

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 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his 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. New: a limited number of copies of the first attachment will now be available at Beth Sholom on the Shabbas table!

How fitting that we are reading Lech Lecha this week, when our son Evan phoned to tell us that he was flying to Maryland for a couple of weeks. Other than Hannah, who was able to fly to California to spend a week with Evan this summer, none of the rest of the family had seen him since the week before Pesach. The importance of family (and especially the legacy of family members) is a key theme of our parsha, as the Torah moves from a quick review of two thousand years of early human history to a close focus on what will become the extended family of B'Nai Yisrael.

In a fascinating article (printed below), Rabbi Zvi Grumet addresses the question of why God selected Avraham rather than any members of the twenty previous generations in the Torah. In answering this question, Rabbi Grumet points to the repetition of "ayleh toldot . . ." – here is the legacy of eleven volumes (all but one individuals) that make up Sefer Bereishis. The best definition of "toldot" is "legacy." Each of these eleven volumes discusses the legacy of various key individuals. (For another detailed and innovative discussion of the significance of toldot, see Rabbi Menachem Leibtag's shiur for Noach, included by E-mail attachment last week.)

Rabbi Grumet explores why the Torah includes Toldot Terah (Avraham's father), Yitzhak, Yaakov, and Esav – but not Toldot Avraham. According to Rabbi Grumet, the Torah implies that Terah left a legacy that included Avraham's entire life. (Only Nahor, the married son with an intact family, remained in the Old Country.) Although Terah was an idol worshiper, when he left Ur to go to Canaan (although he only made it as far as Haran), Terah took with him his son Avram, grandson Lot (son of his deceased son Haran), and daughter-in-law Sarai. Avram and Nahor married Terah's deceased son Haran's daughters, and Avram adopted his orphan nephew Lot (11:27-29). Terah also named one son (Nahor) after his father. These examples illustrate that family and legacy were extremely important – a value that Terah passed on to his son Avram.

Earlier generations included other monotheists and outstanding individuals. Why did God not select any of them to be patriarchs of His special nation? Noach's son Shem and Shem's great grandson Eber were both monotheists who taught the value of justice. However, although chazal credit them with establishing a yeshiva that taught Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov, neither seems to have developed many followers. Terah transmitted his focus on loyalty to family to his sons, but he was an idol worshiper for at least most of his life. Rabbi Grumet concludes that God wanted the forefather of His special nation to combine the monotheism and the values of tzedek u'mishpat (justice and law) with Terah's devotion to family and Avraham's chesed. It is this combination of so many positive values in one person that made Avraham so great and led God to select him to establish a nation to bring others into relationships with God.

Rabbi David Fohrman adds that Avraham came immediately after the sin of the people of Shinar (Tower of Babel). God was concerned about a society unified to use technology to glorify themselves rather than to devote their energies to thanking and building a relationship with God. Avraham, who used all the blessings that God gave him to build monuments to God and to bring others closer to God, was an antidote to the sins of Shinar. In contrast to the people of

Shinar, who tried to build a legacy to themselves, Avraham always focused on building a legacy for his deceased brother. Avraham even gathered an army and went to war to rescue his nephew when he became a prisoner of war. God realized that a man who would go to these extremes to build a legacy for his brother would also devote considerable energies to promoting God and His message to the world. One of the bitter disappointments in Avraham's life was Lot's failure to emulate his focus on God and the values that he spent so many years teaching him, failures that ultimately required Avraham to separate from Lot and his family.

Perhaps more than any other religion, Judaism focuses on family. A family completes most holiday observances. Shabbat meals include a special tribute to the wife and blessings for the children. The highlight of a Seder is retelling the story of the Exodus to children and grandchildren – with children bringing lessons from their classes to the Seder, acting out parts of Maggid, and searching for the Afikoman. Eating meals in a Sukkah is more fun with a family and guests than alone. This focus on family seems to be an important reason why Judaism has survived for more than three thousand years while other cultures have come and gone.

Writing these words reminds me of many holidays with my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, his wonderful wife Elizabeth, and their family. We knew their parents, siblings, and children of their siblings. We enjoyed visiting with Rabbi Cahan's parents, sister, and her family in Israel on several occasions. Seders and other special events with the Cahan family remain vivid special memories. These memories predate when Hannah and I met and continued for many years since then. God selected Avraham to create a nation devoted to Him, and that is what the Cahan family and our other shul friends have helped us bring to our family.

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.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Yehoshua Mayer HaLevi ben Nechama Zelda, Leib Dovid ben Eitel, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, David Leib ben Sheina Reizel, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha, Ramesh bat Heshmat, and Regina bat Simcha, who need our prayers. I have removed a number of names that have been on the list for a long time. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

Drasha: Lech Lecha: Outsiders

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1996

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

And Hashem took Abraham outside and said, gaze toward the heavens and count the stars if you are able! And He said to him, so shall your offspring be!"(Genesis:15:5) With those words, the Torah tells us G-d's promise,"Jews will be like the stars."

Something is troubling. Why was it necessary for Hashem to take a field trip with Abraham in order to impress upon him the vastness of the universe? At the time Abraham was 100 years old. Surely he knew that one cannot count the stars! Rashi, therefore, explains the verse on a deeper level.

Abraham had been told by soothsayers and astrologers that he and Sora would never bear children. Hashem however, took him outside."Go outside of your pre-ordained destiny,"He exclaimed."You are no longer governed by conventional predictions. I am taking you outside that realm."

It's quite interesting to note that Abraham's great-grandson, Yoseph, followed literally in Abraham's footsteps. He too ran outside. Yoseph was about to be seduced by the licentious wife of his master, Potiphar. She claimed she had a vision that a union of Yoseph and her would produce prestigious offspring. (She did not know that Yoseph would legitimately marry her daughter.) In Genesis 39:12 the Torah tells us that"Yoseph dropped his coat and ran outside". Perhaps he was saying,"I am not governed by your visions and predictions. I must do what my faith and morality teach me. Like my forebearers Abraham and Sora, I go outside your visors."

Reb Yoseph Chaim had studied under the Chofetz Chaim before he settled in America. He had a very long and tranquil life until tragedy struck. His son Hirschel was in a terrible car accident and the doctors feared the worst. The family did not know just how to tell the news to the aged, yet very coherent, 87-year-old father. The hospital chaplain, Rabbi Schapiro, was asked to drive the old man to the hospital and slowly break the news on the way. This would be the last time Yoseph Chaim would probably see his son alive. When he broke the terrible news, however, the Rabbi was shocked at the old man's indifference. "Perhaps I didn't explain the severity of the situation,"he thought. He figured that the scene at the bedside would speak for itself. It didn't. Reb Yoseph Chaim walked up to the bedside, saw his son connected to a maze of tubes protruding from all over his body, and said to the surrounding physicians, "I guess he's not up to talking right now. We probably should come back a little later"

The entire family was stupefied. They knew their father had an astute grasp of almost every situation, yet in this instance he could not face reality. The doctors predicted that Hirschel was not going to survive. Yet his father was not even fazed.

Reb Yoseph Chaim looked at all the shocked faces in the crowded ICU. "You doctors think you know the future? I know that Hirschel will be just fine. Let me explain. Many years ago the Chofetz Chaim wanted to make sure that his writings were understandable for the layman. He asked me to read the galley proofs and point out any difficult nuances. He was very appreciative of my efforts, and before I left for America he promised me, "Yoseph Chaim, if you remain a faithful Jew and Shomer Shabbos, I promise that you will have a long life filled with nachas. You will not lose any one of your children or grandchildren in your lifetime.' Now gentlemen," Reb Yoseph continued, "who should I believe?" Needless to say, within weeks Hirschel was out of the hospital. (Reb Yoseph lived to the ripe age of 96, and all his children and grandchildren did outlive him!)

