

Potomac Torah Study Center
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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning almost 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his recent untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah.

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

The Internet is full of posts about one of the special events taking place next Tuesday – an election in the United States. A more significant event, however, not in news reports, is that Tuesday night is 17 Chesvan, the 4231th anniversary of the start of the flood that Noach and his family survived, thanks to God's help. Is the timing a coincidence or a dark preview?

Considering elections, did Avraham win an election when God selected him to be the father of a new nation? From a different perspective, did God select Avraham, or did Avraham select God? Rabbi Marc Angel considers Avraham from the standpoint of an election and easily concludes that Avraham could not have won an election in his native land (see his Dvar Torah below).

Lech Lecha represents a turning point in the Torah, as Rabbi Eitan Mayer observes. In Bereshit and Noach, the Torah focuses collectively on all humans. Starting with Lech Lecha, the Torah focuses on individuals (Avraham and individuals among his children and later generations). After God gives up on establishing a special relationship with all humans, He searches for an exemplary individual who can influence followers to cultivate a special relationship with God. As Rosh Yeshiva Dov Linzer observes, Noach is a detail man who can follow orders, but he needs close supervision and structure. Placed in a world empty of humans, Noach does not know what to do other than make wine and get drunk. Ten generations pass before Avraham selects God – or, from another perspective, God selects Avraham. Avraham has insight, something that Noach lacked. As Rabbi Linzer states, God gave Avraham a hint of instructions, and Avraham filled in the details. He knew without explicit direction where to go, when to stop, and how to call out in God's name to gain followers.

We meet Avraham immediately after the sin of the people of Shinar (who built a tower to make a name for themselves). The people of the generation after the flood disobeyed God's few instructions – to have children, move around, and fill the empty land. Instead, they populated a few places, spurned God's gifts, tried to create new technology (bricks rather than rocks), and aimed at making a name for themselves. Avraham, in contrast, moved around, built alters whenever he stopped, invited guests for meals, observed chesed and emet (kindness and truth in dealings with others), and taught them about God.

Avraham and his brother Nahor both married daughters of their brother Haran after he died. Avraham also adopted Haran's orphan son Lot. As Rabbi Yitz Etshalom observes, Avraham and Nahor therefore fulfilled what later became the mitzvah of Levirate marriage – marrying a deceased brother's wife to provide children to carry on the dead man's legacy. This chesed for a deceased brother contrasts to the selfish policies in Shinar and connects the two stories thematically.

The Torah also spends considerable time focusing on Lot, Avraham's nephew. As Rabbi Etshalom observes, the Torah uses Lot as a comic foil for Avraham. For example, when Lot and Avraham decide to separate because Lot's shepherds

would not respect Avraham's property, Avraham offered Lot to go either north or south to select the land he wanted. Lot instead decided to leave the mountains and move east, to the fertile (at the time) plains of Sodom and Amorah – despite Sodom's well deserved reputation as the city of evil people. In contrast to Avraham's generous meals for guests, when guests come to Lot and the people of Sodom object, Lot offers the Sodomites his two unmarried daughters to please them, if they will permit him to serve a meal to his guests. Lot could not possibly do a worse job messing up Avraham's chesed.

Chesed and emet return over and over again in the Torah and Navi as basic principles of Judaism. My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, focused on chesed and emet in his teachings during the many years in which he was my mentor. The Torah has many ways of teaching this lesson. Moshe focused on teaching these principles as mitzvot (commandments). As we read about Shinar, Lot, and Sodom, we see how the Torah also used sarcasm and black humor to contrast the ugliness of selfishness and deception with the positive midot of Avraham Avinu.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Nossan ben Pessel, Yaakov Tzvi ben Liba, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Eli ben Hanina, Yoram HaKohen ben Shoshana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tziviah, Reuven ben Masha, Moshe David ben Hannah, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhok Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Ramesh bat Heshmat, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, Miriam Chava bat Yachid, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers.

Hannah & Alan

Drasha: Lech Lecha: Count Us If You Can

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1997

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

In this week's portion, Hashem challenges his loyal follower Avram to a most difficult task.

"He took him outside and said, 'Gaze up at the heavens and count the stars if you able to.' Then G-d said, 'thus shall be your children'" (Genesis 15:5).

Hashem says count the stars if you can, and then concludes that thus shall be your children. What is thus referring to? If it is a reference to the amount of stars, then why did Hashem tell Avram to attempt to count them? Surely they both knew it was an impossible task for a mortal being. In addition, from the sentence structure it would appear that the word thus may actually refer to the impossible attempt to count the stars?

Many people assume that Hashem assured Avram that his children will be as numerous as the stars, but those words were never spoken. After all, there may be more stars in heaven than people on earth!

Perhaps then, it is not the actual number of stars that personify the Jews but the attempt to count and understand them. The constant curiosity and mystery that surround the galaxies are the metaphor for the Chosen People.

Rabbi Yosef Weiss, in his recently published work Visions of Greatness, tells the story of one Sam Goldish, an observant Jew who lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma and works for the United States Department of Defense.

Working on a major government contract, Sam was involved in a major project that needed constant defense department scrutiny. Huddled with a dozen co-workers examining structural modifications for a tank, one worker mentioned that there was a string hanging from Sam's pants. He offered to remove it, and Sam, eyes fixed on the schematics, nodded his approval. What happened next was more significant. The co-worker tugged innocently at

the string and it did not yield. In fact, seven other strings followed. Sam's tzizit were revealed. The startled workers gasped. They had never seen that sort of sartorial ornament.

For the next hour, a debate among a dozen gentile workers ensued – in the heart of the Christian Bible belt – all about whether or not Jews must wear fringes. Each worker claimed to be an authority on Jews, each said they knew the religion and were well versed in its customs — yet no one had heard of tzizit! They refused to return to the meeting until Sam showed them, in a King James edition of the Bible, that one of the workers had on hand, exactly where in the Bible it stated that Jews are to wear fringes on the corners of their garments.

The fascination with the little strings far surpassed their interest in the army's latest tanks.

Perhaps Mark Twain asked it best:

"If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

G-d assures Avram that the interest in his kin will rival man's fixation with the starry worlds that he will never reach. The intrigue that surrounds the Jew is inversely proportional to the space he fills in the universe. No matter how tiny the glow of Judaism may seem, civilizations study it, societies try to imitate it, and mystified as they are, some nations try to destroy it.

The proverbial Hubble telescopes of the gentile world will be just as fascinated, fixated, and constantly occupied in utter mystery of the immortal and indestructible lights that twinkle past the dark clouds of civilization – the Jew. And though those gentile observers may never discover the answer to our immortality, nor understand the reason of or resilience, one thing they will surely understand – we shine.

Good Shabbos!.

[Ed. Note]: The world population is approximately 7.8 billion (Google search). The Jewish population is therefore close to 0.2 percent of world populations – around a fifth of what Mark Twain estimated.

What Is Our Vision Statement?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2020

The Jewish story begins with parshat Lekh-Lekha, when G-d tells Avraham "Go to the land which I will show you." The patriarch faithfully sets out towards the land of Cannan, which later becomes the Land of Israel. To understand the religious character of Avraham, it is helpful to compare him to Noah, the main character of the previous parasha.

Regarding Noah, the Torah tells us "וַיֵּלֶךְ נֹחַ אִתּוֹ – Noah went with God." Contrast this with the verse regarding Avraham: "וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָהָם – Go ahead of Me and be perfect." What can we

learn from the difference in how these two men walked in relation to G-d? Hazal explain that Noah was not fully righteous and needed G-d directly alongside him for support. Avraham, however, was completely righteous and could set off on his own without G-d's support.

I'd like to take the contrast further. Noah is a character who is completely obedient. G-d says "Build an ark," and Noah says "How high?!" And G-d lays out a detailed blueprint – 300 cubits by 50 cubits by 30 cubits, with three levels and a window – an exacting level of detail rarely encountered in the Torah, outside of the Mishkan.

Noah needs exact direction, and with it he will accomplish the assigned task exactly. This character trait also explains why Noah got drunk in the aftermath of the deluge. Some explain that he was driven to this by a survivor's guilt, but that isn't the full story. Noah was given an entire world to populate, build and shape; a blank canvas on which to paint. For Noah, that was a terrifying proposition. He couldn't take even the first step. He had no vision for how to move on so he escaped to the bottom of the bottle.

Avraham is the opposite. He receives broad and general instruction from G-d, "Go to the land I will show you," and Avraham heads out. The verse never tells us that God showed him the land; when he reaches Cannan he knows instinctively that it is the correct place, the place that God has chosen. And later, in the story of the Akeidah, G-d similarly commands him "Go to one of the mountains that I will tell you," and Avraham goes to the correct mountain with no additional instruction at all! Avraham so intuitively knows what God wants from him, that we hear at the end of last week's parasha that Avraham actually began heading to the land of Cannan without any instruction from G-d! He just needs a small nudge to keep going, and he is propelled from within.

Avraham is not one whose service to God is defined in terms of obedience with exacting attention to every tiny detail. Obviously, he is a devout follower of the Almighty, willing to sacrifice his own son, but he is guided by a sense of the big picture. What does G-d want from me? How can I make this world better? How can I shape this world in the vision of G-d, into what G-d wants it to be?

Avraham goes to the land "לְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן – that I will show you." He is able to see a vision of what that land will look like. And he goes throughout that land and calls out in the name of G-d, bringing more and more people to belief in a single, ethical God. He's changing the world without being commanded to do so, because he has a sense of what it is to be nourished by a religious vision and to work to realize that vision.

For us, leading a halakhic life starts with being a Noah, with a detailed observance of halakha. Yet the goal lies beyond that. While we remain anchored in a world of observance, we aim to achieve Avraham's level of vision.

There actually is a middle stage between vision and simple obedience. It is a sense of mission, an internalized belief that one has a job to do in this world, and that it is her responsibility to do it. To observe a halakhic life with a sense of mission is to have a sense of purpose, to feel commanded.

Many people live their halakhic, religious lives out of a sense of mission. But how many of us ever cultivate a sense of vision? To ask why God has sent us on this mission. What is God and the Torah trying to achieve in the world? What does a more Divine world look like?

My bracha to all of us is that we should start in parshat Noach, and that we should ascend from Noah to Avraham; from "לְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן," going with G-d, to "לְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן," going in front of G-d, driven by a religious vision with God there right behind us all the way.

Shabbat Shalom!

Lech Licha: Enjoy the Forever Journey by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine* © 2020 Teach 613

When Avraham and Sarah set out on their journey to establish the Jewish people, Hashem withheld the name of the country to which they were headed. "Go!" was the command. And "Go" they did.

Rashi explains that by withholding the destination from them, Hashem was giving them the opportunity to earn reward for each step that they took. When you don't know how long a trip will be, each step into the great unknown is harder, and deserves more reward. But there is an additional message about "Steps" which is being introduced.

The Mishna in Avos tells us, "It is not upon you to complete the task, but you must work towards its completion." Indeed, in many challenging situations, we cannot necessarily see the successful conclusion on the horizon. But we have an obligation to work in that direction. This was the attitude of so many people throughout the ages. It was the attitude of the Jews in the desert in the formidable task of building a Sanctuary to house G-d's presence. After all their plans and work, Moshe's two questions resound, "How can man create an abode for G-d?" and "After all the work, the building was simply too heavy to erect!" Responding to both questions Hashem said, "Do your best, and I will make it work out." And He did.

Similarly, it was the attitude of the Jews in the time of the Chanuka miracle, as they were religiously oppressed by the Syrian-Greeks, who were the world power of the time. The Jews resisted the religious oppression in a way that must have seemed ludicrous. How could a small band of teachers and priests stand up to the great army of Antiochus? Yet they did, and Hashem blessed them with victory.

It is hard to imagine the personal emotional challenge that Jews after the Holocaust had to overcome to remain faithful to the idea that traditional Judaism had a future. It is doubtful that they could have imagined the awesome success and vibrancy that blossomed from their fortitude and from their efforts. Communities were founded, Yeshivos built, and infrastructure, including Mikvaos, summer camps, and Kashrus organizations, were started. What blossomed is the result of taking things one step at a time, just as Avraham and Sarah did.

Interestingly, the "take it one step at a time" approach of Avraham and Sarah created a "movement" that is forever, and a nation that is eternal. I find it fascinating that even in the wishful thinking of regimes such as the Nazis, they could only think in terms of "A thousand year Reich." To us, as Jews, a thousand years is "child's play." When we gauge things on the historical stage, we talk in terms of eternity.

Avraham and Sarah were not just stepping out with faith in a G-dly calling, and into destiny. They were also teaching us how it is done. Not with clarity of exactly how everything will work out, but only with clarity that, right now, this is the correct next step to take. Indeed, when Yakov wanted to reveal to his children the Acharis Hayamim (end of days) it was hidden from him. The Jewish people create that awesome success by doing today what needs to be done today, even as the true end goal is "Asher Ar'eka," something that Hashem has yet to show us.

As we stand suspended between the realities of COVID and the drive and obligation to Reopen as best we can, safely, the principle of "one step at a time" becomes most relevant. We don't know how things will play out, but we do know that we need to make decisions as best we can, one at a time. As we do, we fall in step with our beloved father and mother of old, as they too stepped forward into the great unknown, as an act of faith, and to be blessed, as a nation, with eternal blessing.

* Rav of Southeast Hebrew Congregation, White Oak (Silver Spring), MD and Director of Teach 613.

Abraham Wasn't Electable – But He Was Elected! – Thoughts on Parashat Lekh Lekha

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel*

Abraham must have been a very unpopular man in the society and family in which he was raised. He wouldn't likely have been elected to lead the citizenry of Ur Kasdim. He rejected their worldview, smashed their idols, repudiated their (un)ethical system. Who would vote for Abraham? He was a starry-eyed mystic and philosopher, not interested in pandering to the values and interests of his fellow citizens.

A Midrash tells a story that Terah, Abraham's father, was not only an idolater, but did business manufacturing and selling idols. One night, the young Abraham went into his father's shop and smashed all the idols, except one. In that last idol's hand, Abraham placed a hammer. When Terah went to his shop the next morning, he was shocked to see the idols broken to pieces. He asked Abraham: who could have done such a terrible act of vandalism? Abraham answered: the idol holding the hammer must have smashed the other idols. Terah responded: that's impossible, that idol is made of stone, it

can't do anything. Abraham retorted: if you don't believe a stone idol can smash other idols, why do you believe it is a powerful god? It's just a piece of powerless stone!

Children like this story because it shows how Abraham outsmarted his father, thereby demonstrating the foolishness of idolatry. Abraham thus made his preliminary case for the truth of ethical monotheism.

As we grow older, though, this story requires a more sophisticated interpretation. After all, we do not think that idolaters really believe that their idols are gods. Rather, the idols are symbols of gods. Terah certainly would never have imagined that one of his idols could act autonomously. He would have thought that his idols were symbols of gods, or that in some way the gods' spirits rested within the idols. So he would not have been impressed with Abraham's question and seeming refutation of idolatry. By analogy, we pledge allegiance to the flag--but the flag is just a piece of cloth, with little intrinsic value. When someone burns the flag, though, we are outraged--not because a piece of cloth was set ablaze, but because that flag is a powerful symbol to us of our nation and our values. Terah would have been outraged to see his idols shattered, in a similar sense to the outrage we feel when our flag is desecrated.

Perhaps that Midrash was alluding to a deeper idea. It was telling us something important about Abraham that would have convinced God to choose Abraham to be father of a new nation.

Abraham was living in Terah's household. He knew his father worshipped idols and promoted idolatry. What young boy wants to rise up against his father's values and his father's business? It would have been so much easier for Abraham to hold his peace, and wait until he was old enough to live on his own before he espoused his monotheistic views. Moreover, even if Abraham chose to argue with his father about the worthlessness of idols, why would he have vandalized his father's shop, an action that was bound to generate a lot of discussion and anger among the townspeople? Furthermore, why would he make a public mockery of idolatry while living in a society full of idolaters? It would have been so much more convenient for Abraham to remain silent, to keep his ideas to himself, to respect the mores of his father, his birthplace, his society.

The Midrash is teaching us that Abraham was a powerful, courageous individual who was not afraid to dissent from the majority when he knew that the majority was wrong. Abraham was willing to risk his own comfort by defying the perverse ideas and values of his father and of the entire idolatrous society. He did not just speak out against idolatry: he had the gumption to smash idols, to bring matters to a head. He was not "diplomatic" in espousing belief in one God and in rejecting idolatry.

Thus, when God saw that Abraham was absolutely not "electable" by his community, God decided that Abraham was His man. God "elected" Abraham--a man of incredible personal strength and vision--to set out on the journey, to leave his society, his birthplace, his father's home. God elected Abraham to establish a new nation, with a new vision, a new idealism, a new ethical system, a new way of relating to God.

The words "lekh lekha" are commonly translated: get thee out. But they can also be translated as: go to yourself. In the latter sense, God was telling Abraham: go to yourself, to your own inner core; don't be misled by your father and his society; don't strive to conform and get along. Stand on your own, be true to yourself. If you "go to yourself" and stay faithful to who you are, you will be the father of a great nation.

* Jewishideas.org. **The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website jewishideas.org or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.**

Reflections on the Tragedy in Pittsburgh...and Beyond:
Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel
By Rabbi Marc D. Angel*

Sholom Aleichem wrote a story about a Jewish young man who was conscripted into the Russian army, and was trained how to use his rifle “At the firing line the sergeant noticed Yechiel shooting up in the air instead of ahead; he poured a flood of curses and abuse on his head, with all the worst names for Jews in Russian to boot, and showed him where to aim his gun. A little later the sergeant again saw Yechiel aiming up in the air. This time he was flabbergasted: What, he wanted to know, was the matter with that crazy Jewish soldier? Hadn’t he told Yechiel where to aim his gun? ‘Yes,’ Yechiel replied, ‘but there are people there!’”

This seemingly amusing story points to a serious truth. When people see each other as fellow human beings, it is difficult to shoot at them. To engage in violent action first requires a process of dehumanization of the victim. People need to be trained to hate the “enemy,” to see the other as a villain unworthy of life.

The root of hatred in our society—in all human societies—arises with the planting of seeds of mistrust, fear and vilification of those deemed as “the enemy.” Once the victims are dehumanized, violent action against them becomes possible. There’s no need to show mercy on people who are now deemed to be vermin.

Jews know as well as anyone—probably better than anyone—how dangerous it is to become victimized by haters. Once the hatred seeps in, violent words and actions follow. Once people come to dehumanize others, they become capable of acting against them with egregious cruelty.

It is impossible to ignore the growing polarizations within our society today. The level of hateful discourse has led to increasing acts of violence, including the tragic murder of Jews in their synagogue in Pittsburgh by a hate-filled anti-Semite.

This one murderer’s heinous deed reflects a much broader and deeper malaise within America—the dehumanization and demonization of people perceived to be the “enemy.” We Jews certainly feel the pain of this phenomenon...but so do almost all people who are targets of one hate group or another. There are those who demonize Jews, blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, Christians, Muslims, immigrants, homosexuals...the list goes on. Because hatred is aimed at virtually everyone, virtually everyone needs to rise and resist it. Demonization of any one group threatens the moral fabric of society as a whole.

While we grieve the terrible tragedy and loss of life in Pittsburgh, we should also take heart from the thousands of people of all backgrounds who stood strong with the Jewish community. We witness a profound idealism and sense of solidarity on the part of those who refuse to surrender to dehumanization.

Various national studies have shown that Jews are among the most highly regarded groups in the United States. People feel more warmly toward the Jews than toward most other American religious denominations. People appreciate that Jews generally are highly educated, highly involved in social justice, highly engaged in the betterment of society. We cannot ignore the haters, but we also must not forget those many millions with whom we have warm and very positive relationships.

We cry at the murder of innocent Jews in their synagogue. We cry at the manifestations of anti-Semitism in our land.

But crying isn’t really enough. We also have to cry out, loudly and clearly: unless society as a whole can address the plague of dehumanization and demonization, all of us—of whatever background—are at risk. Crying out is a responsibility of all people, at all levels of society.

We need to strive for a society where we look into each other’s eyes and see a fellow human being. As Yechiel in Sholom Aleichem’s story said: There are people there!

* Jewishideas.org. The tragedy at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh, PA took place on October 27, 2018.

Parshas Lech Lecha

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer*

[Rabbi Singer's Dvar Torah was not ready in time for my deadline this week. Watch for his insights on the Torah in future issues.]

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

Dvar Torah for Lech Leca

by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

[note: because Hurricane Zeta knocked out power to more than 500,000 homes in Alabama, including the area around Kneseth Israel, Rabbi Rube was unable to type and send his Dvar Torah in time for my deadline. Watch for his column in future weeks.]

* Rabbi, Kneseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL.

Rav Kook Torah Lech Lecha: Be Complete!

When Abraham was 99 years old, God appeared to him, announcing the mitzvah of brit milah (circumcision).

"I am God Almighty. Walk before Me and be complete. I will make a covenant (brit) between Me and you." (Gen. 17:1-2)

What was Abraham's immediate reaction? He literally fell on his face. The Talmud (Nedarim 32b) writes that when Abraham heard God command him, "walk before Me and be complete," his entire body began to shake. Abraham was confused and mortified. "Perhaps there is something improper in my actions?" But Abraham calmed down when God began to command him to circumcise himself and his household.

Why was Abraham comforted to hear that God was referring to brit milah?

A Higher Prophetic Level

We perceive the outside world through various gateways. These include the five physical senses, and our powers of intellect and reason. And there exists an additional portal — the faculty of prophecy. We cannot truly fathom this unique gift, the product of a hidden connection between the soul and the body. For this reason, prophecy, unlike pure intellectual activity, involves the powers of imagination, desire, and other baser aspects of the mind.

When God charged Abraham, "Be complete," Abraham feared that he was lacking in his intellectual dedication in serving God. This would be a fault for which a righteous individual like Abraham would certainly be held accountable.

But when Abraham heard that God was referring to the mitzvah of circumcision, his concerns were put to rest. Brit milah serves to refine the special connection between body and soul. It deals with a sphere that is beyond human

comprehension — and accountability. God's command was not that Abraham needed to rectify some error or character flaw, but rather to bestow upon him a unique covenant, one which would enable him to attain a purer, higher level of prophecy.

With this gift, Abraham would be able to “walk before God.” The word *hit'halech* (‘walk’) is in the reflexive tense; Abraham would be able to “walk himself” as it were, and progress on his own, before God.

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 37-38. Adapted from *Olat Re'iyah* vol. I, pp. 396-397.)

How Perfect Were the Matriarchs and Patriarchs? (Lech Lecha 5775)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Former UK Chief Rabbi,*

Please remember Yaakov Tzvi ben Liba for a Mishebarach!

In an extraordinary series of observations on this week's parsha, Nahmanides (Ramban, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman Girondi, 1194 – 1270), delivers harsh criticisms of Abraham and Sarah. The first has to do with Abraham's decision, after arriving at the land of Canaan, to leave and go to Egypt because “there was a famine in the land.” On this Nahmanides says:

Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that God would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for God surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine God would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children.[1]

According to Ramban, Abraham should have stayed in Canaan and had faith in God that he would sustain him despite the famine. Not only was Abraham wrong to leave. He also put Sarah in a position of moral hazard because, as a result of going to Egypt, she was forced to tell a lie, that she was Abraham's sister not his wife, and because she was taken into pharaoh's harem where she might have been forced to commit an act of adultery. This is a very harsh judgment, made more so by Ramban's further assertion that it was because of this lack of faith that Abraham's children were sentenced to exile in Egypt centuries later.

Later in the parsha, Ramban criticizes Sarah. Despairing of having a child, she asked Abraham to sleep with her handmaid Hagar in the hope that she might bear him a child. Abraham did so, and Hagar became pregnant. The text then says that Hagar “began to despise her mistress.” Sarah complained to Abraham, and then “afflicted Hagar” who fled from her into the desert. On this, Ramban writes:

Our mother [Sarah] transgressed by this affliction, as did Abraham by allowing her to do so. So God heard her [Hagar's] affliction and gave her a son who would be a wild ass of a man to afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all kinds of affliction.[2]

Here the moral judgment is easier to understand. Sarah's conduct does seem volatile and harsh. The Torah itself says that Sarah “afflicted” Hagar. Yet Ramban seems to be saying that it was this episode in the ancient past that explains Jewish suffering at the hands of Muslims (descendants of Ishmael) in a much later age.

It is not difficult to defend Abraham and Sarah in these incidents and other commentators did so. Abraham was not to know that God would perform a miracle and save him and Sarah from famine had they stayed in Canaan. Nor was he to

know that the Egyptians would endanger his life and place Sarah in a moral dilemma. Neither of them had been to Egypt before. They did not know in advance what to expect.

As for Sarah and Hagar, although an angel sent Hagar back, later when Ishmael and Isaac were born, Sarah once again banished Hagar. This time, though Abraham protested, God told him to do what Sarah said. So Ramban's criticisms are easily answered. Why then did he make them?

Ramban surely did not make these comments lightly. He was, I believe, driven by another consideration altogether, namely the justice of history. Why did the Israelites suffer exile and slavery in Egypt? Why in Ramban's own age were Jews subject to attack by radical Islamists, the Almohades, who brought to an end the Golden Age of Spain they had enjoyed under the more tolerant rule of the Umayyads.

Ramban believed, as we say in our prayers, that "because of our sins we were exiled from our land," but what sins had the Israelites committed in the days of Jacob that merited exile? He also believed that "the acts of the fathers are a sign for the children," and that what happened in the lives of the patriarchs foreshadowed what would happen to their descendants. What had they done to Ishmael to earn the scorn of Muslims? A close reading of the biblical text pointed Ramban in the direction of Sarah's treatment of Hagar.

So Ramban's comments make sense within his reading of Jewish history, but this too is not without its difficulties. The Torah states explicitly that God may punish "the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation" but not beyond. The rabbis further restricted this to cases where "the children continue the sins of the parents." Jeremiah and Ezekiel both said that no one would any more say, "The parents have eaten sour grapes and their children's teeth are set on edge." The transfer of sins across the generations is problematic, Jewishly and ethically.

What is deeply interesting about Ramban's approach to Abraham and Sarah is his willingness to point out flaws in their behaviour. This answers a fundamental question as far as our understanding of the narratives of Genesis is concerned. How are we to judge the patriarchs when their behaviour seems problematic: Jacob taking Esau's blessing in disguise, for example, or Shimon and Levi's brutality in the course of rescuing their sister Dina?

The stories of Genesis are often morally perplexing. Rarely does the Torah pass an explicit, unequivocal verdict on people's conduct. This means that it is sometimes difficult to teach these narratives as a guide to how to behave. This led to their systematic reinterpretation by rabbinic midrash so that black and white take the place of subtle shades of grey.

So, for example, the words "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian ... mocking," were understood by the sages to mean that the thirteen-year-old Ishmael was guilty of idolatry, illicit sex or murder. This is clearly not the plain sense of the verse. It is, instead, an interpretation that would justify Sarah's insistence that Ishmael be sent away.

Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes explained that the entire tendency of midrash to make the heroes seem perfect and the villains completely evil is for educational reasons. The word Torah means "teaching" or "instruction," and it is difficult to teach ethics through stories whose characters are fraught with complexity and ambiguity.

Yet the Torah does paint its characters in shades of grey. Why so? For three reasons:

The first is that the moral life is not something we understand in depth all at once. As children we hear stories of heroes and villains. We learn basic distinctions: right and wrong, good and bad, permitted and forbidden. As we grow, though, we begin to realise how difficult some decisions are. Do I go to Egypt? Do I stay in Canaan? Do I show compassion to my servant's child at the risk that he may be a bad influence on my child who has been chosen by God for a sacred mission? Anyone who thinks such decisions are easy is not yet morally mature. So the best way of teaching ethics is to do so by way of stories that can be read at different levels at different times in our life.

Second, not only are decisions difficult. People are also complex. No one in the Torah is portrayed as perfect. Noah, the only person in Tanakh to be called righteous, ends drunk and dishevelled. Moses, Aaron and Miriam are all punished for their sins. So is King David. Solomon, wisest of men, ends his life as a deeply compromised leader. Many of the prophets suffered dark nights of despair. "There is none so righteous on earth," says Kohelet, "as to do only good and never sin." No religious literature was ever further from hagiography, idealisation and hero-worship.

In the opposite direction, even the non-heroes have their saving graces. Esau is a loving son, and when he meets his brother Jacob after a long estrangement, they kiss, embrace and go their separate ways. Levi, condemned by Jacob for his violence, counts Moses, Aaron and Miriam among his grandchildren. Even Pharaoh, the man who enslaved the Israelites, had a moral heroine for a daughter. The descendants of Korach sang psalms in the Temple of Solomon. This too is moral maturity, light-years removed from the dualism adopted by many religions, including some Jewish sects (like the Qumran sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls), that divides humanity into children of light and children of darkness.

Lastly and most important, more than any other religious literature, the Torah makes an absolute distinction between earth and heaven, God and human beings. Because God is God, there is space for humans to be human. In Judaism the line dividing them is never blurred. How rare this is was pointed out by Walter Kaufmann:

In India, the Jina and the Buddha, founders of two new religions in the sixth century BCE, came to be worshipped later by their followers. In China, Confucius and Lao-tze came to be deified. To the non-Christian, Jesus seems to represent a parallel case. In Greece, the heroes of the past were held to have been sired by a god or to have been born of goddesses, and the dividing line between gods and men became fluid. In Egypt, the Pharaoh was considered divine.

In Israel, says Kaufmann, "no man was ever worshipped or accorded even semi-divine status. This is one of the most extraordinary facts about the religion of the Old Testament." There never was a cult of Moses or any other biblical figure. That is why "no man knows Moses' burial place to this day," so that it could never become a place of pilgrimage.

No religion has held a higher view of humanity than the book that tells us we are each in the image and likeness of God. Yet none has been more honest about the failings of even the greatest. God does not ask us to be perfect. He asks us, instead, to take risks in pursuit of the right and the good, and to acknowledge the mistakes we will inevitably make.

In Judaism the moral life is about learning and growing, knowing that even the greatest have failings and even the worst have saving graces. It calls for humility about ourselves and generosity toward others. This unique blend of idealism and realism is morality at its most demanding and mature.

Shabbat Shalom.

Footnotes:

[1] Ramban, Commentary to Genesis 12: 10, based on Zohar, Tazria, 52a.

[2] Commentary to Genesis 16: 6.

* Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar. See: <https://rabbisacks.org/perfect-matriarchs-patriarchs-lech-lecha-5775/><https://rabbisacks.org/perfect-matriarchs-patriarchs-lech-lecha-5775/>

Abraham's Miraculous Battle to Save Lot The War of the Vale of Siddim

By Freidi Posner*

The war¹ of the four kings of what one day would become Assyria² against the five kings of the Dead Sea region was fascinating, not because of the feats of the conquering armies or because of the staggering death count, but because of the role that Abraham our patriarch played in it.

The Political Background

Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, ruled much of the region to the north and east of the Land of Canaan but remained

unsatisfied. He led his army in a series of wars, massacring whoever crossed his path, building an empire of countries whose kings were loyal and willing to pay an annual tribute.

After twelve years, five countries within the empire banded together and stopped answering to Chedorlaomer.³ The dictators of each of these lands were strong and cruel. United, they quit paying tribute for thirteen years⁴ and formed a coalition against him.

Although three kings remained faithful, Chedorlaomer prepared to serve the insurgents a heavy blow they wouldn't forget.

The War

In the fourteenth year of this insubordination, Chedorlaomer traveled south, flanked by the armies and kings of the three nations who had remained faithful:⁵ Amraphel, king of Shinar (Rashi maintains that is actually Nimrod, the king who threw Abraham into the furnace in Ur Kasdim⁶); Arioch, king of Elasar; and Tidal, king of Goyim.

Meanwhile, the five rulers in the south—King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemever of Zevoiim, and the king of Bela which is Zoar—met up in the Valley of Siddim.⁷ They believed that they would enjoy an important advantage, being that they were five against four. They also hoped that nearby kings who were similarly oppressed by Chedorlaomer would join their cause.⁸

When the two groups met, war broke out.

Entire cities were wiped off the map by the powerful northern armies. Other mighty nations in the area were also badly smitten.⁹ The five defending armies were left weak and in disarray.

Tar pits dotted the Siddim Valley, their asphalt used for construction.¹⁰ Many of the fleeing soldiers fell and died in these pits, as did the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Midrash reveals that, miraculously, the king of Sodom was able to climb out of the pit and survive.¹¹ The soldiers who managed to avoid the pits escaped to the hills of Judea.¹²

Chedorlaomer and his allies returned home victorious, having captured many victims, seizing all their possessions and food supplies.

Abraham Enters the Picture

As the four kings plundered Sodom, they were determined to capture one victim in particular: Lot, nephew of Abraham.

