RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY כנסת הרבנים

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A Fixed Place for Humility

Parashat Vayera 2026/5787 | Rabbi Noam Kornsgold*

A. The Paradox of a Fixed Place

1. Genesis 19:27-28	1. בראשית יט:כז–כח
(27) And Abraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord, (28) and, looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln.	(כז) וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־עָמַד שָׁם אֶת־פְּנֵי ה׳: (כח) וַיַּשְׁקֵף עַל־פְּנֵי סְדֹם וַעֲמֹרָה וְעַל־כָּל־פְּנֵי אֶרֶץ הַכִּכָּר וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה עָלָה קִיטֹר הָאָרֶץ כְּקִיטֹר הַכִּבְשָׁן:

2. Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 6b	2. תלמוד בבלי, ברכות דף ו עמוד ב
R. Ḥelbo said in the name of Rav Huna: Anyone who establishes a fixed place [*ha-kovea‘ makom*] for his prayer, the God of Abraham helps him. And when he dies, they say about him, “Where is the humble one? Where is the pious one of the students of Abraham, our father?” As it is written, “And Abraham hastened in the morning to the place where he had stood [*‘amad*]” (Genesis 19:27). And there is not standing [*‘amidah*] other than prayer. As it says, “And Phinehas stood [*va-ya‘amod*] and prayed” (Psalms 106:30).	אָמַר רַבִּי חֶלְבּוֹ, אָמַר רַב הוּנָא: כָּל הַקּוֹבֵעַ מָקוֹם לִתְפִלָּתוֹ — אֱלֹקֵי אַבְרָהָם בְּעֶזְרוֹ. וּכְשֶׁמֵּת, אוֹמְרִים לוֹ: ”אֵי עָנָיו, אֵי חָסִיד, מִתַּלְמִידָיו שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ.“ וְאַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ מְנָא לַן דִּקְבַע מָקוֹם? דִּכְתִיב: ”וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר עָמַד שָׁם“ (בראשית יט:כז). וְאֵין ”עֲמִידָה“ אֶלָּא תְּפִלָּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ”וַיַּעֲמֹד פִּינְחָס וַיְפַלֵּל“ (תהילים קו:ל).

Discussion Questions:

- Define the principle of a fixed place (*makom kavua‘*) R. Ḥelbo highlights in the Gemara (source #2).
- Beyond the connection between Genesis 19:27 and the notion of *makom kavua‘*, why do you think “the God of Abraham” was specifically singled out as “helping” the person praying? What qualities did Abraham possess that would make his relationship with God be the paradigm for support engendered by establishing a *makom kavua‘*?

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- Why is it significant that the Rabbis derived the requirement of a *makom kavua'* specifically when Abraham stood watching a cataclysmic event like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (source #1)? What might his return to that place suggest about the relationship between prayer, disappointment, and religious commitment? Does maintaining a fixed place take on a different meaning when our prayers go unanswered?
- Outside of the context of the Talmud, what traits would you associate with someone who establishes a fixed place for praying? What sometimes happens when individuals "claim" a spot in the synagogue?
- According to the Gemara (source #2), what are the traits associated with one who establishes a *makom kavua'*? Define each of these traits. Why are these specific characteristics associated with one who establishes a *makom kavua'*? Why are these traits, in some ways, subversive to our expectations?

B. Humility in Place and Practice

3. ***Talmidei Rabbeinu Yonah, Berakhot* 3b, s.v. כל הקובע מקום לתפלתו אלהי אברהם יהיה בעזרו** [R. Jonah Gerondi, 13th century, Spain]	**3. תלמידי רבינו יונה, ברכות דף ג עמוד ב, ד"ה כל הקובע מקום לתפלתו אלקי אברהם יהיה בעזרו**
And there are those who raise the following difficulty: Is it merely on account of this that they tell such great praise of a person after his death? After all, Shemuel *ha-Katan* (who was as familiar with the pathways of heaven as with the streets of Nehardea), and of whom it was said that he was worthy of having the Divine Presence rest upon him as it did upon Moses our teacher, except that his generation was unworthy of it. Therefore, they said this about him to great praise. And how, then, could they say here about anyone who establishes a special place in his home to pray? And one may answer that they did not say this on account of establishing a fixed place alone. Rather, the intention is that he is so punctilious about his prayer that he takes care even in this matter, desiring that his prayer be in a special	ויש מקשים וכי מפני זה בלבד מספרים אחר מטתו שבח גדול כזה והלא שמואל הקטן (דנהירין ליה שבילין דשמיא כשבילי דנהרדעי) ושאמרו עליו שראוי שתשרה שכינה עליו כמשה רבינו אלא שאין דורו ראוי לכך אמרו זה עליו לשבח גדול והיאך אמרו בכאן שאומרים אותו על כל אדם שקובע מקום מיוחד בביתו להתפלל ויש לומר שלא אמרו בעבור קביעות המקום בלבד אלא רוצה לומר שכל כך מדקדק בתפלתו שגם בזה הוא נזהר שרוצה שתהיה תפלתו במקום מיוחד וכיון שכל כך הוא אוהב התפלה ודאי מדת ענוה יש בו כדי שתהיה תפלתו מקובלת לפני המקום כענין שנאמר זבחי אלקים רוח נשברה וגו' (תהילים נא:יט) שאם לא יהיה לו הענוה לא יוכל לעולם להתפלל בכונה ולא תהיה מקובלת לפני המקום ב"ה...

