YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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GEOGRAPHY IN THE PARASHA

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Jeffrey Paul Friedman

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לע"נ

יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

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**PARASHAT RE’EH**

***Ha-makom***

**By Prof. Yoel Elitzur**

**The Keyword of *Parashat Re’eh***

Upon reviewing *Parashat Re’eh*,it is virtually impossible not to notice that a certain word appears disproportionately throughout the *parasha*:

You must destroy all the sites (***ha-mekomot***) at which the nations you are to dispossess worshiped their gods… Do not worship the Lord your God in like manner, but look only to the site (***ha-makom***) that the Lord your God will choose…

You shall not act at all as we now act here, every man as he pleases… When you cross the Jordan and settle in the land… then you must bring everything that I command you to the site (***ha-makom***) where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name…

Take care not to sacrifice your burnt offerings in any place (***be-khol makom***)you like, but only in the place (***ba-makom***)that the Lord will choose in one of your tribal territories. There you shall sacrifice your burnt offerings… You may not eat in your settlements the tithes of your new grain or wine or oil, or of the firstlings of your herds and flocks… These you must consume before the Lord your God in the place (***ba-makom***)that the Lord your God will choose…If the place (***ha-makom***)where the Lord has chosen to establish His name is too far from you… (Deuteronomy 12:2-21)

The same term continues to appear in other contexts in *Parashat Re’eh*, such as the passage on the mitzva of tithes:

You shall set aside every year a tenth part of all the yield of your sowing… You shall consume the tithes… in the presence of the Lord your God, in the place (***ba-makom***)where He will choose to establish His name… Should the place (***ha-makom***)… be far from you… take it with you to the place (***ha-makom***)that the Lord your God has chosen. (14:22-23)

Similarly, in the passage on the mitzva of consecrating the firstlings, we read: “All male firstlings that are born in your herd and in your flock… You and your household shall eat it annually before the Lord your God in the place (***ba-makom***)that the Lord will choose” (15:19-20).

The passage on the mitzva of the Paschal sacrifice reads:

You are not permitted to slaughter the Passover sacrifice in any of the settlements… but at the place (***ha-makom***) where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name… You shall cook and eat it at the place (***ba-makom***)that the Lord your God will choose. (16:5-8)

Regarding the festival of Shavuot we read: “You shall rejoice before the Lord your God… at the place (***ba-makom***) where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name” (16:11). Regarding the festival of Sukkot we read: “You shall hold a festival for the Lord your God seven days, in the place (***ba-makom***) that the Lord will choose” (16:15). And by way of summarizing all three festivals, the Torah states:

Three times a year – on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the Feast of Weeks and on the Feast of Booths – all your males shall appear before the Lord your God in the place (***ba-makom***) that He will choose. (16:16)

 In the following *parasha* as well, *Parashat Shoftim*, we will encounter the recurring expression “**the place that the Lord will choose**” once again, in connection to the source of judicial authority whose voice all of Israel must obey, and in connection to the right given to the Levites (the priests) to sacrifice and serve God to their hearts’ desire. Finally, regarding the mitzva of first fruits (*bikkurim*), found immediately before the final *mitzvot* section in the Torah at the beginning of *Parashat Ki Tavo*, we read: “You shall put it in a basket and go to **the place (*ha-makom*) where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name**” (26:2).

 In other words, all of these examples of divine service can only be performed in the place that the Lord will choose. However, in two of the instances of *makom* in *Parashat Re’eh*, the word refers to something quite different from a place for divine service:

1. “You must destroy all the sites (***kol******ha-mekomot***) at which the nations worshiped their gods”
2. “Take care not to sacrifice your burnt offerings in any place (***be-khol makom***)you like”

The difference between these two examples and “**the place that the Lord will choose**” is a reflection of the difference between the polytheism of the Canaanite nations and the monotheism of “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” The Canaanites, who worshiped numerous gods, considered “**all the sites**” consecrated and suitable for use as places of worship. In contrast, Israel – the one chosen nation – worships the one true God, in the one chosen place, in the one chosen land that was given as its heritage: “**in the place that the Lord will choose**.”[[1]](#footnote-1)