Lot used to live alongside his uncle, but they parted ways as their herds grew, to avoid disputes over pasturing grounds. Lot settled in Sodom, where he rose to prominence as one of the city's councilmen. The four kings made sure to capture and torture him¹³ because of his kinship to Abraham, whom they despised.¹⁴

A refugee, who managed to flee for his life, came to tell Abraham that Lot had been captured.

According to Midrashic tradition, this was Og, the giant who survived the Great Flood, and was now the sole survivor of the battle in Refaim—the second major calamity he was among the lucky few to survive.

His intentions, however, were far from noble. According to Rashi, he said to himself, "I know that Abraham is a kind man. When he hears that Lot has been taken captive, he will spare no effort to rescue him from the enemy army. Surely, he will be killed." Og hoped that he would then marry Sarai, Abraham's beautiful wife.¹⁵

Og was right. Well, sort of. When Abraham learned of his nephew's predicament, he gathered the 318 loyal members of his household to join him on a daring rescue mission. Abraham sensed their fear, rebuked them for their lack of faith, and gave them money and precious stones. He even offered them a way out, "Is there anyone among you who is faint-hearted? Is there anyone who is afraid to go into battle? Let him return home now." Most took up the offer, leaving just a few men at Abraham's side, including Eliezer, his longtime faithful servant.¹⁶ As for Abraham, he was not afraid; his indomitable faith in G d made him certain he'd succeed.

Wishing to utilize the element of surprise,¹⁷ Abraham and his small army set out in the darkness of night. Although they

were ten days' travel from the four kings, they miraculously reached Damascus—where the kings were—in a single day.^{18 19}

Abraham's Victory

When Abraham and his small army faced their opponents, Abraham threw dust and straw in their direction. Miraculously, when the dust and straw were airborne, G d transformed the dust into spears and the straw into arrows. Conversely, the arrows and spears that were directed at Abraham were transformed into dust.²⁰

When the kings realized that they were powerless against Abraham they ran for their lives. Abraham pursued them until night fell. When it became too dark to see where they were heading, Abraham divided his men into groups to seek the enemy in as many directions as possible. Three of the four mighty kings were killed. Only Amrafel survived.

Abraham returned with Lot, whom he had freed from captivity, and all of the possessions and people that were taken in the war. The king of Sodom—the ringleader of the five rebellious kings—emerged from the pit where he had been hiding and asked Abraham to return his subjects and wives, “graciously” offering that Abraham keep the possessions.

(The Torah pauses here to inform us of the kind gifts that Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought to Abraham and the warriors who were with him. Midrash Tanchuma says that this is despite the fact that Abraham killed Melchizedek's descendants in battle,²¹ to show us that Abraham had no problem receiving gifts which came from a moral source, and why he rejected the offer of the King of Sodom. The Ohr Hachayim gives the explanation that this draws a clear contrast between the behavior of the just and that of the wicked.²²)

Abraham said to the king of Sodom, “I will not take from you so much as a thread or a sandal strap; you shall not say, ‘It is I who made Abraham rich.’”

Afterthought

A cornerstone of Jewish faith is that G d controls the world and everything happens by His will. Abraham chose to go into a seemingly hopeless battle only because of his trust in G d.

There is a saying in the Talmud that those on the path to performing a mitzvah will not be susceptible to harm.²³ When we follow Abraham's example and choose to follow the path of goodness and kindness, we can be certain that no harm will befall us.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Genesis chapter 14.
2. Abarbanel on Genesis 14:1.
3. Genesis 14:4.
4. Malbim on Genesis 14:4.
5. Genesis 4:5.
6. Rashi on Genesis 14:1.
7. Genesis 14:8.
8. Radak on Genesis 14:8.
9. Genesis 14:7.

10. Targum Onkelos on Genesis 14:10.
11. Bereishit Raba 42:7.
12. Genesis 14:10.
13. Genesis 14:12.
14. Sforno on Genesis 14:12.
15. Rashi on Genesis 14:13.
16. Daat Zkeinim on Genesis 14:14.
17. Sforno on Genesis 14:15.
18. Bereishit Rabba 43:3.
19. Ramban 14:15.
20. Bereshit Rabbah 43,7.
21. Midrash Tanchuma Lech Lecha 15.
22. Ohr Hachayim on Genesis 14:18.
23. Pesachim 8b.

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Lech Lecha: Follow the Tide or Swim Upstream?

By Chana Weisberg*

In Lech Lecha, we are introduced to Abraham, the first Jew and the forefather of our people. Abraham is called Ivri, a Hebrew, and the name has stuck for his descendants.

On a simple level, he was called Ivri because geographically he came from ever hanahar, the "other side of the river." On a deeper level, he stood on the "other side" of the world in his principles and moral standing. In a dark, decadent world, he shined the light of monotheism and divine moral clarity.

G-d entrusted the Jewish people with the obligation of being "a light unto the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). It's a job description that not only is arduous, but has caused genuine envy as well as the deepest and most vile hatred. Most of humanity would rather yield to the prevailing status quo and social pressure than deviate from its accustomed behaviors.

Abraham, too, could easily have chosen to follow the norm; instead, he followed his soul. As a result, he was thrown into a burning furnace for not bowing to idols, was expelled from his home, was tested countless times, and only miraculously escaped with his life. Nevertheless, he stood tall and firm in what he knew to be the truth.

He passed on this legacy to his descendants.

We all have choices: To follow the tide or to swim upstream. To be satisfied with the status quo, or to improve our world through a higher spiritual service or a greater moral code. Throughout the centuries, Abraham's descendants have made disproportionate contributions in these areas.

Our greatest haters realized that this was our fate. They also realized that this desire to make our world a home for G-d is inherently embedded within our Jewish soul.

Within each and every one of us.

-- From: Shabbas DeLights *

* **Shabbat deLights** is a collection of essays on the Torah portion by acclaimed author, editor and teacher, Chana Weisberg.

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Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The Courage not to Conform

Leaders lead. That does not mean to say that they do not follow. But what they follow is different from what most people follow. They don't conform for the sake of conforming. They don't do what others do merely because others are doing it. They follow an inner voice, a call. They have a vision, not of what is, but of what might be. They think outside the box. They march to a different tune.

Never was this more dramatically signalled than in the first words of God to Abraham, the words that set Jewish history in motion: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you. (Gen. 12:1)"

Why? Because people do conform. They adopt the standards and absorb the culture of the time and place in which they live – "your land." At a deeper level, they are influenced by friends and neighbours – "your birthplace." More deeply still they are shaped by their parents, and the family in which they grew up – "your father's house."

I want you, says God to Abraham, to be different. Not for the sake of being different, but for the sake of starting something new: a religion that will not worship power and the symbols of power – for that is what idols really were and are. I want you, said God, to "teach your children and your household afterward to follow the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (Gen. 18:19).

To be a Jew is to be willing to challenge the prevailing consensus when, as so often happens, nations slip into worshipping the old gods. They did so in Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. That was the age of nationalism: the pursuit of power in the name of the nation-state that led to two world wars and tens of millions of deaths. It is the age we are living in now as North Korea acquires and Iran pursues nuclear weapons so that they can impose their

ambitions by force. It is what is happening today throughout much of the Middle East and Africa as nations descend into violence and into what Hobbes called "the war of every man against every man." [1]

We make a mistake when we think of idols in terms of their physical appearance – statues, figurines, icons. In that sense they belong to the ancient times we have long outgrown. The way to think of idols is in terms of what they represent. They symbolise power. That is what Ra was for the Egyptians, Baal for the Canaanites, Chemosh for the Moabites, Zeus for the Greeks, and what missiles and bombs are for terrorists and rogue states today.

Power allows us to rule over others without their consent. As the Greek historian Thucydides put it: "The strong do what they wish and the weak suffer what they must." [2] Judaism is a sustained critique of power. That is the conclusion I have reached after a lifetime of studying our sacred texts. It is about how a nation can be formed on the basis of shared commitment and collective responsibility. It is about how to construct a society that honours the human person as the image and likeness of God. It is about a vision, never fully realised but never abandoned, of a world based on justice and compassion, in which "They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

Abraham is without doubt the most influential person who ever lived. Today he is claimed as the spiritual ancestor of 2.3 billion Christians, 1.8 billion Muslims and 14 million Jews, more than half the people alive today. Yet he ruled no empire, commanded no great army, performed no miracles and proclaimed no prophecy. He is the supreme example in all of history of influence without power.

Why? Because he was prepared to be different. As the Sages say, he was called ha-ivri, "the Hebrew," because "all the world was on one side (be-ever echad) and he was on the other". [3] Leadership, as every leader knows, can be lonely. Yet you continue to do what you have to do because you know that the majority is not always right and conventional wisdom is not always wise. Dead fish go with

the flow. Live fish swim against the current. So it is with conscience and courage. So it is with the children of Abraham. They are prepared to challenge the idols of the age.

After the Holocaust, some social scientists were haunted by the question of why so many people were prepared, whether by active participation or silent consent, to go along with a regime that was committing one of the great crimes against humanity. One key experiment was conducted by Solomon Asch. He assembled a group of people, asking them to perform a series of simple cognitive tasks. They were shown two cards, one with a line on it, the other with three lines of different lengths, and asked which was the same size as the line on the first. Unbeknown to one participant, all the others had been briefed by Asch to give the correct answer for the first few cards, and then to answer incorrectly for most of the rest. On a significant number of occasions the experimental subject gave an answer he could see was the wrong, because everyone else had done so. Such is the power of the pressure to conform: it can lead us to say what we know is untrue.

More frightening still was the Stanford experiment carried out in the early 1970s by Philip Zimbardo. The participants were randomly assigned roles as guards or prisoners in a mock prison. Within days the students cast as guards were behaving abusively, some of them subjecting the "prisoners" to psychological torture. The students cast as prisoners put up with this passively, even siding with the guards against those who resisted. The experiment was called off after six days, by which time even Zimbardo had found himself drawn into the artificial reality he had created. The pressure to conform to assigned roles is strong enough to lead people into doing what they know is wrong.

That is why Abraham, at the start of his mission, was told to leave "his land, his birthplace and his father's house," to free himself from the pressure to conform. Leaders must be prepared not to follow the consensus. One of the great writers on leadership, Warren Bennis, writes: "By the time we reach puberty,

By Sari, Russell, Avi, Atara and Arella Mayer on the occasion of the 18th yearzeit of Sari's mother, Mrs. Rita Walker, z"l (Rivka bat Reuven) - 13 Marcheshvan

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the world has shaped us to a greater extent than we realise. Our family, friends, and society in general have told us – by word and example – how to be. But people begin to become leaders at that moment when they decide for themselves how to be.”[4]

One reason why Jews have become, out of all proportion to their numbers, leaders in almost every sphere of human endeavour, is precisely this willingness to be different. Throughout the centuries, Jews have been the most striking example of a group that refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith.

One other finding of Solomon Asch is worth noting. He noted that when just one other person was willing to support the individual who could see that the others were giving the wrong answer, it gave him the strength to stand up against the consensus. That is why, however small their numbers, Jews created communities. It is hard to lead alone, far less hard to lead in the company of others even if you are a minority.

Judaism is the counter-voice in the conversation of humankind. As Jews, we do not follow the majority merely because it is the majority. In age after age, century after century, Jews were prepared to do what the poet Robert Frost immortalised: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference.[5] It is what makes a nation of leaders.

[1] Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), part 1, ch. 13.

[2] Thucydides, 5.89.

[3] Genesis Rabbah 42:8

[4] Walter Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 49.

[5] Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken, Birches, and Other Poems* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1916), 10.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

“The Lord said to Abram: ‘Get out of your country, and from your homeland, and from your father’s home, to the land that I will show you.’” (Gen. 12:1)

Abraham’s father, Terah, is often perceived as a primitive symbol of an outmoded religion, from whom his iconoclast, revolutionary son broke away to adhere to a new faith that would ultimately redeem the world. “Get out of your father’s home,” says God to the newly-penitent Abraham.

But what if there is another way of looking at Terah, more in accord with the actual words of the Torah? What if it was Terah who had discovered God first—rendering Abraham less a trailblazer and more a faithful follower?

Perhaps Abraham was not so much a rebellious son as he was a respectful son, who continued and built upon the road laid out for him by his father?

After all, there is every reason to believe that when God tells Abraham to go forth from his country, his birthplace, to a land that God will reveal, God is communicating to a man who was already aware of Him, and of a mind-set that was most probably based on a religious perspective first learned at home.

Terah himself was at one time an idolater, but may have turned to the One God while Abraham was yet a very young lad, or even before Abraham was born. I suspect that a subtle clue testifying to the correctness of this position is to be found in an enigmatic verse:

“Terah took his son, Abram; his grandson Lot, the son of Haran; and his daughter-in-law, Sarai, the wife of his son Abram; and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran.” (Gen. 11:31-32)

Why does Terah set out for Canaan, the very place where Abraham himself ends up at the relatively advanced age of seventy-five at the behest of the call from God? Could Abraham have been completing the journey his father had begun decades earlier? And what was special about Canaan? Why would Terah have wished to journey there, and why does the Torah believe the journey significant enough to mention Terah’s effort to arrive at that destination?

Further on in this portion, Abraham (then Abram) wages a successful war against four despotic kings in order to save his nephew Lot, who along with others had been taken captive by them. Malkizedek, the King of Shalem (“Jeru” = city, “Shalem” = peace) and a priest of God on High, recognizes the justice of Abram’s battle against tyranny, and greets the victor with bread and wine, offering the benediction:

“Blessed be Abram to God on High, Maker of heaven and earth, and blessed be God on High, Who delivered your enemies into your hand.” (Gen. 14:19)

Abram then gives Malkizedek, whom he clearly respects, a tribute of one tenth of his spoils. The city of Shalem (Jerusalem) was the capital city of Canaan—and this is the first time it is mentioned in the Bible. Malkizedek literally means “the King of Righteousness”, and Jerusalem is biblically known as the “City of Righteousness.” (Isa. 1:26) From whence

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did this Malkizedek, apparently older than Abram, hear of God on High (El Elyon)?

Nahmanides (on Gen. 14:18) maintains that from the very beginning of the world, the monotheistic traditions of Adam and Noah were preserved in only one place in the world—Jerusalem. Its king, Shem, son of Noah, also known as Malkizedek, was a priest to God-on-High. If this is the case, it is plausible that Terah was someone who had come to believe in this One God even in the spiritual wilds of Ur of the Chaldeans—and therefore set out for Canaan, the land of monotheism, where he wished to raise his family.

Terah may even have had personal contact with Malkizedek, who greets the son of his friend with religious words of encouragement to the victor of a religious battle in which right triumphed over might, a victory of the God of ethical monotheism. Like so many contemporary Jews who set out for Israel, Terah had to stop half way and didn’t quite make it. But all along God was waiting for Terah’s son to embrace the opportunity to continue where his father had left off.

The common view of Terah has Abraham defying his father’s way of life as he creates his own path, becoming in effect a model for many modern day ba’alei teshuva (penitents) who attempt to radically break away from non-believing parents, rejecting everything from their past.

According to the understanding we have suggested here, however, Abraham is actually following in his father’s footsteps, building on the foundation built by his father, redefining his father’s way of life, and for the first time in history, paving the way for himself and others to move up the spiritual ladder by not only continuing, but also advancing.

The Person in the Parsha

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Walking With and Walking Before

When I was still a pulpit rabbi back in Baltimore, I would meet with a group of teenagers from time to time. The agenda was open-ended, and my goal was to encourage the group to share their feelings and attitudes freely. One of the favorite topics chosen by the kids was their school curriculum and what they found wrong with it.

I learned many things from this group of adolescents, whose critique of the curricula of the schools they attended was sharp and accurate. I particularly remember the outburst of one exceptionally creative young man. Let us call him Josh.

He was a student in a very academically oriented high school which put its major emphasis upon textual study. “What am I supposed to do with my creativity”, he asked. “Where is there room in the school for me to express my artistic talents?”

I was hard-pressed to come up with an answer for Josh’s pained query. All I could say was that he was personally experiencing a tension which pervades the history of our religious faith. It is the tension between conformity to the rules and regulations of our sacred texts versus the natural and powerful human need for creative expression and innovation.

Our religion reveres tradition and continuity. Attempts to question tradition and to stake out new spiritual turf have been typically viewed in our history as heresy and rebellion. Is there no room for creative novelty in our faith?

I think that there is room for such creativity, and I think that it is none other than Abraham himself who is the first example in the Torah of innovative ingenuity, within the context of religious service.

In this week’s Torah portion, Lech Lecha, we find God Himself describing Abraham as one who “walks before Me”, “hit’halech lefanai...” (Genesis 17:1). Our sages contrast this description of Abraham with an earlier description of Noah, to be found in last week’s Torah portion. There we read, “Noah walked with God”, “et HaElokim” (Genesis 6:9). Noah walked with God, whereas Abraham walked before Him.

Noah walked with God and required Divine support to live his religious life. He was not able to walk before God. He could not take the initiative and strike out on his own. He needed to be certain of God’s will before he could act.

Abraham, on the other hand, walked before God. He stepped out on his own and risked acting independently and creatively. He was confident in his own religious judgment and did not require God’s prior approval for all of his actions. Indeed, he dared to challenge God’s own judgment.

Thus, we never find Noah speaking out in defense of his generation, nor does he pray for their salvation. Abraham, on the contrary, forcefully defends sinful Sodom and Gomorrah and prays even for his adversaries.

Of Moses too, it can be said that he walked before God. He broke the tablets on his own initiative, and, according to our sages, added a day to God’s own timetable for giving the Torah. In both cases, we are told that the Lord congratulated him for his bold creative actions.

I remember reading an anecdote about Rav Kook, the first chief Rabbi of the Holy Land, which illustrates his preference for the creative genius over the person who just conforms. Rav Kook once had to decide a halachic issue by resolving a disagreement between two great Talmudic authorities. The dispute was between the author of Darchei Teshuvah, a monumental anthology of halachic dicta, and the Maharsham, who authored many volumes in response to questions arising from the circumstances of new technological inventions.

Rav Kook decided in favor of the Maharsham over the Darchei Teshuva. He argued that whereas the latter was a gaon me’asef, a genius at recording the opinions of others, the former was a gaon yotzer, an inventive genius. The creative authority trumped the expert anthology.

One of the areas of psychology which has always fascinated me has been the research on the phenomenon of human creativity. One line of that research suggests that there are two modes of thought of which we are all capable, although some of us are better at one and some are better at the other.

There are those of us who are convergent thinkers. Our ideas connect and ultimately merge with the ideas of our predecessors and peers. Others think divergently, and their ideas veer from earlier norms and carve out new paths and different solutions.

The contrast between Abraham and Noah suggests that although Abraham was the model of ultimate obedience to God’s will, he nevertheless was capable of divergent thinking. He was able to walk before God. Noah, however, could only think convergently and, figuratively speaking, needed to hold God’s hand.

It is important that we realize that creativity is not at odds with spirituality and with faithful adherence to meticulous religious observance. We must not be afraid of our own powers of creative thinking.

The realization that there is a place for creativity in the worship of the Almighty is especially essential for those who are responsible for the curricula of our educational institutions. They must be on guard never to stifle the wonderful creative impulses which typify youth. They must cultivate those impulses and allow for their expression within our tradition. And we must allow for the development of contemporary Abrahams, and not be satisfied to raise a generation of mere Noahs.

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Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

"Pshat" in Rashi - Developing Potential; How Did Rashi Know That?

The Almighty informs Avraham Avinu that his wife will have a child: “And G-d said to Avraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife—do not call her name Sarai, for Sarah is her name. I will bless her, and, I will also give you a son through her; I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples will rise from her.’” [Bereshis 17:15] Avraham is flabbergasted to receive this prophecy, but then he says, “O that Yishmael might live before You.” [Bereshis 17:18] Rashi interprets “Would that Yishmael should live! I am not worthy to receive a grant of reward such as this.”

Then the pasuk continues: “Indeed your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Yitzchak; and I will fulfill My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. But regarding Yishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and I will make him fruitful and will increase him most exceedingly; he will beget twelve princes (shneim asar Nesi'im) and I will make him into a great nation.” [Bereshis 17:19-20]

Rashi comments on the fact that Hashem promised to give Yishmael twelve princes (Nesi'im): “They will disappear like clouds.” (The word nesi'im can also mean clouds) “as in the pasuk ‘clouds and wind’ (nesi'im v'ruach)” [Mishlei 25:14]. We use this latter meaning of the word in tefilas geshem [the prayer for rain recited on Shmini Atzeres] and in the Hoshanos (that are recited on Succos). Rashi is interpreting this pasuk, in which Hashem is promising Yishmael nesi'im (as opposed to Sarim or Roshim, which also mean princes or leaders), as not such good news. Yishmael will have princes alright, but they will be like clouds (nesi'im). Clouds come and clouds go! Clouds disappear! The twelve princes Yishmael will have are no big deal. They will dissipate like clouds.

The Tolner Rebbe asks a question. Rashi says in the beginning of Bereshis [3:8] “I have only come to provide the p'shuto shel mikra [the simple interpretation of Scripture].” In other words, Rashi realizes that if he wanted to explain the pesukim of Chumash according to all the Medrashic interpretations, then a set of Chumash with Rashi would be as big as a set of shas. There are thousands of medrashim. Rashi makes it clear in Sefer Bereshis that he does not consider it his mission to provide a Medrashic interpretation of Scripture. Certainly, Rashi occasionally quotes Medrashic interpretations, and he typically will label an interpretation as such. However, Rashi considers his job to say “p'shat” [the simple interpretation of the pesukim of Chumash].

Given that “job description” of Rashi—to say p’shat—why does he interpret the pasuk regarding Yishamel “he will give birth to twelve nesi’im” in this way? The linkage to the pasuk in Mishlei regarding the clouds certainly does not seem to be the simple interpretation! Where does Rashi see that this interpretation of the word nesi’im becomes peshuto shel mikra in this context?

This question did not originate with the Tolner Rebbe. The super commentaries on Rashi—the Mizrahi, the Maharal, and others—are troubled by this comment of Rashi as well. It is a strange Rashi. Rav Eliyahu Mizrahi answers that if it really meant princes, it should have used a more common Biblical expression for political and military leaders—sarim, alufim, etc. Since the relatively unusual expression for head of a tribe—nesi’im—is used, it means dissipating like clouds.

But this answer leaves something to be desired. Is nesi’im such an uncommon expression? The argument can be made that it is every bit as natural to use nesi’im as it is sarim and alufim! What kind of answer is this?

The Tolner Rebbe gives a brilliant interpretation: The solution lies in a Medrash Tanchuma in Parshas Vayechi. When Yaakov Avinu blesses the twelve tribes on his deathbed, the Medrash says “All these tribes of Israel, twelve in number, these are the Tribes.” The pasuk there uses the expression “Kol eleh shivtei Yisrael, shneim asar” but by Yishmael the pasuk says “twelve nesi’im he will father (yolid)”. The Medrash contrasts the Biblical expression used to describe the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve princes of Yishmael.

What is the contrast? The Tolner Rebbe says the key to the contrast lies in one word: shneim asar nesi’im yolid. What is unusual about this expression? The expression is unusual because a person does not give birth to a prince. No one is born a nasi. No one is born President of the United States. You become President. You need to work your way into the job. What does it mean “he will give birth to twelve princes?”

The Tolner Rebbe explains that this is the fundamental nature of Yishmael. Yishmael is about extraordinary potential that was there at birth but was never developed. When someone has extraordinary potential that was never developed, nothing comes from it. He gives an example.

Sometimes a youngster is a child prodigy (an illuyishe kid), a genius of a child. People may assume the child will grow up to be the next gadol hador! However, genius needs to be cultivated. It must be nurtured. A child prodigy may sit down at the piano and play beautiful

music when he is three years old. If someone takes that three year old and sends him to the Juilliard School of Music where he can be trained and develop his talent, then he can become something special. However, if someone has a child genius—whether in math, science, music, or art, or in learning—and no one works with him and develops him, nothing will come of him. (If someone has been in Yeshiva long enough, he sees this often.)

Hashem tells Avraham, “Avraham, you prayed for Yishmael. Okay. Your prayers will be answered. He will give birth to twelve princes—child prodigies with awesome potential. But the promise is only that they will be that way at birth. Let’s see what he does with them!” Yishmael, unfortunately has a history of not developing his talent.

That is the point of the Medrash. “All these are the Tribes of Israel...” Yaakov Avinu had twelve sons by his death bed. They were not all perfect. But they worked on themselves. They developed. There on his death bed, Yaakov Avinu was still giving them mussar. “You still have not perfected yourselves.” This is Klal Yisrael. Klal Yisrael were not perfect from birth. They had to develop, they had to work, and they had to sweat. Yishmael fathered “twelve princes” from the moment of their birth. That is the difference.

From this, the Tolner Rebbe goes on to decry the phenomenon we have in our day and time of a “Yeshiva for metzuyanim” [A yeshiva for geniuses]. Sometimes a good boy is not the brightest child, but he is willing to work hard to achieve in learning. Many times, his parents will apply to get him into a high quality Yeshiva and they are told “No. We cannot take him into our school. He is not a genius.” So what if he is not a genius? He is a “plugger”! At the end of the day, that wins the race. You want geniuses? That is Yishmael. Klal Yisrael is “Kol Eleh Shivtei Yisrael – twelve in number.” He slams the concept of Yeshivas where everybody must be “above average.”

Travelling a Circuitous Route before “Tying the Knot” - The other observation I would like to share is a story I heard in the middle of last winter. The details of the story were becoming a bit hazy, but I decided I wanted to tell over the story this week. The fellow who told me the story last winter is Yosef Chaim Golding. I have worked with him in the past, but do not see or talk to him on a regular basis. Amazingly, just this Tuesday, unexpectedly, he called me about something. I asked him to please tell me over again the story he told me last winter. Here is the story:

A couple of years ago, we said a shiur on the week of Parshas Lech Lecha about tying shoes. The Halacha proscribes an appropriate sequence for putting on and tying shoes based

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on the laws of putting on hand tefillin (which we put on the left hand and tie with the right hand). Usually, we give the right side precedence. Therefore, we first put on our right shoes and then our left shoes. However, by tying, we tie the left shoe first, just as we tie tefillin on our left arms.

The connection between shoes and tefillin is learned from this week’s parsha where Avraham comments that he would not take from the King of Sodom “neither a thread nor a shoelace” (so that the king not later claim that he was responsible for Avraham’s wealth). The gemara in Chullin comments that because of this statement of Avraham, his descendants merited receiving the mitzvah of techeiles [the blue thread on the tzitzis fringes] and tefillin (represented by the “shoelace”). Since the Talmud makes a connection between tefillin and shoelaces, the tying of shoes is supposed to correspond with the tying of tefillin (where the left side has precedence).

Yosef Golding told me the following amazing story, which he heard from a person who was present in a mourner’s house, when the subject told the story: Dr. Joseph Kamenetsky was one of the prime leaders of the Day School movement in America. He was a student of Rav Shraga Feivel Mendelovitz. All the Day Schools that were in the “hinterlands” were the result of Dr. Joseph Kamenetsky’s work. He passed away several years ago. His daughter was sitting Shiva in Eretz Yisrael. A fellow came in to be menachem avel, to offer consolation to the mourners. All of the family members began whispering with each other to try to figure out his identity. No one knew him. The fellow explained why he came:

I am here because I want to show appreciation to your father and grandfather, Dr. Joseph Kamenetsky. I come from a small town in America. My parents were not religious. They sent me to a Day School. My father really was not into religion, but he sent me to a Day School. One day, he wanted to take me somewhere and called up to my room and said, “Hurry up! We are late. You need to come down already so we can go!” I told him “Sorry, Daddy, I have to retie my shoes.” My father was incredulous. “You have to retie your shoes? What’s the problem?”

I told him that after tying my shoes I remembered that I did it wrong. Instead of tying the left shoe first and then the right shoe, I tied the right shoe and then the left shoe. So now I must untie the shoes and then retie the left followed by the right. My father said “Are you out of your mind? Where did you get this craziness from?” I told him “That is what they taught me in school!” My father said, “That is what they teach you in school? Are they crazy? I am taking you out of that school!”

His father pulled him out of Day School and put him into Public School. The son went “the way of all flesh” and grew up an irreligious Jew to the extent that years later he became engaged to a non-Jewish woman.

Now comes the incredible part. On the day of his marriage, he bent down to tie his shoe. He bent down to tie his shoe and he tied his left shoe first. Why? Because that’s what he learned in school! He said to himself: “I am going to throw this away? I am going to completely abandon Judaism?” He called up his bride—on what was to be their wedding day—and told her “I cannot go through with it.”

What happened? He went to Eretz Yisrael. He became a baal teshuva [newly observant]. He learned in Yeshiva. He was getting older and he had not yet found a shidduch [matrimonial match]. One day, his Rosh Yeshiva told him, “I have a girl for you. She is a nice religious girl. However, you should know that she is a convert.” The “hero of the story,” who was getting older by now, said, “I don’t care!” He called up the girl to make the date. Lo and behold—it was the bride he abandoned on the day of their scheduled wedding!”

After that traumatic experience of her groom cancelling her wedding on the day of the wedding, she said to herself, “If someone is willing to give up his love for his bride for a thing called Judaism, I need to see for myself what it is all about!” She investigated Yiddishkeit. She wound up in Eretz Yisrael. She went to a ba’alas teshuva institution. She converted and became observant.

He married this very girl to whom he was once engaged and almost married!

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis
Did you know that Sheva Brachot are in the Parasha of Lech Lecha? - Immediately after Hashem commands Avram and Sarai to uproot themselves from the land of Mesopotamia in order to make Aliyah ‘el ha’aretz asher areka’ – to the land which Hashem will show them. Hashem follows up by giving seven blessings to Avram; ‘Ve’escha L’goi gadol’ – and I will make you into a great nation, ‘v’avarechecha’ – and I will bless you, ‘Veagadla Shemecha’ – and I will make your name great, ‘v’heye bracha’ – and you will be a blessing, ‘V’avarcha mevarachecha’ – I will bless those who bless you, ‘umcallecha a’or’ – and I will curse those who curse you. And the seventh blessing is ‘v’nivrechu vecha kol mishpachot ha’adama’ – and may every family on earth be blessed thanks to the impact you will have on them.

Such wonderful blessings! And actually these

seven blessings match the sentiments that accompany our good wishes to every bride and groom for whom we recite ‘sheva brachot’ under the ‘chupa’ and during the first seven days of their marriage. We want them to be blessed by Hashem, we want them to have a positive impact on their surroundings. We want Hashem to be with them always and to prevent others from standing in the way of their success.

There is a further strong comparison. You see the term ‘lech lecha’ appears twice in the bible, once in our parsha of Lech Lecha and the second, fascinatingly, in a week’s time, when we will read in Parashat Va’eira, ‘v’lech lecha el eretz hamoria’ – uproot yourself, make an Aliyah, to the land of Moriah and that’s where the akeida (the binding of Isaac) took place.

What Hashem wanted to say to Avram was that it is not good enough just to make a physical Aliyah to the Holy Land. Within the Holy Land you need to make a subsequent spiritual Aliyah to Moriah – which according to our tradition stands for ‘she’misham yozzeit chora’ah l’yisrael’ – ‘from there instruction emerges for the people of Israel’. As it says in the verse ‘ki metzion tezei torah’ the torah comes forth from Zion’ which is Moriah/Jerusalem.

Similarly we would like to inspire every bride and groom to embark on a double Lech Lecha. First of all may God bless them that they should reach the promised land of their dreams and that in their marriage they will not only bond together physically but to have a spiritual Aliyah, leading to a meaningful and fulfilled life of engagement with our torah and with our roots.

So what we find, quite unexpectedly, is that already in the Parasha of Lech Lecha, as soon as there was a couple on earth who recognised the truth of the one living God, not only did Hashem give them his blessing, he provided the key for them to be a blessing for everyone on earth.

OTS Dvar Torah

Moriah Dayan: Avraham’s way is about going forward and constantly developing

It is no coincidence that the term halakha is used to denote the path a Jew is commanded to take. This is the path we tread, the path along which we develop. We don’t remain “boxed-in” or adhere to norms. This is a path that requires us to hear the same call that Avraham heard; to walk, to seek, to move, and to develop in sync with our life conditions.

Our Parsha opens with a well-known commandment to our forefather Avraham: “Go forth from your native land and from your

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father’s house to the land that I will show you.” The first question that arises here is, of course, why this commandment appears at this point, considering that Avraham and his family were already on the way to Canaan, as we read at the end of Parshat Noach (Genesis 11:31).

Furthermore, what was so unique about Avraham, on account of which he merited to be called by Hashem? The text does not tell us anything about what Avraham did. It doesn’t describe his characteristics, or give us any other information that could explain why Hashem calls out to him, and none other. When Hashem called out to Noah, in person, the text explains that “Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age.” We are also given Hanoch’s background: “Hanoch walked with God”. However, in Avraham’s case, the text remains vague, and except for a few technical details on his family history and the decision to leave Ur Kasdim and head to Canaan, we are given no substantial information on his character or actions which might explain why Hashem called upon him. So, why did Avraham merit to be called upon by God?

