

# **SHECHEM: A FORESHADOWING OF THE FUTURE AND A METAPHOR**

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There is an old Hebrew adage that says "All that occurred to the Patriarchs is a foreshadow of what will happen to their descendants." One who peruses the Bible comes across some apparent superfluous detail. When one delves into the reason for the detail, one may find hidden messages that are essential in gaining a proper understanding of the lessons of the Bible.

Genesis 12:6 states that *Abram passed into the land as far as the site of Shechem, until the plain of Moreh, and the Canaanite was then in the land.* Later on, Genesis 33:18 states: *Jacob arrived in peace [or whole] at the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, upon his arriving from Paddan-Aram, and he encamped before the city.* One should inquire: Why does the Bible record that both Abram and Jacob made their entrance into Canaan by way of the city of Shechem? In ascertaining the hidden message, we learn how the actions and occurrences in the lives of the Patriarchs foreshadow those of their descendants. This is part of the insightful wisdom of the Bible.

To answer the question above, one can start with the basic Jewish commentators on the Scripture. Rashi comments on Genesis 12:6 that Abram entered the city to pray for the sons of Jacob when the time would come for them to wage war against Shechem (Gen. 34). The *Siftei Chachamim*, a supra-commentary on Rashi, notes that although the verse says that Abram "passed" the city, in Scripture this word occasionally can have a dual meaning of "entered." This leads to a basic understanding of the necessity of Scripture's recording the entrance via "Shechem" from Abram's perspective looking forward to Jacob's entrance. Abram foresaw that when Jacob entered Canaan through Shechem, his daughter Dinah would be captured and raped, causing Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi to take vengeance on Shechem.

Nahmanides [Ramban] in his commentary asks: "What is the significance of Abraham's various stations upon his 'arrival' in the land of Canaan, that the Bible saw fit to record them in detail?"<sup>1</sup> Although content with Rashi's

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explanation, Nahmanides asserts that whenever the Scripture records an incident that occurred in the lives of the Patriarchs, the event foreshadows some parallel event that would affect the Israelites in the future. He answers that Shechem was destined to be the first place that Israelites would visit upon entering the land, before they could begin their siege of Jericho. Indeed, this was a replay of an event in Abraham's life, for he himself first approached Shechem when he entered Canaan for the first time. Not only did the Israelites visit Shechem before attacking any of the local population, but also on the very day that they crossed the Jordan and entered Canaan, they went directly to Mount Abel and Mount Gerizim in the district of Shechem. The account of this layover of the Israelites is documented in the Talmud, when Rabbi Simeon states: "Come and see how many miracles happened on the day the Israelites crossed the Jordan and came to Mount Abel and Mount Gerizim" (Sotah 36b).

By understanding the nature of Shechem, one can appreciate why Abraham, Jacob, and eventually the Israelites needed to begin their dwelling in the land of Canaan at precisely this location. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon<sup>2</sup> gives one of the meanings of the word "*shechem* [shoulder]" as "responsibility of rule," as in *and the government is upon his shoulder* (Isa. 9:5), and *the key to the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder* (22:22). Each person in the city of Shechem wanted his own portion in life to be significant in itself, and not just part of a larger entity. It was a place which influenced its dwellers and those who came through it to feel that they themselves were important and wealthy. A person who misuses this characteristic becomes completely self-oriented. He ends up clinging to his aims, despite the opposition of his society and even his God, and becomes an arrogant person.

Samson Raphael Hirsch comments that Scripture says *until the place of Shechem*, for it did not gain a glorious reputation.<sup>3</sup> Hirsch quotes the Talmud that describes Shechem as a place where various punishments were meted out (Sanhedrin 102a). "It is a place where affliction ripens in Shechem for the sin of Dinah's rape: the sale of Joseph and the schism of David's Kingdom." The sages of the Talmud are not simply placing it in Canaan but rather telling us something important about its nature, based on another understanding of the term *shechem* as "bearing burden" derived from "shoulder," as in *and he*

*bowed his shoulder to bear* (Gen. 49:15), and *his burden shall depart from off thy shoulder* (Isa. 10:27; 14:25).

Shechem is just as holy as every other part of Canaan. It was given as a gift by Jacob to Joseph, the son closest to him, and Joseph was buried there. It was in Shechem where Jacob sent Joseph to inquire how his brothers and their flocks were faring. Each of three events which occurred in Shechem: the rape of Dinah, a stage in the sale of Joseph, and the splitting of David's kingdom were cases of one group trying to control or gain influence over another.

Despite the potentially destructive nature of the Shechem character trait, every person needs a little of it to succeed. It is actually the source of the drive to achieve something in the face of adversity. One needs to feel strong and independent to commence any activity. Of course, this feeling of personal empowerment and independence must be controlled to avoid going to the opposite extreme, as happened in the cases of these three sins. This is stressed in the connotation of *shechem* as "responsibility" of rule.