The Jewish people are not controlled by the soothsayers of conventional wisdom. Predictions of defeat were abound when Israel's army is outnumbered 10 to 1 and — yet we survived. The dire predictions of mass assimilation amidst despair after World War II faded into a rebirth of a Jewish community and renewed Torah education on unparalleled levels. Conventional wisdom had lost hope for our Russian brothers and sisters, yet new embers of Torah Judaism are beginning to glow out of the former bastion of atheism.

We are not ruled by conventional wisdom. Like our forefather Abraham, we Jews are just outsiders.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/drasha-5756-lechlecha/>

Our God, or God of Our Forefathers?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2021

The Amidah prayer opens with a blessing about the forefathers. It begins like this: "Blessed are you God, Our God, God of our forefathers," and it then continues to name those forefathers explicitly: "God of Avraham, God of Yitzchak, God of Yaakov." In its conclusion, however, it only references Avraham: "Blessed are you God, Protector of Avraham." Why is Avraham singled out from all the rest?

The answer is rooted in the function that that first blessing plays in the Amidah. Think about it: Here we are, standing up to pray, standing up to directly speak to God. What allows us to do that? How do we have the chutzpah to do such a thing? Said in a different way: What is the framework in which this conversation is taking place? How do we know God? Right at the outset, we must frame how we experience and understand God, since it is that very relationship that makes our prayer to God meaningful.

The opening blessing says: This relationship is a received and inherited one. It is an understanding of God that has been passed down and experienced for over 3,000 years, going all the way back to the forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. It is a relationship that has continued to persevere, deepen, grow and evolve over the centuries—through our time in Egypt and the Wilderness, during the Temple periods, and amid the Exile—and which is one that we can now call our own. God is “our God” because God is the “God of our forefathers.”

Taken this way, the framing of the relationship is anchoring. It gives it depth and richness; it provides us with structure and a sense of belonging. We must ask, however: Where is our own personal experience of God, our own personal relationship?

The answer can be found in the blessing’s conclusion: “Blessed are you God, Shield of Avraham.”

Unlike Yitzchak and Yaakov, Avraham had no tradition, no inherited relationship with God. Avraham broke away from his father’s house and charted his own path to follow a voice of God that only he could hear. His relationship with God was dynamic, with highs and lows, arguments and obedience, seeking and finding. After all, a personal relationship is not always stable and comforting. It can be passionate and full of vicissitudes. It can be a roller-coaster of emotions.

Avraham’s life was suffused with God. Rambam writes that the way to ideally fulfill the mitzvah to love God can be learned from Avraham, whom the verse calls “Avraham, the one who loves me” (Isa. 41:8). Avraham, Rambam writes, is like a lovesick man, a person so enraptured with the woman whom he loves, that he is endlessly talking about her and singing her praises. You cannot get him to stop! This is Avraham. Wherever he went: “He built an altar and cried out in the name of God.” Everyone he meets, every person he has a conversation with—he is talking about God. God, God, and more God!

One who converts to Judaism is called a “Ben Avraham” or a “Bat Avraham.” Jewish converts, like Avraham, have not inherited their newly-found relationship to God. On their own, they have sought it out; on their own, they have heard God’s voice, and it has propelled them forward.

Such a relationship is personal, not communal. It is not one that a person inherits; it is one that a person seeks and yearns for, nurtures and cultivates.

The opening blessing of the Amidah says to us: This is the God of your forefathers and foremothers, of all those fathers and mothers and sons and daughters who came before you. You are part of a rich tradition. If you choose, you can stop right there and live a deep and meaningful religious life! But you can also choose not to stop there; you can strive to have a personal relationship with God as well. We know of God through Avraham. But we can seek God as Avraham did, as well. Avraham has shown us that each one of us can hear the voice of God. Each of us can feel the tug, the yearning to experience God, struggle with God, and find God on our own.

Blessed are You, Protector of Avraham.

Shabbat Shalom.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2021/10/our-god-or-god-of-our-forefathers/>

I am so sorry
by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine * © 2021

Our father Avraham was a simple person. I don’t mean to say that he was not sophisticated; he was that too. Despite his sophistication in understanding life, creation, and even Torah and Mitzvos, he was able to bring Torah principles to the simplest level so that people could readily understand them.

The Medrash describes how Avraham discovered Hashem. He looked at the world in all its sophistication and asked quite simply, "Who is the owner of this mansion?" A mansion doesn't simply appear out of nowhere. There must be an owner, an interested party, and a builder. So, too, Avraham wondered: Who is the owner, the interested party, the builder, of the world? Through this line of reasoning, Avraham discovered Hashem.

Avraham implemented the same logic in his strategy to reach mankind. He and his beloved wife Sora, set up a hostel for travelers. After Avraham and Sora provided for the guest's needs, the guest was ready to pay for the services. Avraham declared, "All you need to do is say 'Thank you!'" In this way, Avraham emulated Hashem, and created his own microcosm of the world to illustrate the way Hashem runs His world with bountiful generosity. Hashem does not require that we pay Him for the air that we breathe, the water we drink, or the food that grows in His plantation. All he asks is that we incorporate a sense of gratitude into our life perspective. Indeed, Avraham took this concept quite personally, to its logical conclusion. He told the guest, "Hashem is the one you should thank. If you thank Hashem, you need not pay for the hospitality, because it was really Hashem who provided the resources for me to provide for you."

This perspective of seeing the world as one big act of Hashem's hospitality led Avraham to a great sense of mission. He appreciated Hashem's generosity, came to love Hashem intensely, and desired to be the human counterpart for Hashem, the partner of Hashem in the purpose of creation. These are the perspectives that he and Sora passed on to their descendants. Indeed, to this day, we recite a blessing before eating food, acknowledging ourselves as guests in Hashem's mansion, a place which we call "The world."

Not everyone gets this. There are those who insist as an act of their own "blind faith," that there is no creator. I recall from my youth, that on the State exams that we had to take in high school we were obligated to respond to questions according to the theory of evolution. It is not clear to me what is gained by ignoring G-d's bountiful creation and generous hospitality.

A number of months ago, in my capacity as Kashrus auditor, I found myself on site in DC reviewing an event as it was taking place. Security was tight, the event was complicated, and after talking with the Mashgiach for a few moments it became clear to me that it would be beneficial if I would stay for the duration of the event to make sure things went smoothly.

As Shkiya (sunset) neared, I approached a security guard and asked if he could point out a place where I could recite the afternoon prayers. He pointed me to a particular area, and I davened. Afterwards, I went over to him with a friendly wave to thank him. He motioned for me to come closer to his station, and as I approached, I could see the sadness in his eyes. Apparently, he was thoughtfully comparing himself to me and my prayers and he said, "But I don't believe in G-d."

"I am so sorry for you," I said. I explained that our legacy from our father Abraham is that there is a G-d. So, before we take a bite of an apple, for example, we recite a blessing of thanks. But if one doesn't believe in G-d, then the fruit, in all its sophistication, is nothing more than a fortuitous mistake. That's sad. That is a way of thinking that robs the human being from enjoying the gifts that G-d bestows.

"Not long ago," I continued, "my wife and I were blessed with a baby. To us the baby is a personal gift from G-d. It generated within us a sense of immense gratitude, as well as a sense of purpose and mission to raise this gift to the best of our ability. We were partners with G-d! But if someone tells you that there is no G-d, what they are really saying is that the miracle of birth is nothing more than a fortuitous coincidence. To me that's sad. I suggest you step away from whoever told you that there is no G-d, to consider the alternative."