The Sefat Emet (Genesis 21) uses the Zohar to propose a marvelous explanation: It appears to me that the holy Zohar sees this very fact as what makes Avraham praiseworthy. He heard the call of ‘go forth’ which comes out from God to all people at all time, as it says ‘woe to those who sleep in their holes (and do not hear)!’ Our father Avraham heard the call and received its message.

In other words, the call to “go forth” is addressed to all individuals, and wasn’t made solely to Avraham. Hashem called each and every one of us. What’s unique about Avraham is that he heard this call, and accepted it. If we accept this explanation, it can also answer our first question. It is now clear why this call appears where it does in the text, even though Avraham and his family were already on the way to Canaan.

Yet we must delve deeper and reflect on the nature of the call that, according to the Zohar, was addressed to all individuals. What was this call supposed to evoke? Let us try to understand the way of Avraham, and what made him unique. Then, we can understand the nature of the call.

If we read the verses concerning Avraham carefully, we’ll discover several recurring words, such as “walking”, “travelling”, “speed”, “awakening early in the morning”, etc. What these words have in common is that they all indicate a state of motion. Our forefather Avraham was constantly in motion; he was in constant flux, developing all the time.

During the binding of Isaac, we once again encounter the expression *lech lecha*, “go forth” (Genesis 22:2). In that Parsha (ibid., 22:3), Avraham wakes up early in the morning, just as he woke up early in the morning when Sdom was overturned (ibid., 19:27).

In Parshat Vayerah (ibid. 18:2), Avraham ran out to the angels, and later (ibid., 18:7) he runs out to the cattle. In the same story, he rushes to Sarah, and tells her to hasten and prepare cakes (ibid., 18:8), and he also hastens the lad (ibid., 18:6).

This is perhaps Avraham’s most prominent character trait. This is something new that he brings to the world. “The whole world on one side, and Avraham on the other” (Bereishit Rabbah, Chapter 42). Avraham doesn’t remain rigid. He doesn’t adhere to norms. Rather, he is constantly evolving and tirelessly seeking.

In Bereishit Rabbah (39:1), our sages compare Avraham to a man who moves from place to place, and sees a lit-up mansion. The man wonders who owns the mansion, “the owner of the mansion peered out at him, and said to him: ‘I am the owner of the mansion’”. Then, our forefather Avraham would say: ‘Is it possible that this world has no owner?’ God looked down at him and said to him: ‘I am the owner of the world.’ Avraham’s sojourns cause him to constantly explore and seek out the roots of all things. In Bereishit Rabbah, our sages compare him to a plate filled with incense. As long as the plate lays still, it doesn’t give off any scent, but once the plate is moved, its fragrances can be smelled from a distance. Thus, Avraham constantly shifts from place to place, and it’s this constant motion that spreads a sweet scent around the world.

The Sefat Emet (in his interpretation to Genesis, chapter 29), discusses this trait:

Set forth from your land – for man is defined by walking, and must always move up, from level to level, abandoning nature and his habits. Even if one has reached a certain level of worship of Hashem, that, too, becomes second nature. Therefore, at all times, one must renew one’s ways to worship Hashem with one’s soul.

In our Parsha (Genesis 12:9) we find Avraham’s constant flux, which grows even more intense. The verse reads: “Then Abram journeyed more and more toward the Negev”. Rashi comments that “going on more and more refers to going in stages, he stayed here a month or more, then travelled on and pitched his tent in another place.” Perpetual motion.

Later in the Parsha (17:1), just before commanding him to perform the mitzva of circumcision, Hashem says to Avraham: “I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless.” Once more, Hashem calls out to Avraham, commanding him to walk, to remain in motion. The Malbim suggests a marvelous interpretation of this verse: “Walk before Me – for you shall be My partner in the act of Creation, to complete and fix everything.”

Motion and progress are how we become Hashem’s partners to the act of Creation, and as partners, our role is *tikkun olam* – fixing the world. The call that Hashem sent out to all individuals is the same call that Avraham heard – it was a call to walk and to progress, to be Hashem’s partner in the act of Creation.

It is no coincidence that the term *halakha* is used to denote the path a Jew is commanded to take. This is the path we tread, the path along which we develop. We don’t remain “boxed-in” or adhere to norms. This is a path that requires us to hear the same call that Avraham heard; to walk, to seek, to move, and to develop in sync with our life conditions.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Daniel Stein Living with Emunah

The text of the Torah provides us with a scant amount of information regarding the background of Avraham Avinu, and no indication whatsoever regarding the nature of his previous activities or accomplishments. We are formally introduced to Avraham somewhat abruptly, as he is taking leave of his ancestral birthplace and embarking upon a pilgrimage to Eretz Yisrael. It is only in the Medrash where we discover that Avraham independently deduced the existence of a Creator, and that he courageously promoted his monotheistic convictions to an unreceptive pagan family and society. In fact, the episode which occurred at Ur Kasdim, wherein Avraham was miraculously rescued from the clutches of a fiery furnace, is not mentioned at all in the pesukim of the Torah. Additionally, the Gemara (Avodah Zara 14b) attests that Avraham elucidated four hundred chapters of original halachic rulings in the area of avodah zara, none of which are recorded anywhere for posterity or future study. The Ramban and many other meforshim wonder, why would the Torah omit these impressive events which are not only critical to the narrative of Avraham but also justify why he alone was chosen to be the cornerstone of the Jewish people?

Rav Moshe Shapiro (Mimamakim) answers that while Avraham Avinu’s brave brand of belief in the existence of Hashem was undoubtably noteworthy, *emunah* comes in varying degrees and depths. The Maharal (Gevuros Hashem ch. 7) explains that a

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theoretical belief in the existence of Hashem is merely the preamble to a religious existence. Mature and complete *emunah* requires a person to also be able to implement their belief in Hashem as a guiding force in their lives, even when confronted with evidence to the contrary. Therefore, the Torah commences the story of Avraham not by describing the profundity of his innovative theological breakthroughs or even with his willingness to sacrifice himself while defending the tenets of his faith, but rather with the transitional moment when his *emunah* began to dictate his actions even in the face of adversity. The true triumph of traveling to Eretz Yisrael was not in overcoming the inconvenience of the initial upheaval, but in Avraham’s unwavering commitment to his divine mission even while being temporarily forced to flee as a result of the ensuing famine. Avraham only became the father of the Jewish people because his *emunah* in Hashem brought him to continue to invest in the promise of an enduring spiritual legacy despite the fact that he was aging and childless. Therefore, it is with these feats, and not the adventures of his past, that the Biblical narrative of Avraham’s life begins.

For this reason, only after enduring the first round of challenges and tests is Avraham regarded as a “believer”, when the pasuk states, “and he believed in Hashem and He considered it as charity” (Breishis 15:6). Why does Avraham only merit to be recognized as a believer at this relatively late stage of his life? How can the Torah discount the decades he spent developing and defending the articles of his faith? The Bnei Yissaschar (Sivan 5) explains that Avraham’s *emunah* fully blossomed for the first time when he refrained from doubting the wisdom and legitimacy of Hashem’s instructions despite the hardships and setbacks he had to endure. Only when he remained determined in the face of resistance did the reality of his transcendent *emunah* become tangible. This clarifies the comparison between Avraham’s *emunah* and the institution of charity. Ostensibly, the requirement to give charity results in a fiscal loss for the benefactor; after all, money is being transferred out of his account and deposited into the account of another. However, from the perspective of a *maamin*, who trusts in Hashem’s promise to reimburse and reward all those who distribute their resources to the needy, *tzedakah* is an investment which pays handsome dividends. Therefore, every sincere and enthusiastic act of *tzedakah* is likely the manifestation of a deeply held *emunah*.

According to the Rambam (Sefer Hamitzvos 1), belief in Hashem is a positive commandment and the first mitzvah. Other rishonim do not consider *emunah* to be a mitzvah at all since the entire notion of a mitzvah presupposes a basic belief in Hashem.

Indeed, without some measure of emunah the very concept of mitzvos cannot possibly exist, for how can we speak of a commandment without a commander. Since this argument is so overwhelmingly compelling, many meforshim suggest that the Rambam would have to cede this point as well. The Rambam only asserts that the mitzvah of emunah demands more than just a rudimentary belief in the existence of Hashem, it requires us to act in accordance with that belief and to remain steadfast despite the difficulties we might encounter along the way. In other words, to fulfill the first mitzvah, emunah must be practiced not just preached.

This is supported by the Gemara (Makkos 24a) which recounts that Habakkuk distilled the entire system of mitzvos to one central theme, which is encapsulated by the pasuk "ve'tzaddik be'emunaso yichyeh - the tzaddik lives with his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). The Ben Yehoyada notes that the gematriah of the word emunah is 102 while the numerical value of the word tzaddik is 204, because every tzaddik (204) must have two (2) dimensions to their emunah (2×102). There must be a theological belief in the existence of Hashem, but also a determination to put that emunah into practice. It is the relationship between these two facets of emunah which serves as the framework for the rest of religious life.

The Mishnah (Avos 5:19) identifies the disciples of Avraham as those who possess a good eye, a humble spirit, and a controlled personality. At first glance this is surprising, since the defining quality of Avraham was certainly his unshakable emunah. How can the emergence of emunah be completely absent in any reflection on Avraham Avinu's contributions? Rav Eliezer Geldzahler (Sichos Eliezer) suggests that intellectual emunah alone is not enough. Emunah is only meaningful when it is translated into action and ultimately produces a person who has a good eye, a humble spirit, and a controlled personality. Therefore, as we read about Avraham's historic accomplishments, we should be inspired to not only reinforce the theological foundations of our own faith, but to also concentrate on living constantly with that emunah and allowing it to become the guiding force in all that we do. Only if we are successful in this challenge may we proudly renew our claim to be the faithful students and spiritual heirs of Avraham Avinu.



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BS"D

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From: "**Ohr Somayach** <ohr@jer1.co.il>" [Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair]

Highlights of the Torah weekly portion Date: 10/29/95 1:52pm

Subject: **Torah Weekly Lech Lecha**

"Go for yourself..." (12:1). There was a traveler who was journeying from place to place. He came upon a large mansion ablaze with light. He said, "Don't tell me that this mansion has no master!" Suddenly, the owner peeked out and said to him "I am the master of the mansion..." Similarly, because Avraham Avinu looked at the world and said, "Don't tell me that this world has no Master," the Holy One, Blessed be He, 'peeked out' and said to him. "I am the Master of the world..." (Midrash Rabah)

"And Hashem said to Avram 'Go for yourself...' (12:1). The great tzadik, Reb Zushia of Anipoli once said "When I get to the next world, the World of Truth, if they say to me: 'Zushia why weren't you like the Baal Shem Tov?' That's not going to frighten me one bit how can you compare me to the Baal Shem Tov?! And if they say to me 'Zushia why weren't you like the Magid of Mezrich? That's not going to frighten me either Look at me and look at the Magid of Mezrich! What frightens me is when they say to say to me 'Zushia! Why weren't you Zushia!?' Zushia that you could have been, why weren't you even that...?" "Go for yourself" can also be translated "Go to yourself..." The mystical sources understand this to mean: "Go to the root of your neshama (soul)." In the next world, there will be no claims against a person that he failed to live up to the potential of others. However, it is our duty to maximize our talents, to push out to the very limits of our abilities so that we bring the root of our neshamos to flower. It is only in this way that we will be, at least, our own "Zushias." (Adapted from Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin)

"So Avram said to Lot: 'Please let there not be strife between me and you...Please separate from me'" (13:5). A person should always distance

himself from partnerships, for they are the source of arguments and lashon hara. Avraham and Lot did not start out fighting it was their shepherds who fell out, and inevitably this led to Avraham asking Lot to separate from him!

"And (Hashem) took him outside and said to him 'Look up, please, at the Heavens and count the stars, if you can count them' and He said to him 'So, too, will be your descendants'". (14:24). Two great rabbis of the previous generation, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetzky, were once seen standing beside the chauffeur driven car which was to take them home, discussing which of them was going to get out of the car first. As Reb Moshe lived nearer, and would thus get out first, he got in the back and Reb Yaakov got in the front. The reason for their discussion was that if Reb Moshe had sat in the front, when he exited, the driver would look like a chauffeur and they were concerned for the dignity of the driver. The Baal Shem Tov explains that the descendants of Avraham are like stars. >From our point of view the stars seem like insignificant specks of light, whereas in the heavens they are in reality whole universes. When you look at another person, realize that he is a star not the Hollywood variety! but a galactic mirror, reflecting the infinite light of the Creator. He may seem very small to you. He may not have achieved much in your eyes. But his potential is vaster than the trackless emptiness of space. When you see people in this light, you will behave towards them with great respect, and when you show others respect, they gain respect for themselves, and this in turn can give them the encouragement to fulfill their potential greatness and shine all the more brightly. (Adapted from Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Mayana Shel Torah, and a story by Rabbi Nissan Wolpin in The Jewish Observer)

Haftarah: Yeshayahu 40:27 41:16

"...As much dust as Avraham used, turned into swords..." (41:2).

Nachum Ish Gamzu was a man who's very name expressed his essence whatever happened to him he would always say "This is also for the good!" He never doubted that what Hashem does is always for the best. Nachum was chosen to travel to the Emperor and present him with a box filled with precious stones as tribute from the Jewish People. On the way, and unknown to Nachum, the jewels were switched with worthless dust. With great ceremony the 'jewels' were presented to the Emperor and slowly the box was opened in front of him... The Emperor's rage knew no bounds at this unbelievable insult from the Jews. Suddenly, the prophet Eliyahu appeared in the guise of one of the Emperor's ministers and said: "Your Imperial Majesty, this must be the special dust that the Jews' forefather Abraham used to defeat the four kings as it says '...As much dust as Avraham used, turned into swords...'. Let us, at least, try the dust and see if it works for us as well."

The Emperor agreed and Hashem caused a miracle to happen the dust indeed proved to be lethal against the Emperor's enemies. We must remember that even in the darkest moments of exile, when all our jewels look like dust, Hashem will eventually bring the prophet Eliyahu to announce the dawn of redemption. (Based on the Midrash)

From: "jr@sco.COM" "mj ravtorah@shamash.org"

Date: 10/25/96

Shiur HaRav Soloveichik on Parshas Lech Lecha

[The Rav began the shiur by saying that he heard from his father that without the methodology of studying Talmud that was introduced by his grandfather Reb Chaim, it would be impossible today to study Halacha with students who are trained scientifically. The method of Reb Chaim is a most modern method that involves classification, conceptualization and definition, particularly to look for unity in Halacha. The problems need to be formulated and understood. The question and the answer are of secondary importance. This was also the method that Reb Akiva Eiger's children ascribed to him as well. The Rav noted that he was a forerunner of Reb Chaim. When it comes to the study of Tanach there was no Reb Chaim. We don't tend to look enough between the lines and get hold of the larger picture. The Ramban was unique in his ability to see and understand ideas in Chumash. His spiritual perceptions are exceptionally fine and sensitive to every word of chumash.]

The Ramban contributed greatly to the philosophy of religion because he was original in his thoughts and approach to religion.]

Vayomer Hashem el Avraham Lech Lecha Mayartzecha etc. According to the Ramban Sefer Breishis is called Sefer Hayetzira. It deals with creation of the world and each being and the life events of the patriarchs, continuing through the death of Joseph. It is not limited to the simple topics of reaction of the world and man. What happened to them will be paradigmatic and symbolic of what will happen to their children through the ages. According to the Ramban we don't look at the events that occurred to the patriarchs from hindsight as being symbolic, rather they foretell the events that will happen to the Bnay Yisrael. There is pre determination of what will happen to Bnay Yisrael. The Ramban lays down this concept saying that the reason that the description of the travels and well digging etc. are described at great length because each event forecasts an event that will occur to Bnay Yisrael. The sensational thing in the Ramban is that we may derive from an event a similar event that that will transpire in the lives of the children. Any event that happened to the patriarchs and is recorded and translated will never be invalidated and will have to occur at some later point in the lives of Bnay Yisrael. For example, the destruction of the 2 Batei Mikdash are foretold by the 2 wells that Yitzchak dug and were filled in by Plishtim. The experiences of the patriarchs determined the future course of history.

Rashi and the Chachmei Sefard raised the problem that Artzecha Umimoladetecha Umibais Avicha means Ur Kasdim and not Charan (the Ramban disagrees). Abraham left Ur Kasdim long before he received the commandment of Lech Lecha. Rashi rearranges the order of the verse of Lech Lecha. Even though Avraham already left Ur Kasdim his native land and ancestral home established in Charan, he was told to go even further away from his fathers home that was newly established in Charan. According to Rashi, Terach left Ur Kasdim voluntarily. Avraham's further migration came later.

Ibn Ezra disagrees with Rashi and rearranges the verse (Ain Mukdam Umeuchar Batorah). According to him the command to leave Ur Kasdim was given to Avraham before he left Ur Kasdim. The opening verses of Lech Lecha should be conceptually inserted before the verse of Vayikach Terach Es Avraham at the end of Parshas Noach. The next Parsha would begin with Avraham leaving Charan and going to Canaan. The Ramban rejected this approach. He raised the question on the Ibn Ezra that the Torah describes Terach as the central figure in the migration from Ur Kasdim to Charan, not Avraham. Terach's decision to leave was spontaneous and apparently Avraham left with him out of obedience and not because of a divine commandment.

If we would accept the opinion of the Ibn Ezra we would find the answer to another puzzling question. Chazal stated that Terach repented and embraced the new faith of his son, a Gd that he could not see or touch. This is an interesting statement because the Navi Yehoshua describes Terach and his father Nachor as idolators. Rashi quotes this on the verse Vatah Tavo El Avosecha Bsayva Tova. Why would Hashem promise to unite him with father who is an idolator? From here we learn that Terach did Teshuva. When did Terach make this change in his life to embrace the Elokey Avraham?

We need to look at this conversion in the context of his relationship with his son Avraham. Terach was the one who sought to destroy his son physically after the episode of the destruction of the idols. Terach informed the king of Avraham's outrageous actions knowing full well that it would lead to a death sentence for his son. In general, tension between father and son results in deep enmity usually on the part of the son towards the father. When the hatred is on the part of the father toward the son it is indicative of a mental aberration bordering on the psychopathic. It indicates a sick soul that delights in destructive behavior. Chazal wanted to emphasize that Terach was sick with hatred towards his son. He was willing to sacrifice his family and everything he stood for and sacrifice his son. When did Terach change his behavior?

It happened when Terach decided to abandon Ur Kasdim and move his

family to Charan. It was a strange decision, one that is most perplexing to understand when looked at through the background of the Midrash. Terach is described as being one of the leading citizens of Ur Kasdim, some even state that he was related to the royal household. It was a difficult move for Terach to uproot himself from the advanced society that existed in Ur Kasdim and move to a primitive place like Charan. Ur Kasdim society was the most developed society in antiquity, industrially, scientifically. Its society was quite sophisticated and modern for its time. His migration was counter to normal human nature in migrating to a less sophisticated society. He was the father of the of the idolatrous society in Ur Kasdim. What caused him to abandon all this? The answer is Hirhur Teshuva. The thought that perhaps his son Avraham was correct and that his philosophy was wrong. The Baal Teshuva was responsible for the decision to leave Ur Kasdim and begin life anew in Charan.

Hashem waited for this moment to arrive for Terach to be willing to make this extreme sacrifice and undergo the tribulations that the immigrant must endure. When he made this decision, Hashem told Avraham to leave.

We don't know if Terach knew of Avraham's contacts with Hashem. The Rav noted that the Torah does not [usually] engage in physical descriptions of people. In Tanach we do find them (e.g. David). Typically these descriptions are not relevant to the unfolding events of the covenantal community and the realization of the great vision foreshadowed by the patriarchs. For example, by the Akeidah the Torah is interested only in the event. It does not mention whether Avraham knew the way to the mountain or if he inquired as to directions from anyone. There is only one subject matter: Avraham's compliance with the divine order to sacrifice Yitzchak. In the story of Jacob sending Joseph to search for his brothers, the Torah describes in detail the encounter and conversation between Joseph and a man, who Chazal say was the angel Gavriel. At first glance this narrative appears to be inconsistent with the usual style of the Torah. Why tell us all this? Because Joseph's mission was not planned by Jacob. Chazal say that at first glance Jacob should not have sent Joseph to look for his brothers. He knew very well the enmity of the brothers towards Joseph. Hashem forced him to send him, because the edict of Ger Yihey Zaracha needed to be fulfilled. We don't know if Terach knew of the secret that Hashem commanded Avraham to migrate to Canaan. We do know that when the message came through for Avraham to leave. Avraham found to his great surprise that his fathers bags had been long ago packed ready to leave on the great march to Canaan.

The Rav said that the objection of the Ramban to the opinion of the Ibn Ezra as to Terach being the central figure in the migration to Canaan is not really critical. That Avraham complied with the word of Hashem is well known. One only needs to look at the Akeidah to see the depths of commitment of Avraham to Hashem. The greatest story in Parshas Noach is not the departure of Avraham from Ur Kasdim but is the Teshuva of Terach and his abandonment of all he knew and loved to follow the Gd of his son Avraham. The greatest story of the Baal Teshuva is contained in the verse of Vayikach Terach. The Torah tells us all this in a few words. But the verse is not so much concerned with the journey they took, but rather the dramatic change that occurred in Terach.

Avraham was not always successful in his attempts to convert his own family to his faith. He did not succeed with his brothers, nephews, he had limited success with his nephew Lot. The word Lecha means that Avraham and Sarah alone should go to Canaan, no other family members should come along. Lot tagged along. Once Lot decided to remain at Avraham's side, Avraham had to teach him and train him, even though he did not want him to come along. In order to be a great teacher one must be able to reach his own family. Teaching begins at home. In order for Avraham to be considered the Av Hamon Goyim he had to be able to show success within his family. Terach was his success story. Avraham saw Terach was ready to leave so he did not say anything regarding his own desire to leave. He was respectful of his father and kept in the background to give the impression that it was Terach alone who initiated the decision to leave Ur Kasdim. He knew that

Terach, the Baal Teshuva, had attained a very high level and did not want diminish the the great achievement and sacrifice that Terach decided to make.

There is a verse in Job, Mi Yiten Mitamay Tahor Halo Echad. Who can make the Tamay to yield Tahor. The Midrash says that this is Avraham from Terach. Avraham was a great prophet but he achieved his covenant with Hashem and prophecy after great searching. Moshe on the other hand was surprised with the gift of prophecy and imposed with it by Hashem. Avraham asked many questions and sought Hashem. As the Rambam describes, Avraham in his youth was immersed with the people of the generation yet he was constantly questioning their practices looking for the truth. He had the mind of a genius. He had vision and asked questions. There was depth to his intuition, there was breadth to his understanding. Otherwise Hashem would not have chosen him as the Av Hamon Goyim. Such traits are hereditary. Terach Passed these traits on to him. Terach wasted his talents for a long time. Avraham utilized his talents.

The Rav quoted the Rashi on El Haaretz Asher Arekah: Hashem did not reveal to him the identity of the land in order to increase his love for the land and to reward him for each statement. A similar approach is used when describing the commands of going to the Akeidah. Hashem did not give Avraham any directions to travel. How did he know where to go? Avraham traveled from place to place, finally arriving in Canaan. When he arrived he did not know immediately that this will be his land. Only later did Hashem tell him that this will be his homeland. The Ramban, like Rashi, said that Avraham did not receive directions. But how did he know where to go? Should he go north, south, east or west? Similar to the Akeidah how did he know which mountain to travel to?

Avraham used the term Hisu Osi Elokim, when Hashem caused Avraham to be lost and bewildered, confused as to direction to go. The Ramban says that he wandered like a stray sheep not knowing how to return home. Hashem did not guide Avraham. He wanted to bewilder and mystify him, to move on till he found the land intuitively, till he magically felt the attraction of the land, the way birds are mechanically to migrate in fall and spring. We don't understand this pull, it is mechanical. Hashem wanted Avraham to develop the ability to distinguish between Kodosh and Chol, and to be guided on his own intuition into the land of Canaan.

The verse states that Hashem chose Avraham and took him out of Ur Kasdim and changed his name to Avraham. even though he wandered around as a lost sheep for a long time, He felt intuitively that his destination was Canaan. He toured Canaan and spent time there even before being told by Hashem that he had arrived in the right land and it would be given to his children as their homeland.

The Ramban adds that Avraham guessed where to go based on his intuition because he had no premises on which to base his directions. But Terach also left to go to Eretz Canaan, the Ramban mentions that Avraham had Daas Aviv. Terach also headed to Canaan. The Ramban points out that not only was Avraham blessed with uncanny intuition, but so was Terach.

He also felt a mysterious pull on those that were thirsting for the knowledge of Hashem. Why was Canaan intuitively selected by both Terach and Avraham? What attracted them to this land? Here is a central idea of Judaism. The idea of Kedusha pulled them both to Canaan. Major decisions in one life are sudden and intuitive. Secondary decisions are based on careful calculation. Avraham and Terach made a major intuitive decision.

People respond to a stimulus. The Dor Hamabul responded to the challenge of beauty. Their philosophy was that one must succumb to the power of beauty and give in to the aesthetic challenge. They responded to the fair women who were the symbol of beauty. Modern man is still captive to the aesthetic experience, the exploitation of enjoyment in life, making use of all that is available. The serpent in the garden of Eden was the first one to describe this aesthetic pull when describing the Eitz Hadaas as Nechmad L'aynayim. The aesthetic experience is boundless: you want to grab as much as possible. It has no laws that restrict man. The ethical life involves restraints. I can not take what ever I wish whenever I want it. This is directly

opposed to the aesthetic experience which says no limits. I resent authority and tradition. There is one moment only, the fleeting present. The Rav compared western society with the Dor Hamabul. Such aphildophy results in the disintegration of society.

The Dor Haflaga thought that power was the great challenge to man, that he be able to set himself up as god. Technological achievement, according to the Dor Haflaga, was viewed as the end to be worshiped, it makes him proud to be a man. The ability to control their environment was the greatest goal. The Rav compared Communist society with the Dor Haflaga. Living for the present with no eye on the past and future causes breakdown of society. However, the Dor Haflaga was a highly organized society that prized technological achievement above all else. They would weep for a dropped brick that they spent years carrying, yet did not shed a tear for a baby that would fall from the tower. The technological achievement is more important than the human being, along the goal to attaining conquest and infinity. Man wants to be triumphant, he wants to be a hero. He hates to be defeated.

Avraham proclaimed a new idea to the world:Kedusha. The main goal is not to gain the maximum pleasure but to find Hashem and cling to him. To do this man does not need to always be successful. Man can afford to be defeated, as Avraham was throughout his years of wandering. As long as he is pulled in the right direction he achieves and is successful. Kedusha is frightening to those who are afraid to fail and those who lack imagination. Those that have imagination and are bold are pulled to Kedusha instinctively, mechanically.

David describes his quest for Hashem as that of the gazelle searching for the brook. Why did he use the metaphor of the gazelle? It would have been obvious to simply describe it in terms of human attraction to Hashem? If one observes the nature of animals in their mechanical drive that pushes them to find water, they persevere until they find it and are able to drink. David wanted to describe man in the same way as needing that mechanical instinctive push to Hashem. If man tries to deny this urge he breaks down. This drive is to be found in every person no matter if he is an atheist or an agnostic. He still has this drive to Kedusha like the gazelle to water. Avraham and Terach were driven mechanically and were not satisfied until they found Hashem.

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Dvar Torah: Lech Lecha, 5757 1996

Rabbi Moshe Shulman

OUR CHILDREN ARE OUR FUTURE!

When we speak of Abraham, we picture in our minds a man of incredible faith, and commitment, who would follow the word of G'd, no matter how difficult. It is, therefore, surprising, almost unimaginable, to find Abraham doubting a promise made to him by the Almighty Himself! Yet, that is precisely what the Torah describes.

Four times Abraham is promised that he will have children, even at the age of 99 (see Gen. 12:2, 7, 13:16, and 15:5). And after each time, Abraham demonstrated his total faith in G'd's word: "VEHEAMIN BA'HASHEM", "And he believed the Lord, and it was counted for him for righteousness." (15:6) Yet immediately following, G d tells Abraham his children will inherit the Land of Canaan. All of a sudden, Abraham demonstrates doubt, as he questions: "BAMOH EIDAH KI IRASHENA" "By what shall I know that I shall inherit it?" How could a man who had followed G d halfway around the world, maintained his faith despite 25 years of frustration and hardship, accepted the miracle of having a child at the age of 100 years, had faith enough in G d and in His Prophecy to submit himself to circumcision at that same age how could a man of such faith possibly doubt a relatively innocuous statement such as: "Your seed will inherit this land"? And this, when he had already accepted the basic notion that he was yet to have

children?!?

Evidently, Abraham's doubt was not in the Power of G d to fulfil His promise, and provide him with children. His doubt, however, lay in the guarantee in the future that his children would DESERVE the land they were promised! For G d never guaranteed the commitment of those children!!

That is, perhaps, the most difficult question a Jew can ask. What guarantee do we have to our children's commitment to Judaism?

You all know the beautiful Midrash, that describes how G d came to the Jewish People and asked them for a guarantor before giving them the Torah. The first choice Our forefathers, was rejected, for they are no longer here, and cannot be our guarantor today. Our prophets their teachings can be forgotten. The only acceptable guarantor was our children Yes our children are our guarantors. Their commitment, is our guarantee to continuity.

But what is the guarantee to the continuity of their commitment? "How do I know that we will inherit the Land?", asks Abraham. How do we know that our children will stay committed? WE DON'T! There is no sure fire guarantees from heaven. Because there are really only two answers to the question of how to maintain Jewish Continuity. Both are learnt from the life of Abraham.

1) LIVE BY EXAMPLE

Abraham's 13 year old son, Yishmael, was willing to be circumcised, because he saw his father do it, at age 99. Abraham taught, not by preaching, but by being a living example. He taught the notion of thanking G d, by feeding guests, and then refusing to take credit for his kindness. He taught commitment to G d, and to Judaism, by following the Commands of G d, no matter how difficult they may be.

We know that children learn by example. While we bemoan the lack of commitment in our youth, we must ask ourselves, "what level of commitment and Jewish observance did they see in their parents?" Compare our commitment to Judaism, and to Jewish values, with those of our parents, or grandparents? What direction did we take? Did we maintain their level of commitment, or even strengthen it? Or did we neglect those values, let them slide and degenerate, slowly but surely, until it was too late? What examples did we set for our children?

2) EDUCATION

There is another crucial element in the recipe for Jewish commitment. EDUCATION. This too, we learn from Abraham, who was not satisfied to lead by example. He taught people the lessons of faith, 'the souls he had made in Charan'. He sought out visitors, whom he could teach about thanking G d. He actively engaged in moral lessons to all around him, and to his family.

For what commitment can we possibly hope for, if our children don't KNOW what being Jewish is all about? Meaningful Jewish education, which emphasises the centrality of Torah to our identity as Jews, has always been the key to Jewish survival, and our continuity. Torah education, for the Jewish people, is not a luxury. It is a matter of survival! It is our investment in our children's Jewish future.

Our Sages lauded the mitzvah of the study of Torah over and above all other Mitzvot: Talmud Torah keneged kulam, "Torah study matches all other Mitzvot." In Jewish law, the sanctity of a school of Torah education is greater than the Sanctity of even a Synagogue!

There is a beautiful legend in the Midrash that when the Messiah will come, G d will throw two bridges across the ocean, one made of steel, the other of paper. The nations of the world will try to walk across the ocean on the bridge of steel, but it will collapse beneath them. The Jewish people will walk across the bridge of paper, and it will sustain them, and they will safely reach the Promised Land.

This is the truth of history. The nations of the world have put their faith in steel, in might, in cannons, and in bombs. While we have built a bridge of paper, the paper of the wisdom and teachings of our Sages, our literature, philosophy, and exegesis, the pages of the prophets, the Mishna and the Talmud. The foundations of this bridge are the strongest possible: the laws of the Torah, 613 Commandments!

Through a strong meaningful Jewish education, where Judaism is taught and lived by example, we build the future of Israel. In this way, we have a hope that our children shall indeed be our guarantors for the future of Jewish commitment. For our children are our future.

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Circa 2000

From THE PRACTICAL TORAH A Collection of Presentations of Halachah Based on the Parshas Hashavua

BY RABBI MICHAEL TAUBES

Parshas Lech Lecha: **Changing One's Name**

No definitive Halacha LeMa'aseh conclusions should be applied to practical situations based on any of these Shiurim.

