

Nature in the Parasha

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Parashat Yayislach – The Weeping Oak

One of our recent donors placed an interesting note with his donation “please name the next exotic plant you plant in your greenhouse after me.” I bless this donor to live until 120 so it will be a long time until we can name any exotic plant after him! Whereas I have not found any sources in the Torah for the beautiful custom to plant a tree in the honor of the birth of a child, in this week’s *Parasha* we find a source for naming a tree after the passing of a dear one. Ya’acov was on his way back home after having been away from his parents for 34 years, 14 in Yeshiva and 20 years in Lavan’s house in Padan Aram (Rashi, *Bereishit* 28:9). He left home because of his mother’s advice. Rivkah knew that Esau planned to kill Ya’acov. She, therefore, told him to get away and escape to her brother Lavan immediately, until Esau’s anger would abate. Then she would send for him to return (*Bereishit* 27:42-45). After all these years of waiting, Rivkah’s old wet-nurse Devorah finally reached Ya’acov to inform him that Rivkah had sent her to tell him that it was now safe to return home. With longing and excitement, Ya’acov gathered his four wives and eleven children together to finally return home to reunite with his dear parents. On the way Rivkah’s old nurse Devorah died (*Bereishit* 35:8), and Ya’acov was notified of an even sadder event – the death of his dear mother (Rashi, *ibid.*). With tears streaming down his cheeks, while burying Devorah, he mourned profusely for his mother whose funeral he was unable to attend. Thereupon, he named the oak beneath which Devorah was buried the Weeping Oak to memorialize both of these two holy women (Ramban *ibid.*). Why does the Torah make no explicit mention of Rivkah’s death, while publicizing the death of her maidservant Devorah? What is the significance of this mysterious Devorah who is unexpectedly introduced only at the time of her death? Moreover, why did Hashem arrange that the tidings of Rivkah’s death reached Ya’acov at the same time as the mourning for Devorah? Was Rivkah not deserving of her own separate period of mourning? Why name the place the “Weeping Oak or ‘Tree of Cryings?’”

Blessings of Consolation

“But Devorah, Rivkah’s nurse died, and she was buried beneath Beit El, under the oak, and he called the name אֶלֹן בְּכֹתֶת/Alon Bachut (Weeping Oak). Thereupon G-d revealed himself to Ya’acov again when he came from Padan Aram and he blessed him” (*Bereishit* 35:8-9). Which blessing did Hashem bless Ya’acov with at this time? Rivkah had promised Ya’acov “Then I will send and fetch you from there” (*Ibid.* 27:45). She sent Devorah to him in Padan Aram to tell him to leave that place, and she died on the return journey. ‘Alon’ is the name of the plain of Beit El. ‘Alon’ also means ‘another’ in Greek. The agaddah states that there he received news of another mourning, for he was informed that his mother had died... but Scripture doesn’t make open mention of her death” (Rashi). It makes sense that Ya’acov called the name ‘Weeping Oak’ as a memorial for his mother’s death, for why would he be weeping for the old nursemaid? Yet, Ya’acov cried and mourned for his righteous mother, who loved him and sent him away to protect him, but didn’t merit to see him return. Therefore, G-d revealed himself to Ya’acov and blessed him to comfort him from his

mourning over his mother as the Midrash explains that Hashem's blessing here was the blessing for the mourner. Similarly, Hashem also blessed Yitzchak after Avraham's death (*Bereishit* 25:11), with the blessing of consolation given to mourners (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah* 14a). A support for the fact that Rivkah had passed on is the verse further on which states, "Ya'acov came to Yitzchak his father, to Mamrei, Kiriath Arbah" (*Ibid.* 35:27). Had Rivkah been there it would have mentioned that he returned to both his father and his mother, as it was Rivkah who sent him to Padan Aram, and caused him all his blessings (Ramban, *Bereishit* 35:8). I found it so beautiful to learn how Hashem is always with us in our greatest pain. When we are in mourning, we can always find comfort in Hashem's presence, which reveals Himself to the mourner to bless him or her with blessings of consolation.

Envisioning the Greatness of the Matriarch Rivkah – Through Devorah

Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann notes the peculiarity of how the Torah doesn't mention Devorah except for here, at her death. There is no doubt that Devorah was a righteous woman to merit being Rivkah's wet-nurse. We can imagine how difficult it must have been for Ya'acov to raise his family in Padan Aram, far away from his parents and birthplace in the Land of Israel. Ya'acov surely missed no opportunity to tell his children (and wives) about his parents. Especially since the only grandparents his children had ever known were Lavan and his wife, who were far from being the kind of role-models Ya'acov envisioned for his children. After having heard about them for so many years, we can imagine the anticipation of Ya'acov's family to one-day meet Yitzchak and Rivkah. When they were finally on their way home, they looked forward to soon having the opportunity to meet their holy grandparents face to face. Then, suddenly, their anticipation was shattered when the news of Rivkah's death arrived. Ya'acov's family were crushed when they realized that they would never will have the opportunity to meet their amazing matriarch and receive her guidance and blessings. Thus Hashem arranged that at least they would have the opportunity to get to know Rivkah's wet-nurse, who herself was a stronghold of piety and strength. Although Devorah does not even reach Rivkah's ankles, at the very least Ya'acov's family could, through Devorah, grasp a remote spark of what must have been the greatness of Ya'acov's illustrious mother. This is the 'double mourning' to which Rashi refers. While crying over the righteous wet-nurse Devorah, Ya'acov took the opportunity to open the eyes of his family and awaken their hearts to what kind of person Rivkah was. They could remotely imagine what a person she must have been to have had such a maidservant!

