

“THE COVENANTAL IDEAL IN A VERSE”

Here is an absolutely remarkable verse: “God said to Jacob, ‘Arise go up to Bethel and remain there; and build an altar...’” (Gen. 35:1).

What distinguishes this verse is first, that God calls the city Bethel. For it is Jacob who has named it (see Gen. 28:19). This is a subtle declaration that God will adopt the human system of naming and understanding of the world. Since naming something means a degree of mastery over it, God is granting humanity mastery over the natural world, just as promised at the outset of creation. Jacob names the city and God agrees to his choice.

As the Meshech Chochmah points out, this is the only time in the Bible when God commands someone to build an altar. Although Jacob names the place, God instructs him how to make it sacred. Together human initiative and Divine direction will consecrate a shrine throughout history.

Too often we assume that the world is either all in the hands of human will or conversely, all subject to Divine direction. But here, in a subtle and beautiful verse, is the covenantal ideal acted out: God and humanity in relationship to sanctify our lives, and our world.