

The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

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Parashat Vayishlach

How do We Know that our Current Site of Kever Rachel is the Real Tomb of Rachel?

What Enabled the Tomb of Rachel to Remain in Jewish Hands?

Kever Rachel (the Tomb of Rachel) is one of my favorite holy places to pray. We are blessed to live so close to Kever Rachel, a barely 25-minute ride from Bat Ayin (without traffic). When I went for fertility treatments 29 years ago, I prayed there almost every day. This was during those old brave days of my youth before we had a bypass road. I would drive to Kever Rachel, pass ‘the refugee camp’ of Dehesa, and then drive a bit more toward Jerusalem, park my car on the roadside, and enter the holy atmosphere of Rachel’s tomb. There I would pour out my soul in the merit of Mama Rachel and cry from the deepest part of my heart to be blessed with the fruits of my womb. I learned to supplement my prayer with actions from Ya’acov, when he prepared to face Esav who didn’t behave like his brother. When going through challenges, we need to use three different methods, like Ya’acov who prayed to Hashem, sent a gift, and prepared for war (Rashi, *Bereishit* 32:9). While I kept praying strongly, I saw many Rabbis for blessings, gave *tzedakah* (gift), and went through the most sophisticated fertility treatments (war). Thank G-d, Hashem responded favorably to my *histadlut* (efforts) and answered my prayer with a beautiful baby boy. Since then, I keep praying at Kever Rachel whenever I can. It was there I prayed for a wife for my son and thank G-d! Hashem once again answered my prayer. Following the violence of the first Intifada involving numerous attacks by the so-called ‘Palestinians’ against Israeli civilians and security forces, Beit-Lechem was given to the Palestinian Authority, though Israel retained control of Rachel’s gravesite. Thus, Kever Rachel became the main connecting point between Gush Etzion and Jerusalem, linking Judea with Yerushalayim. I recall that at a certain point, Israel was on the verge of handing over the Tomb of Rachel to the PA as it was thought to be too dangerous a place to keep secure. Thankfully we, the women of Gush Etzion didn’t let that happen. We mobilized ourselves and divided the week with each community of Gush women filling private buses to pray at Kever Rachel on a different weekday. This put pressure on the government to keep the Tomb of Rachel in Jewish hands. Thus in 1996 (incidentally, the year my son was born), Israel’s Ministry of Religion built a fortress around the tiny Kever Rachel structure, to secure it with two guard towers, three-foot thick concrete walls, and barbed wire. The construction effort endured Arab rioters and gunmen. While the new building differs greatly from the old romantic look of Kever Rachel that you can find in old paintings and photos, I am so grateful to have witnessed how Hashem responded favorably to women’s dedication to one of the important holy sites in the Land of Israel.

How can the Tomb of Rachel be Both in Beit-Lechem and in Binyamin’s Portion?

ספר בראשית פרק לה פסוק טז ויסעו מבית אל והיה עוד כבֵּרֶת הָאֶרֶץ לְבוֹא אֶפְרָתָה וְתֵלֵד רָחֵל וְתִקַּשׁ בְּלִדְתָּהּ: (יז) וְהָיָה בְּהִקְשָׁתָהּ בְּלִדְתָּהּ וְתֹאמַר לָהּ הַמִּיֻּלְּדֵת אֵל תִּירְאִי כִּי גַם זֶה לְךָ בֵּן: (יח) וְהָיָה בְּצִאת נַפְשָׁהּ כִּי יָמְתָה וְתִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בֶן אוֹנִי וְאָבִיו קָרָא לוֹ בְּנֵימִין: (יט) וְיָמָת רָחֵל וְתִקְבַּר בְּדֶרֶךְ אֶפְרָתָה הוּא בֵּית לְחָם:

“They journeyed from Beit El, and there was still some distance to come to Efrat, then Rachel gave birth, and her labor was difficult. It came to pass when she had such difficulty giving birth, that the midwife said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, for this one, too, is a son for you.’ It came to pass when her soul departed for she died that she named him Ben-oni, but his father called him Binyamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the road to Efrat, which is Beit-Lechem” (*Bereishit* 35:16-19).

