

Parshat Vayeitzei
Where there's a Will, There's a...Mountain?
Rabbanit Yael Smooha - Class of 2020

Lately, I've been really missing summer. The shorter days, the bare trees, the gloomy gray, all stand in sharp contrast to the carefree lightness of summer, which seems like a distant memory. This week, however, I found some winter comfort in the parsha, in our weekly Sfat Emes class taught by Rabbi Erin Leib Smokler.

Our first verses describe Yaakov's journey from home, and his first stop as the sky darkens:

וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּעַר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּלֶךְ חֲרָנָה:: וַיִּפְגַּע בְּמָקוֹם וַיֵּלֶן שָׁם כִּי-בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ...

Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon the place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set...

Rashi comments that “the place” is none other than Mount Moriah, where Avraham bound up Yitzchak. He infers this from the fact that the same language is used to describe Mount Moriah in that story - “and he [Avraham] saw *the place* from afar”. Mount Moriah is synonymous with the Temple Mount.

The word וַיִּפְגַּע - he came upon - is a strange choice to describe Yaakov's first stop on his journey. וַיִּפְגַּע could be read as “he ran into”, “he bumped into”. There is a suddenness to Yaakov's finding of “a certain place” - almost an unexpected collision, as it were, of traveler and land.

Rashi explains that this “coming upon” is a reference to Yaakov's institution of the Arvit prayer, the prayer traditionally said at night. He adds:

וְשָׁנָה הַכְּתוּב וְלֹא כָתוּב וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל, לְלַמְדֵךְ שֶׁקִּפְצָה לוֹ הָאָרֶץ

The Torah deliberately chose different language [to describe this prayer] and did not write “And he prayed” [but rather “he came upon”], in order to teach you that the land “jumped” before him.

A few verses later, Rashi describes this “jumping” more specifically:

...אָנִי אוֹמֵר שֶׁנִּעְקַר הַר הַמִּזְבֵּיחַ וּבָא לְכָאן, וְזוֹ הִיא קִפְצַת הָאָרֶץ הָאֲמוּרָה בְּשַׁחֲסִיטַת חֲלִין, שֶׁבָּא בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לְקִרְאָתוֹ עַד בֵּית אֵל, וְזֶהוּ וַיִּפְגַּע בְּמָקוֹם...

I say that Mount Moriah uprooted itself and came here...that the Holy Temple came towards him [Yaakov] at Beth El, and this is what is meant by “he came upon the place”

I remember learning the midrash as a teen about the land miraculously “jumping”, “folding”, “shrinking” - I personally imagined an accordion-like action happening here - so that Yaakov would reach Mount Moriah way ahead of schedule. (And I often dream about this notion when stuck in heavy traffic.)

But what does Yaakov's institution of Arvit have to do with the magical folding of earth?

The Sfat Emet offers a beautiful interpretation of this Rashi.

...אך בודאי כפי רצון האדם יכול לעורר קדושת השי"ת בכל מקום. וז"ש רש"י נעקר הר המוריה ובא לכאן פי' כיון שהי' ליעקב אע"ה רצון גדול לבוא להר המורי'. אף כי מקום הזה הי' מרוחק מאוד קפץ הר המורי' לכאן.

The will of a person is undoubtedly capable of arousing the holiness of Hashem anywhere. And so when Rashi states that Mount Moriah uprooted itself and came here [to Yaacov] - that's because Yaakov had a great desire to come to Mount Moriah [think: the place of the Holy Temple], and so even though this place [Beth El] was very distant, Mount Moriah jumped right over.

וזהו עצמו פי' תפלת ערבית כי בודאי בעת חושך אין מקום להתגלות האור רק ע"י רצון האדם ...

And this is the very essence of the prayer of Arvit. For certainly at a time of darkness there is no space for revelation of light except through the will of man..

וז"ש ללמדך שקפצה כו' שיש מזה לימוד לכל איש ישראל שידע שאין לך מקום שלא יוכל להרגיש הארה הפנימיות ע"י יגיעה של אמת כנ"ל:

And this is what Rashi meant when he said "to teach us that the land jumped, etc." for this is a teaching for every Jew to know that, with true effort, there is no place that he cannot feel [his own] internal illumination:

Sfat Emet boldly claims that the power of spiritual longing can literally and figuratively move mountains. Even in the darkest of places and times, our own inner spark is there, waiting for us to uncover its beauty. The only caveat: it takes hard work.

Dark times demand human effort. Just as the night requires of us to light a fire, so too must we be spiritually proactive in order to sustain ourselves in times of darkness. And that spiritual sustenance emanates from our spiritual will, which we must dig hard at times to unearth. Once we do, our spiritual wills summon our personal Mount Moriahs right to our doorstep.



Rabbanit Yael Smooha came to Maharat after nearly two decades of teaching in both Jewish Day Schools and NYC public schools, and receiving an MA in Childhood Education from Teachers College, Columbia University. Yael's passion for deepening Jewish spirituality drives her to facilitate meaningful connections among her students through personal reflection, discussion, and artistic expression, as Director of the Jspace Family Hebrew School program at the Bayit, as intern at the Mt. Freedom Jewish Center in Randolph, NJ, and currently as a middle school educator at Kinneret Day School in Riverdale, NY.