

KEVER RACHEL: THE “NORTHERN THEORY” by *Yitzchak Etshalom*

I

INTRODUCTION

A number of weeks ago I submitted an essay which raised several challenges to the conventional identification of קבר רחל - and which cast some doubt as to the accuracy of our understanding of the description of her burial site provided in B'reshet. Although ultimately providing support - through both historic sources and the insightful literary analysis suggested by Dr. Yoel Elitzur - for Ramban's testimony that “now that I have merited to arrive in Yerushalayim, I have seen with my own eyes that there is less than one Mil from Rachel's tomb to Beit Lechem”, one must admit that the plain sense of the text in I Sh'mu'el (see below) strongly suggests that קבר רחל is north of Yerushalayim, in Binyamin's territory. In this essay, we will outline the arguments proposed by the proponents of the “northern theory”; i.e. the proposition that the site where Binyamin was born, Rachel died and was buried and her burial place enshrined is located north of Yerushalayim, in the territory later given to the Binyaminites.

II

THE “NORTHERN” PASSAGES

As noted in the earlier shiur, the two key passages that seem to support the “northern theory” are found in Yirmiyah 31 and I Sh'mu'el 10.

Yirmiyah 31: 14-16:

Thus says Hashem; A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. Thus says Hashem; Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says Hashem; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope for your future, says Hashem, that your children shall come again to their own border.

The town of Ramah, well known throughout the T'nakh (there are actually two of them - רמת בנימין and רמת אפרים; here we are referring to Ramat Binyamin, near or at the present town of **A-Ram**, about 4 miles north of Yerushalayim) was a transit stop where the exiles were taken on their way to Babylonia (see Yirmiyah 40:1). If Rachel's voice is heard in Ramah, that may imply that that is the location of her grave.

The Targum and some Rishonim explain רימה as “heavens”, which immediately dispenses with the problem. According to those who read it as the town of Ramah (and there is no town by that name anywhere in the vicinity of Beit-Lechem Yehudah), the challenge may still be deflected. The text states that her voice is heard “in Ramah”, not “from Ramah”! i.e. wherever she is, her voice is comforting the exiles who are presently in Ramah.

This passage is the lesser of the “problems” for the “southern theory” - as has been shown. Nonetheless, it sits much more comfortably with a burial site for Rachel near Ramah than elsewhere.

I Sh'muel 10:1-6

Then Sh'mu'el took a vial of oil, and poured it upon his head, and kissed him, and said, Is it not because Hashem has anointed you to be captain over his inheritance? When you part from me today, then you shall find two men by the tomb of Rachel (קְבוּרַת רָחֵל) in the border of Binyamin at Zelzah; and they will say to you, "The donkeys which you went to seek have been found; and, behold, 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, one carrying three kids, and another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a skin of wine; And they will greet you, and give you two loaves of bread; which you shall receive from their hands. After that you shall come to the Giv'at ha'Elokim, where the garrisons of the Philistines are; and it shall come to pass, when you have come there to the city, that 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.

This passage is much more challenging and is the wedge used by anyone trying to promote the "northern theory." Sh'mu'el was speaking to Sha'ul in Ramah (the one in Binyamin) and telling him about three wondrous things he would experience on his way home - to Giv'ah. Giv'ah (identified with present-day Jaba) is also in Binyamin, a few miles southeast of Ramah. If he was going to meet people at קְבוּרַת רָחֵל on the way home, then קְבוּרַת רָחֵל is not only north of Yerushalayim, but we can even identify, with some accuracy and confidence, its exact location. In spite of the creative manner in which Dr. Elitzur interpreted the sequencing of these signs, restoring Kever Rachel to its southern site, the simplest read of this text places Kever Rachel in Binyamin's territory.

Before continuing, we should note that the bulk of Midrashic literature supports the "northern theory" and needs to be explained - somewhat forcefully in places - to conform to the conventional approach. The interested reader is encouraged to review **V'shinantam** 5/8 for a full presentation of that material.

III

YIRMIYAHU AND THE RIVER "P' RAT"

Our solution begins far from the passages which are central to the Rachel narrative - and, a priori, quite a distance from either proposed location for her tomb.