Avraham and Sora were sophisticated people. They grew intellectually and emotionally in their great mission. They blazed a trail for mankind of kindness, virtue, and how to develop a relationship with G-d. But despite their sophistication, they were still able to express great concepts simply, and see themselves as humble guests in the mansion of Hashem.

Have a wonderful Shabbos!

Rabbi Rhine, until recently Rav of Southeast Congregation in Silver Spring, is a well known mediator and coach. His web site, Teach613.org, contains many of his brilliant Devrei Torah. RMRhine@Teach613.org

Biblical Heroes, Imperfections, Truth: Thoughts on Parashat Lekh Lekha

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Some years ago, I had a conversation with a Hassidic Jew who assured me that his Rebbe never committed any sins. He stated with certainty that his Rebbe was endowed with a grand and holy soul, far superior to the soul of any other people.

When I pointed out to him that even Moses committed sins, he flatly denied that this was so. I reminded him that the Torah itself reports Moses's shortcomings. He said: You do not understand the Torah! It is impossible that Moses could have done anything wrong. He was perfect in every way.

The conversation came to an end, with both of us unhappy with the result. He felt I did not demonstrate enough faith in the perfection of saintly personalities, and I felt he was guilty of distorting the Torah's words and distorting the reality of the human condition.

This conversation came to mind recently when I received an email from a colleague, in which he included some important passages by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. The comments related specifically to stories reported in Parashat Lekh Lekha — but Rabbi Hirsch's point is of general relevance to our study of Torah...and to our evaluation of saintly individuals.

The Torah relates various problematic narratives about Abraham. For example, when going to Egypt, Abraham feared that the Egyptians would murder him and take his wife Sarah. Abraham told Sarah to say she was his sister, rather than his wife. In spite of (or because of!) this deception, Sarah was taken to Pharaoh. Abraham was given rewards and he thrived in Egypt. When God punished Pharaoh and when Pharaoh realized that Sarah was really Abraham's wife, Pharaoh expressed outrage to Abraham over the deception. Pharaoh expelled Abraham and Sarah, who left Pharaoh's domain with much wealth.

This story surely does not cast Abraham in a good light. He asked his wife to participate in a deception. He let his wife be taken by the Egyptians. He reaped financial rewards while his wife was in captivity in Pharaoh's house.

Rabbi Hirsch makes a profoundly important point: "The Torah does not attempt to hide from us the faults, errors and weaknesses of our great men, and precisely thereby it places the stamp of credibility upon the happenings it relates. The fact that we are told about their faults and weaknesses does not detract from our great men. Indeed, it adds to their stature and makes their life stories even more instructive. Had they all been portrayed to us as models of perfection we would have believed that they had been endowed with a higher nature not give to us to attain. Had they been presented to us free of human passions and inner conflicts, their nature would seem to us merely the result of a loftier predisposition, not a product of their personal merit, and certainly no model we could ever hope to emulate."

Rabbi Hirsch goes on to say that "we must never attempt to whitewash the spiritual and moral heroes of our past. They are not in need of our apologetics, nor would they tolerate such attempts on our part. Truth is the seal of our Word of God, and truthfulness is the distinctive characteristic also of all its genuinely great teachers and commentators."

Our great biblical heroes, as well as our great spiritual heroes of all generations, were real human beings, not plaster saints. They had real feelings, real conflicts. Many times they performed admirably; on some occasions they fell short. To suggest that anyone is "perfect"— totally devoid of sin and error — is to misrepresent that person and to misrepresent truth.

There is a popular genre of "religious literature" that presents biographies of biblical and later religious luminaries as paragons of virtue, totally devoid of sin and inner conflict. In fact, such books are not authentic biographies, because they describe their heroes in an untruthful way. These personalities are drawn in such superlative terms, that readers will find it exceedingly difficult to identify with them or to emulate them.

There is an opposite tendency in some circles to point to every flaw and sin of our spiritual heroes, and to undermine their credibility as religious models. Our prophets and teachers are presented as though devoid of higher spiritual and moral qualities.

Just as it is false to overstate the perfection of our heroes, so it is false to undervalue their spiritual achievements. Rather, we must study their lives honestly, recognizing that these are remarkable individuals who reached great heights — and

who had to struggle mightily to attain their levels of religious insight and righteousness. Their failings can be as instructive to us as their successes.

Just as Truth is the seal of the Word of God, so is the pursuit of Truth the proper objective of all students of Torah and Jewish tradition.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/biblical-heroes-imperfections-truth-thoughts-parashat-lekh-lekha>

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The Revolution of Terah and Avraham

by Rabbi Zvi Grumet *

The opening of Lekh Lekha raises numerous questions. Why did God choose Avraham? Why was it necessary to choose anyone? Why does the focus of Sefer Bereshit suddenly shift from a broad universal focus to a narrow, particularistic one?

Let us begin with an observation about the structure of Sefer Bereshit. More than any other book in Tanakh, Bereshit can be identified as a book of toledot, of listing generations. There are only 13 times in all of Tanakh that a passage is introduced by the words elleh toledot or zeh sefer toledot ("These are the generations of..." or "This is the book of generations of") — and 11 of those are in Bereshit. This expression is so dominant that one could argue that it is the defining literary element of the book. That is, Bereshit is essentially comprised of 11 books of toledot, with Chapter 1 as an introductory chapter — and each unit of toledot ends just before the next one begins.

One interesting literary element defining each book of toledot is that it begins by repeating some information that we already know. Thus, toledot Adam begins with the birth of Shet, even though the end of the previous section concluded with that information; toledot Noah begins by telling us about his three sons, even though we were told that just a few pesukim earlier; toledot Yitzhak begins by telling us that Avraham had fathered Yitzhak. This insight leads us to a somewhat puzzling observation — there is a toledot Terah, but no toledot Avram or toledot Avraham. How are we to understand this?

We would need to begin by defining what we believe toledot refers to. A survey of the 11 records of toledot reveals that "toledot" means neither children nor generations, as many would like to think. One need look no further than the first time it is used — toledot shamayim ve-ha-aretz, the "toledot" of the heavens and the earth (Bereshit 2:4). The heavens and the earth have neither children nor generations. It would appear that the term refers to an outcome or result, as in Mishlei 27:1 — lo teda mah yeled yom — who knows what this day will give birth to, or, what will be the final outcome of what this day brings? What was the result of the creation of shamayim va-aretz? In the end, what came from Noah? The word toledot can almost be understood as meaning legacy. What was the legacy of Yitzhak? What was the legacy of Yishmael, or Esav?

Sefer Bereshit, then, would be the unfolding of the legacy of God's creation, followed by the legacy of human involvement in that creation, followed by successive legacies. What was the final legacy of Yishmael? That the promise given by the angel to his mother came true — Yishmael would be a great nation and dwell as a nomad. What was the legacy of Esav? That his father's blessing came true, as he finds a place to settle, establishes (or takes over) a kingdom, and plants his permanent roots outside the Promised Land.

Applying this observation to our earlier question yields a most bizarre conclusion. Since there is a toledot Terah but no toledot Avraham, Terah leaves a legacy under which Avraham's entire life's work is subsumed. How are we to understand this? Hazal understand Terah as nothing more than an idolater. His idolatry is unquestionable, and is mentioned explicitly in a pasuk in Yehoshua (24:2). Yet an investigation of his introduction to us in Bereshit reveals another aspect to Terah, one that is truly revolutionary. Terah is introduced to us at the end of Parashat Noah. Right from the start it is clear that he represents the end of one era and the beginning of a new one — each previous generation is introduced as having borne a single son (there were others, but they were unimportant to the Torah's story), Terah has three named sons. Terah fits into a pattern in Bereshit, in which significant figures have three sons. Adam has three named sons; Lemekh has three named sons; Noah has three named sons; and now it is Terah.

