



# Likkutei Sichos

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## Where is Avraham? Where is Sarah?

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## 1.

### QUESTIONING THE FIRST RASHI

From the verse,<sup>1</sup> “They said to him, ‘Where is Sarah your wife?...’” Rashi quotes the words, “They said to him,” and explains:

There are dots over the letters ו י א of the word “אליו {to him}.” And it has been taught:<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said, “Any place that the script {i.e., the undotted letters} outnumber the dotted {letters} you expound the script; but here, where the dotted {letters} outnumber the script, you expound the dotted. {Thus the dots here imply} that the angels also asked Sarah, “איו — where is Avraham?”<sup>3</sup> This has taught us that a person should ask about {the welfare of} his hosts, asking the man about the woman and the woman about the man.

(Rashi then continues, “In *Bava Metzia*<sup>4</sup> the Sages say...” as will be explained in section 2.)

We need to clarify:

- a. In his caption, why does Rashi also quote the word, ויאמרו, “they said,” since, seemingly, he only comments on the word אליו (“there are dots over the letters ו י א of the word אליו”).
- b. Rashi only mentions the name of the teaching’s author when doing so contributes to our understanding of the issue. What additional insight do we gain here by Rashi saying that **Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar** said this principle (“any place that the script...”)?
- c. This principle, “any place that the script...” needs clarification: Why would Torah place extra dots so that eventually, “the dotted {letters} outnumber

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<sup>1</sup> Bereishis 18:9.

<sup>2</sup> Bereishis Rabbah, ch. 48, sec. 15.

<sup>3</sup> {The dotted letters ו י א of the word אליו are interpreted as spelling איו, “where is he?”}

<sup>4</sup> 87a.

the script, (and then) you expound the dotted.” Since, “Any place that the script outnumber the dotted you expound the script,” it would be sufficient for the Torah to just dot the **minority** of letters which are not expounded upon and we would then expound upon the **same** majority of letters as script, without the dots?

Thus, in our context, if Torah wanted to hint that we should expound the letters ו י א, the Torah could have just placed **one** dot upon the ל, and then we would expound upon the letters ו י א based on the principle that when “the script outnumber the dotted letters, you expound the script.” Why must Torah place dots over **three** letters?

d) Besides the difficulties with Rashi’s interpretation given the context here, this interpretation also contradicts a later interpretation that Rashi offers: On the verse,<sup>5</sup> “and he was not aware of her lying down and of her getting up,” Rashi comments, “*and of her getting up...* is dotted, to say that when she got up, Lot knew what had transpired.” Thus, we see that dots serve to **uproot** the {meaning of the} word. How does this accord with Rashi’s statement here that when “the dotted {letters} outnumber the script, you **expound** the dotted”?

## 2.

### QUESTIONING THE SECOND RASHI

Rashi then continues {his interpretation} under the same caption:

In *Bava Metzia*, the Sages say, “The angels knew the whereabouts of our mother, Sarah. But {they nonetheless asked Avraham} to make it known that she was modest, in order to endear her to her husband.” Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Chanina said: “{They asked about her whereabouts} in order to send her a cup of blessing.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Bereishis* 19:33.

<sup>6</sup> {Usually, the meaning is the cup of wine over which Grace after Meals is recited. (This also seems to be the understating of footnote 37 in the original.) This understanding is problematic (within the context of Rashi’s commentary), however, since Rashi himself says (on verse 8) that Avraham did not serve these guests bread. So why would reciting be saying Grace after Meals? A number of answers are given.}

We need to clarify:

- a. “The angels knew... in order to endear her... in order to send her...” does **not** explain the, “(dots over) ו' א” [which is expounded to mean, “where is Avraham”] but rather the words, “Where is Sarah your wife.” Accordingly, Rashi should have written this under its own caption and not in continuation of his interpretation of the “dots over ו' א.”

The question is even more baffling: The detail that “she was modest,” which Rashi quotes from *Bava Metzia*, contradicts his opening statement, “the angels also asked Sarah....” Seemingly, for the angels to ask Sarah is the opposite of modesty. Thus, how can Rashi mention these two points in immediate succession?

