

Where 'Fell' ישמעאל



By Rabbi Dov Kramer

Although the bulk of the parsha is about Eliezer finding a wife for Yitzchok, it ends by telling us where the descendants of Yishmael lived, *מחילה עד שור אשר על פני מצרים באכה אשורה* (Bereishis 25:18). Assyria/אשור doesn't seem to fit, as it's very far away from שור and מצרים. Before trying to figure out the distance issue, let's look at the location—and context—of the four places mentioned.

אשור is Egypt, which we know is on the northeastern corner of Africa. שור is south of ארץ ישראל, parallel to קדש (see Bereishis 20:1), and although it's unclear exactly where קדש is, or how many there were, it was definitely east of שור, so שור is west. Which is why it's "על פני מצרים" (facing Egypt), between

Egypt and Israel. [This is one of the ways we know קריעת ים סוף was through the Gulf of Suez, as afterwards we entered שור מדבר (Shemos 15:22).] אשור was located on the Tigris River, in what is now northern Iraq.

חילה was previously mentioned three times in Bereishis: it is a marker for one of the four rivers that came out of Gan Eden (2:11); חילה is one of the sons of Kush (10:7), making him a grandson of Cham; and חילה is one of the sons of Yuktun (10:29), making him a great-great-great-grandson of Shem. The חילה near Gan Eden is Shem's (see Ramban and Bechor Shor), and אשור is on one of the other four rivers, but since שור is near מצרים, and another of Cham's sons, this חילה could be either.

The Cham-based חילה would be south of Kush; if this was the חילה where the ישמעאל lived, they "fell" from the eastern part of central Africa, up the African coast through

Egypt to שור, then all the way east (and north) to אשור. That's a lot of ground to cover, and we have no (other) indication that ישמעאל extended into Africa. More importantly, since "fell" על פני כל אדו" (Bereishis 25:18; also see 16:12), i.e. near the sons of Keturah (and Yitzchok)—and they were not in Africa—this חילה is disqualified.

The Shem-based חילה was likely in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, since Yuktun's other sons settled in Arabia. Additionally, Shaul smote Amalek מחילה בארץ (Shmuel I 15:7), and Amalek lived south of ארץ ישראל, so this חילה must be just east of שער. If it was much farther east, between שור and חילה would be more distant than between חילה and אשור, with חילה north of אשור. Besides, the order is backwards. Shouldn't פסוק have said "from חילה to שור" (i.e. west to east →) before mentioning אשור, which is north (↑) of חילה, rather than "from חילה to שור"? Why go east to west (←) and then northeast (↗)? Did the בני ישמעאל take over all the land within that triangle? Did they "fall" on two distinct lines starting from שור, one going east to חילה and the other going northeast to אשור?

Keturah's sons were sent "to the east" (25:6), which likely meant either northern Arabia or the eastern part of Jordan/Syria (or both). Either way, it's not near אשור, and ישמעאל "fell" in front of them. Therefore, including "באכה אשורה" in the description seems problematic.

Because אשור is so far away, some (e.g. הכתב והקבלה) suggest that there must have been a different אשור much closer. Atlas Daat Mikra, discussing Keturah's great-grandson אשור (אשורם 25:3), suggests that this was the אשור that joined our enemies (Tehillim 83:9) and the אשור that ruled over אשור (Shmuel II 2:9). However, the traditional commentators understand the אשור in Tehillim to be the Assyrian kingdom, and the אשור that ruled over to be the Tribe of Asher. Besides, it would be very strange for the Torah to use אשור as a location reference if it didn't mean the well-known אשור.

The Daat Mikra Bible Atlas explains our verse this way: "The Bible does not cite any particular country named for Ishmael, because all of his descendants are among the 'tent dwellers' (Judges 8:11) who lived as no-

madms in the vast deserts east of Eretz Yisrael, stretching as far as the Euphrates (the land of the Kedemites, the Syrian Desert), and south of it, toward Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula: "They camped from Havilah to Shur, which is east of Egypt, all the way to Ashur." I appreciate how they obfuscated the issue of the order of the place-names by making it seem as if "east of Egypt" refers to both Havilah and Shur (and translating "facing" as "east of"), but I don't think that's what the Torah meant. And although the Euphrates is relatively close to the Tigris, at אשור they're not really that close.