Interestingly, there appears to be a pattern within those three sons. One son is clearly outside of the main line of the story (Kayyin, Ham, Haran), one is the central figure from whom the story will continue (Shet, Shem, Avram) and one son plays a "supporting role" (Hevel, Yefet, Nahor). Beyond that, however, there is an anomaly in the description of Terah and his family — his family. The Torah's description of Terah's family members is excessive in its mention of their relationship to him. Take one example. After introducing his three children, the death of Haran and the marriages of Avram and Nahor, the Torah describes a journey Terah initiates (11:31): "Terah took Avram, his son, Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, Sarai, his daughter-in-law, the wife of his son Avram ...". Every relationship mentioned in this pasuk is unnecessary—we were just told that Avram is his son, that Lot is his grandson (from Haran), and that Sarai is Avram's wife. The text could have easily been written as: "Terah took Avram, Lot, and Sarai ...," yet it chose to accentuate the familial bonds. What the Torah seems to be emphasizing is that the value of family, and the responsibility for family, was a paramount value for Terah. This is further accentuated by the verb *va-yikah* — he took. The very fact that Terah took his orphaned grandson suggests a sense of responsibility for grandchildren (contrast that to Noah who curses his grandson). But the verb *va-yikah* is used in the same passage to describe acts by Avram and Nahor, who took wives. This "taking" was apparently also an act of taking responsibility for orphans, as Milkah and Sarai (possibly another name for Yiskah) were their orphaned nieces. Orphaned nephews are adopted, orphaned nieces are married. That is how they are cared for. (This may be why Hazal suggest that Mordekhai was married to his orphaned cousin, Esther.) The value of family, and the responsibility for family, is Terah's legacy.

It is not surprising that the end of toledot Terah indicate this as well. As we suggested earlier, each book of toledot ends just before the next one begins. Toledot Terah ends with death of Avraham and his burial. It is the first time in the Torah that we have explicit reference to a man being buried by his children — the sense of family responsibility has been extended to children's responsibility for parents. Even more, it is both Yitzhak and Yishmael who bury Avraham. Even the family torn by strife is unified by the sense of responsibility for parents. It is also not surprising to find that Terah's son, Nahor, bears the same name as Terah's father. Terah honored his father by bestowing his name on his son.

Let us examine more closely the marriages of Avram and Nahor. Reading the first 11 chapters of Bereshit we are struck by the description of 20 generations of man; not just mankind, but man. There are 20 generations of men begetting men. The only exceptions are the strange references to Lemekh's wives (4:22–24) and the anonymous references to the wives of Noah and his sons. To be sure, the absence of women in the narrative should not be surprising; the narrative reflects the culture and mores of the times. In this strictly patriarchal society, the primary role of women was to carry the man's seed for the next generation of men.

Enter Terah's children. Avram and Nahor are the first individuals in Shet's line to be described as having taken wives. Even more — it becomes clear early on that Sarai is barren. In a society for whom women's function was to serve as incubators for the man's seed, taking — and keeping — a wife who will not bear children was nothing short of revolutionary. If such a revolution were to take place, it would make sense for it to happen within the sphere of the man who effectively "invented" family values.

Aside from the fact that Avram's entire life is subsumed under toledot Terah, and we now understand that it is Terah's legacy of family which Avram continues, there is additional textual evidence that Avram continues — or completes — what Terah set out to do. Let us look at two pesukim, written with only five pesukim separating them. One describes Terah's journey from Ur Kasdim, the other describes Avram's journey from Haran. (Bereshit 11:31 and 12:5) The structure of the two pesukim is identical. Even the unnecessary descriptions of the family relationships (we already know that Sarai is Avram's wife and that Lot is his nephew) is copied in the description of Avram's journey. And just as Terah took responsibility for his orphaned grandson, Avram takes his orphaned nephew under his wing.

The key difference between the two descriptions is that whereas Terah planned to go to Canaan he never arrived. By contrast, Avram finished the journey that Terah started. Both literally — in terms of the arrival in Canaan, and figuratively — in terms of developing the notion of family, Avram completes Terah's journey. It does not surprise us that most of the

challenges Avraham faces revolve around his family. The command to leave his father, Sarai with Pharaoh in Egypt and with Avimelekh in Gerar, Lot in Sodom, Hagar and Sarai, Yishmael and Akedat Yitzhak, all involve sacrifices related to family. The man of family must endure challenges to his core values.

All of this begs the question — why is family so important? Our answer, to put it simply, is that the Torah understands the family as the core unit for the transmission of values. This is actually explicit in the Torah. Prior to the destruction of Sodom, the Torah informs us of God's choice of Avraham and His decision to reveal His impending plan to him. "Avraham will become a great and mighty nation, and through him will come blessing to all other nations of the earth. Since I know that he will instruct his children and his household after him, that they will observe God's way in doing justice and righteousness — that is why Avraham will receive all of which has spoken about him" (Bereshit 18:18–19). The opening words identifying Avraham as the one who will become a great and mighty nation and through whom will come blessing to all of the other nations, are a clear reference to the beginning of Lekh Lekha, where God initially chooses Avraham and promises him precisely those things (12:2–3). If so, then this passage is where the Torah explicitly identifies the reason for the choice of Avraham — because Avraham will use the vehicle of the family as the unit of transmission of the values of tzedakah and mishpat.

Let us explore this innovation of Avraham from a number of angles. If the Torah highlights Terah's legacy as the one who founded the notion of family, to the extent that Avraham's entire life is subsumed under it, we must be curious as to why God did not choose Terah and instruct him with lekh lekha. The answer here is apparently clear — Terah was, as stated in Yehoshua, an idolater. Although Terah's innovation of family was significant, it was insufficient, since he was unprepared to leave his idolatry. Perhaps even more interesting is the question of tzedakah and mishpat, which Avraham apparently championed. From where did Avraham learn these values, and why were his predecessors not chosen? One could easily argue that these were Avraham's innovations, yet it appears from the text that Avraham carried with him an earlier tradition. Hazal identify this earlier tradition as the "yeshiva of Shem and Ever," and this bears a closer examination.

Our introduction to Ever's legacy is introduced by an unusual comment. Back in Parashat Noah, when identifying the legacies of Noah's sons (toledot benei Noah — Bereshit 10:1), Shem is identified as the father of all of the "Ever-ites" (benei Ever — 10:21). This is a strange appellation on two accounts. First, Ever has not been identified yet. He is first introduced three pesukim later. Second, when Ever is introduced, he is only one of Shem's great grandchildren. Apparently, the Torah is suggesting that there is some link between Shem and Ever. Even more, there is a link between Shem and all those identified with Ever. Although at the end of Parashat Noah that identification is still a mystery, that mystery is cleared up later as Avram is identified as an Ivri — a descendant of Ever (14:13). (This appellation is later given to Yosef, and then to Yosef's brothers. They are all the benei Ever referred to in Parashat Noah.) Thus the text is suggesting that there is some legacy which began with Shem, was passed to Ever, and then to all those who are identified with Ever. Shem's precise legacy is left unclear — it might have begun with the incident after the Mabul in which he protects his father's dignity and receives his blessing, and it may have to do with Avraham's notions of tzedakah and mishpat.

