

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 30

Lech Lecha, Sicha 1

The Context:

Parshas Lech Lecha tells of three altars erected by Avraham throughout his journeys.

1. After G-d appeared to Avraham in Shechem and promised him that "to your seed I will give this land," he built an altar. (Bereishis 11:7)
2. He then moved his camp near Ai, and built another altar. (Ibid, 11:8)
3. After disassociating with Lot, Avram moved to Chevron and built a third altar. (Ibid, 13:18)

Rashi explains the significance of the first two altars:

Avraham built the first altar after hearing G-d's promise to give his descendants the Land of Israel — "for the good tidings concerning his descendants and the good tidings concerning the Land of Israel."

Avraham built a second altar near Ai because "He prophesied that his sons were destined to stumble there because of the iniquity of Achan, and he prayed there for them."

The Question:

The Midrash, which is Rashi's source, explains that the third altar was to commemorate the acquisition that Avraham made in the Land of Israel through walking its length and breadth (Bereishis 13:17)

But Rashi does not offer an explanation for the third altar. Why does Rashi omit an explanation for this third altar?

The Explanation:

Ramban famously writes that all the narratives of the forefathers foreshadow the future events, trails, and tasks of their children. In this case, Avraham's erecting of altars is meant to foreshadow, and empower, his descendants in the realm of sacrifices and altars.

The Gemara explains that the Hebrew term for altar, mizbeach, alludes to the four qualities it possesses. 1) It moves [*meziach*]

evil decrees, 2) sustains [*mezin*], because as a result of the offerings sacrificed on the altar, sustenance is provided to all. 3) It endears [*mechabev*], and atones [*mechaper*] for sin. (Kesubos 10b)

Stated more generally, the altar serves three purposes, it sustains the individual and the world, it repairs negativity by negating decrees and atoning for sin, and it endears us, brings us closer, to G-d.

These three purposes correspond to the three categories of sacrifices offered on the altar. 1) Peace offerings — part of these sacrifices are eaten by the owners and the kohanim, representing the sustenance that sacrifices provide to the world. 2) Sin and guilt offerings which are brought expressly for the purpose of achieving atonement. 3) Burnt sacrifices which are consumed entirely by the heavenly fire of the altar, alluding to the yearning for unity with G-d, the endearment between G-d and the world.

More specifically, each purpose of the sacrifices is present in all three categories as a subordinate detail. 1) Sustenance — even though burnt offerings are not consumed by human beings, their hides are given to the kohanim. Thus, all sacrifices contain an element of sustenance. 2) Atonement — all sacrifices have their blood applied to the altar in some fashion which is the act which achieves atonement. 3) Endearment — all sacrifices have a portion that is consumed

by the heavenly fire, alluding to the closeness between G-d and the offerer.

The ritual of sacrifices alludes to the general task of Divine service. These three purposes of sacrifices thus correspond to three modes of Divine service.

1) Torah and mitzvos satiate the individual, providing them with spiritual purpose and meaning, and physical wellbeing as well.

2) The work of repentance repairs our ruptured relationship with G-d. We are not seeking our own satisfaction as we do in the sustenance paradigm, we are seeking to restore the relationship itself. 3) When we serve G-d with no ulterior motive, not to experience spiritual fulfillment, or to atone for the past, but simply to connect with G-d, we are modeling the “burnt offering” which is offered “solely onto G-d.”

We can now understand Rashi’s comments and his omission: Avraham built the first altar to thank G-d for his promise of children and land — the sustenance that Divine service provides. He built the second altar on account of the future sin of his children — the atonement that Divine service achieves. And he built the third altar for no reason that can be articulated, not for any motive but simply to express his desire to be one with G-d. Therefore, Rashi offers no explanation.

This is also why this altar was built in Chevron, the city whose name means

“attachment” alluding to the complete unity with G-d.

The Future:

The three altars also allude to the three Batei Mikdashos. This lends additional significance to the third altar being built in Chevron. This is where Dovid Hamelech was anointed and began his reign which will eventually reach its zenith with the coming of the Moshiach from Dovid’s descendants. Thus the third altar alludes to the third Beis Hamikdash which will be built by Moshiach, whose rule began in Chevron.

In terms of our personal divine service, the ultimate motivation for all our spiritual work must be the third altar, the altruistic desire for unity with G-d which will be achieved in the Messianic era. Even when we engage in the first two modes of divine service, finding personal fulfillment in Torah, reconnecting with G-d in repentance, the heart of those goals is the third altar, the oneness with G-d.