The Torah indicates that Rachel was buried in Beit-Lechem on the road to Efrat, and that this is the place of Rachel’s tomb to this day. While I definitely sense the holiness of Kever Rachel, I always had a hard time

reconciling its present-day location with the Midrash quoted by Rashi, that Ya'acov buried Rachel on the road rather than entering her to the city of Beit-Lechem due to the divine command so that she would be of assistance to her children when they were exiled to Babylonian. They would then pass by Rachel's Tomb, and she would emerge from her grave and weep and beg mercy for them, as it is said: "A voice is heard on high [in Ramah], lamentation, bitter weeping, Rachel is weeping for her children" (Based on Rashi, *Bereishit* 48:7). When looking at a map it just doesn't make sense that the Jewish exiles would go down to Beit-Lechem in the South, on their way to Babylon Northeast of Israel. Furthermore, Rabbi Meir states, [Rachel] died in her son's territory (i.e. *Eretz Binyamin*) (*Sifri Beracha* 11, also quoted by Ramban, *Bereishit* 48:7). Yet, the Tanach teaches us that the Land of Binyamin is north of Jerusalem, whereas Beit-Lechem is south of Jerusalem in Yehuda's portion (See *Yehoshua* 18:16; *Megillat Ruth* 1:1). Moreover, when Shaul came to the prophet Shemuel in Rama, he seems to be indicating to Shaul that Kever Rachel is a skip and a hop from Shemuel's abode located at the edge of Binyamin's land:

"When you leave me today, you will find two men by Rachel's tomb, on the border of Binyamin and Zelzah. They will tell you, the donkeys which you went to seek were found. And your father has ceased to care about the donkeys, and has become anxious about you, saying, what shall I do about my son? Then shall you go on forward from there, and you shall come to Elon Tavor, and there you shall be found by three men going up to G-d to Beit-El... (I *Shemuel* 10:2-3).

The words of the prophet when describing Rachel's crying for her children is another support that Rachel's tomb is near Shemuel's dwelling in Rama:

"So says Hashem: A voice is heard in Rama, lamentation, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, she refuses to be comforted for her children for they are not" (*Yirmeyahu* 31:14).

The Tomb of Rachel is Described as a Stage in Shaul's Spiritual Progression

1. How can Rachel's Tomb be in Beit-Lechem (South of Jerusalem) while also in Binyamin's territory (North of Jerusalem)?
2. If Shemuel indicates that Kever Rachel is near his abode in Ramah, and in Binyamin's portion how can it be in Beit-Lechem (Yehuda's portion)?
3. If Yirmeyahu states that Rachel's weeping is heard in Ramah (north Jerusalem) how can she be buried in Beit-Lechem?
4. Why would the Jewish exiles on their way to Babylon (Northeast) pass by Rachel's tomb in Beit-Lechem (South)?

So how do we resolve all these difficulties in determining the true location of Rachel's Tomb?

1. The statement that Rachel was buried in her son's territory (*Sifri Beracha* 11), can be understood in the light of the fluidity of the borders in the Torah, different from the fixed barriers we have today. For example, Kiriath-Ye'arim is included in Yehuda's portion in *Yehoshua* 15:9,60, while three chapters later it is listed as one of the cities of Binyamin (*Yehoshua* 18:28). When examined closely, Rabbi Meir's statement is not an attempt to relocate Kever Rachel north of Yerushalayim; rather, it is an expansion of Binaymin's borders to include the area of Beit-Lechem in the future. The context of the Sifri is not about the location of Kever Rachel; but about the defining in whose tribe the Beit HaMikdash is located. At the time of Shaul, the border may have shifted to the south and west of Jerusalem.

2. The mention of Kever Rachel in the book of Shemuel doesn't necessarily negate its southern location. When Shmuel mentions Kever Rachel, rather than referring to a geographic marker, he describes Shaul's spiritual ascent to Kingdom. Shaul grows from a "donkey-seeker" to a man imbued with the spirit of G-d. Meeting two men from Kever Rachel is the first of Shaul's three-step progression of spiritual development

which culminates in prophesy as it states:

“You shall meet a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a lute, and a tambourine, and a pipe, and a lyre, before them; and they shall prophesy; And the spirit of Hashem will come upon you, and you shall prophesy with them, and shall be turned into another man (I *Shemuel* 10:6).

The current presence of these men at the Tomb of Rachel is not a way for him to find them – for they won't be there (south of Yerushalayim) when Sha'ul meets them; rather, they will be coming north, from Rachel's Tomb, and Sha'ul will meet them at Zelzah (wherever that is). The final phrase – and [you] shall be turned into another man – is the goal and summation of the entire process (Dr. Yoel Elitzur (Sinai #92, Fall 1982, pp. 35-45). I thought of another spiritual perspective on why Shemuel mentioned Kevurat Rachel to Shaul as the first step in his spiritual transformation to “be turned into another man.” Shaul is a direct descendant of Binyamin, and Rachel is his mother. Therefore, as his first step of transformation from a regular person to becoming the first King of Israel imbued with prophetic spirit he needs to receive Mama Rachel's blessings. Therefore, he must return to his original mother, Rachel, in anticipation of his spiritual rebirth.