All this returns us to our original question. If, indeed, Avraham carries a tradition from Ever, passed on through Shem (or, in Hazal's language, a tradition that Avraham learned in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever), why were Shem and Ever not chosen by God for the lekh lekha command and blessing? The answer, I believe, is that while Shem and Ever may have been champions of particular values, they were unable to find an appropriate vehicle through which to transmit those values. Shem waited for three generations before he found someone worthy to teach; Ever waited even longer. Absent a reliable vehicle for transmitting values, they had to wait until a worthy recipient of their tradition could be found. Avraham, however, presented a new model. Avraham married the values of family he learned from his father with the values of tzedakah and mishpat, and understood that the family had the potential to serve as the vehicle for the transmission of other values. Terah, as an idolater, lacked those other values; Shem and Ever lacked the reliable vehicle of transmission of their values. Hence God's testimony about Avraham's commitment to instruct his children and his household in upholding God's values of tzedakah and mishpat (Bereshit 18:17–19).

The significance of the Terah-Avraham revolution in Bereshit cannot be overstated. The first toledot is toledot shamayim ve-ha-aretz, creation itself. What was the result, or the legacy, of that process? It was a two-fold legacy. On the one hand, it was the legacy of a shattered family, of the first fratricide. On the other hand, it was the legacy of Enosh, who began to call in the name of God (4:26). Humans had the capacity to recognize God, but they would need some help in putting their families in order. The second toledot, that of Adam, yielded an even more troubling dichotomy. There were individuals, like Noah, who managed to find favor in God's eyes (6:8), but for the masses, their thoughts and actions were becoming

increasingly bad (6:5). That left God with little choice but to start anew. Following the Mabul, toledot benei Noah leaves us with a world that is repopulated and diverse. Indeed, God has successfully brought about a fulfillment of His original intent of *peru u-revu u-milu et ha-aretz*, albeit not without considerable effort and intervention (the dispersion from Bavel helped considerably).

The question that remained was whether humanity would once again call in God's name, as did Enosh. With the choice of Avram that question was finally answered. Avram heeds God's instruction, journeys to Canaan, and when he reaches Bet El he builds an altar and calls in God's name (12:8). With the emergence of Avram, who transforms into Avraham, we are returned to a state which existed prior to the Mabul. The return to this state, however, was not a step backward but a step forward. For whereas Enosh's calling in God's name comes in the backdrop of the first failed family, one that did not transmit its values, Avram's calling in God's name is accompanied by his championing of the value of family. With the vehicle for the transmission of values in place, the story can progress.

Yet as we know, although Terah and Avram innovated the notion of family, the families in Bereshit are hardly models worthy of emulation. Tensions between spouses and siblings abound. Those tensions lead to multiple breakups, planned vengeance, and even plots to kill. Indeed, it is my contention that all these family challenges are an essential part of what hindered the process of Bereshit. Strife in the families of the Avot prevented God from moving forward. After all, how could we continue if the central vehicle we need for the transmission of the values God wants to propagate is dysfunctional? This, I believe, is the underlying tension in the story of Yosef. If Yosef disappears, if the brothers don't somehow figure out how to maintain their nuclear unit, then God's plan cannot continue. It is only at the very end of the story, after Yaakov's death and the fear expressed by the brothers and Yosef's response, that it becomes clear that there is a mutual commitment. It is only with the mending of the family that the story can continue. That is why Bereshit ends with a story of a family that reunites following a generations-long conflict. That is why at the end of Bereshit we hear of Yosef raising his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren (50:23). That is why Bereshit can close with Yosef's understanding of his need for his brothers, and of the long-term destiny of his people. And that is why immediately following Bereshit we see the transformation of a family into the seed of a nation.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/revolution-terah-and-avraham-0>

Lech Lecha -- It's The Thought That Matters

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2021

This week's parsha begins with Hashem's first recorded instruction to Avrohom. Hashem says, "Leave for yourself from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father's house and go to the land which I will show you." (Bereishis 12:1) Rash'i asks why Hashem did not simply tell Avrohom to travel to Cannan. He explains that Hashem had two purposes for telling Avrohom this way. One was to cause Avrohom to focus more on the mitzvah he was being given, thereby increasing Avrohom's appreciation for the mitzvah. The second purpose was to give him additional reward for each command which Hashem gave him.

The Levush Ha'orah (ibid.) explains that Rash'i gives two reasons because there are two ways in which Hashem's instructions to Avrohom were not straightforward. One is that Hashem used three phrases to describe where he was leaving from. The second is that Hashem did not tell Avrohom where he was going. The three phrases for Charan were intended to cause Avrohom to focus more and appreciate the mitzvah. Hashem did not tell him where he was going, in order to be able to give Avrohom another set of instructions at a later time, and thereby give him additional mitzvos. We can learn much from each of these answers.

Hashem used three phrases to describe Charan, in order to cause Avrohom to focus more. How much more focus would Avrohom have from a few extra words? Furthermore, Avrohom was already greatly devoted to G-d. Many years earlier he had willingly been thrown into a fire, rather than deny G-d. During the Tower of Bavel, when Nimrod led the world in a rebellion against G-d, Avrohom had stood against the entire world proclaiming G-d's greatness. How much added appreciation could this slight additional focus provide?

Yet, for that added appreciation, Hashem chose to add extra words in the Torah. Although there was only a slight added focus, and only a minimal increase in Avrohom's inspiration, it was still important to G-d. Every small effort we can make to focus more on our appreciation for the mitzvos we do and our relationship with G-d has an impact. However, small that impact is, it is nonetheless precious in G-d's eyes.

Hashem also wanted to increase Avrohom's reward by giving him more mitzvos. Hashem, therefore, gave him a separate command to settle in Canaan when he got there. Yet, it still seems to be one mitzvah. He left Charan with intent to travel to the land Hashem would tell him, and that's what he did. Why would separating one command into two phrases increase Avrohom's reward?

The Levush Ha'orah explains that the repeated instructions changed how Avrohom approached his journey. Each stop along the way, Avrohom thought that perhaps this may be where Hashem wants him to settle. He would then accept in his heart to settle in that land, if that would be Hashem's decree. For accepting the possibility in his heart, Hashem rewarded Avrohom as if he had already fulfilled the mitzvah. When Hashem then told Avrohom that this was not the final destination, it was in effect a new mitzvah – a new opportunity to serve G-d by traveling to where G-d wanted him to go. Although, Avrohom was wrong each time, his intent was pure and true. For this pure intent alone, Hashem rewarded him.

There are times in our lives where we can be paralyzed by our options, concerned that whichever approach we choose may be the wrong one. The Torah is teaching us here, that what matters to Hashem is that our intent is pure to do our best to serve G-d. If we are truly committed to doing whatever Hashem wants us to do, we will be rewarded in full, even if we are wrong.

Every added measure of inspiration and commitment that we can bring into our lives, is of great value to Hashem. Our reward is guaranteed in measure with our commitment. Here in Hashem's first instructions to Avrohom, we are taught that our commitment is what matters most to Hashem.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

Jewish Quotes

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

Avraham Avinu devoted his life to setting new paths, all for the purpose of teaching others about Hashem and spreading the message of social justice and law. In lieu of a traditional Dvar Torah, this week Rabbi Rube built a Jewish quote generator. You may try it at https://flamboyant-wescoff-8ead3a.netlify.app/?mc_cid=e2c6593d08&mc_eid=7938e0deb2 and then hit "new quote" to look through approximately twenty quotes that he loaded. One may also add additional personal quotes and share any of the quotes through twitter. Shabbat Shalom.

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Rav Kook Torah

Lech Lecha: Malkhi-tzedek and Abraham

After Abraham defeated Chedarla'omer and his allied kings, he was greeted by Malkhi-tzedek, the priest-king of Jerusalem:

"Malkhi-tzedek, king of Salem, brought forth bread and wine. He was a priest to God, the Most High." (Gen. 14:18)

Who was Malkhi-tzedek? What is the significance of this encounter?

Shem Loses the Priesthood

The Sages identified the priest-king of Salem as Shem, the son of Noah. With his ill-fated greeting of Abraham, however, Shem forever lost the priesthood.