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place. And since he loves prayer so much, he certainly possesses the trait of humility, so that his prayer may be accepted before the Omnipresent, as it is written: "True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit," etc. (Psalms 51:19). For if he will not possess humility, he will never be able to pray with proper concentration, nor will his prayer be accepted before the Omnipresent, blessed be He...	

4. *Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer* 18:63 [R. Eliezer Waldenberg, 20th century, Israel]	**4. שו"ת ציץ אליעזר חלק יח סימן סג**
And an example from the realm of *aggadah*: In the book *Toledot Ze'ev*, in the addenda to Tractate Berakhot 6b, an explanation is cited in the name of the rabbi, of blessed memory, to explain the Gemara: "Anyone who establishes a fixed place for his prayer, the God of Abraham helps him. And when he dies, they say about him, 'Where is the humble one? Where is the pious one of the students of Abraham, our father?'" At first glance, it is difficult to understand what connection this has to establishing a fixed place for prayer. Granted, "pious" is appropriate, since such a person is punctilious in the commandments. But how is humility appropriate in this? Would we say that someone who is scrupulous in observing the commandment of *tzitzit* is therefore humble? What does one thing have to do with the other?[1] And he explained that humility is indeed appropriate here. For a person who is not humble cannot possibly maintain a fixed place for prayer under any circumstances. For one day, the synagogue official [*gabbai*] will offend	ודוגמא מחלק האגדה: בספר תולדות זאב שם בהשמטות למס' ברכות ד' ו' ע"ב, מובא בשם הרב ז"ל להסביר מאמר הגמ': כל הקובע מקום לתפלתו אלקי אברהם בעזרו וכשמת אומרים לו אי עניו אי חסיד מתלמידיו של אברהם אבינו. דלכאורה אינו מובן שייך בקביעת מקום לתפלה, בשלמא חסיד שייך בזה מכיון שהוא מדקדק במצות, אבל היאך שייך בזה ענוה, וכי נאמר דמי שזהיר במצות ציצית הוא עניו, ומה ענין שמיטה להר סיני? ואמר להסביר דשפיר שייך ענוה בזה, כי מי שאינו עניו אי אפשר לו בשום אופן לקבוע מקום לתפלתו דהיום יקניט לו הגבאי וילך לביהכ"נ אחר, ולא יארכו הימים ושם ג"כ יקניט לו השמש או איש אחר ויברח גם משם לביכ"נ אחר, כמו שרואים מעשים בכל יום באילו אנשים שאין להם ענוה שמחמת איזה קפידא הם עוזבים ביהכ"נ הקבוע להם והולכים לביכ"נ אחר, ולכן מי שקובע מקום לתפלתו, זה אות נאמן שהוא עניו, דעניו פירושו סבלן, דאם לא היה סבלן לא היה אפשר לו לקבוע מקום, דמחמת איזה קפידא שא"א להאדם להמלט מזה בימי חייו בודאי היה משנה קביעות מקומו, ומדקבע מקום לתפלתו זה הוה הוכחה שהוא עניו וסבלן, ושפיר שייך לומר עליו

[1] Literally, "What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mt. Sinai?"