- b. Why does Rashi cite his source — *Bava Metzia* — for the interpretation, “they knew...” ?
- c. Why does Rashi mention the name of the author, “Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Chanina said,” the sage who had taught: “in order to send...”?
- d. Why did the angels send Sarah **their** cup of blessing — especially as this is seemingly improper — Avraham could have given her **his** cup of blessing?
- e. Rashi presents **three** reasons why the angels asked, “Where is Sarah...”:  
(a) “This has taught us that a person should ask about {the welfare of} his hosts, asking **the man about the woman.**” (b) “To make it known that she was modest.” (c) “To send her....” We must clarify why we need **three** reasons, and why one would not suffice.
- f. Furthermore, Rashi has **already**<sup>7</sup> explained that one of the objectives of the angels’ mission was “to bring tidings to Sarah.” Thus, **presumably**, it follows automatically that the question, “Where is Sarah your wife,” was

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<sup>7</sup> *Bereishis* 18:2.

asked in order to impart the news to **her**. [As, in fact, the verse continues,<sup>8</sup> “And he said... and behold! a son to Sarah, your wife. Now Sarah heard...”] Why then does Rashi need to look for other reasons to explain why the angels inquired about Sarah’s whereabouts?

- g. These three reasons that Rashi mentions are three **separate** reasons with no connection with each other. Why then does Rashi write them in one sequence (without interjecting the appropriate wording between them — “another explanation” or something similar — which would divide them)?

The question is even more baffling: In tractate *Bava Metzia* (according to our version) the *Talmud* says, “in order to endear her... **Rabbi Yose ben Chanina amar** {said} in order to send ...” The {syntax of the} phrase, “Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Chanina *amar* {said},” (which places the name of the author of the teaching **before** the verb *amar* {said})<sup>9</sup> implies that Rabbi Yose ben Chanina **disagrees** with the earlier reason — “in order to endear her.” Rashi **deviates** from the syntax of the *Talmud* and writes, “*amar* Rabbi Yose ben Chanina,” whereby his wording (“*amar*” {the verb} before “Rabbi Yose ben Chanina” {the subject}) indicates that “in order to send her...,” follows as a **continuation** of “in order to endear her”?

### 3.

WHY “THEY”

The explanation for all the above:

In his interpretation of the words, “they said to him,” Rashi addresses the following: Since, simply, the question, “Where is Sarah, your wife,” comes in connection with, and was for the purpose of, bringing tidings to Sarah, as

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<sup>8</sup> *Bereishis* 18:10.

<sup>9</sup> {This nuance is indiscernible in English, but in the original, the word *amar* {said} can be placed either before or after the name of the author without altering the meaning. We have a tradition {See *Sdei Chemed, Klolim* (vol. 1, p. 49, and vol. 7, p. 1475, ff.) and the sources mentioned there} that whenever the word *amar* follows the name of the author, this indicates that the author disagrees with the previous opinion.}

mentioned, the following question emerges: **Only** one angel was assigned the task of giving Sarah the news [as Rashi **points out** earlier,<sup>10</sup> “**One** to bring tidings to Sarah.” And, therefore, (as Rashi explains there) later, the verse says, “and he said I will surely return... and behold! a son to Sarah your wife” — “and he said,” in the singular form {i.e., only one angel relayed the news to Sarah}.] So why does the verse say, “*they* said to him,” in the plural form, i.e., that all (three) angels asked, “Where is Sarah?”?

[This also explains why Rashi in his caption also quotes the word, ויאמרו, “and they said”: Rashi seeks to explain here why it says, “and *they* said,” in the plural form.]

To this, Rashi answers, “This has taught us that a person should ask about his hosts, asking the man about the woman.” Since **all** the angels had asked, “Where is Sarah?” (this could not be just in order to bring tidings to Sarah, rather) this is because a person should ask about his hosts, asking the man about the woman.

