

HaMakom, the Place of World

When Aharon haKohen's two sons died at the dedication of the *Mishkan* (*Lev. 10:3*), the Torah recounts his reaction in two stark words: *va-yi-dom Aharon, Aharon was silent*.

There is majesty and holiness in silence. Granted, the power of words is truly miraculous—*mavet ve-hayyim be-yad lashon*—“Death and life are controlled by the tongue” (*Prov. 18:21*). But when all is said and done, one often finds that words, because they are finite and mortal, are not up to the task, and frequently useless. Particularly is one struck dumb when one is caught in the whirlwind between the mysterious force of life and the awesome counterforce of death. It is in this state of dumbness, this awe-filled silence, that one can sense the Presence of the One. The Psalmist's “to Thee, silence is praise” (*65:2*) takes on new life, and one begins to understand the *kol demama daka*, the voice of stillness of *I Kings 19:12*. The din and cacophony of daily discourse can drown out His Presence.

There are, however, certain words which bear within them the power of healing. Such healing is found in the key phrase of the *shiva* period, recited by each comforter before he takes his leave of the mourners: *HaMakom ye-nahem et'hem be-tokh she'ar aveilei Tsiyyon viYrushalayyim*. This can be translated either as a prayer (“May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem”) or as a reassurance (“God will surely comfort you. . . .”). In either case, it suggests that true and lasting *nehama*, comfort, is beyond the power of mortals to provide and can emanate only from the Source of all being.

To be sure, the presence of others does offer some measure of *nehama*. A terrifying sense of isolation and aloneness encompasses a survivor when death strikes. He is isolated even from God during the *aninut* period between death and burial, when no positive *mitsvot* may be performed: no *tefillin*, no *berakhot*, no formal prayer. All his energies are to be focused on the needs of the burial, yes; but symbolically, the survivor is cut off from everyone and even, temporarily, from God. The nerves of the soul seem to have been severed from the rest of mankind.

But with each *HaMakom* sincerely uttered, it is as if a nerve were reconnected. Each *HaMakom* is a verbal caress that soothes and heals, and step by halting step one is brought back into the

society of man. By the end of the *shiva* period, guided by the halakha and its prescriptions, one's connections are somewhat restored, and the mourning soul can now attempt to rejoin the company of humankind.

It is a powerful and moving statement, *HaMakom* But it engenders some questions. Why is this term—which is not listed among those holy Names of God that may not be erased or destroyed (*Shevuot* 35a-b)—used for God? Why not Hashem, or the Holy One, or the Master, or one of His many other Names? And what is meant by “the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem”? Of these questions, we will address here only the major one: what is the significance of *HaMakom*?

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At the beginning of his wanderings, our father Ya'akov approaches a certain field where he will spend the night (*Gen.* 28:11). The Torah describes his arrival with the words, *Va-yifga ba-makom*, “And he alighted onto the *makom* / place.” It is curious: no less than three times in that single verse—and two more times, in verses 16 and 19—is that spot referred to as *makom*. Earlier, in 22:4, when Avraham sees this same place from afar, *ha-makom* is once again the key word: *Va-yar et ha-makom me-rahok*, “And he saw the place from afar.”

Why the insistent repetition of this one term? Clearly, the text wishes to stress that this is no ordinary geographical location. Something wondrous lies beneath the surface of these words and beneath the surface of this place.

Truly, this is no ordinary place. This is the place which would ultimately be the location of the Beit haMikdash (see *Hullin* 91b); it was this spot that supplied the dust for the creation of Man; it was here that the *akeda* took place; this was to be the site of Ya'akov's dream of the ladder connecting heaven and earth; and this is where God gives Ya'akov the promise of the Land.

This is not a common field. This is the Place of the World. Here Ya'akov encounters the bedrock of all creation, the genesis from which all else emanates: the creation of Adam, the interrelationship between man and God. The matrix and the mystery of all creation converge and are concentrated into this one space. (Note *Keli Yakar's* commentary at *Gen.* 28:11.)

When applied to God, the term *HaMakom* has a similar connotation: God as Source and fount of all. (See *Esther* 4:14, where Mordekhai informs Esther that the salvation of the Jews will come from “another place,” an allusion, according to *Hal-zal*, to God. The term used there is, once again, *makom*.) As *Bereshit Rabba* 68 says:

R. Huna said in the name of R. Ami: Why do we use a euphemism (*kinuy*) for the Name of the Holy One, Blessed Be He, and call Him *makom* / “Place”? *She-hu mekomo shel olam, ve-ein ha-olam mekomo* / “Because He is the place of the world, and the world is not His place.”

The world does not contain God; rather, God contains the world, and is Himself The Place of the world. A place encloses all that is within it; similarly, *makom* refers to God’s capacity to contain and sustain everything within His universe. (For a seminal discussion of this subject, see R. Haim of Volozhin, *Nefesh haHayyim, Sha’ar III*.)

It can even enclose apparent opposites and contradictions. Just as a physical place is all-inclusive and can contain opposites, so does this appellation for God encompass apparent contradictions: the ultimate goodness and joy which is in the original design of the universe, as well as that which appears evil and causes suffering and pain. *HaMakom* is both Mercy and Justice; it denotes Sovereign Power, and also *avi yetomim ve-dayan almanot* / Father of orphans and Spokesman for widows (Ps. 68:6); it refers both to Creator of light and Creator of darkness, Creator of good and also Creator of evil (*Is.* 45:7). God as *HaMakom* is the Source of all, subsuming everything within its limitless matrix-space.

Perhaps the designation *HaMakom* also contains within it all the various manifestations of God. Unlike the other Names of God, each of which represents only a single aspect of His Being (*Hashem*: the Merciful One; *Elo-him*: bearer of Strict Justice; *Ado-nai*: God as the Master; *Melekh*: God as Supreme Sovereign), *HaMakom* includes in it every aspect of God.

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The bereaved individual is struck dumb. He or she does not comprehend why life has come to an end. In the midst of pain

and suffering, it seems folly to hope for the ultimate wiping away of tears and the full restoration of the laughter of *sehok pinu* (Ps. 126:2). To sow in tears and reap in joy is a paradox beyond his present comprehension. More than anything else the mourner requires complete and unconditional solace, reassurance, and the ability to understand—something which no mortal can provide. This can emanate only from Above, the ultimate Keeper of the Mysteries. And only that attribute of God which encompasses within it both light and darkness, and both laughter and tears, can grant that ultimate solace and understanding. That all-embracing attribute is referred to as *HaMakom* / The Place.

For at the end of days, the confusion created by opposing forces—the white of limitless joy and purity and the black of limitless sadness and defilement—will clearly be seen as integral elements of the multi-hued fabric whose threads connect God to man; and that which today appears as a torn and chaotic universe will in that great moment be recognized as only an illusion. Through the all-embracing prism of *HaMakom*, reality will finally be perceived as it is: not torn at all, but whole, complete, and, finally, *ehad*.

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There is majesty and holiness in silence. But there are certain spoken words which contain their own majesty and holiness.



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