How Would the Jewish Exiles Pass by Rachel's Tomb on Their Way to Babylon?

3. When Yirmeyahu mentions Rachel's voice of lamentation in Ramah it doesn't prove that she was buried in that location. First of all, the word Ramah can also mean ‘high place,’ and thus Chabad and others translate *Yirmeyahu* 31:14 as “A voice is heard on high...” Ramban notices that it doesn't state that the voice emanated from Ramah, he explains: “I have also seen that Rachel's grave is not in Ramah nor near it, [as the plain meaning of the verse in *Yirmeyahu* 31:14 seems to indicate: *A voice is heard in Ramah... Rachel weeping for her children.*] Instead, I say that the verse is a metaphor, in the manner of rhetorical expression, that Rachel wept so loudly and bitterly that her voice was heard from afar in Ramah, which was on top of the mountain of [the territory of] her son Binyamin. She cried for her children who went into exile *because they were not there*, and she was desolate of them. Thus, Scripture does not say, “In Ramah, Rachel weeps for her children.” but it says that the voice was heard there (*Ramban* 35:16).

4. Ya'akov's decision to bury Rachel on the road to be a sentinel for the exiles who would pass by does not necessarily invalidate the location of Rachel's tomb near Beit-Lechem. The following beautiful Midrash clarifies Ya'akov's reasons for burying his beloved wife on the roadside:

I buried her there. Why? It was known to Ya'akov, that ultimately the Beit haMikdash (Temple) would be destroyed and his children would go into exile, and they would go to the patriarchs [in Chevron] begging the patriarchs to pray for them, but they wouldn't help them. Once on the road, they would come and embrace Kever Rachel, and she would stand and beg G-d's compassion... (*P'sikta* 2:3). This midrash solves my quandary about how Beit-Lechem could be on the way from Israel to the Babylonian exile. When coming northward from Chevron you certainly must pass Kever Rachel in Beit-Lechem.

The Tomb of Rachel – The Primary Place for Prayer in Pain

Rachel represents the Jewish nation in trouble, just as Rachel herself was when Binyamin was born. This is why we all seek the shoulder of her tomb to cry on when we are in distress. I was very moved when reading the following midrash in its entirety (See *Sefer HaYashar, Book of Bereishit, Vayeshev* 8), about how Yosef prayed at his mother's tomb on his way to Egypt. Here is a short summary: The first person to pray at Rachel's tomb was her eldest son, Yosef, who was only 7 when his mother died. When he was 17, his brothers sold him into slavery. As he was being carried away to Egypt, he broke away from his captors, ran to his mother's grave, and cried to her: “Mother, my mother who gave birth to me, wake up, arise and see my suffering.” “Do not fear,” he heard his mother answer. “Go with them, and G-d will be with you.” Since Yosef's brothers sold him in Shechem, Beit-Lechem, in the south of Israel, is certainly on the way to Egypt. Kever Rachel is one of the first resting places mentioned in the Torah where Jews would come to and pour out

their soul in prayer.

Kever Rachel in Beit-Lechem – The Epitome of Praying at the Tombs of the Righteous

ספר בראשית פרק לה פסוק כ ויצב יעקב מצבה על קברתה הוא מצבת קברת רחל עד היום:

“Then Ya’acov erected a monument on her grave; that is the tombstone of Rachel until this day” (*Bereishit* 35:20).

When Ya’acov buried Rachel, each of his sons took a stone and placed it on her grave. Ya’acov then took a large stone and placed it on top of all the other stones. Thus, was formed the first monument on her grave. The stone of Ya’acov was on all of them since they placed 12 stones one on top of the other. Therefore, it says the pillar of the burial of Rachel (*Midrash Lekach Tov, Bereishit* 35:20:2). This is one of the reasons for the custom of placing a stone upon a grave after visiting it. Thus, Rachel’s tomb – where we shed our tears – became the resting place that exemplifies our customs regarding all Jewish gravesites. Kever Rachel in Beit-Lechem encompasses the epitome of the minhag to pray at the tombs of the righteous. Let us keep praying at Kever Rachel for victory and lasting peace in the merit of Mama Rachel. “There is hope for your future, says Hashem, and the children shall return to their own [secure] border!” (*Yirmeyahu* 31:16).