Towards the end of this Parsha, we are told that Hashem changed Avram's name to Avraham (Bereishis 17:5) and then changed Sorai's name to Soroh (Ibid. Posuk 15). Based upon the juxtaposition of his latter Posuk describing Sorai's name change to the Posuk stating that she will eventually have a child (Ibid. Posuk 16), the Gemara in Rosh HaShanah (16b) derives that changing a person's name is one of the things which can alter a bad decree which may have been passed against that person. Interestingly, the Midrash in Bereishis Rabbah (Parsha 44 Siman 15) derives this fact that changing one's name can nullify a bad decree from the earlier Posuk, describing Avram's name change to Avraham. The Midrash in Koheles Rabbasi (Parsha 5 Siman 4), while stating likewise that the value of Shinui HaShem changing one's name is learned from the Posuk relating to Avraham Avinu, mentions Sorai as well, concluding that a decree had been made that Avram and Sorai would never have child; Avraham and Soroh, however, would indeed have a child.

In explaining the reason why changing one's name can cancel a bad decree, the Maharsha on the above cited Gemara in Rosh HaShanah (Chidushai Aggados to Rosh HaShanah Ibid. s.v. Arba Devarim) quotes from the Semag (Mitzvos Aseh 17) that when one changes one's name, one declares that he is, in effect, a different person, and not the same person who committed the deeds which generated the unfavorable decree. The Eitz Yosef, in his commentary to the above cited Midrash in Bereishis Rabbah (Ibid. s.v. Af), explains it similarly, saying that person declares that he is now, with his new name, not the same person he was, and, consequently, not the person against whom this bad decree has been passed. The Maharsha (Ibid.) then adds that after one has changed one's name, one should recognize that in actuality, it was not his original name, but his sins that caused Hashem to decree unfavorable things for him, and he should therefore become inspired to do Teshuvah and change his ways, and in that way become a truly different person. The Ran in Rosh HaShanah (3b in Rif s.v. Shinui HaShem) also stresses that changing one's name can annul a bad decree because this act will inspire the person to do Teshuvah. The Rambam thus rules (Hilchos Teshuvah Perek 2 Halacha 4) that part of the process of doing Teshuvah is to change one's name, meaning, to declare that he is now a different person, not the one who committed so many sins See Perek 7 Ibid. Halachos 6, 7).

In the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah Siman 335 Sif 10), the Ramo, based on this idea that Shinui Hashem can cancel an unfavorable decree, writes that there is a practice to give a new name to a sick person when blessing him and davening on his behalf. The Aruch HaShulchan (ibid. Sif 12) writes that this means that he is given a new name in addition to, not as a replacement for, the name he already has. This is the case despite that fact that the Gemara in Berachos (13a) indicates regarding Avraham Avinu that it is improper to refer to him by his original name at all. He then states (Ibid.) that this name change is done when the illness is very severe, although he offers no guidelines as to how to determine that status. The Gesher HaChaim (Chelek 1, Perek 1, Sif 3, Ot 4) likewise writes that many observe this custom to change the name of a dangerously ill person by adding on a new name, and he then adds that the changing of the name is accompanied by the recitation of Tehillim in the presence of a Minyan and various other special Tefillos,

including a special Yehi Ratzon recited specifically when giving someone an additional name, as printed in many Siddurim. As a side point, it is interesting to note that this idea in general of reciting Tehillim in order to be protected from anguish and harm is codified by the Rambam (Hilchos Avodas Kochavim Perek 11 Halacha 12).

As to precisely how to choose the new name to be added, Rabbeinu Yehudah HaChassid implies in the Sefer Chassidim (Siman 244) that it is done by means of a Goral, a kind of lottery, meaning that a Chumash (or a Tanach) is opened up, and the first name that one comes across is the new name given to the sick person. It is noteworthy that the Birkei Yosef, in his commentary to the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah Siman 179 Sif Katan 8), quotes those who say that one can seek "advice" in general by opening up a Chumash or a Tanach and studying the Pesukim which one comes across. The Sefer Ta'amei HaMinhagim (Kuntras Acharon to Siman 217, Inyanei Berachos Ot 7, Amud 105) quotes, however, that if the first name one sees is that of a wicked person, one may not give that name to the sick person, since the Gemara in Yoma (Ibid. 38b, and see Ibid. Tosafos s.v. D'Lo) indicates that one should not use the name of a wicked person. He then quotes from the Chida (Sefer Dvash, Maareches 300 Ot 4) that there are certain other names which should not be used for this purpose, and certain names which should be used. The common practice today is to give the sick person a name which somehow symbolizes life, health, strength, or some other type of Beracha which expresses the hope that the person will recover from his illness.

The Gesher HaChaim (Ibid. Ot 5) further writes that the new name being added should become the person's first name, and his original name(s) now become(s) the middle name(s). He then explains that whether or not the person will continue to be referred to by the new name will depend upon whether he recovers from the illness, and upon the nature of his recovery. If he recovers even a little bit, and is able to get up from this illness and establish himself with his new name for at least thirty days, even if he then gets sick again and dies after these thirty days, since he had established himself after having recovered from his illness for at least thirty days with this new name, that name remains associated with him forever. It is thus written on his tombstone, and is used when a Keil Molei Rachamim is said, when Yizkor is recited, and when Mishanyos are learned in his memory, and so on. If, however, the person does not recover from the illness, meaning that he does not establish himself after having gotten up from the illness for at least thirty days with this new name, then he is referred to and remembered only by his original name, and the new name is ignored.

The Sefer Ta'amei HaMinhagim cited above (Ibid.) quotes from the Shaloh (Kitzur 335, Inyanei Sefer Torah) that whether or not the person recovers following the addition of the new name likewise determines whether this name will be used when the person and his sons are subsequently called to the Torah. In the Shulchan Aruch (Even HaEzer Siman 129 Sif 18), the Ramo rules regarding a Get that if one of the parties had a name added on because of an illness, the new name and any nickname associated with it is to be mentioned first. The Pischei Teshuvah (Ibid. Sif Katan 53, 54) discusses some details of this ruling; the Be'er Heitev (Ibid. Sif Katan 32) explains under what conditions the person's children will have to use the added name if they need a Get, and what should be done with this name if the sick person himself wants to divorce his wife while he's still sick. Interestingly, these Poskim do not mention the thirty day period. It is worth noting that the Sefer Ta'amei HaMinhagim (Ibid.) quotes authorities who stress that one must be very careful about changing someone's name, and that it should not be done lightly, but rather in the presence of a Talmid Chochom and a Tzaddik who will have the proper Kavanos.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5758-lechlecha>

From: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** ravfrand@torah.org

Parshas Lech Lecha 1997

Dream the Impossible Dream

Go Out and Count the Stars: Two Interpretations In this week's Parsha,

Avraham questions G d: "What can you give me, I am childless?" G d answers by promising Avraham that he will have children. G d directs Avraham outside and asks him to look up and count the stars, saying "Thus will be your descendants" [Bereshis 15:2-5]. I would like to share two insights on this verse, one from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and one from the Lubliner Rav, Rabbi Meir Shapiro.

Rav S. R. Hirsch: Look Beyond the Course of Nature Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says there is significance in the fact that G d told Avraham, the first Jew, to go out and look at the stars. If a person is accustomed only to looking at "our world", at earth, he gets into a mode of thinking that everything is "nature". The sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening. There are laws of physics. Everything is a set pattern that is never broken. This natural order of things is perhaps appropriate for the nations of the world, but it is not appropriate for Klal Yisroel [The Jews]. "You, Avraham, have to go out and look at the stars." Amidst the vast constellations, one has a clearer view of the Hand of G d. One becomes more aware that there is a concept of Hashgacha Protis that there is a G d out there who directs and takes interest in a person's life. "Therefore, maybe Avraham, it appears to you that you are childless. Maybe by looking merely at this earth and this world, you get into the mind set that I am childless. I never have had children; I never will have children.' But look up into the HHeaven, into the realm of the stars where that Hand of G d is more apparent. That is your lot Avraham, and the lot of your children. Yours is not a destiny and a future of 'Nature' (teva), it is a 'super natural' (L'ma ala min haTeva) destiny and future." When one looks at history, where are the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the Babylonians? Where are all these great powers that ruled the world? There is only one nation that is still around for the last 4,000 years. That is Klal Yisroel. This is 'above the course of nature'. This is what G d wanted Avraham to see by looking at the stars.

To Dream the Impossible Dream, To Count the Impossible Count Rav Meir Shapiro asks, "What would be our reaction if someone told us to go out and count the stars?" Our reaction would be to simply ignore the request. We would say, "I know this is an impossible task. I know it is beyond the realm of possibility. Why even bother?" What did Avraham do? He went out and counted the stars! He attempted to do the impossible. G d responded "This is the way your descendants will be" (Koh Yihehye zarecha). "This attribute that you are showing here now when it looks impossible, when it looks beyond the reach of human beings, nevertheless to try; nevertheless to give it one's best Koh Yiheyeh Zarecha. That is the characteristic of Klal Yisrael. That is what a Jew is going to be like. Even though the task seems Herculean, it seems almost impossible, we still must try." The least we can do is try. And when we try, we sometimes see that amazing things can happen. We think that we don't have such strengths and such abilities to withstand that which life deals us. We think it is beyond our capability. But we try and we are gifted and granted with 'kochos' 'strengths' that we never dreamt we possessed. That is the Blessing of "Thus shall be your descendants." Klal Yisroel has the attribute of looking at something which seems impossible, but nevertheless trying, never giving up... and being rewarded with powers that they never thought they had.

A blind Jew once came in to Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer. The Jew put down, in front of Rav Isser Zalman, two volumes of 'chidushei Torah' 'novel insights into Torah' that he had written before he became blind. The Jew told Rav Isser Zalman to look at a certain place in the book and said, "This piece was my last chiddush and then I went blind." Rav Isser Zalman asked the Jew what he meant by saying that it was his 'last chiddush'. The blind man explained that when he wrote that particular insight he was already an older man. He had worked for years on these volumes. When reached that piece he said to himself, "I've had enough. It is difficult to come up with new Torah insights. I am calling it quits. >From now on I will learn, but not with the same intensity and thoroughness I just don't have the strength anymore." The man told Rav Isser Zalman that immediately after that decision, he became blind. The man went to the doctors and specialists of the day, seeking a cure. They examined him and

told him, "With the way your eyes are now, you should have been blind 10 years ago. We can't understand why you weren't blind, long ago." But we can. Because as long as that Jew felt compelled to write those 'chidushei Torah', that he dipped down to reach for strength that he never knew he possessed, he received super natural strengths. He saw things with eyes that perhaps a normal human being could not see out of because he tried, because he reached, because he sought the impossible. When he stopped and said 'enough', he lost those strengths.

It is that quality of 'Thus will be your children' that Avraham exhibited by trying to count the stars. That is the quality of Klal Yisroel.

<https://www.aish.com/48956356.html>

What's In A Name?

May 13, 2000

by Rabbi Paysach J. Krohn

I had already performed the bris on the eight day old infant; the prayers entering the child into the Covenant of Abraham had been recited and now the long anticipated moment had arrived the name of the new infant was about to be announced. The assembled guests eagerly anticipated the exciting news. Traditionally, a baby boy's Hebrew name is not revealed to anyone before the bris other than those involved in choosing it. And likewise, a baby girl's Hebrew name is not revealed until she is named in synagogue during the reading of the Torah. Would the baby boy at this particular bris be named for a late uncle? For a beloved cousin who recently passed away? Or perhaps for a distinguished rabbi? Maybe he would be given a name his parents chose merely because they liked it.

Naming a child is one of the most important decisions new parents make. The Talmud (Berachos 7b) teaches that a Hebrew name has an influence on its bearer. Hence, it is extremely important to name your children after individuals with positive character traits who have led fortunate lives and have helped bring goodness to the world.

The legendary Kabbalist, the Arizal, writes that the nature and behavior of a person, whether good or bad, can be discovered by analyzing his or her name. A child named Yehudah could possibly be destined for leadership, for Yehudah, the fourth son of Jacob, symbolized monarchy and indeed, most Jewish kings descended from the tribe of Yehudah. It is said that parents are actually blessed with prophesy when naming their newborn babies so that they will choose names which aptly describe their children's personas and their destinies in life.

According to the Arizal, even the numerical value of the Hebrew letters in one's name can be indicative of an individual's character. For example, the numerical value, or gematria, of the name Elisheva is equivalent to the numerical value of the Hebrew words "yemei simcha", meaning days of happiness, perhaps portending a joyous life for a baby girl named Elisheva.

It is precisely because the fortunes and misfortunes of mankind are concealed in the secrets of the letters, vowels and meanings of Hebrew names that a seriously ill person is given an additional name like Chaim, meaning life, or Rafael, meaning G-d heals, in order to influence his destiny. We hope and pray that the new name will herald a new mazel, or fortune, for the stricken individual.

One of the founders of Chassidism in Galicia, Poland, Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzhansk, writes in his classic work on Torah, Noam Elimelech, (Bamidbar), that there is a profound connection between the soul of an infant and the soul of the person for whom he or she is named. When a child is named after the deceased, the latter's soul is elevated to a higher realm in Heaven and a spiritual affinity is created between the soul of the departed and the soul of the newborn child. That deep spiritual bond between these two souls can have a profound impact on the child.

The Hebrew word for soul neshama is spelled with the four Hebrew letters nun, shin, mem and hei. Remarkably, the Hebrew word for name, shem spelled shin, mem is contained within the word neshama, indicating yet again the strong connection between one's name and one's soul, or essence.

Back at the bris, the young father was now huddled next to his own father the baby's grandfather who was being honored with the recitation of the naming prayer. Holding a goblet filled with wine, the grandfather intoned, "Our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, preserve this child for his father and mother, and may his name be called in Israel." The grandfather waited for his son to whisper the name in his ear so that he could proudly announce it.

"Yoel" whispered the father. The grandfather gasped as tears suddenly welled in his eyes. His voice choked as his lips quivered with emotion. His new grandson was being named for his own father the baby's great grandfather. Tears also welled in the eyes of all the guests who remembered Yoel Pfeiffer.

In the late 1930s, he was forced to escape from Germany the night after he got married. He made it to England but upon arrival there he was imprisoned as a suspected spy. He remained on British soil throughout the war until he was able at last to immigrate to Canada where he was reunited with his wife.

The late Yoel Pfeiffer began his life anew in Montreal. With almost nothing but perseverance, he built a family, a business and a legacy of charitable deeds. At the festive meal following the bris, the young father recalled the fondness he had for his grandfather and explained how he and his wife wished to honor him and how they hoped to confer his strength of character to their new son, Yoel Pfeiffer.

As a Mohel, one trained to perform Jewish ritual circumcision, I am often involved in helping families choose appropriate Hebrew names for their children. My advice is based on three principles: a) Use the exact Hebrew name of the person you wish to honor or choose a name that at least contains several of the same letters in this individual's Hebrew name; b) be sure your child's name contains only positive connotations, and c) select a name your child will be proud of. Remember, your child's name is his eternal identity.

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<https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/974821/rabbi-moshe-taragin/thoughts-for-lech-lecha-judaism-is-a-different-type-of-religion/>

October 29, 2020 5781

Parshat Lech Lecha Moshe Taragin Are All Religions Valuable?

For approximately two thousand years, humanity was lost in theological confusion and moral mayhem. Finally, one great man uncovered the Creator of the universe and journeyed to the supernatural land of Divine presence. Avraham's selection dramatically revolutionizes the history of religion. The man chosen to revamp religious history was a legendary personality who had single handedly discovered G-d, while displaying fearless courage in defending his beliefs. In the past, humankind had persistently assumed that our vast and teeming world of boundless diversity was fashioned by multiple creators. Avraham debunked this folly and discerned a One G-d who he introduced to his generation. This discovery was remarkable, given that Avraham's own father was a pagan notable who ultimately ratted out his own 'heretic' son, condemning Avraham to death by fire. Miraculously, through Divine intervention, Avraham survived this blazing inferno. Avraham was a revolutionary philosopher and defiant hero- in short- the perfect candidate to launch the history of G-d's chosen people. Yet, surprisingly, the details of Avraham's past are repressed. The Torah introduces Avraham without providing the important background details which warranted his selection. Shouldn't this great man be introduced along with his heroic credentials? Why is this information confidential?

Nachmanides asserts that Avraham's past is suppressed to avoid expounding upon contemporary pagan religions. Detailing Avraham's religious discovery would have mandated equal "air time" for the parallel religions which he discarded. Omitting the details of Avraham's background enables the Torah

to sidestep any mention of these erroneous religious systems and to present the rise of Avraham in an untainted fashion.

Avraham without juxtaposing other religions, the Torah stresses the contrast between Judaism and other religions. Introducing Judaism alongside contemporary religions might have implied "equivalency". Presenting the evolution of Judaism in a "vacuum" emphasizes the unique and singular nature of Judaism.

The Modern Era of enlightenment and religious tolerance demands a nuanced and complex view of other religions. Without question, we value all varieties of religious experience which assist Man in his search for the Other. Religion highlights the dependency of Man upon a higher being – a recognition which is inherently valuable. Additionally, religion conditions people to cardinal virtues such as morality, family, social consciousness, and character improvement. One of the great triumphs of the past century was the convincing defeat of Communism- a system which sought to craft a society absent of religion. A religious world of paganism – as corrupt and barbaric as it may be – is certainly preferable to a world of atheism. Likewise, the modern state of world religion dominated by monotheistic systems, is far preferable to the idolatrous world of our ancestors.

We don't just value alternate religious lifestyles, but also acknowledge important similarities between our own religious experience and the experiences of what many people refer to as our "co-religionists". We form collaborative alliances with members of various religions, jointly struggling to uphold common religious values in a rapidly secularizing world. We are legitimately inspired by lives devoted to religious values, and we are even enriched by studying the religious thoughts of sincerely religious writers from other religions. Religious people share much in common and the advent of religious tolerance has allowed us to bridge across religious communities. However, the age of religious enlightenment can also blur differences between Judaism and other religions or create a false sense of equivalence. Judaism is fundamentally different from other religions – both in content as well as in its transmission. All religions were conceived by human intellect and human imagination. Human constructs can establish language for religious experience and approximations of G-d, but they are utterly incapable of conceiving of the essence of G-d. Avraham also studied and also discovered G-d through human analysis and inquiry. According to one version he assessed all religions until he discovered his Creator at the age of forty eight. However, his "discovery" would have been partial and inaccurate had G-d not answered Avraham's with direct revelation coupled with direct religious instructions. This experience of direct Divine revelation launched the unique religious history of the Jews – the nation of supernatural revelation. The process begun in Genesis climaxed at Har Sinai with "mass revelation". No religion has ever staked this audacious claim of mass revelation and none ever will. The assertion that three and half million people directly encountered the unmediated voice of G-d is the sole province of Judaism. Despite the numerous parallels with other religions, Judaism is fundamentally distinct, and for this reason the contemporary religions of Avraham's era are textually "ignored", even at the cost of withholding Avraham's past heroics. To avoid any sense of equivalency, the launch of Judaism is spotlighted in "a vacuum" without mentioning other religions and without implying any comparison.

We are grateful that the modern era of religious tolerance has rescued Jews from centuries of religious persecution. It is both enriching and reinforcing to acknowledge the common interests and experiences we share with members of other religions. Despite these similarities, we mustn't assume equivalence between our own customs and mores and those of other religions. Avraham was chosen for direct revelation and hundreds of years later G-d directly spoke to his children. This process has only occurred once in history and is fundamentally different from the manner by which other religions were formed.

AFTERWORD

The venerable 19th century leader Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk would consistently walk by the estate of a non-Jewish nobleman well known for his

moral and pious lifestyle. He was asked about this strange decision- to constantly stroll alongside the home of a non-Jew. He explained that when reciting the blessing of "shelo asani goy" – thanking G-d for selecting us as Jews, he wasn't grateful to be selected from drunk or vile Gentiles. Instead, he wanted to celebrate his selection from ideal or outstanding Gentiles whose lives reflected honorable values. His evaluation of his Jewishness wasn't based on the degradation of others but rather the celebration of his unique calling. Our unique Jewish identity isn't built on dismissing the value of non-Jewish lives. However, our "pluralism" in validating different lifestyles cannot erode the pride of our unique Jewish religious experience.

Shema Yisrael Torah Network **Peninim on the Torah**
- Parshas Lech Lecha

Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

א פרשת לך לך; ושפ

וישא לוט את עיניו וירא את כל ככר הירדן... ויסע לוט מקדם

So Lot raised his eyes and saw the entire plain of Jordan... and Lot journeyed from the east. (13:10,11) Rashi (quoting the Midrash) explains that Lot was not simply distancing himself from Avraham Avinu in a geographical sense, but was actually distancing himself m'Kadmono shel Olam, the Ancient One of the world (kedem can also be understood as "before" i.e., ancient one), Hashem Yisborach. Lot separated himself from Avraham and everything he represented, saying, "I want neither Avraham nor his G-d." Chazal attribute this declaration to Lot. It is a strong statement, especially since Lot did not have a history of harboring any negativity towards his uncle, Avraham, or Avraham's G-d, Hashem. On the contrary, we see Lot prepared to relinquish his life to protect his guests. He baked matzos in honor of Pesach (as he had seen Avraham do in the past). Nonetheless, as explained by the Alter, zl, m'Kelm, Chazal deduced that since Lot had been prepared to uproot himself from the sanctity of Avraham's home, to relocate to Sodom, a city filled with inhabitants who were the essence of evil, who mistreated anyone who had the misfortune to visit their community, it was evident that Lot's mitzvah observance was not indicative of his true spiritual essence. He was an apikores, heretic, who denied Hashem. Anyone who truly believed in Hashem could not sanction such a move. Mitzvah observance is not the barometer of true commitment. It is one's hashkafos, philosophic perspective, his outlook on life and living, that tells us who he is and in what he believes. People might perform mitzvos out of habit; thus their actions have no impact on their hashkafah. This is noticeable when we see mitzvah observant Jews maintain abiding relationships with individuals who are morally, ethically and spiritually flawed. They support them and even join in their Torah-negative endeavors. At the end of the day, what did Lot actually benefit from his radical move to Sodom? Nothing? Less than nothing. Had he remained with Avraham, he would have been spiritually and materially wealthy. He left Sodom with nothing but his life. True, he had initially been wealthy until Hashem declared the decree to destroy Sodom. Wealth that does not last (which is the case with all physical/material bounty) is not something for which one should sacrifice himself. It is only the benefits of the spirit which endure and leave a lasting legacy to be imparted to future generations. Horav Yaakov Neiman, zl, supports this idea with the reward Avraham received for refusing to accept financial remuneration from the King of Sodom. "[I refuse to accept anything from you], so much as a thread to a shoe strap; I shall not take anything of yours! So you shall not say, 'It is I who made Avram rich'" (14:23). As a result of declining the two strings: thread, shoe strap, Avraham's descendants merited the mitzvah of techeiles (Tzitzis) and Tefillin, both "cords" which engender enduring spiritual reward. All this was because Avraham refused to allow a pagan to say that he supported Avraham. Avraham could not permit the chillul Hashem, desecration of Hashem's Name, which such a statement engendered. Money meant nothing to Avraham if its source was murky. Lot did not have such inhibitions. He paid dearly for his error. This is an oft-repeated error, whereby we exchange a budding spiritual fortune for its material counterpart. This is tantamount to

swapping our future for the present, forgetting that a present that does not have concrete hope for the future is not much of a present. Rav Neiman relates that during World War I, the Mashgiach of Lomza, Horav Moshe Rozenstein, zl, told him that the Menahel of Lomza, Horav Eliezer Shulovitz, zl, hired him as Mashgiach. At the time, he determined how much would be needed to support the Mashgiach and his family. Rav Rozenstein was considering requesting a higher salary, since he was well aware that his daughters would soon be of marriageable age, and they would require a dowry. He remarked that had he refused the money, Rav Shulovitz would have acquiesced. He decided that he would not request a raise in salary, trusting that Hashem would reward him for his devotion to his students. When the war broke out, the banks went under because the Russian currency no longer had any value. Rav Rozenstein said to Rav Neiman, “Had I asked for the raise, I would have taken the money and deposited it in the bank. I would now have nothing. Instead, I did not take the money and instead I left it up to Hashem to see to my dowry. My daughters married exceptional bnei Torah. (Sadly, the entire family was murdered by the Nazis.) Horav Mordechai Shmukler, zl, was one of the premier students of Yeshivas Radin under the direction of the saintly Chafetz Chaim. When he married, he received from his father-in-law a large sum of money to invest in business. Being a close student of the Chafetz Chaim, he consulted with his Rebbe concerning his future plans. The holy Chafetz Chaim, zl, told him, “When a ben Torah marries and makes plans to abandon Torah life for a life in the field of commerce, if he is truly fortunate, he will lose all of his money immediately. Then, he still has time to return to the yeshivah to learn and become a rav or rosh yeshivah. If he does not have mazel, good fortune, it will be an extended period before he loses his fortune. By then, he will have forgotten his learning and be left bereft of both: his money and his learning.” The Chafetz Chaim blessed him that his material assets not be around long enough for him to forget his learning. The brachah was realized with Rav Mordechai’s first investment. As a result, he became a distinguished rosh yeshivah who inspired many students with his erudition and analytical ability.

ואנשי סדם רעים וחטאים לר' מאד

Now, the people of Sodom were wicked and sinful toward Hashem. (13:13) Every once in a while, I like to veer from the recurrent themes of our commentary and digress with an exposition that has an esoteric Chassidic slant to it, especially if it presents the message of the pasuk in a totally new and positive light. The seudas Melaveh Malkah, meal bidding farewell to the Shabbos Queen, holds great significance in Jewish tradition. While it is true that it seems to have taken on a greater celebratory life in Chassidic circles, it does not mean that it has any less significance in other Orthodox circles. After spending an entire day immersed in the unique – almost mystical – retreat from the material and mundane, our added Shabbos soul, the neshamah yeseirah, takes its leave, and we return to our daily lives. Many sit down to a meal on Motzoei Shabbos, sing zemiros, religious songs, themed concerning Dovid Hamelech/Moshiach and Eliyahu HaNavi, and recite stories of tzaddikim, righteous persons. A further tradition is that we each have a small, indestructible bone in the body called the luz. It sits at the base of the skull, where the knot of the Tefillin rests. It is from this bone that Hashem will reconstruct the entire body when the time for Tachiyas Ha'Meisim, Resurrection of the Dead, arrives. The only food that nourishes the luz bone is that which is eaten during the Melaveh Malkah seudah, meal. In the sefer Divrei Chonoh, Horav Chonoh, zl, m'Koloshitz homiletically renders the pasuk, V'anshei Sodom raim v'chataim l'Hashem, with the word Sodom serving as an abbreviation for samech – seudassa; daled – d'David; mem – Malka, - the meal of David Hamelech, namely the Melaveh Malkah meal. The author continues by interpreting ra'im, as reim – friends, and chata'im, as related to v'cheetai es ha'bayis, “He shall cleanse the house” (Vayikra 14:52), in which ra and chet are interpreted as friend and cleanse, respectively. The pasuk thus implies that when we eat the Melaveh Malkah meal together with friends, it is a purifying and uplifting experience, facilitating our spiritual ascendance. The Ohr Pnei Moshe, Horav Moshe, zl,

m'Pshevorsk, was a close associate of Horav Elimelech, zl, m'Lishensk and Horav Zushe, zl, m'Annapole and other Chassidic giants (1720-1806). He was known to be an unusual sofer, scribe. It is known that the Alshich HaKadosh appeared to him often to teach him Torah. Apparently, prior to being megaleh, revealing himself as a Rebbe, the Pshevorsker was a manager in a whiskey factory. (This story was related by Horav Shlomo Halberstam, zl, first Bobover Rebbe.) When the Rebbe applied for the position, the owner of the factory (himself a deeply-observant Jew) asked if he knew the secret of producing high-quality whiskey. The Rebbe said not to worry, he would produce high grade-whiskey which would be highly sought after. Obviously, having no experience whatsoever in the whiskey-making field, this assurance was a stretch, but, true to his word, the reputation of the whiskey which the factory produced spread far and wide, making the owner a wealthy man. The relationship between the owner and his manager was very amicable. Out of a sense of appreciation for the success engendered by his manager, the owner invited him to share in Melaveh Malkah, to which the manager agreed.

One Motzoei Shabbos, the manager did not come by. After a while, the owner became concerned and went to Rav Moshe's home to find out if anything was wrong. When he came to the house, he noticed a brilliant light shining from the window (This is before light bulbs. A candle gives off just so much light. Apparently, an unusual illumination emanated from the house.) The owner walked over to the window to discover Rav Moshe in deep conversation with an elderly man. Their discussion was Torah-related and involved the pasuk in Tehillim 89:21, Matzasi David Avdi, b'shemen Kodshi Meshachti, “I have found David, My servant, with My holy oil I have anointed him.” The Midrash (Rabbah, Lech Lecha 41) asks: “Where did I find him? In Sodom.” Clearly, this Midrash appears enigmatic. The elderly man (who was evidently a holy person – if he was, in fact, a person) explained that Sodom is a notrakon, acronym, for seudassa d'David Malkah, which alludes that the Melaveh Malkah meal is a time to connect with the attributes of David Hamelech. Afterwards, the elderly man informed Rav Moshe that the time had come to reveal himself as a Rebbe.

The owner of the whiskey factory now realized that Rav Moshe was no simple Jew who knew how to prepare a good whiskey. He was a spiritually-elevated, holy Jew. The very next morning, the owner stood by Rav Moshe's door, bearing a kvittel, written petition, with his family names and a pidyon, redemption money, both of which are given to a Chassidic Rebbe upon petitioning his blessing. He said, “I want to be the first person to give the “Rebbe” a kvittel.

Va'ani Tefillah

ועל כולם יתברך ויתרום שמך – V'Al kulam Yisborach v'Yisromam Shimcha. For all these, may Your Name be blessed and exalted. It appears that in addition to the various expressions of gratitude that preceded this prayer, we add an all-inclusive praise to Hashem for everything that He does for us. What is this prayer adding to what was expressed earlier? Horav Avraham Chaim Feuer (Shemoneh Esrai) relates a well-known incident that occurred concerning Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl, during an outreach visit to Paris. He entered an elegant restaurant, where he was to meet a group of “upper crust” Jews who frequented this establishment. Not wanting to take up a table for no reason, he ordered a glass of water. He was given a bill for forty francs, which was an outlandish price for a glass of water. When he expressed his surprise, the waiter explained, “You are not just paying for the water. You are paying for the ambience that surrounds you while you drink the water.” He was served on crystal; he sat on a stuffed leather couch, at a mahogany table; carpeting covered the floor; and chandeliers lit the room. No wonder he was charged a premium price. Likewise, Rav Yisrael said, “We make a brachah, She'hakol neheyeh Bidevaro, “Through Whose word everything came to be.” When we recite this blessing before drinking a glass of water, we are also thanking Hashem for the magnificent surroundings of this extraordinary world in which we live. This is the meaning of the prayer, V'al kulam: Thank You Hashem for everything! We appreciate all that You do for others, and we acknowledge not only the actual gift, but the manner and the environment through which we enjoy it.

לזכר נשמת חנה בת חיים יששכר דוב ע"ה

נפטרה י"א חשוון

by The Feigenbaum Family

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subject: Rabbi Mayer Twersky - Do Not Be Exceedingly Righteous

Rabbi Mayer Twersky

Do Not Be Exceedingly Righteous [1]

I

For the past months within several of our communities we have been confronted by a strange, dissonant reality.

On the one hand, we are scrupulously observant, and yet, on the other hand, shockingly contemptuous of the cardinal מצוה to safeguard life (ונשמרתם מאד (לנפשותיכם). As multifariously evidenced both on a collective, communal level as well as a personal, individual level, we are extraordinarily kind and compassionate. And yet, we have been acting with extreme cruelty in transmitting a potentially lethal virus to each other with predictably catastrophic consequences. We are committed to protecting the honor of Heaven (כבוד שמים) and yet, time and time again, our contempt for public health measures has greatly profaned the honor of Heaven (חלול השם).

Who would have thought that such a contradiction fraught scenario could possibly exist? And yet, indisputably, this scenario prevails in several of our communities.

II

Let us present and reflect upon one cause (inter alia) of this dissonant reality. (Human behavior, like humans themselves, is complex, and we ought to steer clear of reductionism.) "Human nature is such... that a person emulates his fellow citizens" (Rambam, Hilchos De'os 6:1). "It is prohibited to adopt gentile practices or emulate their ways... Rather a Jew should stand apart from them, distinguished in his dress and conduct, just as he stands apart in his knowledge and character, as the Torah states, 'I have set you apart from the nations'" (ibid. Hilchos Avoda Zara 11:1).

