

***Beer Sheva-City of the Avos, Site of Hashem's Promise to Watch
Over Yaakov In Mitzrayim
by Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh***

In Parshas Vayigash, Bereishis 46:1-4 we are told that as Yaakov was going down to Mitzrayim, he stopped at Beer Sheva He brought korbonos and Hashem appeared to him. Hashem assured Yaakov that his children will become the great nation in Mitzrayim as promised to the patriarchs and therefore he should have no fear. Hashem will be with Yaakov when he descends from Mitzrayim and when he ascends from there.

Chazal, as brought down by Rashi, explain that Yaakov Avinu was in a quandary. Should he follow his father Yitzchak who never left Eretz Yisroel? Or, should he follow his grandfather Avraham who did leave Eretz Yisroel under pressing circumstance? Moreover, the Midrash Rabbah tells us that Yaakov saw the beginning of the exile for his children and had a great fear as to whether or not they would endure this exile. So now specifically, Hashem assured Yaakov that his children will definitely emerge in Mitzrayim as the distinct nation that has been pledged.

Clearly, Beer Sheva Sheva has a special significance as a last stop before leaving Eretz Yisroel as we see in Yaakov's case. Beer Sheva actually had significance from earlier times. In Bereishis 21:22-34 we read of Avraham's stay in Gerar. Although Avraham initially had problems in the land, we that the king Avimelech wanted to make a treaty with Avraham. Avimelech saw how Avraham was miraculously saved on so many occasions He also saw that Avraham was a true representative of Hashem whose majesty Avraham devoted his life to teaching the world about. Avraham gave to Avimelech seven lambs as a token of their covenant as well as a symbol that the wells Avraham had dug were rightfully his. Afterwards, it was in Beer Sheva that Avraham established his 'kiruv center headquarters'. Rashi brings the views of Rav and Shmuel of whom one says the *Aishel* was an orchard and one says it was a hotel. In either case, it was a place that Avraham would give food to people and use this as means of teaching people that Hashem was the creator and sustainer of the universe. After people would eat and drink they would thank Avraham. Avraham would then say, "Don't thank me, thank Hashem the creator."

We see Beer Sheva again being a place where a treaty was made with Avimelech the king of Gerar. Interestingly, it was in the same place as Avraham's treaty with Avimelech or at least nearby.

The Torah tells us [Bereishis 26:33] that Yitzchak called it Shiva so the place was called Beer Sheva. Rashbam and Even Ezra write that Yitzchak's Beer Sheva actually was a different place than Avraham's Beer Sheva. The Ramban understands Yitzchak's calling the well Beer Sheva as part of Yitzchak's greater goal of calling the wells after the same names that his father gave them meaning that Yitzchak devoted his energy to reestablishing the awareness of Hashem that his father devoted his life to. Sforno writes that in Avraham's time the city was called Beer Shava with a kamatz because of the *shvuah*, oath.

Interestingly, the idea of two cities named Beer Sheva cited by Rashbam and Even Ezra has some archeological basis. Excavations in the area have revealed jewelry, potter, basketwork, and ornaments which suggest that the area was inhabited by people who were skilled artisans. In the ancient Middle East this area was the intersection of two major roadways: the Way of the Sea which was the Mediterranean shoreline and the King's Highway which went around the Sinai Peninsula. The fact that the area was a well-known as a resting spot between such major roads would also explain why Avraham would choose this area for his place to teach the world about Hashem. Many archeologists believe that Tel Beer Sheva, 5 kilometers away, which has evidence of earlier settlement, is the biblical Beer Sheva.

Beer Sheva, while not the southernmost point in Eretz Yisreol was generally thought to be the furthest point south since it was one of the last major urban areas in the south. The expression for the entire length of Eretz Yisroel frequently used in Tanakh is from 'Dan to Beer Sheva.' The present day city of Beer Sheva was believed to have been settled during the late Roman and Byzantine period. After the period of the Crusaders the area was primarily a collection of wells where Bedouins watered their flocks. In the Early 1900's the Ottoman Turks rebuilt the city which was the only city they actually built in Eretz Yisroel. During World War I the Germans controlled area of the city to the Sinai Peninsula. In 1917, the famous British General Allenby captured the town. Since Eretz Yisreol became independent in 1948 the city continued to grow. Its present population is about 195,000 and is the seventh largest city in Eretz Yisroel today. Hopefully, in the very near future the entire Jewish world as well as the world at large will come to see and appreciate Beer Sheva as a city of the Avos, giving it the significance truly deserves as a *makom kadosh*, holy place in Eretz Yisroel.