**Does *Makom* Mean “Temple”?**

 There are several places throughout the *Tanakh* where the word *makom* is used in the sense of “temple.” The clearest example of this in I Chronicles 16:27: “Glory and majesty are before Him; strength and joy are **in His place** (*bi-mekomo*).” There is a parallel verse to this one in Psalms 96:6: “Glory and majesty are before Him; strength and splendor are **in His temple** (*be-mikdasho*).”

 From a linguistic perspective, various scholars from as early as the nineteenth century pointed out the parallel between the Hebrew word ***makom*** and the Arabic word *maqām*, which means “monument,” “place of prayer” or “sacred site.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The word *mqm* in the sense of “temple” also appears in Phoenician and Punic inscriptions from Carthage, as well as in a dedicatory inscription discovered in Tel Miqne, which is identified with the Biblical city of Ekron.

**What is *Ha-makom*?**

 Let us now return to our *parasha*. What is “**the place** that the Lord will choose”? It is commonly said to be Jerusalem, but *Parashat Re’eh* does not state this. The reason for this is that the Torah was not referring specifically to Jerusalem, but to a place that God will choose in the future. There is a *baraita* in *Sifrei Zuta* that is parallel to the “ten grades of holiness” *mishna* in *Masekhet Kelim*. The *Sifrei Zuta* adds another distinction, between the two banks of the Jordan River: “The land of Canaan is more sacred than the Transjordan, since the land of Canaan is suitable as a home for the Divine Presence, while the Transjordan is not suitable as a home for the Divine Presence” (*Sifrei Zuta*, *Naso*, 228). In other words, while the Transjordan possesses the same sanctity of the land of Israel as the Cisjordan for the purposes of *mitzvot*, *teruma*, tithes, *shemita* and *yovel* and the mitzva of settling the land, its level of sanctity is different in one respect: “**The** **place that the Lord will choose**” can only be located in the land of Canaan, in the Cisjordan. It cannot be located in the Transjordan because that region has a lesser degree of sanctity than the Cisjordan. The primary sanctity of the land of Israel is in the Cisjordan, in the land of Canaan, and the source of that sanctity is “the place that the Lord will choose.” From this “place,” the sanctity spreads throughout the land of Israel west of the Jordan, and from there to the Transjordan. The epicenter of this sanctity, the nexus “where heaven and earth touch one another” (*Bava Batra* 74a), must be located in the land of Canaan – but it can be anywhere within the land of Canaan. During the period when the *Mishkan* was located in Shiloh, Shiloh was “**the place that the Lord will choose**” and not Jerusalem. Jerusalem became “**the place that the Lord will choose**” when David brought the Ark to Jerusalem, and the identity of “the place” has not changed since then. As the Mishna in *Megilla* 1:11states: “After the sanctification of Shiloh, there is again a time of permission (for high places [*bamot*]), but after the sanctification of Jerusalem there can be no such permission.”

 The same language used in the *Tanakh* to refer to God’s choice of a location for “the place” is also used in connection with His choice of “the man” – i.e., His chosen king over the nation of Israel. The Torah states: “You shall be free to set a king over yourself, **one chosen by the Lord your God**” (Deuteronomy 17:15), meaning that the nation’s choice of a king will receive God’s official approval – that this man is the king who is “chosen by the Lord your God.” In his time, Saul was **the man** “whom the Lord has chosen” (I Samuel 10:24). After Saul was set aside and David was chosen, the prophet Nathan revealed a divine message to David: that from now on God has chosen David and his descendants to be kings of Israel – “your throne shall be established forever” (II Samuel 7:16). And so it was with the process of choosing “the place.” “**The place that the Lord will choose**,” according to its fundamental definition, could be located anywhere in the land of Canaan. But from the moment that David and Jerusalem were chosen, God announced to David through His prophet that from then on He chooses Jerusalem alone – “This is My resting-place for all time; here I will dwell, for I desire it” (Psalms 132:14). Despite this, it is important to stress that this eternal choice of Jerusalem applies only on the prophetic level, while on the Pentateuchal level “**the place**” can be anywhere throughout the land.