In Yirmiyah 13, we read of a command given to the prophet:

Thus says Hashem to me, Go and get a linen girdle, and put it upon your loins, and put it not in water. So I got a girdle according to the word of Hashem, and put it on my loins. And the word of Hashem came to me the second time, saying, Take the girdle that you have got, which is upon your loins, and arise, go to פְּרַת, and hide it there in a hole of the rock. So I went, and hid it in פְּרַת, as Hashem commanded me. And it came to pass after many days, that Hashem said to me, Arise, go to פְּרַת, and take the girdle from there, which I commanded you to hide there. Then I went to פְּרַת, and dug, and took the girdle from the place where I had hidden it; and, behold, the girdle was spoiled, it was good for nothing. (vv. 1-7)

The working assumption, adopted by most of the classical commentators, is that the פְּרַת here is the "famous" one - i.e. the Euphrates River.

This prophecy, in which Yirmiyah is commanded to fulfill an action which will serve as a symbol of what will befall the people if they do not mend their ways (see the rest of the chapter), is not unusual in that particular regard. As Ramban (B'reshet 12:6) explains:

"...know that when [divine decrees] pass from a potential decree to a symbolic act, the decree will in any case be effected. It is for this reason that the prophets often perform some act in conjunction with the prophecies, just as Yirmiyah command Barukh, his student: *And it shall be, when you have made an end of reading this book, that you shall bind a stone to it, and cast it into the midst of the P'rat, and you shall say: Thus shall Bavel sink* (Yirmiyah 51:63-64). Likewise in the matter of Elisha when he put

his arm on the bow [held by Yo'ash, king of Yisra'el]: *And Elisha said: Shoot! And he shot. And he said: The Eternal's arrow of victory, even the arrow of victory against Aram.* (II Melakhim 13:17).

The difficulty here is one of distance - and geology. Is it reasonable that Yirmiyah would be commanded to travel over 700 miles to the Euphrates river, in order to fulfill this symbolic action - then return home, then cover that distance again to retrieve the gir-dle - and return a second time? In addition, the Euphrates Valley is lush and green, there are no **סלעים** (the word for *rock* used in the verse) at water's edge.

Solving the **סרת**-riddle will also, incidentally, help us understand the last passage cited by Ramban, where Barukh is told to cast the book into the **סרת**. We will return to the problem and its solution after a brief but critical interlude.

IV

ANCIENT TEXTS AND MODERN MINDS

As I mentioned in an earlier issue, much has been made of late (especially in our community this past year) of the inevitability of a clash between traditional attitudes towards the text of T'nakh and academic disciplines developed and honed over the past three hundred years. Popular wisdom (an oxymoron if there ever was one) holds that no one who embraces the methodology of literary analysis on the one hand, and archeology and its sister sciences on the other hand, could honestly maintain the traditional approach to the text. Put more bluntly, the common claim is that traditionalists must bury their collective heads in the sand in order to maintain their beliefs.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Much of this claim rests on faulty assumptions about both sides of the coin. Traditional approaches to the text vary, have some measure of flexibility and are (at least in our tradition) far from "fundamentalist". Conversely, both literary criticism and archeology are much more speculative than is commonly believed - there is much more eisegesis (reading into the text what the reader wishes to impute) than honest exegesis (inferring from the text that which is likely the true meaning). We will yet return to this topic in a later issue.

When it comes to archeology, there is a general confusion as to the nature and purpose of this area of the study of the past. Archeology was never intended as a method of proving what did and didn't take place in the ancient world - rather to use findings to help understand the *realia* of that world, to find urban, climactic, numismatic (and so on) clues which would help to sharpen our view of the past as we know it - or to assist us in fine-tuning our understanding of the ancient world.

Those "new archeologists" who have recently used their shovels to try to bury the T'nakh have been, by and large, been discounted by their colleagues (and even their students) - religious and secular alike. (Unfortunately, they have also made "headlines" which self-appointed spokespersons for Judaism have avidly read and transmitted to their constituents, leading to much confusion and darkness).

In the meantime, those earnest and honest students of the T'nakh who are motivated by a true desire to understand the text - and it should be noted that there are many secular students of T'nakh who approach it with reverence and a passion for uncovering its truths - have found that both literary criticism and the wonderful developments in the areas of literary analysis as well as the marvelous "underground life" revealed by the archeologist's spade have done so much to help us understand the T'nakh on its own terms. The overwhelming majority of articles in academic journals that specialize in these areas of Biblical studies are focused on identifying the ancient roots of **ייכום**, the socio-religious background for the piercing of a slave's ear etc. Significantly, many of the claims suggested by the Rishonim, oft ridiculed by an earlier generation of "academicians", have been substantiated by recent finds. I will present several examples of this phenomenon in a later essay.

