

19 He named that place Beis El, though originally the name of the town was Luz.

יט וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים קְרֵב לְפָנָיךְ בֵּית־אֱלֹהִים וְאַוְלֵם לְזַעַר שְׁמַד־הַצְּעִיר לְרָאשָׂנָה:

20 Ya'akov made a vow as follows: If God will be with me and keep me on this path on which I am going, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear;

כ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה נָתַר לְאָמֵר אֶל־יַעֲקֹב אֱלֹהִים עַמְּךָ וְשָׁמְרָנִי בְּדַרְךָ הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי הַזֶּה וְגַתְזִנְתִּי לִפְנֵם לְאָכֵל וּבְגַד לְלִבְשָׁן:

21 And I return in peace to my father's house — then God will be God to me.

כא וַיֹּשֶׁבֶת יְהוָה בְּשָׁלוֹם אֶל־בֵּית אָבִי וְהַנֵּה יְהוָה לִי לְאֱלֹהִים:

of the Sanctuary: Just as oil does not mix with other liquids, the anointed object is set apart from, and raised above, the others. Or he poured oil upon it in the sense of a *libation*. Just as, later, wine was poured out, signifying that all joy comes from God and remains dedicated to Him (תירוז שמי המשחה אלקים ואנשיהם [Shoftim 9:13]); and just as water was poured out, signifying that not only what a person is granted in an exceptional manner, but every drop of water is a gift of Divine providence, connecting him with God; here, too, Ya'akov poured oil — symbol of health and peace [Tehillim 104:15]) — expressing the hope that *preservation and well-being* would be granted to him by God, and that these, too, being God's gift, would be consecrated to Him.

19 Whereas God chose this place and made it a starting point for the salvation of the entire human race, beforehand nothing of note had been noticed in this place, and the city had been named after a hazelnut tree: "the city of Hazelnut."

20–21 נָתַר is related to נָתַר: to jump, not vertically, upward, but horizontally, from one place to another; to move to another place by skipping over the intervening space.

נָדַר is related also to נָטַר, which not only denotes “keeping” and “hiding,” but is also the root of the noun מְטוֹרָה (target, goal), which is a point or place — מ — that one is נוֹטֵר in one’s mind, a point at which one looks from a distance. וְלَا תָטֶר אֶת בְּנֵי עַמָּךְ (Vayikra 19:18): “Do not mark in your mind as a target to be hit any one of the members of your people.” Do not say to yourself, “The time will come when I will strike back at him.”

Now, just as נָהַר denotes moving physically to a distant place by skipping over the intervening space, and just as נָטַר denotes moving mentally toward a still distant target, so, too, every *projects* himself into the future, *to a point in time* that has not yet arrived, and decides what will be done at that point in time. (Cf. the Rabbinic expressions “קִפְצָן וְנַדְרָן,” “קִפְצָן וְנַשְׁבָּע.”)

Precisely for this reason — because he *anticipates* the clouded, unknowable future — the נוֹדֵר is called a *sinner* (see *Nedarim* 22a). It is hard enough to correctly appraise the present moment and faithfully discharge one’s duty. Positive duties and good deeds that will devolve upon us in the future, we will have to do in any case, even without undertaking them as a vow; and we will be prohibited from doing wrong, even if we have vowed to do it. Vows, then, are superfluous as regards anything good or bad. Only insignificant matters remain as the subject of vows, but it would be more than foolish to elevate an insignificant matter to the level of a solemn duty, especially for the unknown future.

Only in exceptional cases, — where, as here, the future is not anticipated, but, on the contrary, the present moment is so significant that it is made the foundation and basis of life in the future — only in such cases is vowing permitted and even considered a mitzvah (see *Bereshis Rabbah* 70:1).

The word עם is problematic. Whereas עם (from the root עִמָּם) denotes just being with, keeping parallel, עמד (from the root עִמָּד) denotes a closer association, in which the one remains standing through the power of the other. It is striking, however, that this preposition occurs only in first person singular.

וְשִׁמְרָנִי וְגֹוי. Unlike בָּרוּךְ הִי וַיִּשְׁמַרְךָ [Bemidbar 6:24]), here the prayer for כהנים (preservation) precedes the prayer for בָּרָכה (food and clothing, basic sustenance and social standing). This **שִׁמְרָה**, then, cannot

refer to material possessions, which he did not yet possess, but, rather, refers to the spiritual and moral assets he bore in himself. Indeed, these assets were endangered, *בדרכו*, “on this path” on which he was going, precisely because he was penniless and empty-handed. To explain:

Ever since the gates of Paradise were closed, the establishment of an independent household involves so many difficulties, hinges on circumstances and situations so complex, that a person needs special help from God so as not to forfeit the whole of his better self in gaining that piece of bread. Who can count the people who were morally pure before they set out on “the path to bread and clothing,” but who subsequently, for the sake of making a living and attaining social status, denied God, spurned morality, were inconsiderate of their neighbor and of his human dignity, and so on. Not for naught do our Sages say that “this path” alludes to *לשון הרע, שפיכות דמים, גילוי עריות, עבודה זרה* (see *Bereshis Rabbah* 70:4).

Thus far, Ya'akov has been a *יושב אהלים*, but now he is setting out to seek a wife and sustenance for his wife and children. The dangers involved seem to him so grave that *first* he prays for the preservation of his character, that he not forfeit his spiritual and moral integrity.

