

Solid as a Jewish Rock

Category: Bereishis, Vayetzei

When the PLO settled in Tunis, Israel tried to evacuate the local Jews, but discovered a surprising force battling them. Who won, and why?

The Anti-immigration Force

In 1982, when Israel went to war against Lebanon, the mission was to destroy the PLO terror camps in the south of the country. And indeed, the IDF succeeded in its mission, and Yasser Arafat was forced to abandon Lebanon and take up exile in Tunisia.

Now, in Tunisia, there is a Jewish community that has been in existence for 2,000 years. At the time Arafat arrived, the community numbered 5,000 souls.

The Israeli government was concerned that as a result of the PLO setting up its headquarters in Tunis, the capital city, there was a new danger to the local Jewish community—which made it urgent to evacuate the entire community and relocate them to Israel.

So the State of Israel sent secret messengers to try to start a movement among the Tunisian Jewish community that would convince them to make aliyah, to move, to Israel.

But they quickly discovered that there was a certain force within the community that was telling them not to leave but just the opposite—to continue Jewish life in Tunis. This force was Rabbi Nissan Pinson, the shliach of the Lubavitcher Rebbe to Tunis. And the Israeli messengers came to understand that Rabbi Pinson was not saying these things of his own accord but rather, that they came from the Rebbe himself.

So, the Israeli government decided to send a fancy diplomat to meet with the Rebbe in New York to explain to him the seriousness of the situation and to convince him to encourage the Tunisian Jews to flee Tunis and move to the Holy Land.

That representative was none other than Ephraim Halevi, who was the head of the Mossad, Israel's spy agency, at the time.

Mr. Halevi later said that he indeed had visited New York and met with the Rebbe. At the very start of the meeting, the Rebbe told Halevi that he had been the one who had told Rabbi Pinson that the Jews should stay in Tunisia. The Rebbe told him that he had gathered information on the situation in Tunis from various sources in the American government and many other various sources, and that he had arrived at the conclusion that there was no danger facing the Jewish community in Tunis.

The Rebbe argued that if a Jew wanted to move to Israel, that's fine and good—but it is forbidden to uproot a Jewish community: anyplace in the world where there is a Jewish community, one needs to try to continue it and preserve it as much as possible.

While the State of Israel believes that every Jew's place is in the Land of Israel, the Rebbe believed that anywhere in the world can be a Jew's place, not just the Land of Israel.

The irony is that several years later, the Israeli government itself brought Arafat and the PLO to Israel, while the Tunisian Jewish community remains in existence to this very day.

Setting Stones

In this week's Torah portion, we learn about Yaakov Avinu, our Patriarch Jacob.

In the beginning of the Parshah, Yaakov leaves Beer Sheva and travels to Charan, which today is in southern Turkey or northern Syria. Along the way, he encountered Mt. Moria, where he had to spend the night.

The Torah tells us that "he took several local stones" and arranged them in a circle around his head when he lay down to sleep on the ground. He then fell asleep.

While sleeping, he had a dream in which G-d revealed Himself to him and promised him, "I will protect you wherever you go, and I will return you the soil I swore to your forefathers." In short, Yaakov got a life insurance policy from G-d

himself.

In the morning, Yaakov got up “and took the stone... and set it as a monument and poured oil on its head.” The Torah then tells us, “Yaakov swore a vow, saying... ‘and this stone which I set as a monument shall be a house of G-d.’”

Immediately after this, the Torah tells us that Yaakov arrived in Charan where he met Rochel, his future wife, at a village well. And here again, the whole story revolves around a rock. There was a huge boulder on the mouth of the well which all the shepherds would remove together after they assembled together at the well to water their flocks.

The Torah tells us that when Yaakov saw Rochel, “Yaakov approached and rolled the rock from the mouth of the well”—he personally removed the boulder with his own two hands.

And the same thing occurs at the end of the Parshah, after 22 years in Lavan’s house. Yaakov decides it’s time to go back home to the Land of Israel. By that time, he already had four wives and 11 kids. He had already tried several times to return to the land of his fathers, but Lavan kept on stopping him—so now, he decided he needed to take action. He fled.

And so, on one fine sunny day, the Torah tells us that “he fled with all he had.” However, right after that, “it was told to Lavan that Yaakov fled”—and so Lavan immediately ran after him and caught up to him.

But the night before Lavan caught up to Yaakov, G-d came to Lavan in a dream and warned him, “Watch yourself from speaking to Yaakov either good or evil.”

And indeed, Lavan and Yaakov met the next morning, and Lavan said, “I had wanted to hurt you but the G-d of your fathers warned me not to touch you—so let’s make a peace treaty.”

Yaakov told his brethren, ‘Gather stones,’ and they gathered stones and made a mound,” and this mound was to serve as a witness of sorts, as testimony, as proof, that a treaty had been made between Yaakov and Lavan.

It seems that Yaakov has some kind of obsession with rocks. The Parshah starts with rocks. We then find Yaakov removing a boulder from a well. And at the end of the Parshah, again we find Yaakov dealing with rocks. What exactly is going on

here? What is this supposed to symbolize?

To explain, let's zoom out and look at the lives of all three Avos, the Patriarchs.

Three Views of the Temple Mount

One of the many things the Avos had in common was that they all prayed on the Temple Mount at one point in their lives. As Rashi comments on the Talmud, Tractate Pesachim page 88a: "Mt. Moria for Avraham, 'the field' for Yitzchak and Bais Kel for Yaakov [were all really the Temple Mount]—they all prayed on the Temple Mount."

When was Avraham on the Temple Mount? When he went there for the Binding of Yitzchak. When was Yitzchak there? When he went out to pray at the time that Rivkah was arriving from Charan. And when was Yaakov there? When he dreamt his famous dream.

Along comes the Talmud (Tractate Pesachim 98a) and points out something interesting: each one of the three Avos called the Temple Mount something else. Avraham called it "mountain" as the verse states, "which was said today on Mt. G-d-Will-Show." Yitzchak called it "field" as the verse states, "and Yitzchak went out to stroll in the field." And Yaakov called this place "house," as the verse states, "and he called the name of that place 'House of G-d.'"

What does all this mean? It means that Avraham and Yitzchak saw the Temple Mount as something temporary, transient, and time-based. Avraham and Yitzchak were nomadic. They moved from place to place, pitched their tent for a short time and then moved on. Yaakov, on the other hand, would put down stones wherever he went. He would gather stones and build something permanent, enduring and true—something that would show that he was not going to be wandering from place to place. That's why he called Mt. Moria "the House of G-d."

Wherever Yaakov went, he immediately put down stones. In other words, he immediately established facts—he immediately turned the place into a Jewish place. Yaakov believed that wherever a Jew ends up, it's because G-d sent him there, and the reason G-d sent him there was to establish an eternal edifice, an ever-lasting house. And that's why Yaakov set up stones wherever he went—because a stone is something that doesn't move. It symbolizes truth and

endurance.

What ultimately happened with the PLO and the Tunisian Jewish community? As mentioned, the PLO abandoned Tunis together with Arafat—but the Jewish community of Tunis remains there to this day.