

Are We Teaching Chumash Correctly to our Children?

By: NOSSON DOVID RABINOWICH

During the past five years I have been delivering a half hour *shiur* every *Shabbos* to young *Ba'alei Batim* in our *shul* on basic Chumash and commentaries. This experience has made me realize how little emphasis was placed by our *Yeshivos* on teaching our children about the geographical locations, routes and areas mentioned in Tanach, especially in *Chumash*. Teachers and *Rabbeim* appear not to have made a serious effort to use either audio-visual methodology or even simple class discussions, to familiarize their students with the geography of the *Chumash*. Unfortunately, based on my discussions with today's elementary-level yeshiva and *Bais Ya'akov* students, I realize that the situation has not changed.

It seems to me that the simple fact that Hashem included various geographical locations and routes in His holy Torah should be reason enough for us to study, appreciate and discuss the Torah's geography, as every word or term in the Torah is that of Hashem.

But, in addition, what if it can be shown that the cities, towns and countries in which the Biblical personalities were born, the locations our ancestors chose for their dwellings and the specific routes they traveled, all shed light on the actual narrative and help us appreciate and better understand the Torah's personalities? Wouldn't every *Rebbe* and *Morah* then deem it necessary to spend time teaching geography or, may Hashem forgive them, even pull out a map of an ancient civilization, i.e. Canaan, Babylonia, Mesopotamia and Egypt?

Nosson Dovid Rabinowich is the Mara d'Asra of Beis Medrash Ahavas Torah, a prolific author, and teacher. His works include a translation and commentary on the *Iggeres of Rav Sherira Gaon* and his latest, *Safra V'Saifa* (the Chasam Sofer's battle against Reform Judaism). He was for many years a *talmid* of Ponevez and Brisk.

I would like to demonstrate from only five examples in *Sefer Bereishis* just how much an appreciation of the geography mentioned in the Torah can enhance our understanding of the *Chumash*.

Example 1. Ur Kasdim (אור כשדים), located in Shinar¹ was, according to most commentators, the birthplace of Avraham Avinu,² or certainly where he spent his formative years after his family left Paddan-Aram (פדן ארם). Rivka,³ on the other hand, was from Charan, as well as Rachel and Leah.⁴ Charan (Genesis 11:32) is situated in Padan Aram, also known as Aram Naharaim (see Genesis 24:10), in North Mesopotamia on the boundary between Syria and Turkey of today.

Shouldn't our children know that Ur Kasdim, situated west of the Euphrates River in Southern Mesopotamia (northeast of Eretz Yisroel), was the very same area in which the famous Diaspora community of Babylonia (approximately the present day Iraq) thrived, from after the destruction of the First *Beis HaMikdash* until the end of the 11th Century? Is it mere coincidence that the birthplace of the father of *Am Yisroel* eventually became the largest *Makom Torah* in Jewish history? Was it not the *mesiras nefesh* that Avraham displayed in publicizing monotheism and, subsequently, in the "oven of fire" episode, that served as the precedent and foundation for the great Yeshivos and academies which could not have thrived for fifteen hundred years without *mesiras nefesh*? Does this insight not deepen our appreciation of Resh Laquish's teaching (Berachos 63b):

מנין שאין דברי תורה מתקיימין אלא במי שממית עצמו עליה?
שנאמר זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל.

From whence do we learn that the words of Torah only exist in the merit of those who sacrifice themselves for it?
– For it is stated: ‘This is the Torah of a man who dies in a tent.’

Example 2. The Torah describes in great detail the background and then the actual battle between the four kings and the five kings (Genesis 14:1-11):

ויהי בימי אמרפל מלך שנער אריוך מלך אלסר כדרלעמר מלך
עילם ותדעל מלך גוים: עשו מלחמה את ברע מלך סדם ואת
ברשע מלך עמרה שנאב מלך אדמה ושמאבר מלך צביים ומלך
בלע היא צער ...

And it happened in the days of Amraphel, king of Shinar; Arioch, king of Ellasar; Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, and Tidal, king of Goiim, that these made war on Bera, king of Sodom; Birsha, king of Gomorrah; Shinab, king of Admah; Shemeber, king of Zboiim; and the king of Bela, which is Zoar

Now, although Amraphel is identified (Eruvin 53a) with the very powerful Nimrod of whom the Torah testifies (Genesis 10: 8-9):

... הוא החל להיות גבר בארץ; הוא היה גבר ציד לפני ה' ...

He was the first to be a mighty man on earth; He was a mighty hunter before Hashem ...

nevertheless, he is not the leader of the "four kings."

