock is the complete opposite of the rock he put under his head as a pillow. This one blocks off access to the water and to the life that is dependent upon it. It is a heavy, physical rock that must be removed – and Yaakov does so (verse 10). Thus, the physical, life-blocking rock from Haran is taken away, while the rock from Eretz Yisrael, upon which Yaakov laid down his head, becomes the foundation of the House of G-d. We thus see that in the Land of Israel, rocks may be physical, but they form the basis for the dwelling of the Divine Presence.

The Gemara (Ketubot 112a-b) teaches us more about the holiness of the stones and earth of the Land of Israel. We learn that when R. Abba, one of the great Talmudic sages of Eretz Yisrael, would arrive at the port of Acco, he would bend down and kiss the stones. Similarly, when R. Hiya bar Gamda arrived in Eretz Yisrael, he rolled in the dust of the ground, in fulfillment of the verse “*For Your servants desire its stones, and cherish its dust.*” (Psalms 102,15)

Yaakov Avinu senses the tremendous difference between the stones of Eretz Yisrael and those of Haran, Lavan’s hometown. This is why, when the time comes to separate from Lavan, Yaakov uses this model to mark the border between them. When Lavan proposes a treaty between them, Yaakov responds by lifting a rock:

וַיִּקַּח יַעֲקֹב אֶבֶן וַיְרִימָהּ מִצֵּבָה.

Yaakov took a rock and lifted it as a monument. (B’reshit 45)

He took a stone from Eretz Yisrael, reminiscent of the rock of many years before on which he laid down his head and which later became an altar in the service of G-d. On the other hand, he then tells Lavan’s brothers – who had come with Lavan to attack Yaakov – to gather stones from Mount Gilad, outside Eretz Yisrael:

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב לְאֶחָיו לְקַטְוּ אֲבָנִים,

וַיִּקְחוּ אֲבָנִים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ גֵל וַיֹּאכְלוּ שָׁם עַל הַגֵּל.

*Yaakov told [Lavan’s] brothers, “Gather stones,”
and they gathered stones and made a mound.* (verse 46)

On one side stands a one-stone monument, and on the other side is a mound of stones: This is the border between the Land of Israel and Haran-Aram Naharayim, between the sacred and the profane, and between the rock that opens the Gates of Heavens and that which blocks off the Well of Living Waters.

■ Three Flocks of Sheep

Let us return to the rock atop the well where Yaakov met Rachel. He found “*three flocks of sheep lying by it*” (29,2), waiting for the well to be uncovered and readied for use. Why does the Torah emphasize the number of flocks?

The answer is that just like the dream was an allegory that required interpretation, the same is true in life. The present is an allegory for the

future. We are to learn from here that the number three will be very dominant in the future.

Rachel was a “blocked up well,” one that could not be opened before three “stations” were passed. Leah gave birth first, followed by Bilhah, and then Zilpah. Only then did “*G-d remember Rachel*” (30,22), leading to the birth of Yosef.

Yosef himself, Rachel’s elder son, must also pass through stages of “three,” in the dreams of the Chief Butler and Chief Baker, before he is redeemed. The butler sees a vine in his dream:

וּבִגְפוֹן שְׁלֶשֶׁה שָׂרִיגִם וְהוּא כְּפֶרֶחַת עֲלֵתָהּ נֹצֵה הַבְּשִׁילוֹ אֲשֶׁכְּלֵתֶיהָ עֲנָבִים.

*The vine had three branches; as its buds formed,
its blossoms bloomed and its clusters ripened into grapes.* (40,11)

The three branches that blossom and ripen into grapes stand for the three days that must pass before the butler is freed and returned to his position. This is actually the beginning of the redemption of Yosef, for the Chief Butler will eventually be he who remembers Yosef when Pharaoh requires an interpreter of dreams. Yaakov alludes to these three branches when later, on his deathbed, he gives Yosef this three-fold blessing:

בֶּן פְּרֵת יוֹסֵף, בֶּן פְּרֵת עָלֵי עַיִן, בְּנוֹת צְעָדָה עָלֵי שׁוּר.

*Yosef is a fruitful son, like a fruitful vine by the fountain,
with young girls marching atop the wall.* (49,22)

The plain meaning of the verse is this: Yosef is 1) like a fruitful vine, 2) like a fruitful branch upon the well, and 3) with branches (daughters) of a fruitful vine spreading out over the wall.

Three flocks of sheep lying by the well, three vines, three budding branches – all awaiting their “redeemer” who will remove the rock of the nations, displace the stone of our hearts, and turn the Rock of Israel into the House of Israel. “*From there, a shepherd and Stone of Israel.*” (49,24)