What was said above, as noted, holds true for all of those who love and revere the text on its own terms. For those of us who, in

addition, understand the text to be D'var Hashem, we take the passion for truth one critical step further. We not only enjoy gaining greater understanding and perhaps revealing the meaning of heretofore mysterious passages, we understand it to be a religious obligation of the highest degree. What can serve the communication of Hashem's word to the world more than the proper elucidation of the text?

This must, of course, be undertaken with a great sense of humility and trepidation - but the knowledge that we are dwarfs standing atop the shoulders of the giants of the generations, guided by our Mesorah (so that we won't jump to the shoulders of some other giant) and every aware of our responsibilities as interpreters of the text (so that shan't forget upon whose shoulders we stand) gives us security and comfort, as well as a constant prod to delve further, ask more probing questions and dig deeper to understand the text.

It is in the spirit of that Avodat Hashem that we undertake to present the less-popular theory regarding the location of קבררחל - not to diminish, but to enhance, our appreciation and love for Torat Hashem and to explore every available avenue to understanding its depths.

V

EPHRATAH = BEIT LEHEM

The textual cornerstone of the "southern theory" is the location of קבררחל mentioned in the narrative (B'resheet 35:19) and repeated by Ya'akov on his deathbed (ibid. 48:7) -

And as for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died by me in the land of Canaan in the way, when yet there was בַּצֵּת רוּךְ to come to Ephrath; and I buried her there in the way of Ephrath; which is Beth-Lehem.

One of the critical points of interpretation is the meaning of בַּצֵּת רוּךְ. Although the Midrashim have used the phrase to identify the season of Binyamin's birth - based on various agricultural allusions in that abstruse phrase - most of the Rishonim understood it to be a measure of distance (see, inter alia, the above-cited comment of Ramban [B'resheet 35:19] in its entirety). Given that, the most reasonable explanation of Kiv'rat Derekh is "a small way" (perhaps a mile or two) - as Ramban testifies. This would seem to seal the location of קבררחל in the south - unless we can succeed in finding an alternate location for "Ephrat, which is Beit Lehem".

As a starting point, it should be noted that there is more than one town named בֵּית לֶחֶם in Eretz Yisra'el; Zevulun inherits, among its cities, the town of בֵּית לֶחֶם (Yehoshua 19:15) - and Zevulun's territory is far to the north. This is easily understood, since a בֵּית לֶחֶם was given that name due to its location amid wheat and barley fields. The town was the central locus for trade and processing of wheat and barley (as highlighted in Megillat Ruth). Hence, any area rich in grains would likely have, at its hub, a town named בֵּית לֶחֶם.

There is one referent omitted in the two passages in B'resheet that is notable - when referring to the "famous" Beit-Lehem, the text often clarifies its identification by appending "Yehudah" (see Shoftim 17 & 19: בֵּית לֶחֶם יְהוּדָה). Both references in B'resheet note the proximity of Beit Lehem to Ephrat - but leave out the more familiar "Yehudah". (This may be a moot point, since Yehudah was not yet given that land at this point - see, however, **V'shinantam** 5/3 where the mention of tribal inheritances in B'resheet is discussed at length.)

Instead of beginning our search from בֵּית לֶחֶם, let's start from the other landmark in the verse - אֶפְרַת.

A few miles north of Yerushalayim, there is a spring that was, well into the 20th century, a main source of drinking water for the city. The spring is called "**Ein-Farah**" - which most Biblical geographers and cartographers identify with the city of פַּיִה mentioned among the cities of Binyamin (Yehoshua 18:23). It is not unreasonable to posit that פַּיִה / **Ein-Farah** was alternatively called אֶפְרַת.

(identical root and meaning - פִּירִייה, meaning “fruitful”).

Modern commentators (including those traditional students of the text who embrace the findings of cartographers, archeologists and the like in enhancing our understanding of the text) have long held that the פִּירִיה where Yirmiyahu was commanded to hide his girdle is none other than Ein-Farah (see Da'at Mikra to Yirmiyah 13). This spring is bounded by the type of rocks called S'la'im in T'nakh, and the obvious word-association of פִּירִיה with פִּירִיה makes the symbolism that much more accessible. Hence, when Barukh is commanded to throw the scroll into the פִּירִיה, he actually threw it into the spring at Farah. Due to the morphological association, that could serve to symbolize the fall of Bavel, bordered by the “other” פִּירִיה.