It is clear from the text that the three kings, including Amraphel, were not acting as conquerors but came merely to assist Chedorlaomer. The Torah states very clearly (Genesis 14: 2-5):

...שנים עשרה שנה עבדו את כדרלעמר ושלוש עשרה שנה
מרדו, ובארבע עשרה שנה בא כדרלעמר והמלכים אשר אתו ..

Twelve years they served Chedorlaomer, and they rebelled thirteen years. In the fourteenth year, Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came...

Why was Chedorlaomer the head of this coalition and not the more appropriate and logical choice, Amraphel (= Nimrod)? Why were the five kings subservient to Chedorlaomer? They were in Canaan⁵ while he was king in Elam (northeast of the Persian Gulf and north of Babylonia!). What was his connection to Canaan?

It would seem that when Hashem first divided the world amongst the seventy nations,⁶ Eretz Canaan, later Eretz Yisroel, was

given to the children of Shem (son of Noah) since his descendants, the Bnei Yisrael, would eventually settle there. The descendants of Canaan captured the land from the sons of Shem⁷ but the king who actually re-claimed the rights to Eretz Canaan was Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, the son of Shem (Genesis 10:22), to whom the land had originally been promised. Rashi makes this point very succinctly (Genesis 12:7):

היה הולך וכובש את א"י מזרעו של שם, שבחלקו של שם נפלה
כשחלק נח את הארץ לבניו ... לפיכך "ויאמר ה' אל אברם
לזרעך אתן את הארץ הזאת" - עתיד אני להחזירה לבניך שהם
מזרעו של שם.

[Canaan's descendants] were gradually capturing Eretz Yisrael from the descendants of Shem, for it had been apportioned to Shem when Noah divided the earth amongst his sons ... therefore Hashem said to Avram: "To your offspring will I give this land." – I will in some future time return it to your offspring who are descendants of Shem.

Indeed, after Avraham defeated the four kings, he met Melchizedek (= Shem) who offered the battle-weary Avraham bread and wine, and perfectly understood Avraham's position, as Rashi points out (Genesis 14:18):

והראה לו שאין בלבו עליו על שהרג את בניו.

He demonstrated to him [Avraham] that he bore him no malice for killing his descendants.

Thus, after the Canaanites captured the territory that Hashem had granted to Shem and his descendants, Chedorlaomer – a descendant of Shem – waged war with the Canaanites to take back this territory. The Canaanites were subservient to him for twelve years but then rebelled and he conquered them again with the help of his three neighbors from the Western Euphrates area.⁸

When Avraham first came to Eretz Canaan, Hashem had told him:⁹

כי את כל הארץ אשר אתה ראה לך אתננה ולזרעך עד עולם.
(בראשית יג:טו)

For all the land that you see, to you will I give it, and to your descendants forever.

We may thus speculate further that Avraham realized that he was justified in waging war against Chedorlaomer because he, and no longer Chedorlaomer, was the rightful heir to the land of Israel that was originally given to Shem.¹⁰ Avraham then temporarily ceded the territory of Sodom and Gomorrah to his nephew Lot (Genesis 13:11) since he too was a descendant of Shem. When Hashem destroyed these two evil cities their ownership, of course, reverted to Avraham.

The above considerations now also help us understand why in the special circumstances of this particular battle, Nimrod was not the leader of the coalition.¹¹

Example 3. In *Bereishis* (Genesis 50:5, 13) Joseph and his brothers must bury their father Ya'akov in Chevron in the *Me'aras HaMachpela*. I would hope that most Yeshiva students are aware, as I will assume their Rabbeim and teachers are, that the shortest route from Goshen, the dwelling place of Bnei Yisroel¹² to Chevron is due north along the Nile River through Eretz Plishtim,¹³ along and up the Mediterranean coast¹⁴ to Aza¹⁵, and then across Eretz Canaan, due east, to Chevron. But that is not the route that Bnei Ya'akov took! The Torah tells us (Genesis 50:10, 11) that they arrived at Goren HaAtad:

ויבאו עד גרן האטד אשר בעבר הירדן ...

They came to Goren HaAtad, which is on the other side of the Jordan.