Since the phrase, “and they said” (in the plural form) warrants the inference of “a person should ask about his hosts....” — whereby the reason why {a person would ask} “the man about the woman,” applies also to “the woman about the man” — thus we can appreciate why, “the angels also asked Sarah, ‘where is Avraham?’” But why is this not stated explicitly in the verse? Rashi explains that here, the dots (above ו י א {which means, “where is he”} of the word אלו) are relevant to *pshuto shel mikra* {and are meant to teach us that the angels asked also Sarah regarding Avraham}. Although in many other places<sup>11</sup> Rashi does **not** explain the meaning behind dotted letters, for in his view this is not an **imperative** part of understanding *pshuto shel mikra*, {nevertheless here Rashi emphasises that it is relevant to *pshuto shel mikra*, for the above mentioned reason}.

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<sup>10</sup> Bereishis 18:2.

<sup>11</sup> Bereishis 16:5, and others.

## 4.

### WHY ASK WHERE SHE IS

However, one question still remains: Ostensibly, “a person should ask about his hosts,” refers to inquiring about their wellbeing. Thus, when inquiring about Sarah’s wellbeing, her **whereabouts** makes no difference — why did the angels ask, “**where** is Sarah?”

Therefore, Rashi continues, “In *Bava Metzia*, the Sages say... in order to endear her... in order to send her....” Meaning, the reason why the angels inquired about Sarah’s wellbeing by asking, “**where** is Sarah?” was, “in order to endear her...,” and, “in order to send her....”<sup>12</sup>

## 5.

### NOT ERASED JUST WEAKENED

By Rashi also quoting, “to make it known that she was modest,” from *Bava Metzia*, he answers another question.

A word (or a letter) that has dots above it indicates that this word (or letter) is different from the other words. In what way is it different? We cannot suggest (according to *pshat*) that the dots serve to entirely **erase** the word, for had that been the case, why did Torah write the word at all? Therefore, we must conclude: The dots only serve to moderate {the meaning of} the letters that are dotted, as Rashi writes regarding the verse, “and he kissed him,”<sup>13</sup> “This dot teaches us that he did not kiss him **wholeheartedly**.” And the same holds true according to Rashi’s second interpretation there, “he kissed him with all his heart,” i.e., not **Esav’s** (usual) kiss, because “it is a given fact” that “Esav hates Yaakov.”

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<sup>12</sup> {By asking "where she was," they were also highlighting that she was modest and was keeping her privacy. Thus their question served a twofold purpose: 1) inquiring about her welfare, 2) endearing her to Avraham by demonstrating her modesty.}

<sup>13</sup> *Bereishis* 33:4.

Furthermore : The dots {in some cases} “uproot”<sup>14</sup> the word (from its place {i.e., from its usual semantic meaning}, or, at least, from its connection point, {i.e. from its connection to the surroundings words,} as {the meaning of the word “uproot”} in {the phrase} “the stone tile was uprooted”<sup>15</sup>) — as Rashi writes regarding, “and he was not aware of her lying down and of her getting up,” that the dots over the letters of the word, ובקומה, “and of her getting up,” indicate that {the meaning of the word is “uprooted,” i.e.,} “when she got up, Lot knew what had transpired” — but as will be explained, the dot does not **erase** the word.

Following the clause, “and he was not aware of her lying down and of her getting up,” Scripture relates further,<sup>16</sup> “And it was on the next day... let us give him wine to drink tonight as well...” Ostensibly, this is difficult to understand: If, “when she got up, Lot knew what had transpired,” the plan “let us give him wine to drink,” would not work anymore? But the explanation is as follows: The fact that “when she got up, **he** knew what had transpired” was known **only** to Lot. However, his daughters thought that even when the first daughter had gotten up, he still did not know what had happened. Therefore, they said, “let us give him wine to drink.” Meaning, the phrase, “and of her getting up,” is uprooted from {its place, i.e., it does not mean what its immediate context would suggest it means, that} “and he (Lot) was not aware,” but it remains in place in regards (to the {context of the} continuation {of the verses, i.e., in regards to the thought process of}) “the older one,” and “the younger one,” {mentioned in the continuation of the verse.}

## 6.

### THE ANGELS’ “WEAK” QUESTION

On this basis, we can appreciate in our context: Since the letters ו י א (of the word אלו) are dotted, this indicates that the question asked to Sarah, “אי {where is} (Avraham)?” was not as strong as the question “אלו” to Avraham.