Throughout the millennia we have made a consistent, concerted effort to overcome susceptibility to negative influences, thereby retaining our singular identity and remaining a distinct, unique people. In recent decades, however, in several of our communities we have adopted a greatly exaggerated stance. A Weltanschauung has emerged and crystalized which indiscriminately rejects and contemptuously dismisses the outside world in toto. Our motivation is noble, but our actions are decidedly ignoble. This extreme Weltanschauung with its intellectual xenophobia embellishes the Torah's imperative of separateness. In embellishing, we diminish, undermine, and imperil (כל המוסיף גורע).

Contempt and hatred inevitably result in extreme, anomalous behavior (שנאה; מקלקלת את השורה; Rashi, Bamidbar 22:21, Sanhedrin 105b). The painful, sacrilegious, dissonant reality we have experienced these past months results from entrenched, indiscriminate contempt and blind, self-destructive hatred. As previously discussed, there is vital need for discriminating, targeted rejection of outside intellectual and cultural currents. Undoubtedly, most of contemporary society's intellectual and cultural output is anathema and, as such, must be blocked and rejected. Additionally, there is room for legitimate difference of opinion regarding a small percentage of society's intellectual output. But there is equally vital, halachic need to "accept truth from whomever speaks it" (Rambam, introduction to Eight Chapters). Rejection of societal culture must be discriminating because Halachah is discriminating; while it unequivocally rejects that which is antithetical, it unabashedly welcomes, even seeks, certain elements of חכמה even when they emanate from the outside world. Case in point: Halachah recognizes, respects and relies upon medical knowledge and opinion from the outside world. (See Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 618:1.)

And yet, in clear, indefensible violation of Halachah, we have (in several of our communities) throughout the pandemic ignored and rejected medical science, its warnings and protocols. In so doing we have acted against our own halachic principles; cruelly inflicted suffering and death upon ourselves; and betrayed our most sacred trust of כבוד שמים.

This profoundly anomalous, self-contradictory, self-destructive behavior has resulted from the toxic hatred and exaggerated, indiscriminate contempt for the outside world.

An even more pronounced form of the self-contradiction has been rejecting medical knowledge even when shared by Torah observant medical health professionals who otherwise are highly respected within our communities. All this rejection and negativity despite the fact that we ourselves, in other medical contexts, seek the best medical treatment available. Apparently, when the initiative is ours, we embrace medical knowledge from the outside world. But when we perceive the initiative as coming from the outside, our visceral contempt self-destructively prevails.

Plagued by a mindset of contempt and suspicion, we also become especially susceptible to misinformation, deception and falsehood cynically propagated to contradict and erode confidence in medical knowledge and guidelines. Our association with such primitivity and perversion adds yet another dimension to the terrible חלול השם. In this context we are unavoidably reminded of the measles outbreak within small segments of some of our communities due to lack of vaccination.

III

Currently, within our aforementioned communities, there are calls for compliance with public health protocols and guidelines. And yet the distortion of תורה and חלול השם continue unabated. The reason being, that we do not attribute the need for compliance with the Torah's zealous, proactive, preventive protection of life. Instead, we attribute the need to comply with our desire to have Yeshivos re-open or remain open. We thus outrageously insinuate that ours is a callous religion r"l exclusively devoted to study, cruelly and irresponsibly impervious to loss of life. Other voices within our communities cite the second wave as a reason for compliance, as though Halachah only reacts to loss of life ex post facto. Our stubborn, ongoing distortion of תורה is staggering and frightening.

How long will we distort תורה? And how long will we continue to be מחלל שם שמים?

IV

The ongoing distortion of תורה and חלול השם demand from us wide-ranging, incisive introspection. The following thought, briefly presented, constitutes, at best, a partial beginning of this crucial process.

The pandemic has not created deficiencies or deficits within our Weltanschauung. It has "only" highlighted pre-existing flaws and exposed their depth. (Thus, for example, we ought to recognize that the imbalance and disproportionality of our approach express themselves in other, non-medical, fundamental forms and contexts.) Accordingly, the end of the pandemic, for which we pray, will not cure these (or other) core religious-spiritual ills.

A religious-philosophical system which distorts תורה and causes continuous חלול השם is fundamentally flawed; it can neither guide us in our lives nor provide an educational framework for our children. Fundamental change and correction are required as part of תשובה. The task is most formidable, but not too formidable given the devotion and dedication which characterize our communities.

"Let us search our ways, and investigate; and return to Hashem" (Eicha 3:40).

[1] Koheles 7:16. An adapted, English version of חזקוני הרבה, published 7 Cheshvan 5781/25 October 2020.

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Rabbi Mordechai Willig

A Great Nation

I
"And I will make you a great nation' (Bereishis 12:2). Because the journey diminishes reproduction, Avraham needed a blessing to have many descendants" (Rashi). The Midrash Tanchuma explains differently, as follows: when did Hashem make Avraham into a great nation? When Am Yisrael accepted the Torah, as Moshe declared (Devarim 4:8), "And which is a great nation that has just statutes and laws, as the entire Torah that I place before you today?" (Tanchuma Lech Lecha 3).

Rashi understands a great nation quantitatively. Despite the arduous journey, which inhibits procreation, you will father a large nation. By contrast, the Tanchuma interprets a great nation qualitatively and links this greatness to the acceptance of the laws of the Torah.

In fact, the phrase "great nation" (goy gadol) is found twice more in Devarim (4:6-7), "When the nations of the world hear the Torah laws, they will comment, when seeing you observe the laws, 'This great nation is wise and understanding.' For which is a great nation that has a G-d Who is close to it, as HaShem whenever we call to Him?"

The Ba'al HaTurim writes that the blessing "I will make you a nation (goy)" is the greatest (gadol) of the seven blessings found in 12:2 and 12:3. This national experience includes slavery and emancipation. The mere fact that Avraham's progeny will emerge as a national unit that survives forever, as a national unit in good times and bad, is "gadol," the greatest bracha.

II

The series of the aforementioned three pesukim which contain the phrase "great nation" begins (4:6), "This is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations." The Gemara (Shabbos 75a) asks: What is the wisdom and understanding that is visible to the eyes of the nations? This is the calculation of the "tekufos umazalos." These astronomical and astrological phenomena, as interpreted by wise Jewish scholars, are later confirmed when their meteorological predictions come true (Rashi).

It is this wisdom which is called bina, understanding (Divrei Hayamim I 12:33, see Rashi Devarim 33:18) that the nations, which do not possess Torah wisdom, can ascertain (Maharsha).

This, in turn, leads to their statement that our great nation is wise and because we observe all of the laws of the Torah.

In earlier generations, Rabbinic scholars were recognized for their scientific and medical knowledge, which led to a great appreciation of Torah by their non-Jewish contemporaries. Today, Jewish scientists and doctors continue to enhance our great nation's international reputation.

III

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the Orthodox Jewish community disproportionately. All of the blessings of "I will make you a great nation" have been affected. The sheer number of fatalities, r"l, has quantitatively reduced our great nation. Of course, each loss is a terrible tragedy for the deceased and the close family and friends. But the cumulative losses in the Orthodox community have been devastating.

Our reputation as a wise and understanding nation has been tarnished. Despite staggering numbers of mortality and morbidity, and notwithstanding repeated warnings and predictions that have come true, appropriate precautions are often ignored. Nearly all physicians, including numerous Orthodox doctors, agree that masks and social distance reduce risk of transmission. In many if not most circumstances, lack of precaution adds danger. It is not only unscientific, it is against the halachic requirement to avoid danger whenever possible. The dozens of recent Covid-19 funerals across the spectrum of Orthodoxy, in the US and Eretz Yisrael, should lead to universal compliance. The failure to wear masks and to distance is a perplexing case of cognitive dissonance, unbefitting a wise and understanding nation.

IV

Avraham's greatest blessing was the creation of an eternal national unit known as Am Yisrael. Based on halacha and mesora, Jews congregate in

tefila and Torah, in simcha and aivel. However, the basis of these laudable practices is concern for a fellow Jew. We often go to extraordinary lengths to help and join with others. Today this same mandate demands that we reduce these communal activities to help us stay safe. As a single national unit, we may not practice extreme individualism which results in the spread COVID. Similarly, young Jews may not unnecessarily risk getting COVID-19 based on relatively mild outcomes for youngsters. As a single national unit, the welfare of older Jews, who can be infected by younger ones with disastrous consequences, cannot be ignored. Shuls, schools, wedding and funerals are all potential spreaders and must proceed with caution. Teaching youngsters to engage in lies or subterfuge to circumvent local laws is terrible chinuch. Dishonesty leads some to leave Torah observance (See the book "Off the Derech" by Faranak Margolese), and causes a chilul Hashem. It could lead to anti-Semitism by those claiming that Orthodox Jews spread disease.

V

Thankfully, many are now taking the precautions advocated by many gedolei rabbanim, doctors and governmental authorities. This will lead to the fulfillment of Hashem's promise to make us a goy gadol, a great nation. Our numbers will increase as we limit death by COVID-19. Our reputation as a wise and understanding nation, which the Torah attributes to scientific knowledge as well as halachic observance, both of which are reflected by adhering to sound medical advice, will be restored. And the greatest blessing is realized when, as a single national unit, we do whatever is necessary and appropriate to save lives, including staying home.

As members of this great nation, let us all call to HaShem Who is close to us. May Hashem answer our prayers, bring a refua shelaima to the sick, protect the healthy, end the pandemic speedily and fulfill the blessings He gave Avraham Avinu so many years ago.

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More divrei Torah on Parshas Lech Lecha

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Parshas Lech Lecha: Avraham, Lot and the Roots of Jewish Monarchy

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. THE NO'ACH-AVRAHAM CONNECTION: AN ALTERNATIVE PAIRING

Conventional wisdom holds that the T'nakh deliberately situates No'ach as an early, less refined prototype of the righteous man - a role ultimately filled capably by Avraham. The frequent comparisons between No'ach and Avraham - found as early as the Midrash Tanhuma at the beginning of Parashat No'ach (cited by Rashi), which notes that No'ach is considered "righteous in his generations" because "had he lived in the generation of Avraham, he wouldn't have been considered anything special". This comparison may be rooted in several literary associations made between the two (e.g. "No'ach was a just man and *Tamim* [perfect] in his generations" [6:9] and "When Avram was ninety nine years old, Hashem appeared to Avram, and said to him, I am the Almighty God; walk before Me, and be *Tamim* [17:1]), or it may be based on the parallel number of generations which separated Adam from No'ach and No'ach from Avraham (cf. Mishnah Avot 5:2).

In any case, although these two heroes share some noble qualities, the presentation of the T'nakh reveals someone else who is closely paired with No'ach.

Note that until we are introduced to No'ach (5:28), we have gone through a brief recap of the "begats" which link Adam (via Shet) to Lemekh, No'ach's father. In each case, we are told the name of the patriarch, how long he lived before giving birth to his first son, how long he lived after that event and that he had sons and daughters. We are then given his entire lifespan - and then move on to that son's progeny, in like fashion. For instance:

And Enosh lived ninety years, and fathered Cainan; And Enosh lived after he fathered Cainan eight hundred and fifteen years. and fathered sons and daughters; And all the days of Enosh were nine hundred and five years; and he died. (5:9-11)

Suddenly, there is a broadening of the information provided:

And No'ach was five hundred years old; and No'ach fathered Shem, Ham, and Yaphet. (5:32)

Instead of being told about No'ach's firstborn, we are told about all three of his sons.

At a later point in the text, when we are about to begin the second set of "begats" (linking No'ach to Avraham), we are again introduced to these three sons - with a curious addition:

And the sons of No'ach, who went out of the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Yaphet; and Ham is the father of K'na'an. (9:18)

Why are we told about K'na'an, the son of Ham?

The answer to this is quite clear, once we read further (9:18-29). As the story there evolves, we learn that as a result of either Ham or K'na'an's violation of No'ach, K'na'an was cursed to be a slave to his brothers - so it is important for us to be aware of the relationship between Ham and K'na'an at the outset.

One more anomaly about No'ach - he gives birth to his children at a much more advanced age than his forebears. Following the generations listed in Chapter 5, Adam's first sired a son at age 130 (Kayyin and Hevel are not part of this accounting); Shet was 105; Enosh was 90; Keinan was 70, M'halalel was 65; Yered was 62, Hanoch was 65; Metushelach was 87 and Lemekh was 82.

No'ach was significantly older than any of his ancestors before having children: "And No'ach was five hundred years old; and No'ach fathered Shem, Ham, and Yaphet."

There is one later member of the Noachide family who is presented in curiously similar terms - but it isn't Avraham. Avraham's descendants are not listed within the "begats" list - it ends with his birth. The birth of Yishma'el, the miraculous birth of Yitzhak, the children of his old age (25:1-5); none of these are presented as part of a chain of generations.

Note, however, the unusual introduction of Terach's family - at the end of the second "begats" list:

Now these are the generations of Terach; Terach fathered Avram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. (11:27)

Why is Lot, the grandson, introduced immediately along with Terach's sons? The next few verses seem to indicate a reason:

And Haran died before his father Terach in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Avram and Nahor took wives; the name of Avram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah. But Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terach took Avram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the land of K'na'an; and they came to Haran, and lived there. And the days of Terach were two hundred and five years; and Terach died in Haran. (11:27-32)

Nevertheless, if all we needed to know was why Lot was accompanying his grandfather - and later ended up with Avraham in K'na'an, he could have been introduced in v. 31 ("And Terach took Avram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his grandson..."); subsequent to the news of his father's death (v. 27), we would have understood his participation in the Terachian (and, later Avrahamic) migration. Why did the Torah introduce Lot in this fashion?

To further strengthen the parallel between Terach and No'ach, note the ages when the patriarchs of the second "begats" list (linking No'ach to Avraham) first had children. Shem was 100; Arpach'shad 35; Shelach was 30; Ever was 30; Peleg was 30; R'u was 32; S'rug was 30; Nahor was 29.

"And Terach lived seventy years, and fathered Avram, Nahor, and Haran." (11:26) With the exception of Shem (who was delayed in establishing a family on account of the flood), Terach waited at least twice as long as any of his (recent) ancestors before having children. When placed against the background of numbers like 35,32,30 and 29, 70 suddenly seems very old, indeed.

In summary, we have noted that although the parallels (and comparisons - some highly unfavorable to No'ach) between No'ach and Avraham are legend, the text-presentation actually aligns No'ach much more closely with Terach. One of the critical points of this comparison is the introduction of Lot, Avraham's nephew. I would like to suggest that the purpose of the No'ach-Terach comparison (especially the unusual presentation of one grandson among the three sons) is designed to teach us about Lot - who he was and the critical role that his progeny will play in the unfolding history and destiny of the B'nei Yisra'el.

Lot is presented in terms reminiscent of K'na'an (the grandson of No'ach). In spite of his close relationship with Avraham, the first real hero in the T'nakh, we already sense that Lot is destined to fail.

We will devote the rest of this shiur to an analysis of Lot and his descendants - with a critical "detour" into the book of Ruth, via a link to B'resheet made by the Midrash.

II. "I FOUND MY SERVANT DAVID..."

In relating the story of Lot's fleeing from S'dom, the messenger tells Lot:

"Arise, take your wife and your two daughters who are found here (*haNimtza'ot*)..." (19:16)

This curious turn of a phrase - *haNimtza'ot* - leads the Midrash to associate this verse with a (seemingly unrelated) verse in T'hilim about David:

"I have found (*Matza'ti*) David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him," (T'hilim 89:21).

The Midrash states: "R. Yitzhak says: 'I have found (*Matza'ti*) David my servant' - where did I find him? In S'dom" (B'resheet Rabbah 41:4)

What is the connection between David and S'dom? How was David "found" in S'dom? Certainly, the Midrash is not just connecting David to S'dom due to the common root M*Tz*A found in reference to both.

In order to answer this question, we have to turn a lot of pages in our T'nakh - from the early parts of Sefer B'resheet to the middle of the Five Megillot. The shortest of those Megillot is Sefer Ruth, chronologically placed during the days of the Judges (1:1). What is the purpose of Sefer Ruth? Why is this story about loyalty included in our T'nakh?

At the end of this short Sefer, we learn of this progeny of Ruth (the protagonist) and Bo'az:

"Now these are the generations of Peretz; Peretz fathered Hetzron, And Hetzron fathered Ram, and Ram fathered Amminadav, and Amminadav fathered Nach'shon, and Nach'shon fathered Salmon, and Salmon fathered Bo'az, and Bo'az fathered Oved, and Oved fathered Yishai, and Yishai fathered David." (4:18-22)

In other words, the final statement of this Sefer is the "yichus" of David - and, via this story, we learn about his roots (pun intended). Keep in mind that Ruth was a Moabite woman.

Where does Mo'av come from?

We turn back to Sefer B'resheet, in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the cities of S'dom, and learn of their origins...

"And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Avraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot lived. And Lot went up out of Tzo'ar, and lived in the mountain, and his two daughters with him; for he feared to live in Tzo'ar; and he lived in a cave, he and his two daughters. And the firstborn said to the younger, Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth; Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father. And they made their father drink wine that night; and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; and he perceived not when she lay down, nor when she arose. And it came to pass on the next day, that the firstborn said to the younger, Behold, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine this night also; and you go in, and lie with him, that we

may preserve seed of our father. And they made their father drink wine that night also; and the younger arose, and lay with him; and he perceived not when she lay down, nor when she arose. Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father. And the firstborn bore a son, and called his name Mo'av; the same is the father of the Mo'avites to this day. And the younger, she also bore a son, and called his name Benammi; the same is the father of the Ammonites to this day." (19:29-38)

In other words, these two daughters, who were *Nimtza'ot* in S'dom, conspired to bring two nations into the world, one of whom would provide an extraordinary woman who would help develop David - who God *Matza* (found). (The other would provide him a daughter-in-law, as Shlomo's wife Na'amah, mother of the next king Rehav'am, was an Ammonite)

So far, we have explained why the Midrash made this connection - the unusual phrase relating to Lot's two daughters shows up again in reference to David, and these two daughters and their misunderstanding about the destruction of S'dom and their subsequent raising of two nations which led to the birth of David.

Let's ask a more fundamental question here: Why does the T'nakh establish a Lot-Ruth-David connection, if only by word-association? In other words, is the T'nakh merely trying to stress the fact that David is descended from Lot? I would like to suggest that the development of Jewish monarchy through the seed of Lot, through Ruth, was a very deliberate and necessary process.

In order to understand this, we'll need to address the central issue in this week's Parashah - the selection of Avraham and his role in the world. First, a brief summary of the first two Parashiot, as regards the development of Avraham.

III. CHAPTERS 1-11: A BRIEF RECAP

When God created mankind, He called him "Adam" - since he was from the "Adamah" (earth - note the last phrase in B'resheet 2:5). Indeed, man was so much "of the earth" that his failures caused the earth to be cursed (3:17). This tie was further severed when his son committed the first murder. Not only was he "cursed from the ground that opened its mouth to receive the blood of your brother", but he was uprooted and made to wander (4:11-12).

When humanity continued to descend into a storm of moral depravity and violence, God decided to wipe them out (6:7) - and to begin the process anew with Noach (note the similarities between the charge given to Noach upon his exit from the Ark in Chapter 9 and those given to Adam in Chapter 1).

Just as the name "Adam" implies a symbiotic relationship with the earth, implying a static harmony with nature, similarly the name "Noach" implies a type of respite and calm amid the storm of corruption around him. The Torah provides this explanation for his name, crediting his father, Lemekh, with this prayer/prophecy (6:29). Noach was to be "at rest" (a close literal translation of his name) and, indeed, that is how he behaved. While the storm of corruption - and, later, the storm of Divine justice - swirled around him, he was calm and at rest. From the Divine perspective, there was every reason to utilize this method of "starting over"; since not only every corrupted being was wiped off the face of the earth, but even the memories of their sinful behavior were eradicated. There was every possibility for a "fresh start". The worldview behind this perspective is that if man is created with goodness, then, if he remains "at rest", (status quo), he will continue to be good and upright.

This approach, as we know, did not succeed. No'ach, who was to be the "second chance" for mankind, did not live up to his potential exhibited earlier, when he was described as a "righteous and perfect."

Almost immediately after coming out of the Ark, No'ach descended into becoming a "man of the earth" (9:20; the intent is clearly pejorative - see B'resheet Rabbah ad loc.) After his drunken interaction with Ham (or K'na'an) and the subsequent curse, his progeny continued to behave in an unworthy manner - culminating with the scene at the Tower of Shin'ar, when Mankind was dispersed throughout the world.

IV. THE TOWER AT SHIN'AR: THE BACKDROP AGAINST WHICH TO VIEW AVRAHAM

At the beginning of Ch. 11, we meet the builders of the great tower at Shin'ar. We know that their behavior was considered sinful - for why else would God disrupt it - but what was their terrible sin?

The "P'shat" (straightforward) reading of the text reveals only one crime:

"Come, let us build a tower with its spire in the heavens and make a name for ourselves, lest we be spread throughout the land." (11:4)

God had commanded Noach and his children (in the same manner as He had commanded Adam) to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...spread throughout the earth and multiply in it" (9:1,7). The Divine purpose would be met by mankind's populating the earth, settling the many lands and creating many diverse civilizations. These sons of Noach chose to do the exact opposite -and the build a tower that would support their ill-fated unity.

As is well know, however, the Rabbis read much worse intentions into their behavior - understanding that they desired to compete with God, to fight against Him etc. Where are these ideas in the text? (not that they need be; but it is always more impactful to identify textual allusions which support Midrashic threads). Truth to tell, we can only identify these textual allusions after our introduction to Avraham, as we shall see.

It was onto this particular stage of humanity, a species which desired nothing but to avoid spreading out and preferred to "sit still", that this great hero, Avraham Avinu, made his powerful entrance. In a world where everyone was satisfied to stay put, Avraham unquestionably and immediately accepted God's call to: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house." Not only did he leave - he continued his wanderings long after reaching "the place that I will show you." Everywhere he went, he built an altar and called out in God's Name (whatever that may mean; prayer, education, declaration). He was clearly a "mover and shaker" in the most literal sense of the phrase: He moved from place to place in order to shake the people from their spiritual and intellectual complacency. Note how S'forno (12:8-9) explains Avraham's route (north and south, between Beit-El and Ha'Ai) - "between these two large cities, in order that many people would come to hear him call out in God's Name... when he traveled from place to place as is the custom of the shepherds, he didn't go from east to west, in order not to abandon either one of these cities where some of the people were already drawn to him."

We now understand Avraham's greatness which earned him (and we, his progeny) the great blessings promised throughout his life: When God told him to wander, he took it upon himself to go against the lifestyle in which he grew up, to fight the complacency and "status quo" of the world around him - and to tirelessly bring the word of God to those around him.

V. OLAM HESED YIBANEH

How was Avraham going to fulfill his mission, to restore humanity to its former nobility and to help Mankind actualize the "image of God" in which it was created?

" 'And he called there on the name of Hashem, the Everlasting God'. Resh Lakish said: Read not 'and he called' but 'and he made to call', thereby teaching that our father Avraham caused the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, to be uttered by the mouth of every passer-by. How was this? After [travelers] had eaten and drunk, they stood up to bless him; but, said he to them, 'Did you eat of mine? You ate of that which belongs to the God of the Universe. Thank, praise and bless Him who spoke and the world came into being.' " (BT Sotah 10a-b)

It was through his unending kindness, opening his tent to all passersby and demonstrating deep and passionate concern for everyone (including entire communities devoted to decidedly un-Avrahamic behavior), that Avraham was successful in influencing people. His constant movement, from north to south, east to west, attracted many adherent because he personified the attribute of lovingkindness - *Hessed*.

There are several types of Hessed - altruistic, self-serving, parochial, universal etc. For our purposes, let's note that there is Hessed which obliterates valuable boundaries and blurs the truth. Often, people will, in the name of love, ignore harsh realities and embrace and even encourage immoral, unethical and even felonious behavior. Although motivated by noble instincts, this sort of Hessed is often self-destructive as well as counterproductive.

Avraham's brand of Hessed, on the other hand, was "Hessed shel Emet" - lovingkindness which doesn't compromise truth (note how these two concepts "balance" each other in Mikhah 6:8, Zekharyah 8:18 and Esther 9:30). An example of this is related in Parashat Vayera:

And Avraham reproved Avimelech because of a well of water, which Avimelech's servants had violently taken away. (21:25)

Note the Midrash's inference from this verse: "Any love without reproving is not [genuine] love".

In short, Avraham's mission - to be a source of blessing for all of humanity (B'resheet 12:3) by teaching them and bringing them close to the way of God - was to be accomplished by synthesizing impassioned Hessed with uncompromising Emet.

VI. AND THEY SEPARATED...

This model of Hessed and Emet, so inspiring to myriad followers, was not entirely successful in actualizing it within his own family. After the near-tragedy in Egypt, Lot accompanied Avraham and Sarah back to K'na'an - and both nephew and uncle were "very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold". Unfortunately, that very wealth led to disputes between their shepherds (see the Rishonim at 13:7 for various explanations as to the nature of those disputes) - and Lot and Avraham separated. Avraham offered Lot his choice of land, and Lot chose the (then-) fertile valley of S'dom.

Lot's choice of S'dom is odd. The closest relative and protege of Avraham, the man of Hessed, chooses a city whose very name reeks of selfishness:

"Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom...she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy." (Yehezqel 16:49)

Lot's emigration to S'dom, away from Avraham, was, at the very least, a serious obstacle in the path of the Avrahamic mission. How could he use Hessed to teach the world when his own nephew opted to live in the "anti-Hessed" city?

Something about the loving-kindness of Avraham remained incomplete as a result of this separation.

In the meantime, we find that the uncompromising characteristic of Emet was "diluted" in the generations following Avraham. Although we will address this topic at length in a few weeks, I'd like to briefly point out that there are a number of episodes involving deceit in the Ya'akov and Yehudah (and Yoseph) narratives (e.g. Lavan's deceit of Ya'akov, the brothers' deceit of their father with Yoseph's tunic).

In other words, by the time we encounter the third generation of the Avrahamic tribe, both Hessed and Emet, the crowning characteristics of father Avraham, have been taken down at least a few pegs and are in need of restoration.

Curiously, each of these losses resulted in the birth of two boys: As a result of Lot's separation, he ended up in that cave with his two "found" daughters - and that's where Ammon and Mo'av came into the world. Yehudah's deception in the Tamar episode (Ch. 38) is clearly linked to the earlier episodes of deceit (more on that in a later shiur) documented in B'resheet. As a result of this interaction, Peretz and Zerach are born to Yehudah.

VII. BACK TO MEGILLAT RUTH...

What was Ruth's crowning characteristic? We'll let the Midrash tell us:

"R. Ze'ira says: This Scroll [of Ruth] has no [laws of] impurity and purity, prohibition and permission - so why was it written? To teach you how great is the reward of *Gom'lei Hassadim* (people who perform acts of lovingkindness).

Ruth's Hessed is legendary (see Ruth 1:8); her devotion to her mother-in-law is one of the most inspirational stories in all of our literature.

The fidelity, honesty and guilelessness (Emet) which typify both Bo'az and Ruth throughout the story are surely indicative of a reversal of the disruptive developments in Sefer B'resheet.

Now, let's take a quick look back at the genealogy of David at the end of Megillat Ruth:

"Now these are the generations of Peretz; Peretz fathered Hetzron, And Hetzron fathered Ram, and Ram fathered Amminadav, and Amminadav fathered Nach'shon, and Nach'shon fathered Salmon, and Salmon fathered Bo'az, and Bo'az fathered Oved, and Oved fathered Yishai, and Yishai fathered David." (4:18-22)

VIII. ...AND BACK TO LOT

Near the beginning of the shiur, I proposed that the presentation of Terach in parallel form to the presentation of No'ach was aimed at setting up Lot as a latter-day K'na'an. I also proposed that it was necessary for David to be a descendant of Lot - that the foundation of Jewish monarchy had to come from that wayward nephew of Avraham.

By noting the effects of Lot's separation from Avraham on his mission - and the later diminution of uncompromising Emet in Avraham's family - we understand how the Avrahamic task could not be completed until they were properly returned to the fold. It was in the person of David, the product of that union of Emet and Hessed (Bo'az and Ruth), that these were restored to the B'nei Yisra'el. This king was the person most appropriate to continue the Avrahamic task - to be a blessing for all families of the earth.

Bo'az is a direct descendant of Peretz, the product of deceit; Ruth is the child of Mo'av, the product of rejection. Together, they give birth to the seeds of Jewish monarchy and, ultimately, the Mashiach.

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Parshat Lech Lecha: Trust in Training

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

Creating humanity was Hashem's experiment: could a limited being, the human, reflect the divine ("tzelem Elokim")? By the end of Parashat Bereishit, Hashem has decided that the answer is no: just before He brings the Flood to wipe out life on Earth, Hashem concludes (sadly) that humanity is basically evil. Even after the Flood, when only the righteous Noah is left, Hashem maintains the same belief in humanity's basic evil inclination, despite having destroyed those humans whose evil behavior led to the Flood. But there is a critical difference between how Hashem characterizes humanity before and after the Flood; before the Flood, Hashem says, "All of the inclinations of the thoughts of Man's heart are PURELY evil ALL DAY"; after the Flood, He says, "The inclinations of the heart of Man are evil FROM HIS YOUTH." What is Hashem really "thinking"?

AVOID DISAPPOINTMENT: LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS!

Over the course of Parashat Noah, Hashem dramatically lowers His expectations of humanity: before the Flood, He had decided to destroy the world because the people were "purely evil all day" -- since they had chosen evil, they deserved to be destroyed. But after the Flood, Hashem asserts that humans are "evil from their youth" -- He 'realizes' that the evil inclination is built in, a part of them "from their youth." Since Man must constantly struggle with his powerful evil inclination, he deserves some slack when he fails. While he is still held responsible for his actions, those actions will never lead to another worldwide destruction. Hashem no longer links the continued existence of the world to Man's goodness. [Hashem continues to be ready to punish people for doing evil, as we see when he destroys Sedom and Amora.]

A FEW GOOD MEN:

Originally, Hashem's plan had been to establish a close relationship with all humans. That plan met with disappointment and was rejected. The theme of the rest of Sefer Bereishit is Hashem's search for "a few good men": our parasha begins the process by which Hashem will identify the individuals to found an elect group, the one nation which will maintain a close relationship with Him. This is the meaning of the term "am segula" which we find later in the Torah: we have a special, intimate relationship with Hashem which implies both privileges and responsibilities.

Not only is this a turning point in the grand divine plan, it's also a turning point for the Torah from a literary perspective. Until now, we've heard a lot about the universal: the creation of the entire cosmos, the sins of all of humanity, the destruction of the whole world. But from here on, the rest of Sefer Bereishit is filled with stories about individual people. The topic remains the development of a relationship between Hashem and humanity, but Hashem has decided to establish a special relationship with a select group. The stories of Sefer Bereishit explain how Hashem comes to choose this particular group of people.

AVRAHAM: THE FIRST TO PASS:

The first person to come along with the right combination of characteristics to found Hashem's elite group is Avraham. The Torah does not tell us whether Hashem tested other people before Avraham to see if they could fill the role, but it is possible that there were other candidates before Avraham. If so, the reason we hear about only Avraham is because he is the only one to pass all the tests and succeed! [I have heard that the Hiddushei HaRim says that Hashem did indeed make attempts to get others to go to Canaan before attempting with Avraham, but none of them listened. I was unable to find this myself in the Hiddushei HaRim.]

Avraham's first reported act in our parasha is "Lekh lekha" -- he abandons his life in Ur Kasdim, following the command of Hashem to leave everything behind and move to Canaan. [Actually, the end of Parashat Noah seems to imply that Terah, Avraham's father, led the family out of Ur Kasdim towards Canaan, but the family stops for an undetermined time at Haran, where Terah dies. Hazal and the mefarshim suggest various solutions to resolve this account with the beginning of Parashat Lekh Lekha.] But our discussion will focus on something perhaps less well-understood: two very important agreements which Hashem makes with Avraham in our parasha.

We start with the "Berit bein ha-betarim," the "Covenant Between the Split Parts":

BEREISHIT 15:1-18 --

After these matters, the word of Hashem came to Avram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Avram, I shall protect you; your reward is truly great."

Avram said, "Hashem, Lord, what can You give to me? For I am childless, and the master of provisions of my house is Eliezer of Damascus!" Avram said, "You have not given me children; the son of my household [i.e., my servant] shall inherit me!"

The word of Hashem came to him, saying, "He shall not inherit you; instead, he who comes from your body, he shall inherit you." He brought him outside and said, "Look at the sky and count the stars, if you can count them!" He told him: "So [many] shall be your children." He believed Hashem, and thought it just ["tzedaka"].

He said to him, "I am Hashem, who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land as an inheritance."

