New Beginnings: Thoughts for Parashat Vayetsei

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayetsei

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And Jacob went from Beersheva and went toward Haran” (Bereishith28:10).

After Jacob received Isaac’s blessing, he had to flee from his brother Esau who had wanted the blessing himself. The Torah reports that Jacob went from Beersheva. But we had thought that Isaac and Rebecca were living in Hebron and that would have been the point of departure for Jacob. Yet, the Torah specifies that Jacob left from Beersheva.

One explanation may be that Isaac and Rebecca also had residence in Beersheva, and that is where Jacob was located when he had to leave for Haran.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz suggests that the family had been living in Hebron but that Jacob first went to Beersheva before heading for Haran. He wanted to go to Beersheva because that was where both Abraham and Isaac had significant experiences. After making a treaty with Abimelech, “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheva and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Eternal God” (Bereishith 21: 33). And Isaac was in Beersheva when the Lord appeared to him and renewed the promises He had made to Abraham; Isaac built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord (Bereishith 26:23-24). Before setting out on his own journey, Jacob wanted to gain spiritual strength by visiting a place sacred to his father and grandfather.

As Jacob began his journey, he was facing a massive life crisis. He was leaving his parents’ home. He was heading for a new place where he would be dealing with people he did not know. He would need to earn a livelihood, marry and start a family, face unknown difficulties. At this turning point, he wanted to be connected spiritually to his parents and grandparents. He needed to visit Beersheva before setting out for the next chapter of his life.

When we face our own crises in life, we are fortunate if we can return to a powerful starting point that can strengthen us. We can recall the challenges faced by parents and grandparents and contemplate how they were able to draw on their faith, courage and determination. We sometimes can physically go back to our childhood home; or to our grandparents’ home; or we can stand at their graves and meditate about their lives. If we don’t go back to a physical “Beersheva” we can still draw on memories, episodes in their lives that demonstrated qualities that we ourselves need as we face our own challenges.

Going back to a significant starting point helps us put life into context. It reminds us of origins. It allows us to think things through quietly. As we visit—and depart from—our personal “Beersheva” we set off on the journey ahead with greater confidence, faith and wisdom.