YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**SICHOT OF THE RASHEI HA-YESHIVA**

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

This week’s *shiurim* are dedicated by Abe Mezrich

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

PARASHAT VAYETZE

## SICHA OF HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL

**The Stones That Joined Together**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

"He came upon the place and he turned in there, for the sun had set, and he took from the stones of the place and placed [them] under his head, and he lay down in that place… And Yaakov awoke early in the morning and he took the stone he had placed under his head…" (*Bereishit* 28:11-18)

Rashi, citing the Gemara (*Chullin* 91b), notes that the “stones” are subsequently called a “stone,” and he elaborates:

"He formed them into a sort of border around his head, for he feared wild animals. [The stones] began to argue among themselves: One said, 'Let the righteous one lay his head upon me,' while the other said, 'Upon me.' The Holy One, blessed be He, made them into a single stone, and this is why it says (afterwards), 'He took the stone (sing.) which he had placed under his head.'"

What are *Chazal* trying to teach us in this midrash? What is the meaning of this strange story about stones arguing among themselves and then joining together? Ramchal, in his *Messilat* *Yesharim*, mentions this midrash in his discussion of role of the different creations in the world:

"… For the world was created for the use of man, but this places him in a position of great responsibility, for if he is drawn after the world and distances himself from his Creator, he himself is corruped and the whole world is corrupted with him. If, on the other hand, he controls himself and adheres to God, using what exists in the world only to help him in serving God, then he is elevated and the world itself is elevated along with him. For he brings about a great elevation for all of Creation, insofar as it is placed at the service of the man who is complete and sanctified with God's sanctity… and concerning the 'stones of the place' which Yaakov took and placed under his head, [our Sages] taught: 'Rabbi Yitzchak said: This teaches that they all gathered in one place, and each said, 'Let the righteous one lay his head upon me.'" (chapter 1)

According to Ramchal, the description of the stones arguing in their desperation to serve Yaakov comes to teach us that all of Creation exists only to serve man – and especially the righteous men. However, it is difficult to accept that this is the entire message of the midrash, since it emphasizes not only the desire on the part of the stones to serve Yaakov but also their "argument" and eventual unification. The significance of the midrash therefore requires further exploration.

A different version of the same midrash may shed light on our question:

"Rabbi Yehuda said: He took twelve stones – in accordance with God's decree that he would father twelve tribes. [Yaakov] said, 'Avraham did not establish [the twelve tribes]; Yitzchak did not establish them; what of me? If these twelve stones join together, I will know that I will father twelve tribes.' When the twelve stones joined together, he knew that he would establish the twelve tribes." (*Bereishit Rabba* 68, 11)

According to the midrash here, the joining of the stones was not merely a miraculous phenomenon, it was also an important omen for the future. The symbolism of this must be understood.

The Rambam, in his *Moreh Nevukhim* (III:51), explains what occupied the forefathers and Moshe Rabbeinu more than anything else:

"Their main quest throughout their lives was to produce a nation that would know God and serve Him… for all their efforts were aimed towards publicizing God's Oneness in the world and guiding people towards the love of Him."

The forefathers took on a dual mission: to establish a nation of worshippers of God, and to spread the message of monotheism and love of God throughout the world. In order for the Chosen Nation to be able to bequeath these values to the entire world, they would need great and diverse powers, corresponding to the special characteristics of all the different nations. For this reason *Am* *Yisrael* had to comprise twelve tribes – each with its own special characteristic to contribute to the overall effort: one tribe would bring valor, another would engage in commerce, another would study Torah, etc.

When a single nation must combine many different elements, a question arises concerning proper proportions and balances among them. In the *parashot* we will be reading in the coming weeks, we find many conflicts going on amongst Yaakov's household: Leah and Rachel clash over the mandrakes (*duda'im*); the brothers turn against Yosef, etc. The matriarchs and the sons knew that they were laying the foundations for a nation, and they fought over the character it would take and the focus that would define it. Each tribe represented a certain idea and believed itself to be at the center. Yaakov's role was to integrate all of these forces, to build a nation which included all of these elements in the proper proportions.

This explains the message of the story of the stones. Each stone symbolized a certain aspect of *Am* *Yisrael* and wanted Yaakov to "lay his head" upon it – i.e., to recognize its centrality. Yaakov knew that the nation he was going to produce was supposed to be composed of different elements, and therefore declared that if the stones would join together it would be a sign that it was possible to build a nation within which all the different forces would be united. The stones did indeed join together, and thus Yaakov concluded that the objective could be attained.

A well-known midrash describes Rachel begging God for mercy on behalf of *Am* *Yisrael* at the time of the Destruction of the Temple:

"'Master of the Universe – You know that Yaakov, your sevant, loved me greatly, and worked for my father for seven years to earn me [in marriage]. When those seven years were complete and the time came to me to be married to my husband, my father conspired to exchange me for my sister as my husband's bride. This pained me greatly, for I became aware of this conspiracy and I made it known to my husband, and gave him a sign by which he could tell me from my sister, so that my father would not be able to exchange us. But afterwards I regretted what I had done, and overcame my own desires, and had mercy on my sister, that she should not be humiliated. In the evening they gave my sister to my husband instead of me, and I gave my sister all the signs which I had given to my husband, so that he would believe that she was Rachel. I even lay under the bed where he lay with my sister, and when he spoke to her she remained silent and I replied to everything he said, so that he would not hear my sister's voice. I performed this kindness towards her and was not jealous of her, and did not expose her to humiliation. And if I – a mere mortal, dust and ashes, felt no jealousy towards my rival sister, and did not expose her to shame and humiliation – what of You, living and enduring merciful King? Why have You been jealous of idolatry which has no substance, and exiled my children, and permitted them to be killed by the sword, and their enemies to do to them as they please?'

This evoked God's mercy and He said, 'For your sake, Rachel, I shall return Israel to their place…'" (*Eikha* *Rabba*, *Petichta* 24)

The Maharal (*Netzach Yisrael*, chapter 34) explains Rachel's claim. According to his view, Rachel knew that she was meant to be Yaakov's principal wife, but also knew that he would not have only one wife: in order to father twelve tribes who would contribute diverse strengths to *Am* *Yisrael*, he needed to have other wives in addition to her. For this reason Rachel conveyed the signs to Leah, thereby facilitating her marriage to Yaakov. In the same way, she argues, God should forgive *Am* *Yisrael* because the world is complex, with many diverse and competing forces; it is not yet ready to attain the state of "God is One and His Name is One."

"And Yaakov awoke early in the morning and he took the stone he had put under his head, and placed it as a monument, and poured oil over the top of it. And he called the name of that place Beit-El." (*Bereishit* 28:18-19)

Yaakov takes the stone that symbolizes the unification of the different elements within *Am* *Yisrael*, and transforms it into a monument. This monument becomes "Beit El," the house of God: *Am* *Yisrael*, bringing together its wealth of different strengths, is worthy and capable of being a center for the dissemination of monotheism and love of God throughout the world.