In my opinion, the key is the word "באכה." Does it mean "when you arrive at" the location referenced, or "as you approach" (i.e. in the direction of) the location mentioned? If it's the latter, the distance from חילה to אשור isn't as big of an issue. It would be like traveling east on Route 4 in North Jersey; the signs will say New York, even if your destination is west of the Hudson River (or past New York City). Traveling west on I-80 is still towards the Delaware Water Gap whether you are going to Parsippany or Cleveland. Nevertheless, the distance is a bit curious, and the place-names seem out of order.

Nomads do not have a permanent home. They travel from place to place based on where they can pasture their flocks. As the בני ישמעאל multiplied, there were no cities to build up or expand. Instead, they had to spread out. It was this spreading that the Torah is trying to convey. Their tents stretched from חילה to שור, but kept expanding eastward and northward. Which direction were they spreading? In the direction of אשור. Not that they reached that far, but were heading in that direction, with no definitive end point. By switching the order of the place names, the Torah is telling us that they originally "fell" from חילה to שור, giving us the locations east to west before telling us the direction of their expansion, towards the east and the north.

Rabbi Dov Kramer looks forward to the fulfillment of the Yalkut Shimoni's explanation of ישמעאל's name (45): "Why was he called ישמעאל? Because in the future G-d will listen to the cries of the nation from what בני ישמעאל do to them in the end-days." May He answer our cries soon.

TORAH TIDBITS

Civilization Depends On Just Thinking



By Steven Genack

In last week's reading, we witnessed Avimelech who put forth supposed "logical" arguments towards God as to why he was treated unjustly by taking Sarah. After all, he claims, how can he be faulted for taking her when he thought she wasn't Avraham's wife. He keeps pressing the argument.

Finally Avraham says to him that all of his claims are worthless because there is no fear of God in this place.

What was Avraham saying? In essence, Avimelech was trying to justify an argument that was based in moral corruption. Any civilization that feels the first question to a man is whether the woman he is with is his wife has demonstrated how corrupt it is. In this society, God didn't exist as the arguments were mere tools to continue in false ways.

This gives a glimpse into the greatness of Avraham, for when he tries to sacrifice Yitzchak and is held back, God testifies how now He knows Avraham has fear of God. The fear that God expected from Avraham was whether he would go against everything he stood for. However for society, at the very least, a basic moral clarity is needed.

Dovid HaMelech took 70 years from Adam and in Tehillim he says how God looks down on man from up high and looks to see if he will make decisions based on his *sechel*, his thinking mind. The message is that Adam went against a basic law as a servant of God, failing to apply his thought process as to whether

it was worth defying God's order. Dovid, as a tikkun, is telling man to think before he acts in order to function with a moral compass.

The story is told of Rav Hutner that in Germany when Hitler was rising, the students got into a debate as to whether Germany was a society of culture and refinement or not.

One student brought a proof by the fact that after a German would give directions to someone, the German would ask the person, if the directions he just gave the person were correct. This was a nonsensical question since the person couldn't confirm if it was right as they just asked for it. One student argued that this shows the refinement of the Germans whereas Rav Hutner said all of their thinking counters human behavior.

Many years later, that student came to Rav Hutner. He asked Rav Hutner if he remembered him, which Rav Hutner affirmed and put out his hand to greet him. This man had no arm with which to return the greeting. He told Rav Hutner that he was right about the Germans. He said he was captured and as one of the Germans was sawing off his arm, he said to the student, "This hurts, is that correct?" Such a society had no fear of God.

At a minimum we can claim that we have moral clarity. We don't engage in arguments to justify unjustifiable behavior. We are thinking people. And therefore, God can look at us and say that this is a nation that has arisen above Adam, as fear of God is central to our core.

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