He said, "Lord Hashem, by what sign will I know that I shall inherit it?" He said to him, "Take for Me a 3-year-old calf, a 3-year-old goat, a 3-year-old ram, and a turtledove, and a young dove." He brought all these to Him and split them down the middle, and put each piece opposite the other; but he did not split the bird The sun was about to set, and a deep sleep fell upon Avram, and then a black, terrible fear fell upon him. He said to Avram, "Know that your children shall be foreigners in a land not their own, and they shall enslave them and abuse them for four hundred years. But also the nation whom they serve, judge I shall; then they shall leave with great wealth. But you shall come to your fathers in peace -- you shall be buried at a good old age. And the fourth generation will return here, because the sins of the Emori will not be complete until then." The sun had set, and it was twilight, and [there appeared] a smoking oven, with a flaming fire, which passed between the pieces.

On that day, Hashem made a covenant with Avram, saying, "To your children I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great Euphrates River"

Now that we have read through the passage, we can start with some questions:

- 1) The first thing Hashem says to Avraham is, "Don't be afraid." What is Avraham afraid of, that he needs Hashem's reassurance?
- 2) Next, Hashem tells Avraham that he will be rewarded well -- but for what?
- 3) Taking Hashem's entire statement together, why does He connect two things which seem totally unrelated: a) Avraham's fear of something, from which he needs protection and b) the fact that he will be rewarded?
- 4) Avraham's doubting Hashem's assurance of reward seems shocking: is he questioning the promise he has already received about his having children?
- 5) Hashem shows Avraham the stars and promises that his descendants will be similarly numerous. But then, just a moment or two later, Hashem seems to interrupt the conversation to introduce Himself again: "I am Hashem, who brought you out of Ur Kasdim" Doesn't Avraham know Whom he has been talking with?
- 6) In response to Hashem's mentioning that this land will be Avraham's inheritance, Avraham seems to ask for some sort of guarantee. Is he questioning the promises he has already received about his inheriting the land?
- 7) A related question: what does the slavery in Egypt have to do with Avraham's question?

NOW FOR SOME ANSWERS:

- 1) On the issue of what Avraham is afraid of, several interpretations are offered by the mefarshim (commentators) :
 - a) Avraham is afraid he has used up his stored-up merit, that he has been rewarded for all of his good deeds with the success Hashem has granted him in the war he and his men have just won. He fears that he has consumed what should have been stored up for him as his portion in the afterlife. (The weakness of this alternative is that there is no evidence for it at all in the text.)
 - b) He is afraid that during the war he killed a righteous person. (Again, no evidence for this in the text.)
 - c) He is afraid that the supporters of the kings he has beaten will hunt him down. (Support for this possibility: Hashem's reassurance comes immediately after Avraham's victory in the war.)
- In any event, what is clear here is that Hashem is doing is reassuring him.
- 2) What is the reward is for? Again, suggestions from the mefarshim:
 - a) The reward is his place in the world to come, a reward for all the good deeds of his life: he is being told that he did not use up all of his merit. (Again, no textual support at all.)
 - b) The reward is for saving Lot, his nephew, which is what he has just done in the previous section and for which he has just refused the reward offered by the king of Sedom. Hashem is reassuring him that despite his refusal of the king of Sedom's reward (Avraham did not want to be enriched by an evil person), he will be rewarded.

- 3) Why does Hashem connect the seemingly unrelated issues of Avraham's fear and the reward he will get?

The most plausible connection is that both concerns flow directly from the section preceding the one above. Avraham is afraid of reprisals from the defeated kings, so Hashem reassures him of divine protection; Avraham has refused the reward offered by the king of Sedom, so Hashem assures him that He will reward Avraham Himself.

Hashem is especially interested in reassuring Avraham about the reward not because he wants Avraham to know he will be rewarded per se, but because this promise of reward provokes Avraham into revealing his anxiety about having no children to whom to pass whatever Hashem might give him. Hashem means to provoke this expression of insecurity so that He can reconfirm the promise and strengthen Avraham's faith in it. If you don't agree yet with this reading, in a moment we'll see more evidence for it.

- 4) That moves us to the next question: is Avraham questioning Hashem's promise of children?

- a) Most mefarshim suggest that Avraham is not doubting Hashem's promise, but he is afraid that the promise has been revoked because he did something wrong. There is no textual evidence for this approach; the commentators are motivated to suggest this alternative primarily because the other alternative is to say that Avraham did indeed doubt Hashem's promise.
- b) A plain reading of the text indicates exactly that: Avraham's faith in the promise is weakening. He has grown old, yet he remains childless. He believed the promise before, but he is beginning to worry, and he wants reassurance.

This alternative may seem controversial, but it is explicitly supported by the next pasuk (verse), which makes the strange comment that Avraham "believed the promise." In other words, only after Hashem's reassurance is Avraham confident that Hashem will indeed give him a child. Perhaps our image of Avraham makes it hard for us to believe that he could doubt anything Hashem said, but the Torah itself tells us here that only after this reassurance do Avraham's doubts go away. We will return to this issue as we continue.

- 5) Why does Hashem interrupt the conversation to introduce Himself once again?

This is really not an interruption in the middle of the conversation. It's the Torah's way of telling us that these are two totally separate conversations! Hashem introduces Himself again because He is indeed introducing Himself at the beginning of a separate conversation

which took place at a different time. The reason why the Torah places the two conversations side by side is part of the answer to our next question.

6) Is Avraham questioning the promise about the land? Possibilities:

a) He is worried that the promise has been revoked because he did something wrong. (Again, no evidence for this.)

b) Avraham is getting old, and the land is still quite occupied by Canaanite nations. He sees nothing happening to advance the process of his inheriting the land. He wants confirmation of the promise.

As mentioned above, there are really two totally separate episodes here. The first episode concerns the promise of children; this section ends when the Torah tells us that Avraham believes the promise. Then comes another story, which begins with Hashem introducing Himself and mentioning, seemingly out of nowhere, that He is the God who took Avraham out of Ur Kasdim in order to give the land of Canaan to him as an inheritance. What Hashem is trying to do is to provoke Avraham into revealing his anxiety about this issue as well - if he is indeed to inherit the land, when is that going to happen? He has been promised that he will inherit it, but the years are passing by and there is no sign that the divine plan is becoming reality.

It should be clear by now that the reason the Torah puts these two stories together is because of their common theme. In both, Hashem provokes Avraham into revealing his doubts about the promises he has received. This gives Hashem the opportunity to reassure him.

7) Our last question was why Hashem tells Avraham all about the enslavement in Egypt at this point, and how this relates to his question about inheriting the land.

Avraham's question was whether he would inherit the land, and if so, when. Hashem responds that Avraham misunderstood the promise: the land would never actually be his personally -- it would belong to his descendants. Hashem tells him that before they inherit the land, two other processes will have to run their course: the enslavement in Egypt and the moral degradation of the current Canaanite inhabitants of the land to the point where they deserve to lose their claim to it.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:

We are used to thinking of Avraham as appearing on the scene of the Humash with his faith in Hashem already perfect; we are used to thinking of him as having "already" been selected by Hashem. I am suggesting that he has not yet passed all the tests (a thought confirmed resoundingly by Hazal). At this point, Hashem is both training him and reassuring him, on the one hand, as well as testing him, on the other hand. The command to leave his homeland is one of the tests, which, as we know, he passes. This earns him the right to the promises recorded earlier in the parasha -- the promises of children and land. In the section we looked at above, Hashem relates to Avraham not as a tester, challenging Avraham's faith, but as a trainer and reassurer of Avraham's faith. Avraham is afraid, so Hashem tells him not to be afraid, that He will protect him; Avraham is worried about the promise of children, so Hashem provokes him into revealing his doubt and then reassures him; Avraham is worried about the promise of the land, so Hashem provokes him into revealing his doubt and then reassures him by making a covenant with him.

Doubt is part of the process of growing in faith. Hashem understands that we often need reassurance, even about things we have already been told. Hashem knows that we are not born with perfect faith, and does not expect that we will never falter in that faith. In these two stories, Hashem shows tremendous patience with Avraham's doubts and a deep willingness to train Avraham to strengthen his faith. We usually miss this critical message of the Torah because we simply assume that Avraham could never have doubted anything. We are therefore forced to deny the plain sense of the Torah.

Our parasha presents a process by which Hashem both strengthens Avraham and tests his strength; if Avraham harbored doubts and needed strengthening, it is certainly acceptable for us to have doubts and to need strengthening. Not only is it legitimate to have doubts, it is also legitimate to come to Hashem Himself with these doubts and share them with Him.

THE CIRCUMCISION COVENANT:

The next section we will look at is one in which Avraham receives the command of Berit Mila -- the covenant of circumcision. Because of time and space concerns, we will look at this section only briefly.

BEREISHIT 17:1-14 --

Avram was 99 years old, and Hashem appeared to Avram and said to him, "I am E-l Shad-dai, walk before Me and be perfect. I hereby place My covenant between Me and you, and I shall greatly, greatly increase you."

Avram fell upon his face, and Hashem spoke with him, saying: "I hereby make a covenant with you: you shall be the father of MANY NATIONS. You shall no longer be called 'Avram', but 'Avraham', because I have made you the father of MANY NATIONS ["av hamon goyim"]. I shall make you very, very fruitful -- into NATIONS -- and kings shall come from you. I will uphold My covenant between Me and you, and with YOUR CHILDREN AFTER YOU, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be your God and YOUR CHILDREN'S AFTER YOU. I will give to you and YOUR CHILDREN AFTER YOU the land in which you live, all of the Land of Canaan, as a permanent possession, and I will be their God."

Hashem said to Avraham, "You shall keep My covenant, you and YOUR CHILDREN AFTER YOU, in their generations. This is My covenant which you should keep between Me and you, and with YOUR CHILDREN AFTER YOU: circumcise every male. You should circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, as a sign of the covenant between Me and you. An uncircumcised male, who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin -- that soul will be cut off from its nation; he has annulled My covenant."

How is this covenant different from the Berit bein HaBetarim, the Covenant Between the Pieces, which we looked at above? One way to pinpoint differences between apparently similar pieces of the Torah is to look for the key words of each section and compare them to each other. In the section we have just read, the following words and phrases are key:

1) "Many nations": there is a particular emphasis on Avraham's development into "nations" or "many nations."

2) "Your children after you": the most significant phrase we find here is "your children after you," which appears 5 times within 4 pesukim (verses) -- twice in verse 7, and once each in 8, 9, and 10.

In other words, while the previous berit (covenant) focused powerfully on Avraham personally and individually, this covenant focuses very much on the relationship between Hashem and the *descendants* of Avraham. This is not just a promise of children and land for Avraham qua righteous individual, not just reassurance and strengthening for Avraham qua man of growing faith, it is the establishment of a covenant between a leader and all generations of his descendants.

3) "An everlasting covenant": one other indication of the everlasting nature of this covenant is that the pesukim come right out and tell us -- twice -- that this covenant is permanent, in pesukim 7 and 8.

The content of the covenant itself is contained in pesukim 7 and 8, and it is two-fold:

a) Hashem will be the God of this nation forever. This is an unprecedented phrase in the Torah: never before has Hashem said a word about being the God of any one particular people. Until now, He has been the God of all nations equally. Now, He focuses on one nation. This nation will be the select group with the special relationship with Hashem, and they will possess the Land of Canaan forever.

The physical symbol of this covenant also indicates that the covenant does not focus on Avraham, the individual, and instead focuses on all of the future individuals of the nation he will produce. That symbol is the mila, circumcision. Avraham is the first person to enter this covenant, the first to perform the act of cutting which is traditionally part of a covenant (as in the case of the Covenant Between the "Cut Pieces" which we discussed above). But unlike the previous covenant, which was sealed by Avraham and his action, this covenant, the covenant of circumcision, must be repeated in every generation, by every male individual who wishes to be a part of it. Unlike the Covenant Between the Cut Pieces, where Avraham played a central role, here he is only the first in a line of millions of Jews who will enter the same covenant with Hashem. By keeping the covenant, each generation affirms its relationship with Hashem and with Eretz Yisrael. Of course, one cannot help pondering this everlasting covenant's implications in light of recent developments in Israel: finding the correct balance between our responsibility to our and future generations' connection to Eretz Yisrael, and our responsibility to our and future generations' safety and security and peace, can only be a wrenching process. May Hashem guide us and our leaders.

Shabbat Shalom

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PARSHAT LECH L'CHA

Almost 'out of the blue', at the beginning of Parshat Lech L'cha, God appears unto Avraham, commanding him to travel to the 'promised land', while blessing him that he will become a great nation. However, contrary to what we would expect, the Torah never tells us WHY he was chosen; nor does it tell us why HE was chosen!

In contrast to Parshat Noach, where the Torah informs us at the outset both why NOACH was chosen [i.e. "for he was a righteous man..." (see 6:9)]; as well as WHY he was chosen [i.e. for the purpose of re-creation (see 6:5-8); in Parshat Lech L'cha, the Torah never informs us concerning WHY God chose Avraham Avinu.

Did Avraham Avinu simply win a 'Divine lottery'?

In this week's shiur, we discuss the Torah's presentation of God's choice of Avraham Avinu, in an attempt to understand the literary method that the Torah employs to explain why Avraham was chosen, and its thematic significance.

INTRODUCTION

Our series of shiurim on Chumash is based on the assumption that each book of the Bible carries a unique theme; and to identify that theme, one must study the progression of its primary topics.

In our shiur on Parshat Noach, we discussed the progression of topics in the first eleven chapters of Sefer Breishit, showing how each successive story discussed a story relating to 'sin & punishment' (i.e. God's disappointment with the behavior of each successive generation, and how He punished them).

This included the story of man's sin in Gan Eden, Cain's murder of Hevel, the corruption of the generation of the Flood, and finally the building of the Tower of Babel.

That pattern of stories relating to 'sin & punishment' abruptly changes at the beginning of Parshat Lech L'cha, as the focus of Sefer Breishit now changes to God's choice of Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of His special nation. This change of focus in Sefer Breishit from 'universalistic' to 'particularistic' must relate in some manner to the reason for God's need for choosing a special nation.

As the MIGDAL BAVEL incident (see 11:1-9) was the last story recorded in Sefer Breishit prior to God's choice of Avraham Avinu, and hence forms the segue between these two sections - our shiur begins with a careful study of that narrative in search of a thematic connection (and/or a textual parallel) between this story and God's choice of Avraham Avinu.

THE SIN OF "DOR HA'PLAGAH"

In our introduction, we assumed that the building of the Tower constituted a sin. However, at first glance, that assumption is not so clear, for it is difficult to find a specific sin the Torah's description of their actions. In contrast to the Torah's introduction of the generation of the Flood, which explicitly brands the population as wicked and corrupt (6:5,10-13), the opening psukim of the Migdal Bavel narrative leave hardly a clue to any specific sin:

"Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they traveled from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another: Come, LET US make bricks and burn them hard. Brick became their stone, and bitumen their mortar. And they said, Come LET US build US a city and a tower with its top in the sky, AND WE WILL MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES, lest WE shall be scattered all over the world." (11:1-4)

Not only don't we find a transgression, one may even be tempted to applaud their accomplishments. After all:

- * Is not achieving unity a positive goal? (11:1)
- * Does not the use of human ingenuity to develop man-made building materials, such as bricks to replace stone, indicate the positive advancement of society? (11:3)
[The very first 'industrial revolution'!]
- * What could possibly be wrong with building a city or tower? Is urbanization a crime? (11:4)
- * Is there anything wrong about traveling towards the east or setting up a city within a valley? (see 11:2)

Nevertheless, God punishes them by mixing their languages, causing them to abandon their joint project (11:5-7).

So what did they do that angered God?

Chazal focus their criticism of this generation on their antagonistic attitude towards God (see Rashi 11:1). However, the final and critical phrase in the Torah's description of their deeds points to an additional reason:

"v'naase LANU SHEM - WE shall make a NAME for OURSELVES" (see 11:4 / See also Sanhedrin 109a)

The use of the first person plural - not only in this pasuk, but also in the ALL of the first four psukim (11:1-4) - reflects the egocentric nature and attitude of this generation. [Note also the repeated use of the Hebrew word "hava" (let US).]

Rather than devoting their endeavors to the glorification of the NAME OF GOD, this generation excludes God from their goals and aspirations, emphasizing instead man's dominion and prowess.

Although this generation is undoubtedly more refined and cultured than the corrupt, depraved generation of the Flood, they unite for the unholy purpose of venerating the 'name of man', rather than that of the Almighty.

Apparently, God had higher expectations for mankind, hoping they would harness their God-given talents and potential towards loftier pursuits. Instead, they established an anthropocentric society, devoting their energies towards MAKING A NAME for THEMSELVES.

God could not allow this project to continue. But in contrast to the corrupt generation of the Flood, the builders of the Tower did not deserve destruction, rather they required 're-direction'. Towards this goal, God will now choose Avraham Avinu to establish a nation whose purpose will be to REDIRECT mankind - to channel those very same qualities of unity and creativity towards a more altruistic end.

The aftermath of the Tower of Babel incident provides the thematic setting for God's startling challenge to Avraham Avinu: "And I will make you a GREAT NATION.... and through you ALL the families of the earth will be blessed." (12:1-3)

Avraham Avinu is CHOSEN FOR A PURPOSE: to direct mankind back in the proper direction. Towards this goal, He is also promised a special land, not as a REWARD, but rather as a VEHICLE to fulfill that purpose. God sets aside a special location, and then designates a special nation to represent Him, and to become a model nation that will inspire nations and spark their spiritual development.

Even though Avraham at this point is only an individual, God promises him that he is destined to become the forefather of this nation - whose development will involve a complex process, which will take some four hundred years (see 15:13-20).]

To become this nation, Avraham's offspring must multiply (ZERA) and then establish their nation in a special land (ARETZ). These two prerequisites not only appear in God's opening statement to Avraham upon his arrival in Eretz Canaan (see 12:7), but they are also repeated each time God speaks to the AVOT in regard to their future (see 13:14-15, 15:18, 17:8, 26:3, 28:13, 35:12, etc.).

The seeds of this nation are 'planted' in Sefer Breishit, as detailed by the story of the Avot.

BET-EL & SHEM HASHEM

Although this goal can only be fully attained once this nation is established, it is significant that Avraham's own life will now foreshadow that ultimate goal.

For example, if we trace Avraham's first journey through Eretz Canaan as described in the Torah, we find that the site of Bet-El earns a unique place within Avraham's itinerary.

After he arrives in Canaan and builds a MIZBAYACH in Shchem, Avraham continues to Bet-El, the climax of his "aliyah": "From there he moved up the mountain range to BET-EL... and he built a MIZBAYACH there and called out b'SHEM HaSHEM - in God's NAME! (12:8).

Then, in the next chapter, Avraham returns to Eretz Canaan after his stay in Egypt and comes specifically to this very same MIZBAYACH in Bet-El. There, he once again calls out b'SHEM HaSHEM (13:1-4)!

Wherein lies the significance of Avraham's MIZBAYACH in Bet-El and his calling out in God's Name?

Avraham's calling out in God's NAME in Bet-El signifies a contrasting parallel to the Migdal Bavel fiasco. There, mankind's focus on their own prominence is reflected in their statement of: "v'naaseh LANU SHEM." Now Avraham must correct that cardinal mistake; he calls out in GOD'S NAME - "va'yikra b'SHEM HASHEM"! It is for this very purpose that Avraham was chosen.

Ramban expresses this understanding in his commentary to this pasuk (12:8):

"... and Avraham would call out there in front of the Mizbayach and make known God's existence to all mankind..." (see Rabman on Breishit 12:8)

A 'STRATEGIC' LOCATION

This thematic background may help us understand why God chose specifically the land of Israel to become the 'homeland' of this nation. Recall (from your study of world history) how Egypt and Mesopotamia emerged as the two great cradles of ancient civilization. One could suggest that the land of Israel, located in between these two centers of civilization (and along the main highway that connects them), provides a 'strategic' location for the accomplishment of their national goal.

This idea may be reflected in events that transpire in chapter 12. Note how Avraham is first commanded to leave his own homeland in **Mesopotamia** and travel to Eretz Canaan (see 12:1). At the highlight of that "aliyah", he builds his "mizbayach" in Bet-el and 'calls out in God's Name' (12:7-8). Then, the next story in Chumash informs us how he traveled to **Egypt** and encounters an incident of corruption (see 12:10-20). Upon his return from that center of civilization, once again Avraham goes to Bet-el and builds a mizbayach and calls out in His Name (see 13:1-4). Finally, note as well how Avraham calls out, once again, in God's Name - after he establishes a covenant of mutual trust with Avimelech (see 21:33). [See also Ramban on 12:8 in its entirety (and the TSC shiur on Parshat Va'yetze).]

A BIBLICAL THEME

This concept, that Am Yisrael is chosen to bring God's Name to mankind, emerges as a central theme not only in Sefer Breishit, but throughout Tanach, as well.

In Sefer Devarim, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to establish a national religious center "ba'makom asher yivchar Hashem l'shakeyn SHMO sham" - in the place which God will choose for His NAME to dwell therein (Devarim 12:5,11). As we explained in our shiurim on Sefer Devarim, this phrase, repeated numerous times in the sefer, describes the BET HA'MIKDASH - which is to become the institution through which God's prominence will be recognized by all mankind.

Some four hundred years later, when the MIKDASH is finally built, this same theme is reflected in Shlomo's prayer at its dedication ceremony:

"If a foreigner comes from a distant land for the SAKE OF YOUR NAME, for they shall hear about YOUR GREAT NAME... when he comes to pray at this House... grant him what he asks. Thus ALL THE PEOPLES OF THE EARTH

will KNOW YOUR NAME and revere You, as do Bnei Yisrael, and they will recognize that YOUR NAME is attached to this House which I have built." (Melachim I 8:43 /see also Shmuel II 7:22-27)

In fact, Malkat Sheva [the Queen of Sheeba], reaches this very conclusion upon her visit to the Bet Ha'Mikdash, as described in Melachim 10:1-9!

IN MESSIANIC TIMES

The famous messianic prophecy of Yeshayahu (chapter 2) not only reflects this same theme, but also creates an intriguing parallel to the Migdal Bavel narrative:

"In the days to come, the MOUNTAIN of BET HA'SHEM (the Temple Mount) will stand high above the mountains... and ALL THE NATIONS shall gaze on it with joy. Then MANY PEOPLES shall go and say: Come let us go up to the House of God, that He may instruct us in His ways and we may walk in His paths - for TORAH shall come forth from Tzion, and the word of God from Yerushalayim... " (2:1-4)

Note the contrasting parallel between this 'hope' and the events at Migdal Bavel. In both events all mankind unites for a joint purpose. However, in Yeshayahu they gather to a MOUNTAIN top (man looking up) rather than in a VALLEY (man looking down); and to the CITY of Yerushalayim and its TOWER - the Bet HaMikdash, rather than their own city and tower. Mankind has now united to hear the word of God, as transmitted and taught by His people.

In diametric opposition to Migdal Bavel, the Mikdash becomes the symbol of the goals of a theocentric society - the ultimate goal of mankind.

The following table reviews this contrasting parallel:

MIGDAL BAVEL	BET HA'MIKDASH
-----	-----
Unity for man	Unity for God
Valley	Mountain
a city	the city of Jerusalem
a tower	the Temple
Man's prominence	God's prominence ("shem Hashem")

Another parallel to the Migdal Bavel narrative appears in the prophecies of Zefania, in his depiction of the messianic era:

"For then I will make the peoples pure of speech - SAFA BRURA - so that they will all call out b'SHEM HASHEM, and worship Him with one accord." (3:9)

Once again, the prophet depicts the unification of mankind for the purpose of calling out in God's Name. An additional parallel to the Migdal Bavel incident is suggested by the use of the word "safa" (=language).

REWARD OR PURPOSE

In light of our discussion, we can now reexamine our original question. We have shown that Avraham Avinu was chosen to fulfill a SPECIFIC MISSION - to become the forefather of a nation that will lead all others to a theocentric existence and refocus mankind's energies in the proper direction.

Thus, Avraham Avinu's distinction came not as a REWARD for any specific deed, but rather for a SPECIFIC PURPOSE. Undoubtedly, as reflected in numerous Midrashim, Avraham must have been a man of extraordinary character and stature who possessed the necessary potential to fulfill this goal. However, the Torah prefers to omit any explicit reference to these qualities, focusing not on his past accomplishments but rather on the mission that lies ahead, thus stressing the primacy of Avraham's designated task.

This same principle applies in all generations. God's choice of Am Yisrael is not a REWARD, but the means by which they can and must fulfill the mission with which He has entrusted them. As this mission is eternal, so too is God's choice of the Jewish Nation.

This Biblical theme stresses our need to focus not on the exclusive PRIVILEGES of being God's special Nation, but rather on its unique RESPONSIBILITIES.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

=====

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. One could suggest that the events at Migdal Bavel represent the natural course of the history of nations. People with a common goal join together for a common purpose and build a society. Sooner or later, splinter groups with other ideals and goals form, often challenging the authority of the first group. Over the course of time, these smaller groups may eventually break off and start their own nation.

When people cannot agree upon a common goal, they are often unable to communicate with each other, even if they do speak the same language. [Israel's "knesset" is classic example.]

One could suggest that when God decides to stop this building project, he does so by sundering the people's unity, by causing them to fight over their goals. Their inability to communicate with each other, to understand each other's language, stems from the breakdown of the unity of mission that had brought them together in the first place.

Based on this suggestion, offer an alternate interpretation of the term "safa" (language) in the Migdal Bavel narrative.

See Ibn Ezra (11:1 - "dvarim achadim") and - if you have time - the Abarbanel on this sugya. Relate their comments to the above discussion.

B. Note that in the entire Migdal Bavel narrative, Hashem's name is exclusively shem "havaya". Relate this to last week's shiur.

C. This connection between Migdal Bavel and the "bechira" of Avraham Avinu is supported by the Midrash's comment (on Breishit 26:5) that Avraham was 48 years old when he recognized God for the first time. By calculating the genealogies in chapters 5 and 11, it can be established that Avraham Avinu reached age 48 on the same year that Peleg died, which, according to Chazal, corresponds to the precise year of Migdal Bavel!

PARSHAT LECH L'CHA -Part Two

How many times must God repeat the SAME promise to Avraham Avinu? In Parshat Lech L'cha alone, God tells Avraham FOUR times that his offspring ("zera") will become a nation in a special land ("aretz")! Would not have one divine promise been sufficient?

In the following shiur, we attempt to explain the reason for each of these promises and their relation to the events that transpire in the interim.

INTRODUCTION

To clarify our opening question, the following table charts the progression of events in Parshat Lech L'cha by providing a short title for each of its seven 'parshiot', while noting in brackets where that 'parshia' includes a 'hitgalut' [revelation] to Avraham in regard to the future of his offspring.

PARSHIA	TOPIC
12:1-9	Avraham's "aliyah" to Eretz Canaan [*12:1-3,7]
12:10-13:18	Lot leaving Avraham [*13:14-17]
14:1-24	Avraham's victory in the war between the kings
15:1-20	Brit Bein ha'Btarim [*15:13-19]
16:1-16	The birth of Yishmael
17:1-14	Brit Milah [*17:7-8]
17:15-27	The promise of the birth of Yitzchak [*17:19]

As you review this chart, read those psukim (quoted in the brackets) - noting how often God promises Avraham Avinu that his "zera" (offspring) will inherit the "aretz" (land). In our shiur, we attempt to explain how and why each "hitgalut" is unique, and how it relates to the events that transpire in Parshat Lech L'cha.

THE FIRST HITGALUT - BECOMING GOD'S NATION

The opening "hitgalut" is the simplest to understand, for in this initial encounter, God must first explain to Avraham the primary purpose for why he has been chosen:

"I will make **you** a GREAT NATION... and through you all the Nations of the world will be blessed..." (see 12:1-3)

As we explained in earlier shiurim, God initiates this special relationship with Avraham Avinu to become the 'forefather' of a 'model nation' that will direct mankind toward a more Theo-centric existence.

This backdrop explains God's next "hitgalut" to Avraham (in that very same 'parshia') upon his arrival in that land:

"To your **ZERA** [offspring] I shall give this **ARETZ** [land]" (see 12:7)

To develop from an 'individual' into a 'nation', it will be necessary for:

Avraham's family will need to multiply -
hence the blessing of "ZERA";

A territory is necessary to establish this nation -
hence the promise of "ARETZ".

Pay careful attention to these two key words: "zera" & "aretz", for they will be repeated quite often in Sefer Breishit, especially when God speaks to the forefathers in regard to the future of their offspring.

Theoretically speaking, these two promises could have sufficed. After all, once Avraham had arrived in the land, he simply needs to give birth to many children, settle the land, and establish this special nation. And if Chumash was a 'fairy tale', that may have been a most likely scenario. However, in Chumash, this "bechira" [choosing] process - to become God's special nation - will unfold instead in a rather complex manner. To appreciate that process, we must now consider the thematic significance of each additional "hitgalut" to Avraham Avinu.

THE FIRST 'SPLIT'

The next 'parshia' (12:9-13:18) describes Avraham's journey to Egypt and upon his return - his quarrel with Lot. Let's examine the next "hitgalut" which takes place immediately after Lot left Avraham:

"And God spoke to Avram after Lot had left him: Lift up your eyes from this place and see... for this entire ARETZ that you see I am giving to you and your ZERA forever..." (see 13:14-18)

This promise, although a bit more 'poetic' than the first, appears to be more or less a repeat of God's original promise of "zera v'aretz". To understand its purpose, we must consider what transpired in those events.

Review 12:10 thru 13:18, noting how this unit discusses two totally different stories, even though they are both included in the same 'parshia':

- 1) Avraham's journey to Egypt and his subsequent return (12:10-13:4)
- 2) The quarrel between Lot and Avraham (13:5-18)

Indeed, there is loose connection between these two stories, as it was their wealth (which they accumulated during their journey to Egypt /see 12:16-20) that sparked their quarrel (see 13:5-9). Nevertheless, it would have been more logical for each of these stories to form their own 'parshia', as reflected in the chapter division.

However, the fact that the Torah records both of these stories in the same 'parshia' - suggests that a deeper thematic connection may exist between these two stories.

Let's explore that possibility.

LIKE NEPHEW LIKE SON

Note once again the opening phrase (in 13:14) which introduces God's second promise:

"And God spoke to Avram **after Lot had left him...**"

This short introduction certainly points to a direct connection between Lot's departure and the need for this additional promise.

One could suggest that God's promise comes to 'cheer up' Avraham Avinu after this tragic separation from his nephew Lot, whom he treated as his own son. Let's explain why.

Recall that at this time, Avraham has no children of his own, while his nephew Lot has no father. For this reason, it seems as though Avraham had practically 'adopted' Lot, treating him like his own son. In fact, from the moment we meet Avraham in Parshat Noach, Lot faithfully follows Avraham everywhere. [See 11:27-31, 12:4-5, and 13:1-2,5]

[Recall as well that Haran (Avraham's brother) left three children: Lot, Milka, and Yiskah / see 11:27-29. Nachor (Avraham's other brother) took care of Milka - by marrying her, while Avraham took care of Lot, by treating him like a son. This also explains why Chazal identify Sarah as Yiskah (see 20:12 & Rashi on 11:29).]

As he had no children of his own, Avraham may have understood that God's promise of "zera" would be fulfilled through Lot! [See Radak 13:14!] Furthermore, even if God would one-day bless him with his own son, Avraham could still have hoped to include Lot as an integral member of his 'chosen' family.

Therefore, Lot's decision to leave (see 13:9-13) could be considered as a personal tragedy for Avraham, and hence the necessity for God to reassure him that His promise of "zera" will still be fulfilled.

With this in mind, let's consider a deeper connection between these two stories in this 'parshia', relating to a more fundamental theme of Sefer Breishit.

LEAVING AVRAHAM OR LEAVING GOD?

In Sefer Breishit, Lot is the first example of a family member who is 'rejected from Avraham's 'chosen' family. Many similar stories (such as the rejection of Yishmael & Esav) will follow.

As this "dechiya" [rejection] process will become a pattern within the "bechira" [choosing] process, we should expect that the Torah's description of these events (in the first section of this 'parshia') will at least allude to WHY Lot is rejected from the 'chosen family'.

Even though both Avraham and Lot travel together to and from Egypt, the impact of that visit on each is profoundly different. Avraham, as reflected in the incident with Pharaoh and Sarah, saw corruption in Egypt. He returns to Eretz Canaan inspired with the resolve to preach against such corrupt behavior - to teach morality. Therefore, Avraham returns immediately to Bet-el, where he once again calls out in God's Name. [See Ramban 12:8 and Rambam Hilchot Avodah Zara 1:2-3!]

In contrast, Lot was impressed by the 'good life' in Egypt; not only by its wealth, but also by its climate - and especially its mighty river. Let's explain how we reach this conclusion.