Integrity is the first thing that the ancestral Jew wishes for himself as he sets out to establish his home. Only then does he request: *ונתן לי וגו'* — “to me” — i.e., an *independent* livelihood, food and clothing, so as to live respectably in society; in short: *sustenance and social position*. The third wish, which lives, and should live, in the heart of every Jew, is for *שלום, peace*, and finally *אב בית אב, family ties* that remain intact.

If God grants me these, *והיה ה' לי לאלקים*. This, too, is an ideal, which henceforth is to be realized, and which the final *גאולה* will look back upon.

When God preserves and blesses a person in the struggle for existence, He reveals Himself as *ה*, in His *מדת הרחמים*, and there is no one who would not wish for such treatment from God. But only the Jew says: *והיה ה' לי לאלקים*, meaning: God, Who showered upon me the bounty of His love and goodness, will be to me a God Who not only *gives and bestows*, but also demands *that His Will be done with all that bounty*. To accept upon yourself the *yoke of the Lawgiver's kingship*, and not just thank Him for His munificent blessings; to *direct* all the inclinations of your heart, and to *use* every penny that you own, only in accordance with God's Will — *that* is the meaning of *ה' לי לאלקים*. Thus God says

כִּי וְהָאָבוֹן הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר־שְׁמַתִּי
 מִגְּבָה יְהִיָּה בֵּית אֱלֹהִים וְכָל־
 אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנַדְּלֵי עַשְׂרֵה אֻשְׁלָגָנוּ לְךָ:
 שני

to Ya'akov's redeemed descendants: I have redeemed you (Bemidbar 15:41) — i.e., so that *you should live and refine, in accordance with My Will, the lives you have now regained.*

22 “And this stone — which I have set up to commemorate this moment, when I stood, poor and destitute, at the crossroads, looking forward to a future blessed by God — will be a house of God,” in which life is devoted to God and pervaded by His Presence.

Only if **הָאֱלֹקִים** to man can man's house become a house of God. The crooked and perverse generations, which pride themselves in their temples of God, will pervert this truth, too. They will build, as the prophet puts it, **אֶת־סְפִּים אַחֲת־סְפִּי**, “their threshold next to My threshold” (*Yechezkel 43:8*), their house *next to* My House — everything in its own separate domain. “God, too, is to have a House,” they say, “but let not our house be His House! We will visit God in His House, but He must not enter our house; His Presence and His demands would only inconvenience us!”

That is not what Ya'akov says of the foundation stone of the first “house of God”! The sanctity of the homes is the necessary condition for the sanctity of God's House, which is called “**מִקְדָּשׁ**” not because it is the place to which **קדושה** is relegated, but because it is the center from which **קדושה** is to flow out and penetrate the human realm and human relations. **וְעַשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ**, Scripture says of the personal and national life that Ya'akov's descendants are to build on the foundation of this stone; (*Shemos 25:8*); (*Vayikra 26:12*). Even of army camps in wartime, it says: **הָאֱלֹקִים מִתְהַלֵּךְ בְּקָרְבֵּן מִתְחַנֵּךְ** (*Devarim 23:15*). And finally, on the strength of this stone, **וְהַיָּה פָּלָסִיר בֵּירוּשָׁלָם וּבֵיהוּדָה קָדֵשׁ לְהָ**, “All the cooking vessels in Yerushalayim and Yehudah will be holy unto God” (*Zechariah 14:21*).

כט וַיֵּשֶׁא יַעֲקֹב רָגְלָיו וַיָּלֹךְ אָרֶץ בְּנֵי קָדָם:

29 1 Ya'akov lifted up his feet, and set out for the land of the people of the east.

Before his death, Ya'akov will look to this stone, and regard it as the cornerstone and foundation of Israel: **משם רעה אָבִן יִשְׂרָאֵל** (below, 49:24); that is to say, like a shepherd, God will protect this stone and realize its ultimate purpose.

Perhaps of this stone it says (*Zecharyah* 3:9): **עַל־אָבִן אַחַת שְׁבֻעָה עֵינִים**, “a single stone [is watched] over by seven eyes,” i.e., it will be protected by the manifold ways of Divine providence. It is the **אָבִן הַרְאֵשָׁה** (ibid. 4:7), the cornerstone of the First Temple, which was to be laid anew with the building of the Second Temple, and **חַנּוּ לְהָ** (ibid.), the ultimate completion of the final edifice is assured.

Of this stone it also says in chap. 35: **עֲשֵׂה אֶת־סְנִיף פְּרָקִי דֶּרֶי אַלְיעָזֶר לְאָרֶץ**; for the whole future destiny of the world is based on this stone, on which man will build the “human house unto God.” It is the **אָבִן שְׁתִיחָה**, the foundation — and founding — stone. (See **קָרְבָּן**, **שְׁרָשִׁים**, **רְדֵקָה**, root **שָׁוֹת**.”)

עֲשֵׂר אַעֲשְׂרָנוּ לְךָ. See Commentary above, 14:20.

CHAPTER 29

- 1 He was a different person now. Instead of saying “**וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב**,” it now says “Ya'akov lifted up his feet.” A person is not led by his feet, the body does not lift the spirit; rather, the person lifts up his feet, the living soul in the person lifts and bears his body. With such an attitude, Ya'akov goes forth to meet his future. With nothing but the staff in his hand, he is full of confidence and joy.

בְּנֵי קָדָם. See Commentary above, 25:6. The lands of the east differed — in culture and morality — from the lands of the west. Ya'akov discovered this very quickly.