<sup>14</sup> {Bava Metzia, 87a, Rashi s.v. “limdah.”}

<sup>15</sup> Zevachim 24a. {See also Rambam, “Hilchos Beis Habechirah,” 1:10.}

<sup>16</sup> Bereishis 19:34.



[This explains why the Torah needed to place the dots above three letters of the word אֱלֹהֵי — although had there been a dot only above the ל we would anyways have expounded upon the letters ו י א (for, “any place that the script outnumber the dotted you expound the script”) — for the dots above the letters א ו י teach us that the question, “אֵי־וָאֵי {where is} Avraham?” was not asked so assertively.]<sup>17</sup>

In what way was the question, “Where is Avraham?” softened? This is clarified based on the quote Rashi mentions from *Bava Metzia*, “to make it known that she was modest.” Since Sarah was modest, logically we must assume that the angels **did** not ask her the question, “Where is Avraham?” in a public and visible venue, rather in a discreet fashion.

Now we can understand why Rashi’s quote from *Bava Metzia*, “to make it known that she was modest,” does not **contradict** the interpretation that, “that the angels also asked Sarah, ‘where is Avraham?’” On the contrary! It is specifically this detail that clarifies why the letters ו י א are dotted {as it underscores that this question was asked discreetly}.

## 7.

### THE SAGES SAY

The reason why regarding the explanation, “The angels knew... to make it known that she was modest,” Rashi prefaces, “In *Bava Metzia*, the Sages say,” is because the beginning part (Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar’s principle) is also stated in *Bereishis Rabbah*.<sup>18</sup> Rashi therefore writes that the continuation comes from *Bava Metzia* specifically, {to highlight} that the teaching follows {the other} and supplement each other.

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<sup>17</sup> {Had a dot been placed over the *lamed*, we could also derive that the angels asked אֵי־וָאֵי. However, we would not have known that they asked this question less emphatically. By having the letters אֵי־וָאֵי dotted, this not only teaches us that the angels asked אֵי־וָאֵי, but the dots also serve to “moderate” the force of this word. Meaning, their question אֵי־וָאֵי concerning Avraham was not so assertive.}

<sup>18</sup> {Loc cit.}

Therefore, Rashi emphasizes, “(In *Bava Metzia*) our **Sages say**,” i.e., **this** matter stated in *Bava Metzia* (“to make it known that she was modest”) is unattributed — “the Sages say.” Meaning, this exposition is taught in conformance to all opinions, also according to Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar who maintains “that the angels also asked Sarah...” {for, as explained earlier (at the end of sec. 6), this question was itself asked discreetly.}

And {the teaching of *Bava Metzia* that Sarah was modest is true} even according to Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Chanina who maintains, “in order to send her...” For “in order to send her...” does **not** contradict, “she was modest,” as will be explained in Section 10 and 11.

## 8.

### THE NECESSITIES

Nevertheless, the interpretation, “to make it known that she was modest,” is not altogether satisfactory, because: Avraham had known that Sarah was modest, and they, too, being angels, knew that Avraham was cognizant of this — thus, their question served only to **arouse** his feelings of dearness to her (which was anyways present). {So since Avraham already cherished Sarah, it is insufficient to say that this was the sole purpose of their question.}

Therefore, Rashi adds that the angels had another reason why they inquired about Sarah’s whereabouts: “in order to send her a cup of blessing.”

However, this answer alone is also unsatisfactory. Since “the angels **knew** where... she was,” they did not need to ask “**where** is Sarah?” Therefore, Rashi adds that the reason why the angels asked the question at length, “Where is Sarah, your wife?” was in order for Avraham to answer (and pay attention to the fact that) “Behold! in the tent,”<sup>19</sup> (and this then brings out and emphasizes that “she was modest”).

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<sup>19</sup> {*Bereishis* 8:9.}

## 9.

### WHY EMPHASIZE EXACTLY WHERE?

Another advantage of the reason “in order to send her...” over the reason “to make it known that she was modest”:

To illustrate Sarah’s modesty, only required the angels to negate something — Sarah was *not* to be found in an open venue. However, it does not explain why {the angels and} the verse notes the **positive** aspect, and says very specifically that she was “בְּאֵהֶל {in the tent}” (the *kamatz* vowel under the ב means, “in the well-known tent”). In contrast, the reason “in order to send her...” also explains the significance of knowing the **exact location** where she was, in order to know where “to send her....”