In an attempt to stop the quarrel between their herdsmen, Avraham had suggested a 'split' with Lot, i.e. one of them would travel to the right, the other to the left (see 13:7-9). Even though the words 'right' and 'left' are often understood as 'east' and 'west', Targum Unkelos explains that Avraham offered Lot to go either NORTH (left / see Breishit 14:15) or SOUTH (right, "ymin" as in Yemen/ see Devarim 3:27). Considering that they were standing in Bet-el (see 12:4), Avraham offered Lot to choose between the hills of YEHUDA (to the south / i.e. to the right) or SHOMRON (to the north, i.e. to the left), i.e. not a complete separation - only a far enough distance to avoid quarrels.

Lot did not accept Avraham's offer. Instead, Lot opted to leave the mountain range of Eretz Canaan altogether, preferring the Jordan Valley

"And Lot lifted his eyes and saw the entire JORDAN valley, for it had plenty of water... **like the LAND OF EGYPT...**" (see 13:10).

Lot's logic was quite reasonable. The Jordan Valley had a river, and hence a constant supply of water - in contrast to the mountain range whose water supply was dependent on the rainfall

However, Lot's choice carried spiritual ramifications as well. As Parshat Ekev explains:

"For the land which you are coming to inherit [i.e. Eretz Canaan] is NOT like Eretz Mitzraim [which has the Nile River as a constant water supply]..., instead it is a land of hills and valleys - which needs RAIN for water. [Therefore] it is a land which God looks after..." (Devarim 11:10-12)

Symbolically, Lot's choice reflects his preference for a different life-style. Avraham accepts the challenge of Eretz Canaan - a life dependent on MATAR (rain) and hence - dependent on God (see Devarim 11:13-16!). Lot prefers the 'easy-life' in Sdom. This understanding is reflected in the Midrash:

"va'yisa Lot m'KEDEM" - Midrash Agada - "hi'si'ah atzmo m'KADMONO shel olam - Lot lifted himself AWAY from God, saying, I can no longer remain with Avraham - nor with his God." (quoted by Rashi on 13:11)

[Sdom is really to the east, therefore the pasuk should say "l'kedem" and not "m'kedem". The Midrash picks up on this to show its deeper meaning. See also the use of "m'kedem" to show a direction away from God, as in 3:24 (leaving Gan Eden), 4:16 and 11:2.]

Lot's total divorce from Avraham is indeed tragic for he has lost not only a 'son' but also a disciple. Therefore, God must now not only console Avraham, but also reassure him that despite Lot's departure (13:14/ "acharei hi'pared Lot") His promise of "zera v'aretz" remains.

Indeed, Avraham will yet have a child - a son who will follow in his footsteps as well.

BRIT BEIN HA'B'TARIM - THE FIRST COVENANT

The next time God speaks to Avraham is in chapter 15 - better known as "brit bein ha'b'tarim". There again, God promises "zera v'aretz" (see 15:18), however in this promise, for the first time, we find the framework of a "brit" - a covenant. To appreciate the significance of this covenant and its 'dialogue', we must take note of the events that precede it in chapter 14.

The battle of the four kings against the five kings in chapter 14 constitutes Avraham's first military victory in Land. Yet, it is this military victory that leads us directly into the topic of "brit bein ha'b'tarim". Note how chapter 15 opens as a direct continuation of that victory:

"achar ha'dvarim ha'eyleh - After THESE events, God spoke to Avram in a vision saying: Do not fearful... I will shield you, your reward is very great..." (see 15:1-2)

Now there are numerous opinions among the commentators explaining why Avraham was fearful (which are not mutually exclusive). However, there is one point that Avraham raises over and over again in his ensuing conversation that definitely relates to his military conquest, as well as his lack of a son:

"...Since you have given me no offspring - v'hinei ben beiti YORASH oti - behold my house servant [i.e. Eliezer] he will be my heir..." (see 15:3)

Avraham becomes upset as he realizes that without a son, everything that he has just acquired in this battle will be taken over by his servant Eliezer.

Considering that to become a nation, his offspring would sooner or later have to secure military conquest of the land (what

we call 'sovereignty'). Avraham's military victory at this time could have achieved this goal. But realizing that he has no children of his own at this time, Avraham gave everything away (see 14:16-24). Hence, this military victory only heightened Avraham's awareness that God's promises remained unfulfilled. For a very good reason, Avraham is now worried that maybe he is no longer worthy of God's original promise. (see Rashi 15:1)

To support this interpretation, let's note the Torah's use of the verb "yorash" [which is usually understood simply as to 'inherit'] in the above pasuk, and in the psukim that follow:

"And God answered: That one [Eliezer] will not YO'RASH you, rather your very own son (yet to be born) - he will YO'RASH you... & then He said to him: I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land I'RISHTAH... Then Avraham asked - b'mah ay'dah ki i'RASHENAH..." (15:4-8)

There is no doubt that "yerusha" is a key word in this conversation, but what does it mean?

Throughout Chumash, "YERUSHA" usually implies some sort of conquest (usually military, as in securing sovereignty over land). For example, in Parshat Masei God's commandment for Bnei Yisrael to conquer the land is worded as follows:

"v'HORSHTEM et ha'ARETZ... - You shall conquer the land and live in it, for I have given you the land - L'RESHET otah.. (see Bamidbar 33:50-53, see also Breishit 22:17)

[Note as well the word "morasha" in this context in Shmot 6:5-8. Note also the special context of "morasha" in Devarim 33:4 - implying that Torah also requires a certain type of 'conquest' / see Maharam.]

This background can help us understand the ensuing conversation between God and Avraham.

First of all, God calms Avraham, promising him once again that the time will come and indeed he will have "zera" - as numerous as the stars in the heavens - that they will one day YORESH (conquer) the land (see 15:4-5). And indeed, Avraham is assured by this promise (see 15:6 "v'he'emin b'Hashem").

Then, God initiates yet another conversation with the powerful statement of:

"I am the God who took you out of Ur Kasdim, to give you this land **L'RISHTA - to inherit by conquest!**" (see 15:7)

[Note similarity to Shmot 20:2 (first line of the Dibrot).]

In reaction, Avraham asks a rather puzzling question: "b'mah aydah ki i'RASHENAH!" (see 15:8), which includes once again the word "yerusha"!

What is the meaning of this question?

It would not make sense that Avraham is asking for divine proof of God's promise of "zera"? First of all, the previous pasuk just stated that Avraham believed in God's promise (see 15:6). Furthermore, God does not answer this question with a proof! So what is Avraham's question?

To answer this, we must 'cheat' a little by looking at God's answer.

Recall once again Avraham's question is: "b'mah **aydah** ki i'RASHENAH" in response to God's promise that He has taken him out of Ur Kasdim in order that he YORASH the land (see 15:7-8).

God's response to this question begins by instructing Avraham to perform a certain ceremony (see 15:9-12), however the actual answer to Avraham's question doesn't begin until 15:13. To understand why, carefully how God's statement of "y'DOAH TAYDAH..." in 15:13 - forms a direct response to Avraham's question of "b'MAH AYDAH..." in 15:8!

[The ceremony in 15:9-12 forms the preparation for the covenant that will be defined in 15:18.]

NOT IN YOUR LIFETIME!

God's answer to Avraham's question continues from 15:13 thru 15:16. Note how it describes WHEN and HOW the YERUSHA of the Land will ultimately take place:

"Surely you should KNOW that your offspring will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be afflicted and enslaved; **four hundred years**. But that nation that will enslave will [ultimately] be punished - afterward they [your offspring] will leave [that land] with great wealth. But you [Avraham] will die in peace... [i.e. before this difficult process begins]; **only the fourth generation will return here** [to inherit/ conquer this land] - for the sin of Emorites will not be complete until that time." (see 15:13-16)

To Avraham's total surprise, God's promise of "yerusha" (see 15:7) - sovereignty over the land, and the establishment of a nation - won't take place in his own lifetime, or in his son's lifetime! Instead, before his offspring will attain YERUSHA of the land, they must first undergo some 'basic training' in someone else's land - a process that will include slavery and affliction in 'a foreign land'. Only after some four hundred years will they attain this YERUSHA. [This 'news' comes as such a 'shock' to Avraham Avinu that Avraham must be first 'sedated' - see 15:12 & 15:17!]

In answer to Avraham's question of "b'mah aydah" - God informs Avraham that in essence, he is only on a 'pilot trip' to Israel. It may be symbolic that he himself just conquered the land, and that he himself had already made God's Name known by calling out in His Name - for these events foreshadow what his offspring will do (as a nation) in the future ("maase Avot, siman l'banim"). However, the ultimate fulfillment of God's original promise that Avraham will establish great sovereign nation will only be fulfilled after many generations of important preparation.

Hence, Avraham's question of "b'mah aydah ki i'RASHENAH" is a request to know WHEN (and possibly HOW) this YERUSHA will ultimately take place. [Recall that the Hebrew word "ki" can also mean 'when'.]

A PROOF FROM VA'EYRA

To prove that this is God's answer to Avraham's question, we simply need to read the famous psukim in Parshat Va'eira (see Shmot 6:2-8), when God informs Moshe that the time has come to fulfill this covenant:

"And I have heard the cries of bondage of Bnei Yisrael... and I have remembered my COVENANT [i.e. "brit bein ha'btarim"], therefore, tell Bnei Yisrael I am God, and I will take you out of your suffering in Egypt... [the 'four cups' psukim] and I will bring you to the land THAT I lifted up My hand to give to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and I will then give it to you as a **MORASHA** [= "yerusha"]!" (see Shmot 6:5-8)

Only after the Exodus, will God give the land to Bnei Yisrael as a MORASHA, as He promised to Avraham Avinu at brit bein ha'btarim.

The implications of this promise are so far reaching that they require an official covenant between God and Avraham, as described in final psukim of this 'parshia', i.e. in 15:18-20.

This explains not only the thematic connection between chapters 14 and 15, but also the necessity of this additional promise of "zera v'aretz" in the form of a covenant. Brit bein ha'btarim includes not only the promise of becoming a nation, but also explains the long historical process of how Avraham's offspring will one day become that nation.

LAND - FOR A PURPOSE

This order of events that unfolds in Brit bein ha'btarim, explaining HOW Bnei Yisrael will become a nation, is quite significant for it highlights the special nature of our relationship with the land.

The histories of all other nations of the world begin in a very different manner. Usually a nation begins when a group of people living in a common land sharing common resources and needs join together for the sake of common interest and form a nation. In other words, **FIRST** we have people living on a common land,

and then those people become a nation. In contrast, Am Yisrael becomes a nation in a very different manner. We don't begin with a common land, rather we begin with a common goal (or destiny), i.e. to become God's model nation. In fact, the Torah emphasizes that we will become a nation in "land that is not ours" [see 15:13]. Technically speaking, our initial bonding is caused by a common plight and suffering in a FOREIGN land. Only AFTER we become a nation, and only after we receive the Torah at Har Sinai (the laws that teach us how we are to achieve our goal), only then do we conquer the Land that God has designated for us.

In other words, we are not a nation because we have a common land, rather we are a nation because we share a common goal and destiny. The land serves as a vehicle to help our nation achieve that goal. [See first Rashi on Chumash, and read it carefully, noting how he explains a very similar theme.]

THE BIRTH OF YISHMAEL

The next 'parshia' in Parshat Lech L'cha describes the events that lead to the birth of Yishmael (see 16:1-16). God promises that he too will become a mighty nation, but a rather wild one (see 16:12). For some divine reason, God's intention is that Avraham's only chosen will be born to Sarah, but only after her lifelong struggle with barrenness.

However, before Avram and Sarai can give birth to this special child, God must change their names to AvraHam and SarAH and enter into yet another covenant - better known as "brit milah".

BRIT MILAH

The next 'parshia', describing the covenant of BRIT MILAH (see 17:1-11), contains the fourth and final promise of "zera v'aretz" in Parshat Lech L'cha. As this brit includes the very FIRST MITZVA that Avraham must keep and pass on to his children, its details are very important. In fact they are so important that their thematic significance has already been discussed in three earlier shiurim.

1) The significance of "brit milah" on the 'eighth day' was discussed at length in our shiur for Shmini Atzeret (sent out a few weeks ago/ see TSC archive for Parshat Tazria).

2) The thematic connection between "brit milah" and "brit bein ha'btarim" was discussed in our shiur for Chag ha'MATZOT and on Parshat Bo and on MAGID.

3) The meaning the borders of the Land of Israel as detailed in "brit milah" (and "brit bein ha'btarim") was discussed in our shiur on Parshat Masei (see archive).

Therefore, we will not discuss "brit milah" in detail in this week's shiur. Instead, we simply note how this "brit" serves as the introduction to the birth of Yitzchak, and the prerequisite for his conception.

The final 'parshia' in Parshat Lech L'cha (see 17:15-27) details how Avraham fulfills this commandment. Yet, at the same time, God informs him that the "bechira" process will continue ONLY thru Yitzchak, who will soon be born (see 17:15-21); and NOT with Yishmael, even though he also fulfilled the mitzva of "brit milah" (see 17:20-24).

[Be sure to note the textual parallel between 17:7-8,19 and God's covenant with Noach in 6:18 and 9:8-17; "v'akmal".]

We have shown how God's original choice of Avraham Avinu was not in REWARD for his merits, but rather IN ORDER that he fulfill God's mission - to become His nation. As this mission is eternal, so too is God's choice of the Jewish Nation. As we concluded in our first shiur on Parshat Lech L'cha, we find once again a Biblical theme that stresses our need to focus more so on our RESPONSIBILITY to act as God's special nation, and less so on those PRIVILEGES that it includes.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Note Yeshayahu 42:5-6 and its context. Relate this pasuk to our shiurim thus far on Sefer Breishit. [Note that this is the opening pasuk of the Haftara for Parshat Breishit (& not by chance!).]

Compare with Devarim 4:5-8. Explain what Yeshayahu refers to when he mentions "brit am" and "or goyim".

AVRAHAM: THE EARLY YEARS

by Yitzchak Etshalom

I

INTRODUCTION

As we mentioned in the preface to last week's essay, the series of analyses on Sefer B'resheet will focus on fundamental issues of our relationship with the text of T'nakh. In future issues we will explore the relationship of traditional biblical scholarship with archeology, geography and other disciplines. In this issue, we will visit an older problem, one which addresses the entire enterprise of tradition and its reliability.

That genre of Rabbinic literature commonly known as "Midrash" has been widely misunderstood - and has taken a proverbial "beating" in more than one circle of late. In order to properly assay the issue and begin our inquiry, we must first clarify and distinguish between two terms which are often confused in discussions of Rabbinic homiletics.

The term "Midrash", which means exegesis, a particular type of textual expansion and application, is properly used to describe any of a number of exegetical methods. Generally speaking, there are two types of Midrash - Midrash Halakhah and Midrash Aggadah.

Midrash Halakhah is an exegetical analysis of a Halakhic text with a normative result.. For instance, when the Midrash Halakhah infers from the word *מִן הַבְּהֵמָה* (of the animals) at the opening of the laws of offerings (Vayyikra 1:2) that not all animals are fit to be brought to the altar (and then goes on to list which are excluded), that is Midrash Halakhah. Since the results of a Halakhic discussion are practical, the exegetical method is (relatively) tightly defined and is subject to challenge and dispute.

Midrash Aggadah can be loosely defined as any other sort of exegesis on T'nakh text. This includes exhortative, poetic, prophetic, narrative, epic and any other non-normative text in T'nakh. As expected, the range of texts available for Midrash Aggadah is much broader and the methodology is less strictly defined than Midrash Halakhah. In addition, multiple approaches can be tolerated and even welcomed since there is generally no Halakhic implication to the inference. Even in those cases where such an inference may be claimed, the general methodology of the study of Midrash Aggadah allows (indeed, encourages) a wider range of approaches and perspectives. As such, we may find a series of alternate Midr'shei Aggadah on a given passage (e.g. the "test" of Avraham in B'resheet 22:1) which, although representing different perspectives, do not necessarily preclude one another.

Hence, the term "Halakhah" when standing alone (and describing a type of Rabbinic statement) would most properly be associated with a normative statement independent of the text. The word "Aggadah" refers to a statement which is non-normative and, again, is not derived from or associated with a given text.

The study of Midrash Aggadah has always been challenging - to identify which interpretations are interpretive and an attempt to discern the straightforward meaning of the text, which are polemic (typically against the early Christians), which are veiled attacks (e.g. on the Roman Empire), which are traditional lore that the homileticist is "hanging" on a particular text etc. Much of the derision shown by many towards statements in the Midrash Aggadah (indicated by phrases such as "it's **only** a Midrash") is rooted in an inability (or unwillingness) to rigorously address the text and analyze its various components; understanding that some are intended as literal interpretations and an actual retelling of history while others are poetic and artistic devices intended to drive home a critical point. R. Avraham ben haRambam neatly divided the students of Aggadah into three groups - those who take everything literally, who are fools, those who take nothing literally, who are heretics - and those who wisely analyze each passage and discern how each passage ought to be studied. A proper and incisive approach to the study of Midrash Aggadah - knowing which passage to approach with which perspective - consistently rewards the student with a discovery of depths of wisdom and profound sensitivity

A proper presentation of the various facets of Midrash Aggadah is well beyond the scope of this forum; however, that does not exempt us from, at the very least, reexamining our attitude towards this central branch of Rabbinic literature and strengthening our awareness of the sagacity and trust of Haza"l which is, after all, one of the forty-eight methods through which Torah is acquired.

To that end, we will assay a famous Midrash Aggadah (which is, *prima facie*, nearly bereft of Midrashic method) whose point of origin is an oblique reference at the end of our Parashah. The central thesis here is that there is, of course, much more to the Midrash Aggadah than meets the eye - the fuller thesis will be presented after the text, below.

II THE MIDRASH

A: PREFACE

One of the central figures - if not the pivotal one - in Sefer B'resheet is Avram/Avraham. We are given rich descriptions of his interactions with kings, family members, angels and G-d Himself - but all of that begins with his selection at age 75. We are told nothing, in the text, about his early life. The few sketchy verses at the end of our Parashah help little (if at all) in explaining why this son of Terach, scion of Shem, was selected as the progenitor of G-d's people.

There are several well-known Aggadot which partially fill in the "missing years" of Avraham's youth. Perhaps the most well-known Aggadah appears in several versions and has, as its point of departure, a minor difficulty in the Torah's retelling of Avraham's family life:

And Terach lived seventy years, and fathered Avram, Nachor, and Haran. Now these are the generations of Terach; Terach fathered Avram, Nachor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. And Haran died before his father Terach in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Avram and Nachor took wives; the name of Avram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nachor's wife, Milkah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milkah, and the father of Yiskah. But Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terach took Avram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Avram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the land of K'na'an; and they came to Charan, and lived there. And the days of Terach were two hundred and five years; and Terach died in Charan. (11:26-32)

The death of Haran (not to be confused with the place Charan, located in northern Syria or southern Turkey) during the life (literally "in the face of") his father was a first. Although Hevel died before Adam, we're not given any information about the relationship between the bereaved father and his murdered child. Here, the text clearly marks the death of Haran as happening before the death of Terach - the first recorded case of a child predeceasing his father where we can actually place the two of them in any sort of relationship.

The question raised by anyone sensitive enough to note the irregularity here is why, of all people, the future father of our people would claim as father and brother the first instance of such tragedy. The Midrash addresses this problem - the premature death of Haran - and, along the way, does much to inform us of Avraham's life before the command of "Lekh Lkha" (12:1).

B: THE TEXT OF THE MIDRASH (B'resheet Rabbah 38:16)

And Haran died in front of Terach his father.

R. Hiyya the grandson of R. Ada of Yafo [said]:

Terach was an idolater.

One day he went out somewhere,

and put Avraham in charge of selling [the idols].

When a man would come who wanted to purchase, he would say to him:

"How old are you?"

[The customer] would answer: "Fifty or sixty years old".

[Avraham] would say: "Woe to the man who is sixty years old

And desires to worship something one day old."

[The customer] would be ashamed and leave.

One day a woman came, carrying in her hand a basket of fine flour.
 She said: "Here, offer it before them."
 Abraham siezed a stick,
 And smashed all the idols,
 And placed the stick in the hand of the biggest of them.
 When his father came, he said to him:
 "Who did this to them?"
 [Avraham] said:, "Would I hide anything from my father? a woman came, carrying in her hand a basket of fine flour.
 She said: "Here, offer it before them."
 When I offered it, one god said: "I will eat first,"
 And another said, "No, I will eat first."
 Then the biggest of them rose up and smashed all the others.
 [His father] said:, "Are you making fun of me? Do they know anything?"
 [Avraham] answered: Shall your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?
 He took [Avraham] and handed him over to Nimrod.
 [Nimrod] said to him: "Let us worship the fire".
 [Avraham said to him: "If so, let us worship the water which extinguishes the fire."
 [Nimrod] said to him: "Let us worship the water".
 [Avraham said to him: "If so, let us worship the clouds which bear the water."
 [Nimrod] said to him: "Let us worship the clouds".
 [Avraham said to him: "If so, let us worship the wind which scatters the clouds."
 [Nimrod] said to him: "Let us worship the wind".
 [Avraham said to him: "If so, let us worship man who withstands the wind."
 [Nimrod] said to him: "You are speaking nonsense; I only bow to the fire.
 "I will throw you into it.
 "Let the G-d to Whom you bow come and save you from it."
 Haran was there.
 He said [to himself] Either way;
 If Avraham is successful, I will say that I am with Avraham;
 If Nimrod is successful, I will say that I am with Nimrod.
 Once Avraham went into the furnace and was saved,
 They asked [Haran]: "With which one are you [allied]"?
 He said to them: "I am with Avraham."
 They took him and threw him into the fire and his bowels were burned out.
 He came out and died in front of Terach his father.
 This is the meaning of the verse: And Haran died in front of Terach.

C: THE OVERALL QUESTION

Reading this Aggadah, one is immediately struck by the non-Midrashic style. There is absolutely no association with text here. Instead, there is a detailed story, down to the specifics of the debate between Avraham and Nimrod, the manner in which Avraham would shame his customers and the story he concocted to explain the decimation of the "inventory" to his father. The question one must pose here is one of source - from where did the rabbis derive this information? How do they know that Terach was an idol-salesman; that Avraham spoke this way to his customers, the other way to his father, in such a manner to Nimrod - and why would we even think that Avraham and Nimrod ever met?

The one answer which is always available and seems an "easy way out" is "Mesorah". To with, the rabbis had a reliable tradition going back to Avraham himself that this is how this particular series of events played out. That is appealing - although anyone embracing this approach would have to contend with variations in alternate versions - yet there are two serious problems with this response. First of all, if this was a reliable tradition dating back to Avraham, why isn't that mentioned in the text of the Aggadah? After all,

when the Rabbis have reliable traditions dating back to a much more recent time, they indicate this (see, inter alia, M. Peah 2:6) or, at the very least, refer to the statement as “Gemara” or הלכה למשה לסיני or, in Aggadic contexts - דבר זה מסורת בידינו (BT Yoma 21a). Second of all, why is the entire Aggadah credited to one authority (R. Hiyya the grandson of R. Ada of Yafu)? Shouldn't it be presented as an anonymous text?

There is another direction - perhaps as much to the “skeptical” side as the first answer was to the “believer” side - that has its roots in some rabbinic scholarship, although certainly not the mainstream. Some will suggest that this Aggadah reflects a polemic against idolatry, is a product of its time in the sense that it stakes no claim to knowing anything about Avraham's actual activities, but uses Avraham as a convenient foil for “making a point” about principles, idols, loyalty etc. As stated, this is not as foreign an idea as one might think and is sometimes the most appropriate way to view an Aggadah - but is often another “easy way out” of contending with the difficult question of “how did they know this”?

I would like to suggest an alternative approach to understanding this Midrash, one which maintains the integrity of the report and its association to the historic character of Avraham, while defending against the two challenges raised above to the “Mesorah” argument noted above.

D: THE THESIS

Although direct derivations are not found in this Aggadah (albeit the opening and closing lines anchor the Aggadah in a Midrashic attempt to identify the reason for Haran's early demise), I'd like to suggest that the entire reconstruction of Avraham's life here is the result of Parshanut - textual interpretation. In other words, every one of the major components of this selection is the result of a reasonable read of T'nakh.

In order to accomplish this, each text in the Avraham narrative (and other selections which shed light on this period) must be read carefully, keeping an eye out for parallel texts and allusions to related passages.

III RECONSTRUCTING THE MIDRASH

There are six principle components to the Aggadah; we will demonstrate that each of them can be supported by a sensitive and careful read of the Avrahamic narrative and related texts:

A: Terach the idolater

B: Terach the salesman

C: Avraham's style of argumentation

D: Avraham's meeting with Nimrod

E: Avraham in the fire

F: Haran and “Pascal's Wager”

A: Terach the Idolater

The source for this one is an explicit text (Yehoshua 24:2). At the end of his life, Yehoshua related a historiosophy to the people, which began with a line familiar to us from the Haggadah:

And Yehoshua said to all the people, Thus said Hashem, G-d of Yisra'el, Your fathers lived on the other side of the river in old time, Terach, the father of Avraham, and the father of Nachor; and they served other gods.

Even though this translation renders the last pronoun unclear, such that we do not know who worshipped foreign gods (it may have been Nachor and Avraham, which would give us a whole different history...), the Ta'amei haMikra (trope marks) make it clear that those who worshipped foreign gods are “your fathers”; Terach is the representative of that group mentioned by name.

When the Aggadah begins by stating “Terach was an idolater”, it isn't innovating a new idea or revising history - this is the infor-

mation found in Yehoshua's farewell address.

B: Terach the Salesman

This one is not as straightforward and accessible as Terach's idolatrous affiliation. A few pieces of information about the ancient world which can be inferred from the text will help us.

First of all, society in the ancient world was not transient. People stayed in one area for generations except for cases of war or famine (which is why the call to Avraham of "Lekh Lkha" is so extravagant and reckoned as the first of his tests.) Only people whose livelihood allowed them to move easily did so - and, as the text tells us, Terach took his family from Ur towards K'na'an, getting only as far as Charan. Terach was the first person to uproot from one location to another without direct Divine intervention (such as Adam, Kayyin and the people in Shin'ar who were exiled). Hence, he must have had a profession which allowed him to easily move - which leaves him either as a shepherd, an artisan or a salesman. As we demonstrated in an earlier shiur (V'shinantam 3/6), Avraham and Ya'akov were traders whose chief livelihood and fortune were made in that fashion.

In addition, we have other records of idolaters who were, in addition to devotees of the pagan religion, men who engaged in the sale of ritual objects. In Shoftim 17-18, we are told the story of Mikhah who lived on Har Ephraim. He took money given to him by his mother and had an idol fashioned which he then set up in a temple. When his idol, its appurtenances and his priest were seized (by members of Dan - a story we will revisit next week), the townspeople chased after the thieves to try to restore their goods. Although not stated explicitly, it seems that the reason for their distress at the loss of the idol and its "support system" was an issue of livelihood. Evidently, the temple was a source of revenue for the town; whether as a result of travelers staying there or because they sold T'raphim (household gods); in any case, the association between idolatry and trade seems clear.

C: Avraham's style of argumentation

At three points in the Aggadah, Avraham engages in some form of theological debate (or rebuke) - with the usual customer, with his father and with Nimrod. His style of arguing is consistent - at no point does he come out and state his beliefs, strong though they may be. Instead, he elicits information from his disputant, and then, in classical Socratic fashion, turns his own words against him, using his disputant's premise to bolster his own argument.

For instance, he doesn't ridicule or rebuke the customer for purchasing a "god fresh from the kiln"; rather he asks him (seemingly off-handedly) as to his age. One almost gets the sense that Avraham's response is muttered under his breath - "how ridiculous, a man of fifty worshipping a day-old idol" - and then, in shame, the customer slinks out of the shop.

That we have every reason to believe that Avraham would have worked to promote the belief in one G-d is evident from the verses which highlight his selection (12:1-3) and his activities in K'na'an (calling out in the name of G-d). We don't need to look far to find sources that support the content of his interactions - but how do the authors of this Midrash Aggadah know his somewhat unconventional form of argumentation?

The answer can be found, I believe, in the interaction between Avraham and Avimelekh (Chapter 20). Unlike the first "wife-sister" episode (in Egypt), which was necessitated by the famine, there is no reason given for Avraham's descent to G'rar (20:1). Avraham knew, in advance, that he would have to utilize the "wife/sister" ruse in order to spare his life (v. 11) - but why go there at all?

Note that in that interaction, Avraham does not rebuke the king (and, indirectly, his constituents) for their moral turpitude until they come to him, ready to hear an explanation for his curious behavior. If he went to G'rar in order to spread the word and attract more adherents (see Rashi at 12:5 and S'forno at 12:9), why didn't he immediately come in and decry their low standards? Alternatively, if he knew that Sarah would be endangered as a result, why go there at all?

It seems that Avraham went there in order to engage in debate, a debate which could only begin once the people challenged him

and were receptive (as a result of their great fear) to what he had to say. It seems to have succeeded, at least partially, because Avimelekh (or his son) recognized G-d's support for Yitzchak (26:28), implying that they had some understanding of - and respect for - the G-d of Avraham.

Utilizing the one instance we have of argumentation and chastisement in which Avraham participated which is explicit in the text, the Ba'alei haMidrash are able to apply that style to earlier interactions in Avraham's life.

(The claim here is not that each of the specific events - or the details, such as the age of the customers - can be inferred from the text, nor that we need accept each of them as an exact historic record; the thesis is merely that the general information and messages of the Aggadah are the result of a careful reading of text).

D: Avraham's meeting with Nimrod

The Torah is not only silent about any meeting between these two, the entire Nimrod biography (10:8-12) is completed well before Avraham is even introduced in the text. From where did the Ba'alei haMidrash get the notion that Nimrod and Avraham had any direct interaction?

One feature shared by these two men is power - both were recognized as kings. Indeed, Nimrod was the first person to be considered a king:

And Kush fathered Nimrod; he was the first on earth to be a mighty one. He was a mighty hunter before Hashem; therefore it is said, As Nimrod the mighty hunter before Hashem. And the beginning of his kingdom was Bavel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.

Avraham is also considered royalty:

And the Hittites answered Avraham, saying to him, Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince among us... (23:5-6)

There is one more component to the Nimrod story which is vital for understanding the Aggadah. The attitude of the T'nakh is generally negative towards human rulers - note Gid'on's response to the people of Menasheh in Shoftim 8, and Sh'mu'el's diatribe against the people's demand for a king in I Sh'mu'el 8. Nimrod being the first self-declared king, he was also the first to form a direct challenge to the Rule of the one true King, haKadosh Barukh Hu. Avraham's entire life was dedicated to teaching the world about the one true G-d and to encouraging everyone to accept His rule. As such, Avraham and Nimrod are natural combatants and antagonists. Since Nimrod's life overlapped that of Avraham, and he ruled in the district where Avraham operated (at least during part of his younger years), the land of the Chaldeans, it is most reasonable that the two of them would have interacted. Once we add in the salvation from fire (see next section), following the model of the latter-day king of the same area (Nevukhadnezzar) throwing loyal monotheists into the fire, their meeting is almost a foregone conclusion.

E: Avraham in the fire

When G-d addresses Avraham in anticipation of the first covenant (chapter 15), He states:

I am Hashem who took you out of Ur Kasdim (15:7).

Before assessing the allusion to a later verse, we need to clarify the meaning of "Ur Kasdim". The word "Ur" may be a place-name (hence "Ur of the Chaldeans" in most translations); alternatively, it may mean "the UR which is in Kasdim" - the word UR meaning furnace (cf. Yeshaya 31:9, 50:11). Even if it is a place name, it may have been named after a great furnace found there.

In any case, G-d took Avraham out of this place - how do we understand the verb הוצאתיך? (*I took you out*)? Does it refer to the command to *Get thee from thy land...*? Does it allude, perhaps, to a more direct and interventionist evacuation?

The only other place in the Torah where the phrase אשר הוצאתי appears is in the first statement of the Decalogue:

I am Hashem your G-d who took you out of the Land of Egypt... (Sh'mot 20:2, D'varim 5:6)

In that case, the “taking out” was accomplished through miraculous, interventionist means.

If we accept the theory (which we have explained and used countless times in this forum) that unspecified terms in T'nakh are best clarified through parallel passages in T'nakh where those same terms are used, then we have a clearer picture of the “exodus” of Avraham from Kasdim. G-d intervened, miraculously, to save him, in some manner which would later be approximated in Egypt.

While we have much information about the miracles leading up to the Exodus, there is little in T'nakh to describe the servitude from which we were redeemed. There is, however, one description of the Egyptian sojourn which appears in three places in T'nakh. In D'varim 4:20, I Melakhim 8:51 and Yirmiyah 11:4, the Egypt from which we were redeemed is called *an iron furnace* (כור ברזל). So...if G-d presents Himself, as it were, to Avraham, with the words “that took you out” and we have no information as to what it was from which Avraham was saved, we can look at the parallel passage and, using the description of Egypt found throughout T'nakh, conclude that Avraham was saved from - a furnace!