***Ha-makom* in Genesis**

 Once we understand the significance of “the place,” we can see that this keyword – ***ha-makom*** – is a keyword that is emphasized in the stories of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis as well. It appears in the story of the binding of Isaac and in Jacob’s Bethel narrative. The proof that the prominent role of the word *ha-makom* in these passages is no coincidence lies in the fact that often, the word is stressed in the Biblical text much more than what would be linguistically reasonable. That is to say, there are several instances in Genesis where the word ***ha-makom*** makes it difficult to understand the simple meaning of the verse. The Torah says:

Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon that place (***ba-makom***)and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place (***ha-makom***), he put it under his head and lay down in that place (***ba-makom***). (Genesis 28:10-11)

The word appears again shortly thereafter: “Surely the Lord is present in this place (***ba-makom***)… How awesome is this place (***ha-makom***)! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven” (28:16-17).

 The first appearance of the word *ba-makom* is puzzling from a grammatical-syntactical perspective. After all, the prefix *ba-* in *ba-makom* includes the definite article, implying that this is a place that is known to us already. What can this possibly mean? We have not yet encountered this place, or any information about it, in the Torah! As a peshatist commentator, Rashbam explains here: “In a certain place outside the city of Luz.” But has Rashbam actually solved the problem? It would seem more accurate to say that rather than solving the problem, he has only highlighted its difficulty: If what the Torah means is “in a certain place,” then the verse could easily have said exactly that. Ibn Ezra, in his characteristically cryptic manner, answers: “The reason for the *patach* [vowelization on the letter] *bet* [in the word] *ba-makom* is that these are Moses’ words. The interpretation is: “in the place that is known today.” In other words, the Torah here calls Bethel “**the place**” because it is already well known to the recipients of the Torah. By Moses’ time, everyone already knew that this was an important place, so it would have been appropriate to use the definite article – ***ba-makom***. This solution is also difficult to accept, since the Torah speaks in “human language” – in natural, common usage – and it would thus be unusual for the text to rely on information that only comes to light later in history. Moreover, there are many similar examples in the *Tanakh* where the text retained its common usage and refrained from using the definite article: “They came upon a valley in the land of Shinar… That is why it was called Babel” (Genesis 11:2, 9); “A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son… She named him Moses” (Exodus 2:1, 10); “There was a man from Ramathaim of the Zuphites, in the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham” (I Samuel 1:1); “There was a man in the land of Uz named Job” (Job 1:1). In our case as well, the text should have employed the common usage instead of relying on later information.

Claude Reignier Conder, a well-known English scholar of the late nineteenth century, was also troubled by this question. Conder inferred from here that the place where Jacob rested in this passage was the same place where his grandfather Abraham built an altar – between Bethel and Ai. This place was indeed already known to the readers of the book of Genesis, hence the word ***ha-makom*** with the definite article.



Claude R. Conder (1848-1910)

In the end, the question is better than all the answers. The repetition of the word is curious as well. Instead of saying, “He came upon **that place**… Taking one of the stones of **that place**… lay down in **that place**,” the Torah could easily have said, “He came upon a certain place… and lay down there” – indicating that the Torah is specifically emphasizing the word ***ha-makom***.

An interesting case can be found in *Parashat Vayishlach*: “God parted from him at the spot (***ba-makom***)where He had spoken to him” (Genesis 35:13). Rashi comments, with his typical and well-known humility: “I do not know what this teaches us.” Indeed, if ***ha-makom*** means simply “place” in the indefinite sense, then the word is entirely superfluous; how could God have parted from him at any place other than where He had spoken to him? However, if we explain, begging Rashi’s forgiveness, that the Torah was emphasizing the particular location of God’s revelation to Jacob, perhaps we can understand what this teaches us after all.