The Tree of Trusting

Although the Hebrew word אֵילָן/Alon usually is translated to mean 'oak,' it can also refer to just a tree similar to the word אֵילָן/ilan. Our rabbis even say that it was actually a date-palm. When it states five hundred years later about Devorah, the prophetess, that she sat under the date-palm of Devorah it was the same Tree of Cryings for Devorah, Rivkah's nursemaid (*Da'at Zekeinim, of Ba'alei Tosfot*). The fact that both trees are mentioned as being near Beit El serves as a support for linking the Tree of Cryings for Devorah and Rivkah with the date- palm of Devorah (*Abarbanel, Shoftim* 4). About Devorah it states, "She dwelled under the palm tree of Devora between Rama and Beit E-I..." (*Shoftim* 4:5), and "Devorah, Rivkah's nurse died, and she was buried beneath Beit E-I, under the oak..." (*Bereishit* 35:8). The word 'E-I' furthermore is one of Hashem's names, which means Divine

Power. It is interesting to note that the word 'Alon' – a strong powerful tree – shares the same root as the word 'E-I.' Perhaps the message of this tree, which spans more than five-hundred years, comes to connect both Ya'acov and the generation of *Shoftim* with the strength of G-d. On his way home, Hashem has to command Ya'acov to return to Beit E-I (*Bereishit* 35:1), in spite of the fact that Ya'acov himself had promised to stop in Beit E-I on his return trip (*Bereishit* 28:22). The midrash explains that Hashem had to command him because he was tarrying (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 81). Perhaps Ya'aov was delaying out of fear. From all the patriarchs Ya'aov was the most fearful. The word 'fear' is related to Ya'acov about ten times in the Bible. Surely, Ya'acov had what to fear. He was justifiably worried about the Shechem aftermath and about the Canaanite people. He had already suffered twenty years of Lavan. During the period of the Judges, Barak was likewise fearful, hesitant and overwhelmed by the military threats of the surrounding enemies. Devorah aroused him to look beyond the 900 armored chariots and trust in Hashem. She delivered the following message, when our internal world is in order, the external world will take care of itself. Empowered by Devorah's words, Barak delivers a crushing blow to Yavin, the Canaanite king (*Shoftim* 4:23).

From Devorah to Devorah

Rabbi Asher Brander explains the link between the date palm of Devorah, which imbued her with trust in Hashem, and the Tree of Crying for Devorah, Rivkah's nursemaid. The first time we hear about Rivkah's nursemaid is when Rivkah left her home to become Yitzchak's wife. Her family then "sent Rivkah their sister and her nursemaid" to accompany her (*Bereishit* 24:59). Devorah witnessed Rivkah's departure from home and her destiny towards greatness. She heard the message [ironically delivered by Lavan] that we impart to our brides until today: "Our sister, you shall be great and your children shall conquer the gate of your enemies." (Ibid. 60). Devorah understood the importance of first becoming great internally in order to afterwards conquer the enemies externally. Devorah witnessed how her Rivkah'le grew into a matriarch. She helped raise Ya'acov who became a patriarch in his own right – father of numerous tribes. Devorah is, therefore, most suitable to impart Rivkah's message to Ya'acov: "Don't worry about the outside. When you ensure that the children of Israel are internally great, then, you can conquer your enemies." This is the message of the Tree with its roots strongly planted in Beit E-I – the house of G-d. Sitting in judgment under this selfsame tree, Devorah, the prophetess, learns this inspirational message from Devorah, the nursemaid, which she then imparts to Barak. The message of emphasizing the internal aspect of trusting in Hashem is alluded to in the name Beit E-I, as the word 'Beit' means 'house' or 'inside,' and the word E-I means strenght, so Beit E-I literally means: "There is strength inside." Moreover, the numerical value of *בְּחוּת*/*Bachut* – 428 is the same as that of *וּבְיַתָּהּ*/*u'Beitecha* – "and your home." It also shares the same numerical value and even the exact same letters as that of the word *בְּתוּךְ*/*betoch* – inside. Women are always linked with the home (see for example *Mishnah Yoma* 1:1). Women are connected with the inner aspect, "The honor of a king' daughter is her innerness" (*Tehillim* 45:14). Therefore, women are the mistresses of the truth of how the internal aspect supersedes the external, which demonstrates the importance of strengthening ourselves in emunah and trusting in Hashem. This is the eternal motherly message transmitted from Devorah to Devorah.