"The Holy One wanted the priesthood to originate from Shem. But when Shem blessed Abraham before he blessed God, the priesthood was transferred to Abraham. Abraham asked: 'Is it proper to bless the servant before blessing his Master?' God immediately gave the priesthood to Abraham. ..."

"That is what is written, 'He was a priest to God.' He [Malkhi-tzedek] was a priest, but his descendants were not." (Nedarim 32b)

This transfer of the priesthood is deeply significant, as it contrasts the different approaches of these two great individuals, Shem and Abraham.

Shem was called Malkhi-tzedek, literally, "the just king." He stressed the trait of tzedek — justice and worthiness. Abraham, on the hand, excelled in chesed and kindness. He sought to reach out to others, to influence and help them even beyond what they deserved.

Shem emphasized God's quality of transcendence. He was a priest "to God, the Most High." His God was exalted far beyond the realm of humanity. Finite and insignificant, we cannot begin to emulate God, and Godliness cannot directly influence us. For Shem, in order to approach God it is necessary to choose a worthy intermediary. Therefore, the text emphasizes that only he was a priest. Only a holy individual of Shem's stature could serve as a bridge between God and His creatures. Since Shem's descendants did not attain the necessary spiritual level, they were unable to inherit Shem's priesthood.

The Inclusive Priesthood of Abraham

The Torah, on the other hand, views every individual as a being created in God's image. We all are capable of connecting with our Creator. What then is the function of the kohen (priest)? The kohen not an intermediary, but rather atones for and purifies the people, enabling them to approach God directly. This form of priesthood could only originate from Abraham, from his attribute of chesed and sincere desire to help others.

Abraham developed his special trait of chesed through the two mitzvot mentioned in the Torah portion: brit milah (circumcision), and settling the Land of Israel. Both commandments strengthened his connection with future generations — "This is My covenant that you must keep, between Me and you and your descendants" (Gen. 17:10). They enabled Abraham to focus on his primary goal: concern for others and preparing the way for future generations.

In general, mitzvot serve to connect and unite. The word mitzvah comes from the root 'tzevet,' meaning 'togetherness' or 'team.' The mitzvot focused Abraham's lifework towards the future community of his descendants, and through them, to the entire world.

Abraham's Altar

A careful reading of the text reveals a major shift that occurred in Abraham's service of God. When Abraham first arrived in the Land of Israel, he built an altar and dedicated it "to God Who appeared to him" (Gen. 12:7). This dedication expressed Abraham's gratitude for his own personal spiritual attainments. "To God who appeared to him" — just to Abraham, the holy prophet in his own private spiritual world.

After fulfilling God's command and traveling through the Land, Abraham returned to the altar he had built. This time, however, Abraham "called out in God's Name" (Gen. 13:4). As Maimonides explained,

"The people would gather around him and question him about his words, and he would explain to each one according to his capabilities" (Laws of Idolatry 1:13).

Now Abraham "called out in God's Name." He publicized the belief in one God. This reflects the essence of Abraham's new prophetic mission: reaching out to others in God's Name.

Shem/Malkhi-tzedek, on the other hand, remained on the level of tzedek, without a public calling. "He was a priest to God." He was a priest, but not the priest. Lacking the definitive article, the prefix letter hey, Shem was only a priest for himself, without a connection to others. Instead, the letter hey was added to Abraham's name, indicating the universal nature of his mission. From Avram he became Avraham — "Av hamon goyim," the father of many nations — bringing the entire world closer to God.

"God has sworn and will not retract: you are a priest forever, due to the words of Malkhi-tzedek." (Psalms 110:4)

(Adapted from Shemu'ot HaRe'iyah 8: Lech Lecha 5690 (1929).)

<http://www.ravkooktorah.org/LECH64.htm>

Lech Lecha (5771) – On Being A Jewish Parent

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

The most influential man who ever lived, does not appear on any list I have seen of the hundred most influential men who ever lived. He ruled no empire, commanded no army, engaged in no spectacular acts of heroism on the battlefield, performed no miracles, proclaimed no prophecy, led no vast throng of followers, and had no disciples other than his own child. Yet today more than half of the 6 billion people alive on the face of the planet identify themselves as his heirs.

His name, of course, is Abraham, held as the founder of faith by the three great monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He fits no conventional stereotype. He is not, like Noah, described as unique in his generation. The Torah tells us no tales of his childhood as it does in the case of Moses. We know next to nothing about his early life. When God calls on him, as He does at the beginning of this week's parsha, to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house, we have no idea why he was singled out.

Yet never was a promise more richly fulfilled than the words of God to him when He changed his name from Abram to Abraham:

"...for I have made you father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5).

There are today 56 Islamic nations, more than 80 Christian ones, and the Jewish state. Truly Abraham became the father of many nations. But who and what was Abraham? Why was he chosen for this exemplary role?

II

There are three famous portraits of Abraham. The first is the one we learned as children. Abraham, left alone with his father's idols, breaks them with a hammer, which he leaves in the hand of the biggest of the idols. His father Terach comes in, sees the devastation, asks who has caused it, and the young Abraham replies, "Can you not see? The hammer is in the hands of the largest idol. It must have been him." Terach replies, "But an idol is mere of wood and stone." Abraham replies, "Then, father, how can you worship them?"^[1] This is Abraham the iconoclast, the breaker of images, the man who while still young rebelled against the pagan, polytheistic world of demigods and demons, superstition and magic.

The second is more haunting and is enigmatic. The Midrash compares Abraham to a man travelling on a journey who sees a Palace in flames. [Ed.: Last sentence modified to correct an obvious error.]

He wondered, "Is it possible that the palace lacks an owner?" The owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." So Abraham our father said, "Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?" God looked out and said to him, "I am the ruler, the Sovereign of the universe."^[2]

This is an extraordinary passage. Abraham sees the order of nature, the elegant design of the universe. It's like a Palace. It must have been made by someone for someone. But the palace is on fire. How can this be? Surely the owner should be putting out the flames. You don't leave a palace empty and unguarded. Yet the owner of the palace calls out to him, as God called to Abraham, asking him to help fight the fire.

God needs us to fight the destructive instinct in the human heart. This is Abraham, the fighter against injustice, the man who sees the beauty of the natural universe being disfigured by the sufferings inflicted by man on man.

Finally comes a third image, this time by Moses Maimonides:

After he was weaned, while still an infant, Abraham's mind began to reflect. Day and night, he thought and wondered, "How is it possible that this celestial sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn, for it cannot be that it turns itself?" He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in anything. He was surrounded, in Ur of the Chaldees, by foolish idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and he worshipped with them. But his mind was constantly active and reflective, until he had attained the way of truth, found the correct line of thought, and knew that there is one God, He that guides the celestial spheres and created everything, and that among all that exists, there is no God beside Him.

This is Abraham the philosopher, anticipating Aristotle, using metaphysical argument to prove the existence of God.

III

Three images of Abraham; three versions, perhaps, of what it is to be a Jew. The first sees Jews as iconoclasts, challenging the idols of the age. Even secular Jews who had cut themselves adrift from Judaism were among the most revolutionary modern thinkers, most famously Spinoza, Marx and Freud. Thorstein Veblen said an essay on "the intellectual pre-eminence of Jews," that the Jew becomes "a disturber of the intellectual peace . . . a wanderer in the intellectuals' no-man's-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon."

The second sees Jewish identity in terms of *tzedek u-mishpat*, a commitment to the just society. Albert Einstein spoke of the "almost fanatical love of justice" as one of "the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it."

The third reminds us that the Greek thinkers Theophrastus and Clearchus, disciples of Aristotle, speak of the Jews as a nation of philosophers.