## 10.

### AVRAHAM DID NOT EAT

The reason why the angels needed to send Sarah **their** cup of blessing — although ostensibly, Avraham could have given her his cup of blessing — is self-understood.

Avraham, being fully devoted to welcoming guests, was preoccupied in tending to the angels — “he **stood over them** {serving them} and they (only the angels) ate.”<sup>20</sup> Avraham himself did not eat, however, and therefore he did not have a cup of blessing.

This also explains why their sending Sarah their cup of blessing was **not** at odds with modest behavior. For there was no way for her to receive a cup of blessing other than for them to send her theirs. Furthermore, they did not hand it directly to Sarah; they merely **sent** it to her (“to send her”).

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<sup>20</sup> Bereishis 18:8.

## 11.

RABBI YOSE BEN CHANINA

The novice student of Torah (if he is an astute student) might still think that Sarah's *acceptance* of their cup of blessing was still not consistent with consummate modest conduct. — Accordingly, Rashi says, "Rabbi Yose ben Chanina said...." {By mentioning his name, Rashi is hinting at another teaching of this sage, which will answer this question.}

Rabbi Yose ben Chanina says in tractate *Berachos*,<sup>21</sup> "a woman can discern the character of her guests better than her husband." On this basis, we can conclude that Sarah perceived that these guests were not common folk — and accepting a cup of blessing from these sorts of guests (who were at least {in her eyes} similar to angels) was not immodest at all.

## 12.

THREE INTERPRETATIONS FOR THREE ANGELS

Notwithstanding all the above, we still need further clarification: Although these three interpretations are not **contradictory** (and so we can suggest that when asking Avraham the whereabouts of Sarah that the angels intended all three meanings) nonetheless, they are three independent explanations. Why does Rashi present them in a **single** continuity? [In other instances where he offers a few interpretations — even when they do not **contradict** each other (and one interpretation resolves the difficulty in the other) — Rashi prefaces each interpretation with the phrase, "another interpretation," or something similar. Here Rashi deviates from this practice.]

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<sup>21</sup> 10b.

The explanation:

Rashi writes three interpretations (in one continuation) because the question was asked by each of the three angels, and each angel asked the question for a different reason. (This idea is analogous to Rashi's interpretation at the beginning of the *parshah*<sup>22</sup> where he writes that one angel cannot perform two tasks) and each interpretation is only relevant to **one** angel.

One angel, on its own, could perform the task of sending a cup of blessing (as is in fact the case in **every** event where there is a cup of blessing). Also, in order to inquire about the wellbeing of a host, one angel could ask on behalf of all of them. Similarly, to achieve the objective of endearing Sarah to Avraham also only required one of the angels to ask. {Thus, each individual angel had a different reason for asking about Sarah's whereabouts.}<sup>23</sup>

### 13.

RABBI SHIMON BEN ELAZAR

The explanation for why Rashi quotes the principle, "Any place that the script outnumbered the dotted..." in the name of **Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar** is as follows:

This principle that when the dotted letters outnumber the undotted script, "you expound the dotted," [does **not negate** the simple meaning of the verse. This is particularly true according to Rashi's methodology in his commentary on Torah which is founded upon *pshuto shel mikra*. Rather, this principle] teaches that in addition to the simple meaning, where the dotted letters are a part of a complete word, the dots indicate that these letters are **also** (like) a word in and of themselves.

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<sup>22</sup> *Bereishis* 18:2.

<sup>23</sup> {Since all three angels asked the same question, each for a different reason, using the words "a different explanation" is inappropriate. That wording only applies when there are different interpretations of the words that the same person uses. Here it's more than "three interpretations." It's the same question asked by three different people for three different reasons.}

Meaning, the dotted letters — in our case, the letters ו י א — contain two elements. a) They are a part of the word, “אֵלָיו {to him},” and in **this** regard the dotted letters ו י א are subsidiary; because the crux of the word אֵלָיו {to him} (to Avraham) is the ל.<sup>24</sup> b) A word (and idea) in and of themselves, אֵיו.

