

Rebuilding the House of Israel

Category: Bereishis, Vayeira

In recent years, Israel has rebuilt a two-thousand-year-old synagogue through groundbreaking technological revolutions. When Avraham arrived in Israel, he seems to have been less of a zealot than before. What is the connection between the two stories?

Technological Rededication

On Sukkos 5779 (2018), a 2,500 year-old synagogue in the Golan Heights rededicated. The Arabic name of the location is Umm el Kanatir, or “Mother of the Arches.” It is the name that Bedouin transients gave the place after finding an arch from the Roman era over a local well. The site was discovered over 120 years ago by Laurence Oliphant, a British diplomat and friend of Jews exploring the Holy Land.

This synagogue was destroyed in the great earthquake of 749, roughly 250 years after it had been built. So when Oliphant came there, he encountered a giant pile of stones. But with modern technology, Israel was able to reconstruct it by placing every stone precisely where it had been when the original building had been first constructed—something never done anywhere else in the world. They turned the place into a highly-sought-after tourist site.

This was accomplished by setting up a crane that moved on aerial tracks over the site, and the crane replaced the traditional labor by hand. All excavation work was done by the crane, which was operated remotely. Each stone was lifted gently and numbered, with some of them even being given barcodes that contained all pertinent data on them. An aerial scan made a global view of the entire site possible. It was the first time that an archaeological dig had used technologies from completely different disciplines.

Now, the original name of the village is unknown. What is known, however, is that it’s an ancient Jewish village dating back to the Talmudic Era. When Laurence Oliphant arrived in 1884, nothing gave testimony to the fact that it was a synagogue. However, once he found stones with certain engravings on them, he

guessed that it was a synagogue—and the fact that he was right was discovered only after the recent excavation.

Inside the synagogue structure, they found an ark—a stone structure that formed a closet of sorts. This closet was decorated with menorahs, a lulav, and other motifs of the Beis Hamikdash. Using this method of computerizing all the pieces, they were able to put it together like a puzzle thus reconstructing the whole ark and all the Jewish pictures that were engraved on it. The ark was also facing south, in the direction of Jerusalem. It turned out to be a synagogue in which the villagers had invested the bulk of their money, which they had not invested even in their own private homes.

Under the floor of the synagogue, the researchers uncovered some 7,000 coins of the Byzantine Period, the Era of the Talmud. The coins bore the likeness of Emperor Justinian, and the floor had been laid directly upon them. There was an ancient Jewish custom to scatter coins on the ground before laying down a floor—and the custom continues to help today's archaeologists date finds and sites.

Today, the ark on site is the oldest one in existence in the world. The government of Israel invested millions of dollars in the project, with the goal of proving to the whole world that in the ancient Golan Heights, a Jewish settlement was in existence over 1,500 years ago.

What Happened to Avraham's Passion?

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

During these weeks, we find ourselves reading and learning about Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Abraham. The great European Jewish leader Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762-1839), known as the Chasam Sofer, was a famous rabbi who lived in Hungary over 200 years ago. In his magnum opus (known as the Chasam Sofer), Rabbi Sofer asks a very interesting question:

“It bears researching why Avraham Avinu risked his life and cast it aside to shatter Nimrod's statues and stand up against him, but did not do so in the Land of Canaan which was filled with idols and where you did not have a leafy tree without idol worship at its base; we don't find that he shattered their false

gods—on the contrary, he bowed to the Children of Cheis and submitted to them!”

He is referring to the famous story that everyone knows: how young Avraham broke the idols of his father Terach and as a punishment, was thrown into a blast furnace. In other words, he fought with all his might against idol worship, right up to the point of self-sacrifice. But when the same Avraham gets to the Land of Canaan, we find that there, he has none of that combativeness!

Once he was in the Land of Israel, in fact, he was a pleasant man. When he needed to purchase a grave for his wife Sarah, we find that he bowed to the Children of Cheis—and even before that, he forges a pact with King Avimelech. We don't hear of any fanaticism, no war against idol worship, nothing! What changed?

Avraham's New Approach

Perhaps we can say that at the beginning, when Avraham began his journey to discover G-d, he could not bear that there were people who actually worshipped idols and even made a living selling them! So, he loaded up his weapons and declared war on idol worship—and was ready to give up his life for that mission.

