YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Vayishlach**

**The Pillar at Rachel’s Tomb**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

Translated by David Strauss

**I. Introduction**

Our matriarch Rachel died on the way from Bet-El to Bet-Lechem, and she was buried along the way. Yaakov was unable to bring her to burial in the Makhpela Cave. According to the *midrash*, he deliberately buried her along the way so that she would argue in favor of her children as they went out into exile. Yaakov himself later asked that he be buried in the Makhpela Cave, where Leah was also buried (*Bereishit* 49:29-31). Yaakov cast the responsibility for his burial primarily on Yosef, viceroy of Egypt, and he charged him with an oath to carry out his wishes. It would appear that the oath was necessary owing to Yosef's natural desire to bury Yaakov alongside his mother, Rachel. Yaakov therefore made him take an oath that he would bury him with his fathers and with Leah.

According to the simple understanding, Yaakov was unable to carry Rachel's body all the long way to the Makhpela Cave. The bodies of Yaakov and Yosef, which were transported from Egypt to *Eretz* *Yisrael*, were first embalmed, perhaps for the express purpose that it be possible to carry them for such a long distance. But in the case of Rachel, the materials to embalm her body were not to be found, and so she was buried alone, close to the place of her death.

Yaakov expressed his love for Rachel after her death in two main ways: through the pillar that he set up on her grave and through the special love that he showed to her sons, Yosef and Binyamin.

**II. The Pillar**

And Rachel died and was buried in the way to Efrat – that is Bet-Lechem. And Yaakov set up a pillar upon her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. (*Bereishit* 35:19-20).

What exactly was the nature of this pillar, and what was its significance? How did it express the relationship between Yaakov and Rachel?

This is the fourth pillar erected by Yaakov. He erected a pillar in Bet-El when God appeared to him in the dream of the ladder when he was running away from his brother Esav (*Bereishit* 28:18), and he once again built a pillar in Bet-El after he returned from Padan-Aram (*Bereishit* 35:14). Between the two, he erected a pillar in the Gil'ad when he made a covenant with Lavan (*Bereishit* 31:45-53). A pillar expresses an everlasting covenant entered into by way of an oath between two parties. The heavy stone, which is not meant to be moved from its place, attests to the covenant made over it, which is also not meant to be moved from its place. The silent testimony of the stone is accompanied by the testimony of God, as is emphasized in connection with the pillar that was erected at the time of the covenant made with Lavan:

And Mitzpa, for he said: “The Lord shall watch between me and you, when we are absent one from another… Behold this heap, and behold the pillar….” (*Bereishit* 31:49-52)

The Ramban explains that the term Mitzpa parallels the word *matzeva* (pillar), both of which express faith in the fact that God will testify against the party who breaks the covenant and the oath.

The silent testimony of the heavy stone finds expression also in other places in the Bible, such as at the covenant that Yehoshua made with the people before his death (*Yehoshua* 24:24-27). This may also be the role of the tablets of the covenant, which were tablets of stone.

For our purposes, the pillar that Yaakov erected upon Rachel's grave may express an oath and covenant between Yaakov and Rachel, his deceased wife. During her life, Yaakov swore to Lavan that he would not afflict his daughters or take wives beside them. The oath to Rachel after her death was to find expression in Yaakov's concern for her sons and in his continuing to see her as the mainstay of his house. Yaakov continued to view Rachel as his main wife even after her death. When the brothers tried to bring Binyamin down with them to Egypt, Yaakov said to them: "You know that my wife bore me two sons" (*Bereishit* 44:27). Even when Yaakov's sons went down to Egypt, Rachel was the only person who merited the title "Yaakov's wife" (*Bereishit* 46:19).

In *Parashat Chayei Sara*,we discussed the covenant that Avraham made with his wife Sara after her death with the purchase of the Makhpela Cave as the site of their joint burial. Rachel did not merit to be buried with Yaakov, and his covenant with her he made by way of the pillar.

Our Sages expounded that in the wake of Rachel's death, Yaakov tried to marry her maidservant, Bilha (Rashi, *Bereishit* 35:22). Bilha was viewed as Rachel's natural successor as the stepmother of Rachel's children. According to the *midrash*, this was Reuven's complaint – that Yaakov's main wife after Rachel's death should have been her sister Leah.

As mentioned, in addition to the two pillars that Yaakov erected in Mitzpe Gil'ad and at the site of Rachel's burial, he also erected two stones as pillars in Bet-El, in places where God spoke to him. In these places as well, the pillars give expression to a covenant that was made with God, which is also the role of the pillars erected at Mount Sinai:

And Moshe wrote all the words of the Lord, and rose up early in the morning, and built an altar under the mount, **and twelve pillars,** according to the twelve tribes of Israel… And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people; and they said: “All that the Lord has spoken will we do, and obey.” And Moshe took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said: “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in agreement with all these words.” (*Shemot* 24:3-8)

The covenant and the pillar are intertwined; this is the case with Yaakov and his wife Rachel, and so too is this the case with Yaakov and God. This understanding fits in with the many parallels that we find in the Bible and in the words of *Chazal* between a covenant with God and a covenant between a man and his wife.