So these views are all true and profound. They share only one shortcoming. There is no evidence for them whatsoever in the Torah. Joshua speaks of Abraham's father Terach as an idolater (Josh. 24:2), but this is not mentioned in Bereishit. The story of the palace in flames is perhaps based on Abraham's challenge to God about the proposed destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain: "Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?" As for Abraham-as-Aristotle, that is based on an ancient tradition that the Greek philosophers (especially Pythagoras) derived their wisdom from the Jews, but this too is nowhere hinted in the Torah.

What then does the Torah say about Abraham? The answer is unexpected and very moving. Abraham was chosen simply to be a father. The "Av" in Avram/Avraham means "father." In the only verse in which the Torah explains the choice of Abraham, it says:

For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him. (Gen. 18:19)

The great scenes in Abraham's life – waiting for a child, the birth of Ishmael, the tension between Sarah and Hagar, the birth of Isaac, and the binding – are all about his role as a father (next week I will write about the troubling episode of the binding).

Judaism, more than any other faith, sees parenthood as the highest challenge of all. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah – the anniversary of creation – we read of two mothers, Sarah and Hannah and the birth of their child, as if to say: Every life is a universe. Therefore if you wish to understand the creation of the universe, think about the birth of a child.

Abraham, the hero of faith, is simply a father. Stephen Hawking famously wrote at the end of *A Brief History of Time* that if we had a Unified Field Theory, a scientific "theory of everything," we would "know the mind of God." We believe otherwise. To know the mind of God we do not need theoretical physics. We simply need to know what it is to be a parent. The

miracle of childbirth is as close as we come to understanding the-love-that-brings-new-life-into-the-world that is God's creativity.

There is a fascinating passage in Yossi Klein Halevi's book on Christians and Muslims in the land of Israel, At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden. Visiting a convent, he is told by a nun, Maria Teresa:

"I watch the families who visit here on weekends. How the parents behave toward their children, speaking to them with patience and encouraging them to ask intelligent questions. It's an example to the whole world. The strength of this people is the love of parents for their children. Not just the mothers but also the fathers. A Jewish child has two mothers."

Judaism takes what is natural and sanctifies it; what is physical and invests it with spirituality; what is elsewhere considered normal and sees it as a miracle. What Darwin saw as the urge to reproduce, what Richard Dawkins calls "the selfish gene," is for Judaism high religious art, full of drama and beauty. Abraham the father, and Sarah the mother, are our enduring role models of parenthood as God's gift and our highest vocation.

[Ed. Unfortunately, the archives of Rabbi Sacks' writings does not include the footnotes for this Dvar Torah.]

* <https://rabbisacks.org/lech-lecha-5771-on-being-a-jewish-parent/> 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.

Parshas Lech Lecha: Go Forth

by Chaya Mushka and Nechama Krimmer *

This week's parsha begins with Hashem commanding Avraham to "Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you" (Bereishis, 12:1).

Hashem's command to "lech lecha" can be interpreted in several ways. The simple meaning of "lech lecha" is "you should go" or "go forth," as translated above.

The Rebbe Rashab, the 5th Rebbe of Lubavitch, explains that this command to "go forth" began the process of elevating the sparks of G dliness that exist within the physical world. Wherever a person finds himself, be it a lowly or holy place, Hashem has led his feet to that exact spot to elevate the sparks within.

"Lech lecha" can also mean "Go, for you." Using this expression, Hashem reassures Avraham that this mysterious adventure he is being sent on is ultimately for his benefit and growth.

Avraham was born into a world of avoda zara, the worship of foreign gods. The nations of the world prayed to clay sculptures and wooden idols, as well as the sun and other heavenly bodies. Avraham's father, Terach, not only worshiped idols, but also made a living selling them.

According to the Midrash, at the tender age of three, young Avraham understood that there had to be something greater than the clay sculptures his father sold, which could neither act nor speak.

One day Avraham went to his father's shop with an ax and destroyed all of the idols except for the largest one. Avraham then put the ax in the hand of the one upright idol. When Terach came home, he immediately suspected Avraham. Avraham was known to persuade customers to stop buying his father's idols as they were worthless dirt.

When confronted by Terach, Avraham told his father that he had watched the standing idol destroy all the other idols in a violent rage.

Terach told Avraham that was impossible as idols can't move on their own. Through this startling admission, Terach was forced to acknowledge that the idols he worshiped were powerless.

Wandering alone, Avraham drew his gaze across the land and wondered who created the sun and the moon, the rivers and the mountains? Avraham recognized that a single God exists who creates and sustains the heavens and the earth and all within it. The birth of monotheism.

The word Torah is derived from the word "hora'ah" or lesson. This is an indication that the stories told of the lives and struggles of our forefathers and foremothers hold lessons for each of us.

Since Avraham acknowledged the existence of Hashem, Hashem, in turn, acknowledged Avraham. To further their bond, Hashem commanded Avraham to leave his previous life and come to a place that only Hashem could reveal to him.

Avraham's sacred journey, his vision quest, represents the process of growth and maturity we all experience.

As a child, Avraham rejected the beliefs and values his parents and community had indoctrinated him into. He smashed the beliefs of his countrymen in the same way he smashed the idols in his father's house.

Avraham's journey is a lesson for all of us. We are influenced by everyone around us: our parents, our families, our homes, our teachers, our schools, our jobs, our communities, and our friends. These relationships influence our core beliefs and values.

When we "go forth" from our comfort zones, having newer, more poignant experiences, as well as mental, emotional, and spiritual growth, we are forced to reevaluate our beliefs and values. This process continues throughout our lives.

With each stage of growth, we have the potential to seek out the Godliness hidden within our experiences, in other people, and in ourselves. This draws us closer to Hashem and Hashem closer to us.

Like Avraham, may we always have the power to overcome our limitations and to leap over our boundaries like a gazelle in order for us to deepen our relationship with Hashem.

* © Chaya Mushka Kramer and Chabad of Greater Dayton, OH

https://www.chabaddayton.com/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/5277750/jewish/Lech-Lecha.htm

The Challenge of Blind Faith: An Essay on Lech Lecha

By Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz) * © Chabad 2021

Trial and struggle

To a certain extent, the first two parshot in the Torah are tragic narratives, dealing with the fundamental failings of man. In contrast, Parshat Lech Lecha begins a series of joyful parshot. From this Parshah onward we enter a different reality, one that focuses on man's triumphs and achievements.

The central characters of these parshot – Adam, Noah, and Abraham – are more than individuals: They are symbols as well. Adam is a symbol of mankind's failed first trial, about which the Torah summarizes, "And God regretted."¹ Noah is a symbol of failure as well – this time, of mankind's second trial – and his parshah concludes in a similar fashion, with the story of Noah's personal downfall and the story of the downfall of the generation that built the Tower of Babel.

Our sages comment briefly on these failures: "There were ten generations from Adam to Noah...ten generations from Noah to Abraham."² All the generations in between are disregarded not because they are unimportant (if they were unimportant to us, we would not talk about them), but because, in the final analysis, they are failed generations. Only here, in Parshat Lech Lecha, does a new story begin – the story of Abraham, of the triumph of man.

Abraham's story is not just the story of a perfect tzaddik who "walked with God," raised righteous children who learned in yeshivas, died peacefully, and all was well. The story does not end that way at all. Abraham's children were not all tzaddikim, and certainly did not all attend yeshivas. In what sense, then, is Abraham's story about the triumph of man? The answer is that it is the story of a man who followed a path that included trials, struggles, and setbacks but, in the end,

succeeded in achieving his goals. In light of this, we can confidently consider - Parshat Lech Lecha the first in a series of joyful parshot.