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him, and he will go to another synagogue. Before long, the attendant [*shamash*] or some other person there will also offend him, and he will flee from that synagogue as well, moving on to yet another. Indeed, we see examples of this every day: people who lack humility abandon their regular synagogue and move to another because of some grievance or resentment. Therefore, one who establishes a fixed place, this is a faithful sign that he is humble, for humility means being forbearing. If he were not forbearing, he could not possibly maintain a fixed place for prayer. For over the course of his life, a person inevitably encounters some offense or grievance from which he cannot escape, and this would certainly cause him to change his fixed place. Thus, the very fact that he has maintained a fixed place for prayer proves that he is humble and forbearing. It is therefore entirely appropriate to describe him as humble, since his constancy in maintaining a fixed place is conclusive evidence that he possesses the trait of humility. Here, then, is an ingenious interpretation of the statement of our Sages, based on an understanding of human impulses and behavior.	שהוא עניו, דהקביעות מקום הוא מופת חותך שיש בו מדת הענוה. הרי פירוש מחוכם בהבנת מאמר חז"ל עפ"י התבוננות ביצרי מעללי איש.

***Discussion Questions*:**

- What question do both R. Jonah (source #3) and the *Tzitz Eliezer* (source #4) attempt to answer? Which response do you find more compelling? How does each answer compare to the definition that you offered for describing the traits that one who establishes a *makom kavua'* possesses?
- What does each interpretation suggest about the relationship between religious observance and moral character?
- According to the *Tzitz Elie*zer (source #4), is the willingness to tolerate an unpleasant situation necessarily a sign of humility? When might remaining in a difficult situation demonstrate strength of character, and when might it be inappropriate?

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- How might both sources understand someone who faithfully attends the same synagogue for decades but consistently insists upon sitting in a particular seat, even at the expense of others?

C. The Geography of Prayer

5. *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 90:19 [R. Joseph Karo, 16th century, Spain/Safed]	**5. שולחן ערוך, אורח חיים צ:יט**
A person should establish a fixed place for his prayer so that he should not change it unless there is a need. And it is not enough that he designate a particular synagogue in which to pray. Rather, he must also establish a fixed place for him in the synagogue.	יקבע מקום לתפלתו שלא ישנהו אם לא לצורך ואין די במה שיקבע לו ב"ה להתפלל אלא גם בב"ה שקבוע בה צריך שיהיה לו מקום קבוע:

6. *Talmidei Rabbeinu Yonah, Berakhot* 3b, s.v. כל הקובע מקום לתפלתו אלהי אברהם יהיה בעזרו [R. Jonah Gerondi, 13th century, Spain]	**6. תלמידי רבינו יונה, ברכות דף ג עמוד ב, ד"ה כל הקובע מקום לתפלתו אלקי אברהם יהיה בעזרו**
They didn't say [that one needs to establish a *makom kavua'*] within the synagogue since its entirety is a place of prayer. He need not be particular about sitting sometimes in one corner and sometimes in another. Rather, it means that he establishes a fixed place for his prayer in his house. For when sometimes he's unable to go to the synagogue, he will pray in his house and establish a known place for it. This is implied in the Jerusalem Talmud where we learn there, "One who establishes a fixed place for his prayer in his house to pray is as if he is surrounded by partitions of iron and when he dies, they say, 'Where is the humble one? Where is the pious one?'"	לא אמר זה במקומות של בית הכנסת דכיון שכולה מקום תפלה היא אין להקפיד אם יושב פעמים בזוית זו ופעמים בזו אלא רצה לומר שקובע מקום לתפלתו בביתו שפעמים שאינו יכול ללכת לבהכ"נ מתפלל בביתו ומייחד מקום ידוע לכך והכי משמע בירושלמי דגרסי התם כל הקובע מקום לתפלתו בביתו להתפלל כאילו הקיפה מחיצות של ברזל וכשמת אומרים אי עניו אי חסיד.

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***Discussion Questions*:**

- Which location, the synagogue (*Shulḥan Arukh*, source #5) or the home (R. Jonah, source #6), do you think is more impactful in terms of establishing a *makom kavua'*?
- Despite the weight of halakhic tradition not following R. Jonah, what makes his answer so appropriate in terms of the characteristics said of one who establishes a *makom kavua'*?
- How does R. Jonah's explanation regarding the house cohere with his understanding of the trait of humility (source #3)?
- The *Shulḥan Arukh* (source #5) permits an individual to change their fixed place when there is a need. What circumstances might justify such a change? How does this qualification complicate the idea that constancy is itself a religious virtue?
- Returning to the Gemara's description (source #2) of the humble and pious individual, what should ultimately matter more: the physical consistency of one's place of prayer or the disposition with which one approaches prayer? Can the two ever come into conflict?