The power of the pillar is indicated by another verse in our *parasha*, the meaning of which is not entirely clear:

And Devora, Rivka's nurse **died**, and **she was buried** below Bet-El under the oak; and the name of it was called Alon-Bakhut. (*Bereishit* 35:8)

We do not know why mention is made of the death and burial of Devora, Rivka's nurse (see Rashi, ad loc., that the intention was to allude to Rivka's death). But for our purposes, this verse parallels what was stated with regard to Rachel:

And Rachel died and was buried in the way to Efrat – that is Bet-Lechem. And Yaakov set up a pillar upon her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. (*Bereishit* 35:19-20)

Devora was buried under an oak, which is named after her death, thereby perpetuating her name and the site of her burial "to this day."

**III. R. Akiva and Rachel**

It is difficult to ignore the resemblance in the names and the similarity in the actions between the love of Yaakov and Rachel and the love of R. Akiva, the great *Tanna*, and his wife Rachel, the daughter of Kalba Savua. Akiva started as a shepherd working for Kalba Savua, and Kalba Savua tended to belittle him. The shepherd fell in love with his master's daughter and took her from him against his will, as Lavan had claimed about Yaakov, who ran away with his daughters. The love between Akiva and Rachel could not find expression in the conventional manner, owing to the important mission that rested on the husband's shoulders – to raise the honor of the Torah of the people of Israel. For twenty-four years, Rachel waited for her husband, R. Akiva, who did not leave the *beit* *midrash* and his Torah study.

Yaakov and Rachel's love also seems to have been a missed love, owing to Yaakov's many years of subjugation and the long, frigid nights of watching the sheep; owing to the infertility that caused jealousy and an exchange of sharp words; and owing to the theft of Lavan's *terafim* and the curse that was pronounced in its wake. The great mission of founding the people of Israel created difficulty in the accepted expressions of the love between Yaakov and Rachel.

From here to the difference between the two cases: R. Akiva and Rachel's love found expression during their lifetimes. There, there was no pillar, but rather a city (Jerusalem) of gold (*Yerushalmi* *Shabbat* 6:1). The matriarch Rachel, in contrast to Rachel the wife of R. Akiva, was buried along the way. It was as if her blood cried out from the ground about the lack of fulfillment, about their many wanderings until they returned to the land of the patriarchs, and there her soul departed and she died. Her cry from the ground was to be heard on the day her children would go out into exile. We will deal with this at length in another forum.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**IV. Rachel’s Sons**

As mentioned, Yaakov's love for Rachel after her death finds expression in his great love and concern for her two sons.

It is possible that apart from his great love for them, he was sincerely concerned that the curse that he had pronounced at the time of the stealing of the *terafim* fell not only upon Rachel, but also upon her descendants. It is possible that this is the way he interpreted for himself the death of Yosef when he saw his blood-stained coat. His concern about the continued curse is what prevented him from sending Binyamin to Egypt. Yaakov's spirit was revived when he learned that Yosef and Binyamin were alive (*Bereishit* 45:27), and only then did he understand that his curse might have fallen upon Rachel, but not upon her descendants.

1. I find it difficult to ignore the similarity between the incident under discussion and the contemporary work of David Shimoni, *Matzeva* (Tombstone), in *Sefer Ha-Idiliot* (The Book of Idylls). The hero of the work is Katriel, a pioneer who immigrated from Russia to *Eretz* *Yisrael* during the Second Aliya and whose heart was filled with a fierce love of the land of *Eretz* *Yisrael*, his ancestral inheritance. He relates to his working the land as a sacred mission and occupies himself with it with absolute devotion. One day he meets a Jewish woman from Russia, falls madly in love with her, and marries her. She sits at home, while he works the land. There is a certain contradiction between Katriel's two great loves, the holy land of Israel and his wife. There is something missing in the expression of his love for his wife owing to his great dedication to working the land.

   Katriel’s wife dies in childbirth, but unlike the matriarch Rachel, the fruit of her womb dies with her. Only then does Katriel recognize that something was missing in the expression of his love for his wife. He decides to build a tombstone over her grave. His working the land does not provide him with enough money with which to purchase a tombstone, and his love for his wife overcomes his love for working the land to which he had related as holy work. He abandons his work of the land for a limited time and hires himself out as a guard, saving the money that he earns for the purpose of erecting a tombstone over his wife's grave.

   When he has saved almost enough money for the tombstone, he is critically injured by an Arab while on guard duty. In his final testament, he accepts his lot before his friend Zevulun. He compares working the land to the service of the incense in the Temple. Just as one who omits one of the ingredients from the incense is liable for the death penalty, the same is true of him when he gave up his love for the land for the love of his wife after her death. He instructs his friend to use his savings to erect a tombstone over his wife's grave and to bury him without a gravestone, because of the sin he committed against the land.

   We will leave the meaning of this work and the analysis of the similarity to our *parasha* to the reader. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)