

Parashat Vayatzte 5776, 2015

“How Awesome Is This Place!”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

And Jacob awakened from his sleep, and he said, “Indeed, the L-rd is in this place, and I did not know [it].” And he was frightened, and he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of heaven.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 28:16-17, Parashat Vayatzte, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The expression, “Indeed, the L-rd is in this place, and I did not know [it],” is somewhat ambiguous in light of the juxtaposed words, “And he was frightened...” One might readily infer that Yaakov’s failure to recognize Hashem’s presence was due to his inability to apprehend G-d’s immanence. If this were the case, a proper translation of the phrase “and I did not know [it]” should be followed by an exclamation point, rather than by a period, as we find in a number of English translations. (See, for example, *The Artscroll Chumash*) Yet, many English translations of our phrase do not use this punctuation. This leads one to ask, “Is the expression, ‘Indeed, the L-rd is in this place, and I did not know [it],’ an exclamatory or declarative statement?” In other words, did Yaakov berate himself regarding his failure to perceive Hashem’s presence, or was he simply stating that he was unable to recognize the nearness of the *Schechinah* (Hashem’s Divine Presence)? These are essential questions, since their answers can lead us to a deeper understanding of both Yaakov’s persona, and the very nature of prophecy.

The great Spanish exegete, Rabbi Avraham Saba *zatzal* (1440-1510), in his classic work of Torah analysis entitled “*Tzror Hamor*,” maintained that our phrase is a declarative rather than exclamatory statement, since Yaakov “was not a famous prophet on the level of Eliyahu and Elisha who said, ‘Let her be, for her soul is bitter to her, and the L-rd hid it from me and did not tell me.’” (*Sefer Melachim* II:4:27, underlining my own) The connotation of this verse suggests that Eliyahu, based upon his prodigious prophetic powers, normally would have been able to perceive the bitterness of soul of the woman standing before him, yet Hashem actively prevented this from happening. In stark contrast, Yaakov lacked Eliyahu’s ability to perceive Hashem’s presence, the recognition of which caused him to state, “Indeed, the L-rd is in this place, and I did not know [it].”

At this juncture, Rav Saba proceeded to analyze the nature of knowing (in philosophical terms, epistemology) and the recognition of that which is known, in an effort to specifically understand Yaakov’s behavior within the context of the prophetic experience:

It is well-known that an individual who comprehends a certain matter does so based upon two possibilities, either because he has prepared himself to do so or because of the preparation fostered by the environment [wherein he finds himself]. This is the case, since, on occasion, a person who is unprepared [intellectually or in regards to prophecy] will be helped by the preparation afforded by the environment. A case in point is when our Sages, may their memory be a blessing stated, “The air of the Land of Israel makes one wise.” So, too, did Kohelet [i.e. King Solomon] declare, “I am Kohelet, I was King over Israel in Jerusalem.” (*Sefer Kohelet* 1:12) This suggests that Kohelet gathered together all of the various branches of knowledge [that existed in his time]. As it states, “And he was wiser than all men...” (*Sefer Melachim* I:5:11) The reason for this is because he was the King of the Jewish people – a wise and discerning nation. So, too, was he in Jerusalem – the very place where knowledge and wisdom stood at the center of the world. All of this helped in his preparation [to become the wisest man in the world].

Armed with the above-stated analysis, Rav Saba proceeded to examine Yaakov’s failure to recognize Hashem’s presence:

Yaakov really was saying that I could see on my own that I was unprepared [to sense the *Schechinah*,] based upon the trials and tribulations of traveling, and the anguish, anxiety and fears [that I was suffering, which were generated] by my brother, Eisav. It is very well known that the *Schechinah* will only dwell with an individual who is experiencing joy [and, therefore, it should have been impossible for me to encounter the Holy One blessed be He] - nonetheless, I saw visions of Hashem! Given that this was the case, what was the causal factor [that enabled me to experience these visions]? I [i.e. Yaakov] analyzed this, and I determined [that the only reason why I was able to have this prophetic encounter] was because this holy place prepared me to do so.

At this point, we are ready to understand two crucial segments of our initial verses. In Rav Saba's view, "Indeed, the L-rd is in this place," actually means that "based upon the [holiness of this] place [I have now been able to perceive Hashem's presence,] since, on my own it is obvious that I was not prepared to do so." Moreover, opined Rav Saba, "this, then, is the correct manner in which to interpret, 'and I did not know [it].' It means that on my own I have been unable to find sufficient preparation to merit this vision." (All translations and brackets my own) Little wonder, then, that given Yaakov's cognizance of his lack of preparation to perceive the *Schechinah*, he proclaimed, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of heaven." Clearly, Yaakov participated in a miraculous and awe-filled experience, recognizing it as a life-transforming event when he declared the land upon which he stood to be "none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of heaven."

Unfortunately, unlike *Yaakov Avinu* (our father Yaakov), we continue to live in a seemingly never-ending period of *hester panim* (the hiding of Hashem's presence). Nevertheless, we must ever try to emulate him with acute awareness that we, too, experience wonders and miracles. This thought was given voice by our Sages in the *Birkat Hoda'ah* (the Blessing of Thanks) of the *Shemoneh Esrai* prayer, "We gratefully thank You ... for Your miracles that are with us every day, and for Your wonders and

favors in every season – evening, morning and afternoon.” (Translation, *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*)

May the Holy One blessed be He bring the *Mashiach* (Messiah) soon and in our days, so that the daily miracles, wonders and favors that He bestows upon us will become revealed to the entire world. For then, “the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day the L-rd shall be one, and His name one.” (*Sefer Zechariah* 14:9) Then, too, may we stand shoulder to shoulder as one united and holy nation and declare, “How awesome is this place!” *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom,

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