F: Haran and “Pascal’s Wager”

The final point in the Midrash which we will address is the role of Haran here. He engages in what is commonly referred to as Pascal’s Wager. Blaise Pascal (1623 - 1662), a French mathematician and logician, suggested that it is a good idea to believe in G-d, based on “the odds”. If one doesn’t believe in G-d and turns out to have erred, he will be eternally damned. If, on the other hand, he is right, he will achieve salvation. If, on the other hand, he believes in G-d and turns out to have erred, he will have lost nothing...

Haran’s faith, unlike that of Avraham, is depicted as opportunistic. The point of this segment of the Aggadah is quite clear - declarations of faith are not cut from one cloth and the faith which can withstand the furnace is one which has already been forged by the crucible - not one of momentary convenience.

How do the Ba’alei haMidrash know that this was Haran’s failing? Why couldn’t he have predeceased his father for some other sin?

Since we have no other information about Haran in the text, we have to go to the next best source - Lot, his son.

As we find out throughout the Avrahamic narratives, Lot is someone who always took the easy path and the most convenient road - even if it affected the society he would join and his family.

When Avraham and Lot needed to separate, Avraham offered Lot his choice: “If you go to the left, I will go to the right; if you go to the right, I will take the left” - meaning that they will divide up the mountain range between north (left) and south (right). Avraham abjured Lot to remain in the mountains, a place of greater faith and solitude (see, inter alia, D'varim 11:10-12). Instead, Lot chose the “easy life” of S'dom, which, at the time, appeared as “the garden of Hashem, the land of Egypt” - lush and fertile. We have discussed the attitudinal implications of his choice elsewhere.

When fleeing from that selfsame city, he begs the angels to allow him to stay nearby, as he cannot go further - and that leads to the shameful scene in which his daughters get him drunk and become pregnant.

We don’t know a lot about Haran, but his son bears the shameful badge of an opportunist - hence, the first child to predecease his father (aside from murder) dies as a result of that opportunistic attitude when applied to the great faith of Avraham.

כי טובים דודיך מיין
אמרה כנסת ישראל לפני הקב"ה:
רבש"ע עריבים עלי דברי דודיך
יותר מיינה של תורה.



PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Nothing Is More Serious Than Humor

"Go for yourself... (lit. Go to yourself)" (12:1)

Around twenty-five years ago, I remember sitting in the dining room of Ohr Somayach at a *Sheva Berachot* (post-wedding celebration). One of the Rabbis there was noted for his seriousness, self-control and gravitas. He sat, his hooded eyes fixed on a small Gemara held by his slender fingers. As soon as the bride and groom entered, he set his Gemara down, stood up and took a small vase with a flower in it that was on the table in front of him. He then proceeded to climb onto the table, place the vase on his head, and dance on the table with the vase perched precariously on his head. The bride and groom were beside themselves with laughter. After the singing and dancing to welcome the bride and groom had died down and everyone returned to their seats, I noticed that the Rabbi had gone back to his learning as though nothing had happened. Every time I saw him, he would do the same thing. It was fascinating to watch this instant metamorphosis. I have never managed to work out if he is a deeply serious person who could turn on the merriment at the turn of a mental switch, or a deeply humorous person who held his humor in check with his self-control.

The Gemara in Ketuvot (17a) recounts that Rav Yehuda bar Ilai would take a branch of myrtle and dance before the bride. Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak would dance while juggling three branches. Rabbi Zeira complained to Rav Shmuel and said, "The elder is embarrassing us." But when Rav Shmuel passed away, a pillar of fire separated him from everyone else, and there was a tradition that this happened only for one or two people in each generation. The question arises: Why didn't a pillar of fire separate Rav Yehuda bar Ilai from everyone else when he passed from the world? It cannot be because he only used one myrtle and not three. The *Eitz Yosef* explains that, whereas Rav Yehuda would dance in front of a bride, it wasn't part of his habitual behavior. He would do it only on occasion. Rav Shmuel, however, never failed to do this.

There are times when we can slip and fall very far, and there are times when we can reach for the stars — but what we normally do is who we really are.

**We wish all of Ohrnet Magazine's readers -
and all of Ohr Somayach's alumni and friends
- a healthy winter.**

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Eruvin 86-92

Honoring the Righteous Rich

“Rebbi honored wealthy people. Rabbi Akiva honored wealthy people.”

These statements on our *daf* require explanation. Why are we taught that these great Torah Sages apparently singled out wealthy people as deserving honor? Is it not important to honor everyone who does not show contempt for Hashem and His Torah? Indeed, we are taught in Pirkei Avot (4:1): “Who is honorable? One who honors others.”

Our *gemara* relates a reason why Rebbi and Rabbi Akiva honored the wealthy. Rava bar Mori expounded a verse that states, “May he dwell forever before Hashem; kindness and truth should be prepared to guard him.” (Tehillim 61:8) The primary meaning (*pshat*) of this verse is to describe King David’s prayer to Hashem to extend his life, due to his virtues. However, Rava bar Mori expounds on an additional meaning of this verse. He explains it in a wider sense, as referring to wealthy people who supply food and other needs for the hungry and the downtrodden. These wealthy people, he teaches, justify the world’s continued existence. As we learn in Pirkei Avot (1:2), Shimon HaTzaddik would say, “The world stands on three things: Torah study, service of Hashem (in the Beit Mikdash, in the synagogue and via mitzvah observance), and acts of loving-kindness (e.g., giving charity and assisting those in need).”

Wealthy people are best-positioned and generally predisposed to provide food and other needs for the poor, and are therefore “pillars” who sustain the existence of the world. For this reason, they are undoubtedly deserving of being shown special honor and gratitude for what they do! This seems to be the approach of Rashi in our *sugya*. (Anecdotally, the Nobel Peace Prize was recently awarded to the “World Food Program” for its

efforts to minimize and hopefully eradicate hunger in the world. Real hunger is not just an idea, but is unfortunately still a reality in our world of plenty. Even if this author or the reader has never been in a state of real hunger, virtually everyone knows of a hungry soul, especially in the era of COVID-19. And many of us have known relatives who miraculously survived unimaginable starvation during the Holocaust.)

Another explanation for honoring the wealthy is found in Rabbi Akiva Eiger’s *Gilyon Hashas* on our *daf*. Rebbi, in addition to being a great Torah scholar, was also exceedingly wealthy. He made a special effort to honor the wealthy so that people would learn to honor him for his wealth, just as he honored others people for their wealth. Why was it important to Rebbi that he be honored for his wealth? He was concerned that people would honor him for being a Torah scholar, and he did not want to “use the crown of the Torah” as a reason for his being honored and treated with special deference. As we learn in Pirkei Avot (4:5), Rabbi Tzaddok would say, “Do not make the Torah a crown to magnify yourself with, or a spade with which to dig.”

Similarly, Hillel would say, “One who makes personal use of the crown of Torah shall perish. Therefore, one who benefits himself from the words of Torah removes his life from the world.” Therefore, Rebbi showed special honor to the wealthy so that people would honor him for his wealth and not for his Torah greatness. Although this approach does not mention Rabbi Akiva, one may assume that he too honored the wealthy for the same reason as Rebbi, when he was financially blessed later in life. (Sources: *Likutei HaMaharil in the name of the Maharam*; *Iyun Yaakov*.)

Another meaning of the honor shown to the wealthy by Rebbi and Rabbi Akiva is taught by the Meiri, and, unlike the previous explanation, is *not* based on the fact that Rebbi and Rabbi Akiva were wealthy individuals. Rather, says the Meiri, it is fitting that a Torah scholar or a pious person should show respect and honor for others in a manner that is indicative of the specific reason for honoring each individual. For example, a wise person should be honored for his wisdom, a wealthy person for his wealth and a kind person for his kindness. “I am glad you are feeling better, dear Rabbi; here is a *sefer* that was just published and when I saw it I was sure that you would enjoy learning it.” Or, “How wonderful is it that Hashem has blessed you with great wealth! I am sure that

you must have given much *tzedaka* that helped you merit your wealth, and that you will use your resources to continue helping the needy.” (*Chidushei HaMeiri. Eruvin 86a*)

It is essential to note that honoring another person for his wealth, wisdom or other positive attribute, is permitted and correct only in honoring a person who is worthy of the honor. False flattery of the wicked is called *chanufa* in the Torah and halachic writings, and is considered one of the most serious transgressions in the Torah. (See *Avosos Ahava* by Rabbis Newman and Becher, *chelek gimel perek gimel*, for a detailed presentation of the source texts.)

▪ *Eruvin 86a*

WHAT'S IN A WORD

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Lech Lecha

A Laughing Matter

When G-d informed Abraham that Sarah was still destined to produce an heir, his reaction was to “laugh” (*va’yitzchak*, Gen. 17:17). Similarly, when Sarah heard about this prophecy, she too laughed (Gen. 18:12). Indeed, when Isaac was born, Sarah exclaimed, “G-d is making ‘laughter’ (*tzchok*) for me; whoever hears will laugh (*yitzchak*) for me” (Gen. 21:6). In this case, the commentators (Onkelos and Rashi) explain that “laughter” stands for an outward expression of happiness. Because of all this “laughing,” G-d also said that this son will be called *Yitzchak* (Gen. 17:19) – a name which literally means “he will laugh.” Nonetheless, the Bible refers to this patriarch in a few places as *Yischak* – a name derived from another verb that means “to laugh.” What is the difference between *Yitzchak* and *Yischak*? And what is the

difference between *tzchok* and *s’chok*, from which those two names are derived?

Throughout the entire Bible, the name *Yitzchak* for our patriarch Isaac appears 108 times. However, as mentioned before, there are four places in which he is referred to as *Yischak*. In one place, the prophet Jeremiah refers to the Jewish People as “the seed of *Avraham*, *Yischak*, and *Yaakov*” (Jer. 33:26). In another passage, the prophet Amos foretells of the destruction of the illegal sites of worship, termed “the high places of *Yischak*” (Amos 7:9), and also offers a legitimate prophecy against Amaziah, the false prophet of Baal, who said that Amos should “not drip [words of prophecy] on the House of *Yischak*” (Amos 7:16). Finally, the Psalmist speaks of G-d’s “oath to *Yischak*” (Ps. 105:9) that the Jewish

People will inherit the Holy Land. These are the only four places in the Bible where Isaac is called “*Yischak*.” [The last passage is customarily recited at the *Brit Milah* (circumcision) ceremony, while a parallel passage (I Chron. 16:16), recited in the daily prayers, reads “*Yitzchak*” instead of “*Yischak*.”]

To understand the difference between *Yischak* and *Yitzchak*, we have to first explore the difference between their respective antecedents, *s’chok* and *tzchok*. The problem with such a line of investigation is that the major Hebrew lexicographers, such as Menachem Ibn Saruk (920-970), Rabbi Yonah Ibn Janach (990-1955), and even Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim (1740-1840), explain that *s’chok* and *tzchok* mean the exact same thing. Indeed, the letters SIN and TZADI are considered interchangeable because they are pronounced by the same part of the mouth (see also *HaKsav VeHaKabbalah* to Ex. 25:29), and so it makes sense that *s’chok* and *tzchok* would mean the exact same thing.

Rabbi Pappenheim explains that the core meaning of *s’chok/tzchok* is “laughter” as an involuntary reaction to some sort of outside stimulus – whether one is physically tickled or simply encounters something humorous. Both words carry positive (“laughing,” “playing,” “enjoying”) and negative (“deriding,” “mocking”) connotations. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 21:6) explains it, those two meanings derive from one singular idea because “mockery/derision” refers to the use of sarcasm and irony to elicit laughter – i.e. getting somebody to “laugh at” someone or something (see also Malbim to Judges 16:25).

As an aside, Rabbi Hirsch (to Gen. 17:7) invokes the interchangeability of CHET and AYIN to explain how *tzchok/s’chok* is related to *tzaakah/zaakah* (“crying out”). He notes that these four roots all represent man’s reaction to the dissonance and incongruence of certain situations. When we perceive a situation in which there is a disparity between what we have beheld and what our expectations are, then there is room for one of two reactions: to laugh or to cry. They are two sides of the same emotional response. Using the examples that Rabbi Hirsch himself mentions, when we see a child wearing a wig like an adult, we might laugh, while

when we see an elderly person wearing a diaper like a child, we might cry. Laughter and crying are ways for us to reconcile what we see with what we expect. (Rabbi Pappenheim makes a similar point, but without comparing the etymologies of the terms in question.)

In short, there seems to be no semantic difference between *s’chok* and *tzchok*. Now, the Jerusalem Talmud (*Berachos* 1:6) teaches that Isaac’s name – unlike Abraham’s and Jacob’s – was never changed, because his name was given by G-d Himself. This source clearly assumes that the names *Yischak* and *Yitzchak* are essentially one and the same, just like *s’chok* and *tzchok* are one and the same. Of course, this brings us to the obvious question: Why then does the Bible sometimes say *Yischak* and sometimes *Yitzchak* if both spellings are really one name? This question leads us to search for more esoteric ways of understanding Isaac’s two names.

Rabbeinu Bachaya (to Gen. 17:19, Num. 32:3) writes that Isaac’s name is really *Yitzchak*, but the prophets sometimes spelled his name with the letter SIN/SHIN to allude to the fact that Isaac personifies the Divine trait of judgment, which is likened to a “raging fire” (*aish*). We can further add that Rabbi Pappenheim maintains that the word *aish* is derived from the monoliteral root SHIN, thus solidifying the connection between the variant spelling of Isaac’s name and the Divine trait that he represents.

Interestingly, Rabbi Shmuel Feivish Kahane (a 17th century sage), in his work *Leket Shmuel*, offers the exact opposite explanation. He writes that Isaac’s name should have really been written as *Yischak*, not *Yitzchak*, but since the presence of the letter SIN/SHIN would have alluded to raging judgment from which the Jewish People would have no possible recovery, the Torah instead spells the patriarch’s name with a TZADI instead of a SIN.

Another approach suggests that Isaac’s name (or at least the way it is spelled) changed or will change. For example, Rabbi Yehuda Moscato (1530-1593) writes that in the future Isaac’s name will change from *Yitzchak* to *Yischak*, because the letter SIN stands for the concepts of *sasson* and *simchah* (different forms of “happiness”). He writes that this new name only

appears four times in the Bible as a hint to the fact that it will appear only after the Jewish People had already completed four exiles.

Rabbi Shmuel Borenstein (1855-1926) uses a variation of this idea to reconcile an apparent contradiction in traditional sources. The Talmud (*Berachos* 61b) and *Sefer Yetzira* (ch. 5) imply that the spleen corresponds to man's ability to engage in "laughter" (*s'chok*), while the *Tikkunei HaZohar* (*Tikkun* #84) associates the spleen with "sadness." To resolve this contradiction, Rabbi Borenstein stipulates that there are two types of laughter: legitimate, holy laughter, versus illegitimate, impure laughter. The former is essentially something reserved for the future, as it says "Then [in the Messianic Era], our mouths will fill with laughter (*s'chok*)" (Ps. 126:2). Until then, most laughter is but an illusion intended to mask one's sadness and despondency. Accordingly, the spleen can be associated with both "laughter" and "sadness" if we assume that the type of laughter it characterizes is the illegitimate laughter of This World, which is merely a cover for "sadness."

Rabbi Borenstein explains that in the future, when *schok* will denote a legitimate expression of laughter, the patriarch Isaac's name will transform from *Yitzchak* (which is associated with only the holy type of laughter) to *Yischak* (which is derived from the formerly unholy form of laughter). [The Arizal (*Shaar HaPesukim* to Isa. 52:3) also offers an explanation of the *Yitzchak*-*Yischak* switch.

In other sources, it seems like Isaac's original name was *Yischak* and it was later changed to *Yitzchak*. These sources relate that when the Jews cried out to

G-d during their exile in Egypt, He asked the forefathers which of them was willing to sacrifice the numerical value of their name in order to save the Jewish People. It was the patriarch Isaac who stepped up to the plate, and he allowed G-d to change the SIN (which holds a numerical value of 300) of his name *Yischak* into a TZADI (which equals 90) to become *Yitzchak*. The difference came out to 210, which is why the Jews were redeemed from Egypt after an exile of 210 years. [This tradition is cited in numerous works, including *Imrei Noam* to Ex. 6:2, a source that is called the *Rosh* (to Ex. 6:1), *Siddur Rokeach*, *Be'er Mayim Chaim* to Gen. 15:13, and *Leket Shmuel* to Gen. 25:19.]

The Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), in his commentary to the Kabbalistic work *Safra d'Tzneusa* (end of chapter 3), writes that each of the three patriarchs of the Jewish People had two names – a Lower Name and a Higher Name. In light of the above, we can now better appreciate the Vilna Gaon's assertion: Just as Abraham was called both *Avram* (lower) and *Avraham* (higher), and Jacob was called both *Yaakov* (lower) and *Yisrael*/*Yeshurun* (higher), so did our middle forefather, Isaac, have two names (or at least two spellings of his one name): *Yitzchak* (lower) and *Yischak* (higher). *Sefer HaShem* (a work ascribed to the *Rokeach*) fascinatingly notes that the sum *gematria* of the names *Avraham*, *Yischak*, and *Yeshurun* equals 2448 (assuming a final MEM equals 600 and a final NUN equals 700) – the year when the Torah was given at Mount Sinai.

For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at rcklein@ohr.edu

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Q & A

LECH LECHA

Questions

1. What benefits did G-d promise Avraham if he would leave his home?
2. "And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." What does this mean?
3. Who were the souls that Avraham and Sarah "made?"
4. What were the Canaanites doing in the Land of Canaan when Avraham arrived?
5. Why did Avraham build an altar at Ai?
6. What two results did Avraham hope to achieve by saying that Sarah was his sister?
7. Why did Avraham's shepherds rebuke Lot's shepherds?
8. Who was Amrafel and why was he called that?
9. Verse 14:7 states that the four kings "smote all the country of the Amalekites". How is this possible, since Amalek had not yet been born?
10. Why did the "palit" tell Avraham of Lot's capture?
11. Who accompanied Avraham in battle against the four kings?
12. Why couldn't Avraham chase the four kings past Dan?
13. Why did Avraham give "ma'aser" specifically to Malki-Tzedek?
14. Why didn't Avraham accept any money from Sodom's king?
15. When did the decree of 400 years of exile begin?
16. What did G-d indicate with His promise that Avraham would "come to his ancestors in peace"?
17. How did G-d fulfill His promise that Avraham would be buried in "a good old age"?
18. Why did the Jewish People need to wait until the fourth generation until they returned to Eretz Canaan?
19. Who was Hagar's father?
20. Why did Avraham fall on his face when G-d appeared to him?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 12:1 - He would become a great nation, his excellence would become known to the world, and he would be blessed with wealth.
2. 12:3 - A person will say to his child, "You should be like Avraham."
3. 12:5 - People they converted to the worship of G-d.
4. 12:6 - They were in the process of conquering the land from the descendants of Shem.
5. He foresaw the Jewish People's defeat there in the days of Yehoshua due to Achan's sin. He built an altar to pray for them.
6. 12:13 - That the Egyptians would not kill him, and would give him presents.
7. 13:7 Lot's shepherds grazed their flocks in privately owned fields.
8. Amrafel was Nimrod. He said (*amar*) to Avraham to fall (*fel*) into the fiery furnace.
9. 14:7 - The Torah uses the name that the place would bear in the future.
10. 14:13 - He wanted Avraham to die trying to save Lot so that he himself could marry Sarah.
11. 14:14 - His servant, Eliezer.
12. 4:14 - He saw prophetically that his descendants would make a golden calf there, and as a result his strength failed.
13. 14:20 - Because Malki-Tzedek was a *kohen*.
14. 14:23 - G-d had promised Avraham wealth, and Avraham didn't want Sodom's King to say, "I made Avraham wealthy."
15. With the birth of Yitzchak.
16. 15:15 - That his father, Terach, would repent and become righteous.
17. 15:15 - Avraham lived to see his son Yishmael repent and become righteous, and he died before his grandson Esav became wicked.
18. 15:16 - They needed to wait until the Amorites had sinned sufficiently to deserve expulsion.
19. 16:1 - Pharaoh.
20. 17:3 - Because he was as yet uncircumcised.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

ASCENDING THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN: THE GRAND FINALE

We made it! Last week we reached the fifteenth and final blessing in the series of the Morning Blessings. We recite these deceptively innocuous blessings each morning. In fact, they are the “opening salvo” in our daily prayers. Due to the pressures of the morning and our rush to begin our day, it is possible that they might sometimes be recited without the required intent. But, for the last few months we have been travelling together on a voyage of exploration. It has been a voyage, which has delved not just into the fifteen Morning Blessings, but, perhaps more significantly, has delved into all of us as well.

We have learned that each blessing is integral to the structure of the Morning Prayers. Not only that, but each blessing is also essential to my own understanding of myself, and my understanding of my responsibilities in our physical world. For this reason we need one last article to arrange all the blessings according to their deeper meanings, and in this way be aided in scaling the Stairway to Heaven.

- It all began with the very first blessing. A blessing that delineated the fact that the concepts of good and evil are universally innate within every person, Jew and non-Jew alike.
- The second blessing begins the triumvirate of blessings that all begin with the words, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, for not having made me...” The first of these three blessings starts our journey in earnest, as it acknowledges the most fundamental characteristic of all – that we are Jews and that we belong to G-d.
- The third blessing thanks G-d for having given us our freedom. Not freedom in the conventional, secular sense and understanding. But freedom to serve G-d the way that G-d wants us to.
- Blessing number four introduces us to the commandments and our obligation to keep them.
- The fifth blessing “opens our eyes” to the fact that the opportunity to perform the commandments is ubiquitous.
- The sixth blessing brings us to the next stage, where we are actively performing the commandments.
- Blessing number seven teaches us that by living our lives according to the commandments, we are able to release ourselves from the negative influences in this physical world that distract us from our spiritual obligations.
- The eighth blessing shows us that we have a purpose in this world. That we can stand up straight, safe in the knowledge that we have a defined objective that is waiting to be achieved.
- The ninth blessing is pivotal, as it takes us into the realm of building a relationship with G-d, which is founded on belief as well as actions.
- Blessing number ten is the astonishing declaration that I have all that I need (not necessarily *want!*). This blessing truly reflects my complete conviction that G-d is with me in all my endeavors.

- The eleventh blessing is the certainty that I will be able to “march” to the beat of the Torah and the commandments.
- Blessing number twelve expresses the assurance that I have been granted the strength to succeed in the tasks that have been allocated to me by G-d.
- The thirteenth blessing reflects my spiritual growth until now. I am now crowned with a spiritual aura that is discernable to those around me.
- The penultimate blessing spells out the obligation of all of my spiritual development – that I have a responsibility to assist and support those who are weaker than me.
- And the fifteenth and final blessing is the resounding affirmation that the only way that I can truly accomplish what I need to do in this world is by internalizing the absolute knowledge that without G-d’s permanent presence in my life I cannot succeed.

What a journey! Fifteen blessings recited each morning that are our means of identifying our true selves. Fifteen blessings that raise us up and introduce us to a startling new vista of spiritual potential. They are so fundamental to our ability to serve G-d properly that these fifteen blessings should be said slowly, with pleasure and delight. Every morning we should savor each blessing, appreciating its depth and its clarity. By doing so, each day we will ascend the Stairway to Heaven anew.

*Ohr Somayach announces a new booklet on The
Morning Blessings by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer
www.ohr.edu/morning-blessings*

5781 - תשפ"א - An Exceptional Year

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

Part 1 of a new mini-series

As we entered into the *Yamim Noraim* of a new year, with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) still raging around the world, and Eretz Yisrael in yet another lockdown, we are surely all *davening* for the Gemara’s aphorism of “*Tichleh Shana U’Klaloteha* – May the year and its curses end” – and its addendum, “*Tachel Shana U’Birchoteha*” – May the New Year and its blessings be ushered in” – to rapidly come true.

Indeed, there are several suggestions floated as to

what the initials of תשפ"א may stand for, including ‘*Tehei Shnat Pdyon Acharon*’ (May this be the year of final redemption), or simply, and perhaps somewhat sarcastically, ‘*Ois Tav Shin Pei*’ – No longer 5780. Many are excited about the great Chasam Sofer’s referring to 5781 as “*Mei’ashpos Yarim Evyon*,” and our nation being exalted and lifted up, as opposed to 5780 being portent of death and calamity. Either way, we are all looking forward to a new year chock-full of blessing.

ZaCh"A

Yet, there is more to 5781's exceptionality. Much more. You see, this year is classified as **ז'ח"א** in our calendars. This abbreviation refers to Rosh Hashana falling out on Shabbos (*Zayin*), both months of Cheshvan and Kislev being *chaseir* (*Ches*, meaning 29-day months instead of 30; these are the only months that can switch off in our set calendar), and Pesach falling out on Sunday (*Aleph*). Out of the 14 possibilities in *Tur*'s 247-year calendar cycle, this is one of the rarest setups of a year, and occurs on average only once in 23 years. The last time we had this calendar makeup was 20 years ago (5761), and the time before that was 24 years prior. The reasons and rules governing the whys and the whens this transpires are too complex for this discussion. Suffice it to say, when the Mishnah Berurah discusses these issues, he writes that this is not the place to expound in detail, which is certainly good enough for this author.

A *ZaCh*"A year ensures that there will be a plethora of rare calendar phenomena that we will *iy"H* be witnessing, or, more accurately, taking an active part in.

No Shofar

The first unusual *minhag* of the year is one that last occurred eleven years ago, back in 5770 (2009). This is that Rosh Hashana fell out on Shabbat. Accordingly, the shofar was not sounded on the first (Biblical) day of Rosh Hashana, but rather only on the second (Rabbinic) day. The reason given for this 'silencing of the shofar' is a remarkable *Gezeira* of Chazal, that one may come to mistakenly carry a shofar out from a permitted area on this Shabbat in order to learn how to properly blow it. Whenever Shabbat Rosh Hashana occurs, we are collectively astounded as to the strength of this extraordinary *Gezeira*: All of Klal Yisrael desists from performing one outright Torah mitzvah simply due to a seemingly far-out possibility that one person unwittingly and unintentionally might transgress

another mitzvah — that of *Hotza'ah* (carrying). Even in an age when many of us have *Eruvin*, which technically renders the issue as moot. This is simply incredible!

Yet, there is an alternate, and perhaps more appropriate way to view this situation. Not sounding the shofar on Shabbat Rosh Hashana, as per the *Gezeira* of Chazal, showcases to us all that the sanctity of Shabbat is of paramount importance in all that we do — even to the extent of pushing off a precious, once-a-year (okay, twice-a-year) Torah mitzvah. A number of Acharonim, including the *Chasam Sofer*, the *Aruch LaNer*, and *Ben Ish Chai*, stressed that, in a way, a year like ours is a gift. Not blowing the shofar due to Shabbat credits us with whatever spiritual gain we would have obtained had we been able to blow the shofar. Yet, there is a caveat. We need to show how much we honor, respect, and delight in our Shabbat observance in order to properly reap the spiritual rewards of a Shabbat Rosh Hashana.

No Lulav

As the Gemara continues, the same *Gezeira* holds true regarding Lulav and Megillah as well. Meaning, if the first day of Rosh Hashana occurred on Shabbat, then the first day of Succot, two weeks later, will also occur on Shabbat. And just as there was no fulfilling the Torah mitzvah of shofar on Rosh Hashana, but rather only on the second day, which is a Rabbinic mitzvah, there will also be no fulfilling the Torah mitzvah of taking and waving the *Arba Minim* on the first day of Succot — which is *M'Deoraysa* — but rather only fulfill it *M'Derabbanan*, as performing this mitzvah on the remaining days of Succot is *M'Derabbanan*. This is yet another spectacular testament to the prominence and centrality of the holiness of Shabbat.

To be continued...

This author wishes to acknowledge Rabbi Shea Linder's excellent article on this topic.

LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman

Laughing Stock

The book of Genesis mainly teaches us about our great forefathers, the lives they led, and the foundations they laid for the future of the Jewish People. We come from good stock. Avraham teaches us loving-kindness, Yitzchak teaches us disciplined courage, and Yaakov teaches us truth. Yitzchak's birth teaches us something else, no less fundamental to our national destiny – that we come from laughing stock.

Avraham and Sarah both laugh in response to the tidings that that they will bear a son in their old age. *Avraham fell upon his face and laughed, saying to himself: Shall a child yet be born to a man who is a hundred years old, or shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth?* (Ber. 17:17)

The Hebrew word – *tzachak* – is closely related to the word for 'crying out' – *tza'ak*, or *za'ak*. These two different phenomena share a common theme. Both are triggered by the confluence of incompatible opposites. The objective reaction to such confluence is laughter, the subjective reaction is crying out. Noticing incongruity in something dissociated from ourselves makes us laugh; but if the incongruity affects us personally, or affects someone with whom we identify empathetically, our reaction is to cry out. A child wearing a wig, an old man dressed as a baby, a dignified adult who slips, an unexpected comparison, elicits laughter. But if we identify with the person and empathize with his pain or shame, we feel like crying out. The same is true when there is a disparity between expectation and performance. This can be a trigger for laughter or for crying, depending on the circumstances. Even exceeding expectations can elicit joyous laughter.

Here, the laughter is triggered by the absurdity of Avraham and Sarah bearing a child at ages 100 and 90. In the course of their long married life, Avraham had no children by Sarah. Now, close to the end of their lives, and way past the age of fertility, they were to have a son! The mere birth of the child would be totally unexpected, and even if he were to be born, he would be an only child and in all likelihood would be orphaned at a young age. Yet the prospect of fulfilling Avraham and Sarah's life mission – prevailing ideologically over the entire world... would the hopes of all mankind rest on this late-born, orphaned youth? If we consider only the natural course of things, this expectation seems totally absurd!

Great significance is attached to Avraham's laughter, and Sarah's laughter, which is recounted in two other places. Indeed, Yitzchak's name bears the reminder of this laughter: the beginning of the Jewish People was absurd. That a thriving people with high hopes and expectations would emerge seemed a ludicrous pretension – that is, to the eye that sees only natural cause and effect. But the Jewish People would not be so bound, because G-d intervenes in their affairs.

It was imperative that our ancestors knew this from the beginning. This is why Yitzchak's birth had to be absurd. The Jewish People were always, and will always be, the people who prove that nature does not rule this world. G-d is in the midst of mankind and He intervenes throughout world history. The laughter that follows the Jew on his way through history testifies to the Divine character of this path. It is a laughter that we have known for a long time, and still resounds today. And, ultimately, as is hinted at by the future tense of the name – Yitzchak (lit. "he will laugh), the last laugh will be ours – *then, our mouths will be full of joyous laughter.* (Tehillim 126:2)

- Sources: Commentary, Bereishet 17:17, 21:6

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Ten generations have passed since Noach. Man has descended spiritually. In the year 1948 from Creation, Avram is born. By observing the world, Avram comes to recognize G-d's existence, and thus merits G-d appearing to him. At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, G-d tells Avram to leave his land, his relatives and his father's house and travel to an unknown land where G-d will make him into a great nation. Avram leaves, taking with him his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, their servants, and those whom they converted to faith in G-d. When they reach the land of Canaan, G-d appears to Avram and tells him that this is the land that He will give to his descendants.

A famine ensues and Avram is forced to relocate to Egypt to find food. Realizing that his wife's beauty could cause his death at the hand of the Egyptians, Avram asks her to say that she is his sister. Sarai is taken to Pharaoh, but G-d afflicts Pharaoh and his court with severe plagues and she is released unmolested. Avram returns to Eretz Yisrael (Canaan) with much wealth given to him by the Egyptians. During a quarrel over grazing rights between their shepherds, Avram decides to part ways with his nephew Lot. Lot chooses to live in the rich but corrupt city of Sodom in the fertile plain of the Jordan. A war breaks out between the kings of the

region and Sodom is defeated. Lot is taken captive. Together with a handful of his converts, Avram rescues Lot, miraculously overpowering vastly superior forces, but Avram demurs at accepting any of the spoils of the battle.

In a prophetic covenant, G-d reveals to Avram that his offspring will be exiled to a strange land where they will be oppressed for 400 years, after which they will emerge with great wealth and return to Eretz Yisrael, their irrevocable inheritance. Sarai is barren and gives Hagar, her Egyptian hand-maiden, to Avram in the hope that she will provide them with a child. Hagar becomes arrogant when she discovers that she is pregnant. Sarai deals harshly with her, and Hagar flees. On the instruction of an angel, Hagar returns to Avram and gives birth to Yishmael. The weekly portion concludes with G-d commanding Avram to circumcise himself and his offspring throughout the generations as a Divine covenant. G-d changes Avram's name to Avraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. Hashem promises Avraham a son, Yitzchak, despite Avraham being ninety-nine years old and Sarah ninety. On that day, Avraham circumcises himself, Yishmael and his entire household.

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