It is likely that this area, lush and well-watered, was surrounded by healthy and abundant crops and may have served as a פִּירִיה - indeed, among the list of Shavei Tziyyon who returned to the cities of Binyamin in 536 BCE we find:

The men of Beth-Lehem and Netophah, a hundred and eighty eight. (Nehemiah 7:26)

Thus, it is well within reason to suppose a town named פִּירִיה built around the spring of פִּירִיה - a town which was later renamed פִּירִיה on account of the grain processing center which developed around there. This would explain the phrase *Ephrat which is Beit Lehem*. The convention of place-identification in T'nakh is to first use the ancient name and then associate it - for the contemporary audience - with the later name. For example:

And the border went over from there toward Luz, to the side of Luz, which is Beth-El (Yehoshua 18:13)...

Remember, from B'reshet, that the ancient name of the town was Luz until Ya'akov renamed it Beit-El (B'reshet 28:19).

In sum, we have found a likely candidate for *Ephrat/Beit-Lehem* in the area just north of Yerushalayim, directly in the route of Sha'ul's return home and very near the Ramah mentioned by Yirmiyah.

VI

YA'AKOV'S ROUTE

The theory presented above was advanced by Nogah Hareuveni, an important contributor to the study and understanding of T'nakh in our day. Hareuveni founded and directs N'ot K'dumim, an outdoor educational center for the study of the *realia* of T'nakh. In his book *Or Hadash al Sefer Yirmiyah*, Hareuveni addressed the problematic Ramah-association in Yirmiyah and recalled, in a sort of nostalgic pastorate, a walk through the land of Binyamin before 1948 when he encountered the spring at Farah and was struck by the possible solution outlined in the previous section.

In promoting his theory, the author has to address another challenge from *realia*. The ancient road from Sh'khem to Hevron, which passes directly through Beit-El (today the Arab village of *Betin*), remains atop the crest of the mountains in a fairly straight north-south line. That road also passes directly through Beit Lehem Yehudah. At the time of Binyamin's birth and Rachel's death, Ya'akov was moving, with his family, servants and livestock, south from Beit El towards Hevron (cf. B'reshet 35:27). If we accept the southern theory, we understand the location - it's right on the route to Hevron. If, however, we buy into the “northern theory”, what is Ya'akov and his camp doing several miles east - and downhill - from the main road?

Hareuveni argues that *realia* actually supports his contention. Ya'akov was not traveling alone; he had children, a pregnant wife and lots of livestock. As Ya'akov himself said to Esav:

And he said to him, My lord knows that the children are tender, and the flocks and herds with young are with me; and if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die. Let my lord, I beg you, pass over before his servant; and I will lead on slowly, according to the pace of the cattle that goes before me and the children are able to endure (33:13-14)

It would not be practical to march the camp directly on the hilltop route without finding a suitable spot for his beloved wife to give birth. Here, a few miles off the road, was the well-known spring of פִּירִיה פִּירִיה, surrounded by its grape arbors and lush

fields. Ya'akov undoubtedly left the road to bring his camp to פרה for this momentous event - the birth of his only son to be born in the Land - and the only one to be a בן ישראל (the rest were all בני יעקב).

The text, however, testifies that she gave birth some distance from Farah - כפרת ארץ - and herein lies the final mystery to be unraveled by Hareuveni's claim.

VII

KUBUR BANI ISRA'IL

Approximately 3 miles west-northwest of Farah there were five identical stone structures, measuring about 50 feet by 10 feet. ("were" because one of them was taken down to make way for the bypass road around Ramallah erected in the late 1980's). These structures serve no obvious purpose - commerce, abode or worship - and have always been called **Kubur Bani Isra'il** by the locals. I visited the site this past January - it is right off of the bypass road - and noted that it rests on the incline down towards Farah. For many years, archeologists and students of the Land have wondered what to make of these structures and why the indigenous population (whose traditions of place-names have been a critical key in unlocking the identification of Biblical sites) insisted that this location was known as **Kubur Bani Isra'il** - i.e. קברות בני ישראל (the tombs of the B'nei Yisra'el). Dr. Elitzur told me that while leading a tour of the site, an ancient Arab came by and when asked the name, he replied **Kubur Bani Isra'il**. When asked the meaning of the name, he shrugged and said: "My grandfather called it by that name, his grandfather called it by that name..."

Hareuveni's theory is like an onion; each mystery that unravels opens another, which in turn makes itself accessible. He suggests that **Kubur Bani Isra'il** is none other than the tombstone of קבר רחל, which later generations of Jews used as a burial site.

According to this version of the "northern theory", not only do all of the verses fall into place - using our new, surprising "northern" Beit-Lehem/Ephrat - but the identity of these odd structures suddenly becomes clear.

והאר עינינו בתורתך