**Are *Chazal* and Rashi Forcing Jerusalem into the Verses?**

 Upon examining several statements throughout rabbinic literature, it seems that *Chazal* are forcing Jerusalem into verses concerning Bethel. Those who have studied *Parashat Vayetze* with Rashi’s commentary (on Genesis 28:17 in the common editions) will recognize three increasingly explicit ways in which *Chazal* do this. The first way is incidental linkage: The ladder that Jacob saw in his dream was slanted such that its base was in Beersheba and its top was above Bethel – and as a result, its center was situated directly above Jerusalem. The second way is *kefitzat ha-aretz*,the midrashic process of shortening long distances, in which one piece of land “jumps” to another location. In this case, Jacob indeed slept in Bethel, but Mount Moriah “jumped” to his location. The third way is explicit identification, completely ignoring the simple understanding of the text. Bethel, which appears in the verse here, is actually Jerusalem.[[3]](#footnote-3) This interpretation may elicit outrage from the peshatist, since the Torah says explicitly in *Parashat Vayetze* and again in *Parashat Vayishlach* that Bethel is identified with Luz – with no connection whatsoever to Jerusalem!

 Another similarly incredulous rabbinic statement is quoted by Rashi here as well: “Not like Abraham, who called it a mountain, and not like Isaac, who called it a field, but like Jacob, who called it a house (*bayit*, i.e., *Beit-El*).” Again, the peshatist grows infuriated: Abraham’s “mountain” is Mount Moriah; Isaac’s “field” is near Beer-lahai-roi in the Negeb and Jacob’s “house” is Bethel! How can all three of these places be considered one and the same?

**The *Peshat***

 In truth, attempting to read the story of God’s revelation to Jacob in Bethel from an approach of strict *peshat* is a frustrating and seemingly fruitless undertaking. As a case in point, the passageends with the verse: “And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God’s abode” (Genesis 28:22). But one can only view this divine foretelling as having come true if one takes into consideration the temple built in Bethel by Jeroboam son of Nebat, and it seems quite unlikely that the Torah would express this kind of support for such a negative character. Onkelos and Rabbi Saadia Gaon suggested a solution. Onkelos provides a non-literal translation here: “And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, **shall be such that I will worship upon it before God**.” Rabbi Saadia Gaon adds only one short word to the literal translation of the verse: “And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be **for me** God’s abode.” What they mean to say is that Jacob’s designation of Bethel as “God’s abode” was not a permanent one, but for himself alone. And indeed, when Jacob returned from Paddan-aram, following the incident with Dinah in Shechem, he went up to Bethel and built an altar there (see Rashi here).

The problem with this simplistic interpretation is that it is extremely disappointing. All the power and intense emotion brought out by the revelation, the ladder, God’s angels, “Shaken, he said, ‘How awesome is this place!’” – how can all of their relevance boil down to the life of one solitary person in one fleeting generation? How can it be that this crucial moment in the life our forefather, in the formation of his intimate relationship with God, has no bearing on his descendants in future generations?

***Ha-makom* – Where the Earth is Suspended from the Heavens**

 The key to understanding all of these things is that there are two basic aspects of ***ha-makom***. The superficial, “revealed” aspect is the simple meaning of the word: the place. But in a deeper sense, ***ha-makom*** refers to something that transcends the simple geographical level; it is the point of contact between the chosen land and the Divine Presence, the point from which the land draws all of its sanctity and virtue. ***Ha-makom*** is perhaps what *Chazal* called “the heavenly Jerusalem” (*Ta’anit* 5a; *Midrash Tehillim* 122). When Abraham, Isaac and Jacob wandered through the land, they were constantly searching for this **place**, this “heavenly Jerusalem.” It was there that they wanted to worship God – to call in God’s name.