Note that the Torah makes a point of informing us that Goren HaAtad was located in עבר הירדן, the eastern side of the Jordan River. This means that Bnei Ya'akov travelled via the דרך המדבר (Midbar Shur,¹⁶ Midbar Paran¹⁷ and probably also Midbar Zin¹⁸), up through Eretz Midian and Eretz Moav. They obviously crossed the Jordan at some point, as they did in Yehoshua's days, cut through Eretz Canaan,¹⁹ travelling due west and then south, until they reached the *Me'aras HaMachpela* in Chevron. There seems to be no

military or logistical reason to take this much longer route (which incidentally turned out to be very similar to the route taken by their descendants two hundred and fifty years later!), i.e. being afraid of battle with the Plishtim,²⁰ since they were accompanied by (Genesis 50:7, 9):

... כל עבדי פרעה זקני ביתו וכל זקני ארץ מצרים ... ויעל עמו
גם רכב גם פרשים ויהי המחנה כבוד מאד.

[And with him went up] all of Pharaoh's servants, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt ... And he brought up with him both chariots and horsemen; and the camp was very imposing.

Why, then, take this much longer and extremely difficult route? This is certainly a “geographical” question that should be addressed in the classroom.²¹

Example 4. The land that was promised to Avraham encompasses (Genesis 15:18):

מנהר מצרים עד הנהר הגדל נהר פרת.

From the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates River.

It is certainly important for our students to realize that when the Torah describes the great influence of the river that flows from Eden to water the “Gan Eden,” it states (Genesis 2:10-14):

ונהר יוצא מעדן להשקות את הגן ומשם יפרד והיה לארבעה ראשים. שם האחד פישון הוא חסובב את כל ארץ החוילה ... ושם הנהר השני גיחון הוא חסובב את כל ארץ כוש. ושם הנהר השלישי חדקל הוא ההולך קדמת אשור ונהר הרביעי הוא פרת.

A river issues from Eden to water the Garden, and from there it is divided and becomes four headwaters. The name of the first is *Pishon*...The name of the second river is

Gichon...The name of the third river is *Chiddekel*, the one that flows toward the east of Assyria;²² and the fourth river is the Euphrates.

A simple understanding of the parallel geographical parameters²³ of these two seemingly separate items, teaches us clearly that the area under the influence of Gan Eden included, in its entirety, the area granted by Hashem to Avraham Avinu, the Promised Land, Eretz Yisroel. The fascinating lesson to be derived from this is self-explanatory.

Example 5. תתן אמת ליעקב חסד לאברהם אשר נשבעת לאבותינו מימי קדם (מיכה ז:כ).

Grant truth to Ya'akov, kindness to Avraham, as you swore to our forefathers in days of old (Micah 7:20).


Much has been said and written about the uniquely similar events found in the lives of these two Avos.²⁴ Indeed, after the tragic parting of ways between Esau and Ya'akov from childbirth, we can see in Ya'akov's life, a new beginning to Avraham's life work. We find Ya'akov returning to Aram Nahraim (Genesis 28:10), Avraham's birth place, and then traveling to Canaan, as did Avraham, with the sole purpose of establishing a generation that would carry out that mission.

A subtle, but remarkable similarity, overlooked by many, is the specific route taken by both Avraham and Ya'akov when traveling to Canaan. Avraham left Charan,²⁵ which was an important commercial center and major crossroad after living there quite a few years. During that period (1900 BCE) there were basically two routes from Charan to Canaan. One route was in the west, via the strategically located city of Carcamish²⁶ at the tip of the Euphrates, then southwest through Aram Tzova (Aleppo), through the Lebanon Valley (Joshua 11:17) and into Chatzor in the Eastern Gallilee. This first route passed through many populated regions which was probably not conducive for the large herds of cattle traveling with Avraham (Genesis 12:17). He therefore chose the second option, the Eastern route, via the vital crossroad city of Tadmor,²⁷ past Damascus (2 Samuel 8:6), through the land of Bashan²⁸ and into

North Gilad.²⁹ In Gilad, Avraham probably cut through the Jordan River at the city of Adam,³⁰ traveling due west directly to Elon Moreh in Shechem³¹ where he set up an altar. He then headed directly southward to Beis-El where he again set up an altar. (Genesis 12:8) After his sojourn in Egypt, he finally settles in Chevron where he builds a third altar to Hashem (Genesis 13:18).

Ya'akov Avinu too, it seems, took this very same second route. The Torah tells us about his pact with Lavan which took place in Gilad.³² From there he made his way via Machanayim (Genesis 32:3) until he reached Ma'avar Yabbok (Genesis 32:24) which passes through the Yabbok stream.³³ He came to Paniel (Genesis 32:31) which is about ten kilometers east of the Jordan River and from there to Succos in the Eastern Jordan Valley (Genesis 33:17). He probably also crossed the Jordan River at Adam, as did Avraham, and headed directly for Shechem (Genesis 33:18-20). He too built an altar there.³⁴ After the episode with Dina, Ya'akov traveled to Beis El and built an altar there (Genesis 35:1-7). Finally, following in Avraham's footsteps, he settles down in Chevron.³⁵

Conclusion

The *mitzvah* of Talmud Torah obligates us to learn and understand Torah in the most complete and thorough manner possible. The availability of multi-media and audio-visual technology today can help us to better fulfill the *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah*, including the *mitzvah* of **ושננתם לבניך**.³⁶ Shouldn't we take advantage of this wonderful opportunity? 

