

The Place Which I Shall Choose - Parshas Re'eh – David Levy

יג / כ / כז מנחם אב תשע"ז – 5/12/19th August 2017 – שבת פ' ואתחנן / עקב / ראה

In Parshas Re'eh we read that B'nei Yisroel shall seek out Hash-m's presence and offer up their sacrifices: "Ki Im El HaMokom Asher Yivchar Hash-m (But only in the Place which Hash-m your G-d shall choose)" (D'vorim Ch 12:5). This formula (or a slight variation of it) is actually used no less than 16 times altogether in this Parashah (see also 12:11,14,18,21,26; 14:23,24,25;15:20;16:2,6,7,11,16,17) and then another 5 times in total in succeeding Sidros of Sefer D'vorim. The Torah is usually brief. Why use this long formula 21 times in fairly quick succession when it could have simply given this holy place its real name? (The individual P'sukim have been enumerated above to illustrate the oddity of this). In fact the Torah never clearly identifies it as Har HaBayis in Y'rushalayim.

In his Philosophical work Moreh N'vuchim (3.45) Rambam (Maimonides) gives three explanations why the Torah obscures its location. He notes that the Place is actually Har HaMoriah where Avrohom and Yitzchok were led to by Hash-m for the Akedah. First he says that if the exact location had been clearly specified the nations of the world would wage war to capture it. Indeed this fear has been borne out by history. After Yerushalayim became established as the site of the Beis HaMikdosh it was captured successively over the last 2,500 years by the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Umayyads, Crusaders, Mamluks (Saladin), Turks and the British (and nearly by the Assyrians in the time of King Chizkiyahu).

A second reason is that the nations of the world would try to destroy this Place if they knew where it was. Again that fear has proven justified with Y'rushalayim having been laid waste by the Babylonians and Romans as we have just mourned on Tisha B'Av and destroyed also in more recent times. Very topically of course many current nations of the world, unable by military means to dispossess the State of Israel of physical control of the Old City of Y'rushalayim resort to ludicrous denials of our unimpeachable historical connection with it.

Rambam's third reason was that the tribes of Israel would themselves fight over it and seek to have it incorporated within their own allotted territory. The Midrash Rabba 22:7 discussing Kayin's motivation for killing his brother Hevel describes how their argument took place BaSodeh (in the field) (Bereishis 4:8) and suggests that Kayin wanted this specific piece of land on which the Beis HaMikdosh would one day be built.

It is rather strange that very few commentators on the Torah remark upon this rather oblique formula for the site of the Beis HaMikdosh. Gur Aryeh interprets Rashi as saying that the reference is to Shiloh where the Ark rested for 369 years but Kli Yokor disagrees and says it must be a reference to the site of the Beis HaMikdosh. He notes that there seems to be a mystical aspect to its location because even when Hash-m commanded Avrohom regarding the Akeidoh with Yitzchok on this very mountain he obscurely described it as: "Al Achad Hehorim Asher Omar Eilecho (on one of the mountains which I shall show you)". When Avrohom encountered the site he called it: "Hash-m Yireh (Hash-m is seen)"

Malbim has a slightly different approach arguing that the Torah specifically concealed the site of the Beis HaMikdosh so that it would only be discovered through intense spiritual yearning. This is portrayed by Dovid Hamelech in Tehilim 132 which poetically describes his attempts to find the place on which to build a Mizbeach (altar) which eventually became part of the Beis HaMikdosh.

Radak and Rashbam (according to the Chasam Sofer) were of the opinion that even the Ovos did not know the precise location of the Beis HaMikdosh (i.e Avrohom and Yitzchok did not know that it would be the same site as the Akeidoh, and Yaakov likewise did not know that this was the site of the pillar he erected on his way from Be'er Sheva to Paddan Aram).

Although Rambam notes in Moreh N'vuchim that nowhere in the Torah itself is the site of the Beis HaMikdosh precisely named, he says elsewhere (Hilchos Beis HaB'chiroh 2:1-2) that its location was an oral tradition and that Odom and Noach had sacrificed there, as well as the events with Kayin and Hevel, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov mentioned above. The Talmud Y'rushalmi (Megilah 1:1) says that the details of the structure of the Beis HaMikdosh were recorded on a scroll which was transmitted from Moshe via Y'hoshua, the Z'keinim, and Shmuel to Dovid and Dovid gave it to his son Shlomo. Towards the end of his life Dovid wrongfully made a census of the people and the nation was punished with a plague. He was told by the Novi Gad to erect a Mizbeach on the threshing floor owned by Aravnah the Jebusite. Dovid purchased this from Aravnah for 50 silver shekels and it became the site of the Beis HaMikdosh.

Echoing Rambam's theory, is it not ironic that our enemies most fiercely and vociferously dispute our claim to the very three places recorded in Tanach that our forefathers took pains to acquire by monetary purchase rather than conquest: Avrohom - the Cave of Machpelah in Chevron; Yaakov - land in Sh'chem (now Nablus) Yosef's burial place; Dovid - the threshing floor of Aravnah for the Beis HaMikdosh.