 Thus, in the superficial sense, “He saw **the place** from afar” (Genesis 22:4) refers to Mount Moriah and “He came upon **that place**” refers to Bethel. But in the deeper sense, ***ha-makom*** is always “Jerusalem”; each of those places is identical in its sanctity, in its role as the nexus of heaven and earth, as the “cloud tied to the mountain” from which all the sanctity of the land of Israel emanates. The incredible transcendence of “Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is present in this place… Shaken, he said, ‘How awesome is this place!’ … and this stone… shall be God’s abode” has not been lost. Rather, it truly does exist, and continued to exist not only for Jacob, but for all the generations that followed – in Mount Moriah in Jerusalem.

 I will conclude with a very original idea in this connection that I heard from Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun. In I Kings 18, in the story of Elijah at Mount Carmel, we learned that Elijah brought a sacrifice on Mount Carmel during a period when the use of *bamot* (altars outside the Temple, literally “high places”) was prohibited. *Chazal* defended Elijah’s action, saying that this was a case of *hora’at sha’a* – an exceptional divine command, citing Elijah’s statement that “I have done all these things at Your bidding” (I Kings 18:36; see *Yerushalmi Megilla* 1:13 [72c and parallels]). It is interesting to note the *Tanakh*’sdescription of Elijah’s decisive moment on Mount Carmel:

When it was time to present the meal offering, the prophet Elijah came forward and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel! Let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant… Answer me, O Lord, answer me… Then fire from the Lord descended and consumed the burnt offering and the wood… (I Kings 18:36-38)

What is the meaning of “When it was time to present the meal offering”? To which meal offering does the verse refer, and what does this offering have to do with the story? The answer is that “the meal offering” in question is the meal offering brought in the afternoon as one of the two daily *tamid* offerings brought **in the Temple in Jerusalem**. The *Tanakh* reveals here that the very moment that Elijah requested that the fire descend upon Mount Carmel was the same moment that the *tamid* meal offering was brought in Jerusalem. In other words, Elijah’s request, made under the extenuating circumstances of *hora’at sha’a*, was not to lift the prohibition on the *bamot* but to suspend the prophetic choice of Jerusalem for a moment. Elijah requested that for just one moment, **the place that the Lord will choose** would be located not in Jerusalem but on Mount Carmel. That is why he waited until the whole daily service of bringing offerings – including the final activity, bringing the afternoon *tamid* together with its meal offering in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem – had concluded. The moment that the meal offering of the afternoon *tamid* – the final activity in the daily order of sacrifices – was brought in Jerusalem, Elijah was able to request that the Divine Presence rest temporarily on Mount Carmel, only to return to its home in Jerusalem immediately thereafter.



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**For further study:**

C. R. Conder, “The Mountains of Judah and Ephraim,” in C. W. Wilson, *The Land of Judea* (Picturesque Palestine, Sinai and Egypt; reprint), ed. Z. Vilnay, Jerusalem, n.d.; 99-101.

S. Gitin, “Israelite and Philistine Cult and the Archaeological Record in Iron Age II: The ‘Smoking Gun’ Phenomenon,” in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past*, ed. W. G. Dever and S. Gitin, Winona Lake 2003, 279-295.

D. Vanderhooft, “Dwelling Beneath the Sacred Place: A Proposal for Reading 2 Samuel 7:10,” *JBL* 118 (1999), 625-633.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. Map 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It should be noted that in this case there is generally an opposite parallel between the Hebrew and Arabic words. The Hebrew *makom* usually appears in the *Tanakh* in a prosaic, mundane context, meaning simply “place,” while the word *makhon* is more literary and poetic, referring to the sacred, as in the dwelling place of the *Shekhina*. In Arabic, however, the usual word for “place” is ***makān***, while ***maqām*** is a relatively rare term that is reserved for sacred sites. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. My good friend Nissim Erez pointed out to me that this same increasing degree of connectedness can be found in each successive appearance of the word ***ha-makom*** in the verse in question. First Jacob “came upon” that place; then he “took” one of the stone; and finally he “lay down” in that place. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)