NOTES

¹ Genesis 11:31. Avraham's birthplace is usually identified with Ur, a city in the Sumeria-Akkadia kingdom, west of the Euphrates, in Southern Mesopotamia.

² This is the clear opinion of the Ibn Ezra to Genesis 11:26. He feels that just as the Torah informs us explicitly that the youngest brother, Charan, was born there, so was the case with the second brother, Avraham. In fact, he notes that the eldest brother, Nachor, even named one of his sons Kesed (Genesis 22:22), after his birthplace, Ur Kasdim.

³ According to the Ramban (to Genesis 11:28), Avraham was born in Aram Naharaim, see below, which is located primarily on the eastern side of the Euphrates. His primary proofs are:

a. Genesis 14:13: "Avraham, from the other side; Joshua 24:2-3: "Your forefathers ... **always** dwelt beyond the [Euphrates] River...But I took your forefather Avraham from beyond the River."

b. This was clearly the area always inhabited by the children of Shem, see Genesis 10:30-31 and Numbers 23:7, which would, of course, include Terach and his family.

c. Had all Terach's sons been born in Ur Kasdim, Nachor would have remained there since he did not leave with his father, see Genesis 11:31. Yet, that is not the case; the Torah (Genesis 24:10) calls Charan the city of Nachor. How did he get to Charan?

The Ramban then quotes Bava Basra 91a which identifies Ur Kasdim with Ivra Ze'ira of Cutha, which is probably in North Mesopotamia, about 300 kilometres from Charan. The Ramban also says:

"It was a major city between Charan and Assyria, about six days travelling time from Charan. And the reason it is still considered "the other side of the river," is because it [still] lies between the Euphrates and the Chiddekel." (This, incidentally, should be the correct reading and not the corrupt version found in most editions of the Ramban!)

⁴ Genesis 24:4; 28:2, 6, 7; Genesis 31:41.

⁵ They were all descendants of Canaan, see Genesis 10:19.

⁶ See Rashi to Gen. 9:26 and Rashi to Deuteronomy 32:8, 9.

⁷ See Rashi to Genesis 12:6, "והכנעני אז בארץ". Further proof that Shem actually lived in this land can be adduced from Genesis 14:18: "ומלכי צדק"

"מלך שלם" and our tradition (Nedarim 32b) that Malchizedek is actually Shem.

⁸ Perhaps his three coalition partners were also offspring of Shem [see notes in the Sibermann translation of Rashi], or were interested in preserving the original division of the earth to the nations (see note 6 above), to ensure their own stability and security.

⁹ Actually, Hashem had already promised Avraham Eretz Yisroel when he arrived in Shechem, situated in the center of Eretz Yisroel, as the verse says (12:6-7): לזרעך אתן את הארץ הזאת. We quoted the later verse because this promise took place after Lot left him, so that the promise would be fulfilled solely with Avraham's actual descendants and not with the adopted Lot, who left to Sodom. In addition, in this verse Hashem emphasizes "all the land" including the area Lot had taken.

¹⁰ This is in addition to the commonly known reason that he had to rescue Lot and his family.

¹¹ In our comments above, we have stressed the historical connection between Avraham and Eretz Canaan, beginning with his ancestor Shem. It is noteworthy that throughout *Sefer Bereishis* we see a concerted effort on the part of our three *Avos*/ancestors to establish sole possession of Eretz Canaan. Here are a few examples:

- a. The parting of ways between Avraham and Lot (chapter 13).
- b. The exile of Yishmael and Hagar (chapter 21).
- c. The removal of the "*Bnei Pilagshim*" from Yitzchak's circle of friends (chapter 25).
- d. The struggle between Yaakov and Esau about the inheritance of Eretz Canaan (chaps. 27-28; 32-33).
- e. Esau's self-removal from Canaan (36:6-8).

¹² Eretz Goshen (Genesis 45:10,18) was probably located on the eastern side of the Nile River, bordering Midbar Shur; see below.