But Avraham discovered that his war did not successfully convince even a single person to believe in G-d. Even with the mighty miracle of him emerging alive from the furnace, which should have been the strongest proof that there is a G-d, we do not find that anyone was convinced to join Avraham's new faith movement. In fact, when Avraham left Ur Kasdim, the Torah only mentions his father Terach, Lot, and his wife Sarah. No one else joined them.

And so, when Avraham got to Charan, he arrived at the conclusion that “blood, fire and pillars of smoke,” the path of zealotry and—even with miracles—did not convince anyone. He understood that he needed to try the positive approach—and that's where the change began. When Avraham left Charan, he already had a large following. The Torah tells us, “And Avram took Sarai his wife... and the souls they had made in Charan,” on which Rashi comments, “which he had brought under the wings of the Shechinah; Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women” (Bireishis 12:5).

Avraham further solidified that philosophy once he was in the Holy Land, where he established a 'hostel' with the sole purpose of teaching his customers about G-d. As Rashi says, after they would eat and drink, Avraham would tell them to bless G-d. "Do you think you ate of mine?! Your sustenance came from G-d!"

What's more, not only did he not fight with bad people but he even judged them favorably! When G-d came to Avraham and said that he planned to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham defended them, and prayed for their salvation. Not only that, but, as Rashi points out, he spoke harshly to G-d when he argued, "Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?" That is a 180-degree change, miles from his approach back in Ur Kasdim.

Don't Argue; Inspire!

So perhaps we can say that the entire "Ur Kasdim saga" is not at all mentioned in the written Torah because Avraham's techniques failed to sway anyone. The Torah only tells us what is incumbent upon us to do and how we are to act. And so the saga of Avraham begins with "Lech Lecha," "Go forth"—with a philosophy of "asei tov," of positive inspiration.

We find a slight hint to this in the words of the Rambam (Hilchos Avodah Zarah 1:3). There, in describing Avraham Avinu's life's work, the Rambam writes as follows: "At age 40, Avraham recognized his Creator; once he recognize and knew, he began to react to the people of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, saying, 'Your way is not the path of truth' and shattering the images, and starting to inform the people that it only appropriate to serve the G-d of the Universe... and it is appropriate to destroy and shatter all the images... Once he dominated them with his proofs, the king sought to execute him, and a miracle happened to him and he left for Charan, where he started standing up and calling out loudly to the entire world and informing them that there is one G-d to the entire universe and it is appropriate to serve Him; he would go forth and summon and gather the people from city to city and kingdom to kingdom until he arrived in the Land of Canaan while calling out, as the verse states, 'And he called out there in the name of G-d, L-rd of the Universe.' "

We thus have it that while Avraham was still in Ur Kasdim, he held debates with people and defeated them, but it did not help his cause—on the contrary, they

wanted to kill him. And so, when he was saved from Ur Kasdim, he understood that with debates and battles he would not succeed in convincing anyone. Rather, it would only work through love and giving, with feeding travelers and passersby—not with tough love but with kindness.

A Scolding or a Hug?

What Avraham Avinu understood was that the world that came into being after the Flood was a world that needed not a scolding but a hug.

Some 80 years ago, the Jewish world experienced a frightful earthquake. Across the entire Europe, wherever Jews were to be found, the ground shook beneath their feet. Everything collapsed. After the Holocaust, the Jewish People looked like little more than a pile of shattered stones. Survivors walked around like living dead people, and even those who hadn't experienced the Holocaust despaired of the Jewish future.

But it was in those times that the Rebbe was appointed as leader of Chabad, and he took upon himself the mission of building anew the House of Israel, the ancient structure that had fallen apart. The Rebbe taught us all that to rebuild this Jewish house, we must scan every stone one by one—putting them together exactly where they belong. And that is accomplished not with outcries and protests or with breaking things or debates and proofs but rather with love; out of a deep faith that every rock, no matter what size, is a part of the House of Israel. And if one stone is missing, then there is something missing in the entire house.

And with that approach, we will succeed in restoring and rebuilding the House of Israel, our people.

Good Shabbos!