The novice student of scripture (if he is a seasoned student) may ask: How is it possible that the dotted letters (ו י א) which **outnumber** the {undotted} script — and are (also) a standalone concept — are subsidiary to one letter, the ל?

Rashi addresses this question by mentioning that this rule (that when the dotted letters outnumber the script you expound the dotted letters) was expounded by **Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar**.

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says in tractate *Beitzah*:<sup>25</sup>

A woman may fill the entire oven with bread {on *Yom Tov*, although she does not intend to use it all on that day} because bread bakes well when the oven is full.

Meaning, although she only needs one loaf for *Yom Tov*, she may bake an entire oven-full of bread in order (to lessen the empty space in the oven, in order) that the bread necessary for *Yom Tov* will bake better.

We see from here that according to Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar many loaves of bread can become subordinate to one loaf. Similarly, in our context, three letters ו י א are subordinate to the ל.

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<sup>24</sup> {In footnote 45 in the original, the Rebbe explains that in Hebrew, the letter "lamed" itself is the principal part of the word, אֵיו, meaning "to." See there.}

<sup>25</sup> *Beitzah* 17a.

## 14.

### THE LIFESTYLE

From the “wine of Torah”<sup>26</sup> in Rashi’s commentary:

When a Jew contemplates that the time he spends performing Torah and *mitzvos* is quantitatively, at least, a short amount of time, while most of his time he spends eating, drinking, sleeping, earning a livelihood, etc. — mundane matters — his heart may become dejected. He may think that his life contains a big “void,” an, “empty space,” empty of Torah and *mitzvos*.

This, then, is the lesson: If the mundane matters are performed for the sake of Heaven, they morph into something else, becoming (secondary to) Torah and *mitzvos*. Similar to, “a woman may fill the entire oven with bread... — even though, on *Yom Tov* we may only perform work necessary for *Yom Tov* itself — for the entire oven full of bread, since it exists in order for the bread that is necessary for *Yom Tov* to bake better, becomes *Yom Tov* bread. And the empty space (in the oven) is filled not with weekday matters, but with *Yom Tov* ones.

When a Jewish person performs ordinary activities for the purpose of Torah and *mitzvos*, in general, and particularly in order for his “bread of Torah,” to bake well, this is similar to what is explained in *Likkutei Torah*,<sup>27</sup> regarding the verse,<sup>28</sup> “Ten women will bake their bread in one oven”: The bread of Torah must be *baked* “in the warmth (oven) of the love generated by contemplating the Oneness {of Hashem}.” Then, this person becomes that which *Rambam* describes:<sup>29</sup> “...serving Hashem constantly; even in the midst of his business dealings... Even when he sleeps... his sleep is service to Hashem.”

Meaning, this person becomes a servant of Hashem, “in all his activities,”<sup>30</sup> and, “in all his ways,”<sup>31</sup> even when interacting with the lowliest of them.

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<sup>26</sup> {The deeper teachings of the Torah.}

<sup>27</sup> *Parshas Bechukosai* 48c.

<sup>28</sup> *Vayikra* 26:26.

<sup>29</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Deos*,” ch. 3, par. 3.

<sup>30</sup> {*Pirkei Avos* ch. 2, *mishnah* 12.}

<sup>31</sup> {*Mishlei* 3:6.}

This is the purpose of the creation of the worlds — to create a home for Hashem in the lower worlds, specifically, as the Rebbe Rashab, whose birthday we celebrate this *Shabbos*,<sup>32</sup> explains at length in the series of *maamarim*, {beginning *Yom Tov Shel Rosh Hashanah*} of the year 5666 (1905).

This also serves to prepare us for the time when we will no longer need to bake, because “the Land of Israel will produce {ready to eat} cakes and fine wool garments,”<sup>33</sup> with the coming of the righteous Moshiach, may it actually happen very soon.

-Based on a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Vayera*, 5736 (1975)

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<sup>32</sup> {The Rebbe Rashab was born on 20 *Cheshvan*, 5621.}

<sup>33</sup> *Shabbos* 30b.