¹³ דרך ארץ פלשתים כי קרוב הוא (Exodus 13:17); see also Joshua 13:2,3

¹⁴ The Mediterranean Sea, interestingly enough, has three names in the Torah: ים פלשתים (Exodus 23:31); ים הגדול (Numbers 34:6, 7) and ים האחרון (Deuteronomy 34:3).

¹⁵ Judges 1:18. This, of course, is the center of what is politically known today as the Gaza Strip. Even if the school/yeshiva or teacher/*Rebbe* is

uninterested in a political discussion about one of the most important life and death issues facing our brethren today in Eretz Yisroel, a *halachic* and historical discussion can ensue regarding such questions as: Is the Gaza Strip part of Eretz Yisrael? Was it included in the original land promised to Avraham Avinu (see Genesis 15:18)? Was it captured by Yehoshua (see Joshua 13:2, 3)? Was it settled by Jews during the days of Ezra, when the Jews returned a second time to Eretz Yisrael?

¹⁶ See Genesis 20:1 and 25:18.

¹⁷ See Numbers 10:12.

¹⁸ See Numbers 27:14.

¹⁹ It is not commonly realized that the Canaanites also dwelled along the Jordan River. See Genesis 10:19: *ויהי גבול הכנעני מצידן באכה גררה עד עזה* : “And the Canaanite boundary extended from Zidon going toward Gerar, as far as Gaza; going toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha.” This strategic settlement/military situation was understood and reported by the spies (Numbers 13:29) when they said: *והכנעני יושב על הים ועל יד הירדן*... “... and the Canaanite dwells by the Sea and on the bank of the Jordan.” See also Joshua 11:3.

²⁰ That of course is precisely the reason *Bnei Yisrael* did not take this short route out of Egypt as the Torah states clearly in Exodus 13:17.

²¹ A treatment of this problem is not within the scope of this article, but a good beginning might be made by consulting the Mechilta at the beginning of *Parashas BeShalach*. See also Ramban to Deuteronomy 2:23.

²² Assyria is situated in the north of Mesopotamia on the banks of the Chiddekel River. In the eighth century B.C.E., it was the most powerful kingdom in the world, exiling the ten tribes, conquering the Ephraim and Judean kingdoms and resettling the Cuteans (= Samaritans) in Eretz Yisroel, as we studied in *Sefer Melachim*.

²³ This is true since most scholars have identified these first two rivers as the White Nile and the Blue Nile. The Pishon is the Blue Nile, surrounding Ethiopia and Somalia of today (= “the one that encircles the whole land of Chavilah”) while the Gichon is the White Nile, surrounding Sudan of today (= “the one that encircles the whole land of Cush”). Since these two rivers eventually join at some point, we find the Torah referring to them in the singular (Gen 41:1). And, of course, the Nile is the river of Egypt.

²⁴ Some of these fascinating parallels include: a) Change of name: Avraham 17:5; Ya'akov 35:10. b) Subsequent promise of children and kingship: Avraham 17:16; Ya'akov 35:11. c) Separation from a relative: Avraham 13:6; Ya'akov 36:7. d) Exact same blessing when leaving birthplace: Avraham 12:3; Ya'akov 28:14.

²⁵ See above example 1 re: Charan and *Divrei HaYamim* 35:20-22.

²⁶ The city is mentioned in Jeremiah 46:2.

²⁷ 1 Kings 9:18; 1 Chronicles 8:4.

²⁸ Numbers 21:33, Deuteronomy 3:1.

²⁹ It is one of the six geographical areas of the Eastern part of Eretz Yisroel mentioned by Yehoshua; see Joshua, chapter 11.

³⁰ See Joshua 3:16.

³¹ ויעבר אברם בארץ עד מקום שכם עד אלון מורה (בראשית יב:ו)

³² This is the large area right below the land of Bashan. See Deuteronomy 3:10. Gilad is split vertically by the Yabbok stream, which although it flows from south (its source lies west of Rabat Benei Ammon [Deuteronomy 3:11]) to north, at some point turns westward towards the Jordan and somewhere along that western part of the stream was the path called Ma'avar Yabbok.

³³ See Judges 11:22.

³⁴ Ibid 21.

³⁵ Genesis 35:27: ויבא יעקב אל יצחק אביו ממרא קרית הארבע הוא חברון.

³⁶ Editors' note: *Atlas Daat Mikra*, Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem 1993, 344 pages, by Yehuda Elitzur and Yehuda Kiel, is a compendium of geographical and historical terms in the Scriptures and it is replete with hundreds of maps, diagrams and archaeological information of the Land of Israel during the period of Tanakh. It is an excellent reference guide that can be used by educators and laymen to further the goal advocated by our author.