One can now understand why the Israelites needed to begin in Canaan with a layover at Shechem. Coming from the desert, the entry to the land and the capture of the cities was the greatest venture they would ever undertake. Although God was with them at every step, it was extremely daunting and probably terrifying to take a new and unfamiliar land. They needed a tremendous boost of strength and confidence to launch their task in the correct frame of mind. This, of course, was the power of Shechem. As they began their conquest of Canaan, they stopped there, which gave them the boost of confidence they surely needed at that historic moment.

The Israelites were able to avoid falling into the trap of arrogance and unreasonable self-fulfillment in view of the very nature and actions of the Patriarchs so many years before the Conquest. Both Abraham and Jacob, who first visited Shechem when they entered Canaan, were models of modesty. Abraham said: '*I am but dust and ashes*' (Gen. 18:27). Jacob's very name *Yaakov* comes from the Hebrew word "*ekev* [heel]," the lowest part of the body. Furthermore, in the introduction to *Seforno*<sup>4</sup> (a commentary written to bring out the moral meaning of Scripture) the author writes: "The sages call Genesis the "Book of Righteousness" because the Patriarchs were tolerant men as a result of their modesty." They were masters at using the Shechem

element when necessary, but still retained a proper prospective on life and their own worth. We can be sure they passed on this ability to their descendants, the Israelites as a whole, who were able to derive inspiration from Shechem as they entered the land without losing the balance between self-confidence and arrogance.

The Dubner Maggid says:

All this detail is to show us the chain reaction from generation to generation. As soon as Abraham arrived in Canaan, he went to Shechem. Jacob too, when he returned from Haran, immediately went there with his family to teach them the moral value of Shechem. So in Joshua's time it was inherent in the Israelites on the day that they crossed the Jordan to recite the blessings and curses of Mount Abel and Mount Gerizim, at Shechem.<sup>5</sup>

Uziel Milevsky<sup>6</sup> indicates that Abraham foresaw specific events that would one day take place at Shechem. He therefore stopped to offer sacrifices to God and pray on behalf of the Israelites. This is referring to the incident of Shechem the prince raping Dinah, and then holding her captive. Levi and Simeon decided to take matters into their own hands and slew all its male inhabitants, rescuing their sister (Genesis 34).

Milevsky points out why of all the future events which would take place in Israelite history, Abraham focused on this particular episode and chose this moment to pray for the Israelites. It is a landmark in Israelite history, but compared to the total picture that has been discussed, it was certainly not the most important event of the era.

Throughout the 40-year journey in the desert recorded in the Bible, each Israelite maintained a personal, independent relationship with God through many miracles, such as the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, God's presence on Mount Sinai, receiving manna, water flowing from rock, and victory in war with mighty nations. Life in the desert was a transcendent experience that allowed for a transcendent relationship with God. Each Israelite experienced God independently. Upon entering Canaan, however, the great miracles ceased altogether. God said their spiritual and physical survival would depend on unity. Indeed, another meaning of "*shechem*" is "unity," as the verse *to serve Him [with] one shoulder [as one man]* (Zeph, 3:9). The episode involving Simeon and Levi shows this lack of unity. Though they were

motivated by worthy intentions, their actions demonstrated a reckless independence. It was by way of Shechem that Joseph went to meet his brothers who sold him into slavery, another strong example of disunity among the Israelites.

Abraham, foreseeing this problem, tried desperately to reinforce the trait of unity among his descendants before disunity could take root. When he foresaw the events that were to take place in Shechem, he prayed to God to minimize the spiritual fall-out that would be released by the behavior of Simeon and Levi. As the Book of Joshua progresses, one can see how the Israelites were able through unity to face the task at hand and drive out all seven nations of Canaan and dwell in their own Promised Land, so-called because God promised it to Abraham as a homeland for his descendants. God gave this land to the Israelites on Abraham's behalf, for the deeds of the Patriarch foretold that they would merit it.

From a careful reading of the text, one can derive literature's profound implication. The benefit that is reached is the awareness of the "universal truth" that Shechem is a metaphor for the good and evil strengths that exist in a person. It all depends on how a person utilizes his strengths: for unity or disunity, both found in the term *shechem*. Each individual is endowed with remarkable qualities and personal intuition given to him by God. We must be able to identify what these strengths are, and utilize them for good.

#### NOTES

1. *Commentary on the Torah/ Ramban (Nachmanides)*, translated and annotated with index by Charles Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1976).
2. F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003).
3. *The Pentateuch*, translated and explained by Samson Raphael Hirsch; rendered into English by Isaac Levy (Gateshead, England: Judaica Press, 1973)
4. *Seforno, Torat Chaim Chumash* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986).
5. Benno Heinemann, *The Maggid of Dubno and His Parables*, 4th ed. (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1978).
6. Uziel Milevsky, *Ner Uziel: Perspectives on the Parashah* (Southfield MI: Targum Press, 2002).