Trials

The Parshah begins with a trial. Commenting on this trial and on similar trials throughout Genesis, our sages say, "The experiences of the patriarchs prefigure the history of their descendants."³ Because of this, it is important for us to understand what a trial is and what it means to withstand a trial. Although both Adam and Noah are our ancestors, the Torah never implies that we should follow their example in any regard. Abraham, by contrast, is our exemplar; we attempt to emulate his conduct, following his path in the process of building our character.

The Mishna states, "Abraham our patriarch was tested with ten trials, and he withstood them all."⁴ Logic dictates that Abraham's trials became increasingly difficult, for a person who withstands a difficult trial will not then be tested with an easier one. Despite this, the trials did not necessarily increase in difficulty in terms of the physical suffering they entailed. After all, the very first trial – "Go forth (lech lecha),"⁵ in which Abraham is told to pack his bags and move elsewhere – is much more difficult and complicated than the trial of "Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says,"⁶ which does not entail physical strain. The increasing difficulty of the trials, then, is in terms of the spiritual effort required of Abraham: Each trial becomes more personal, more poignant, and more internally challenging than the preceding one. Each one of the trials cuts more deeply into Abraham's soul and demands a more profound inner and spiritual sacrifice.

A comprehensive view of all of the ten trials shows that Abraham is required to sever – albeit gradually and progressively – all of the ties between him and other people, between him and things that he is connected and close to. And he indeed does so, with all the difficulty that this entails.

First, he must leave his home and family, and separate from his friends and relatives and from everything with which he is familiar. Abraham is instructed to go forth "from your land" – i.e., his homeland, where he knows the language and the customs; "from your birthplace" – i.e., his own private sphere, not necessarily related to physical space; "and from your father's house" – i.e., his family. Abraham must detach himself from all the components of his life and personality.

Later on, there is a famine in Canaan, and Abraham is forced to leave his new home as well, even though he had arrived only recently. In Egypt, his wife is taken from him, and he does not know when she will return; Pharaoh does not give him an address or a date. He is told to cast out his eldest son Ishmael, and he does so.

The tenth trial – the akiedah – is the most difficult trial of them all. It is many times more difficult than the previous trials because it requires that Abraham do two things at once: First, he must kill his son Isaac, who is "your son, your only son, whom you love,"⁷ and who is also the offspring promised him by God. Second, he must perform an act that is far more serious and difficult, beyond the private-personal crisis of losing his only son. It is the ultimate crisis of faith for Abraham – he must kill and sacrifice a human being, something that Abraham has stood against all his life.

Nullifying the "why"

Upon examining the trial of lech lecha, several puzzling questions immediately present themselves. God says to Abraham:

Go forth from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you, and through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.⁸

At first glance, this command does not appear to be so terrible. God tells Abraham to go forth, promising to lavish blessings upon him if he does so. What could be better?

The question is only exacerbated when this trial is compared to that of the Akeidah. It is interesting to note that the two trials share certain expressions ("go forth," "that I will show you," "that I will point out to you"), and they are stylistically similar in several practical details as well. Nevertheless, there is an essential difference between the trials. In the Akeidah, there is no promise attached to the trial; there is only the command to perform the Akeidah, without providing any reason, incentive, or assurance. Here, alongside the command to "go forth" there is a long list of blessings. Today, people frequently leave their home countries – whether it is the Land of Israel or another country with fewer problems – to pursue

the mere possibility of finding prosperity elsewhere. Their explanations for their departure are characterized by uncertainty, by the words “perhaps,” “possibly,” and “maybe.” People often move overseas even when they know that they will only find partial blessing, and not complete blessing. Here, however, God promises Abraham that he need only go away, and he will have all that is good. What more does he need?

Additionally, the trial of lech lecha was not actually the first trial. It was preceded by another trial, which is not explicitly recounted in the Torah but which appears in the Midrash.⁹ In that trial, Abraham had to cast himself into the fiery furnace in Ur Kasdim as a result of his refusal to worship idols. Abraham was willing to give his life rather than disavow his belief in one God. After such an experience, what is the difficulty of lech lecha? It seems absurd: After Abraham was ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of his God, he is told, “I have seen that you are willing to die. Now I will put you to a greater test: Are you also willing to change your place of residence?”

The answer to these questions is twofold. First, as we have stated, the trials are in ascending order in terms of inner, spiritual difficulty, not in terms of their physical demands. It is true that suffering martyrdom for the glorification of God’s name is incomparably more physically difficult than moving to a different land. Nevertheless, when a person dies for the glorification of His name, he knows why he is doing it. Granted, this kind of martyrdom is a great and praiseworthy act, a trial that not everyone has been able to withstand. Furthermore, over the course of history, those who elected to die as martyrs were always regarded as extraordinary examples. At the same time, martyrdom was never an entirely uncommon occurrence. As it says in the Midrash, recounting a dialogue between two Jews who were sentenced to death, “For what are you going out to be stoned? ‘Because I circumcised my son.’ ‘For what are you going out to be burned?’ ‘Because I kept Shabbat.’”¹⁰ A person who is prepared to die for the glorification of God’s name possesses an inner certainty; he knows that this is the absolute truth. He knows for whose sake he is about to die, and he knows for what purpose he is giving his life.

By contrast, the trial of lech lecha lacks this element. Abraham receives an order, but no justification or reason is provided. If one wants to be a God-fearing individual, why can’t this be accomplished in Brooklyn? Is it impossible to be a God-fearing person in Charan, in Ur Kasdim, in Akkad, or in Shinar? Is there something wrong with those places? Why must Abraham, or anyone else, uproot himself from his home in the service of God?

Thus, the trial here pertains not to the physical strain but to the lack of inner justification, of a sense of meaning and purpose. In the trial of the fiery furnace, Abraham does not have to change what is in his heart. He has a clear purpose and absolute inner conviction. Here in Parshat Lech Lecha, however, Abraham has no inner reason, and the question is to what extent he is willing to change himself, to renounce his personal beliefs, in order to accept upon himself God’s kingship. Why should a person get up and leave – even if he is promised blessing and success – if there is seemingly no rhyme or reason for doing so? Nullifying the “why” is the challenge here, the true test of the trial of lech lecha.

Setting out with no destination

There is also a second aspect to the trial of lech lecha, which appears to be the essence of the difficulty, and which is found in the command’s second part: “to the land that I will show you.”

Abraham sets out without an address, without a destination. This is much more difficult than severing personal ties. When Noah builds an ark, he certainly knows why he is making it. Hence, his assignment is not referred to as “the trial of building the ark.” It is a clearly defined assignment: He must build an ark over the course of 120 years and thereby save himself from the imminent worldwide catastrophe. But when Abraham leaves his home, he sets out for the endless horizon with no apparent goal or destination whatsoever.

It is very difficult to accept the idea that one must proceed without a destination. This is fundamentally different from the self-sacrifice that was required of Abraham earlier. When he is told to go to a place “that I will show you,” then even if he has absolute faith in God, he is inevitably beset with a powerful personal question: “Where am I going?” “For what purpose?” If God had said to Abraham, “Go the land of Canaan,” then even if he had not wanted to go specifically to the land of Canaan – which does not seem to have been a place of widespread piety – it would not have been the least bit difficult for him to have gone. He could have gone anywhere – even to Sodom. But to go without a destination, to “a land that I will show you,” means to go without the anticipation of arriving at a certain place. Knowing where one is going lends a certain peace of mind, the particular location notwithstanding. God says to Abraham, “You are going.” “Where to?” “You will find out; you will be told.”

No end

This trial is a personal dilemma faced not only by Abraham. It exists in many spheres, recalling the words of our sages cited above: "The experiences of the patriarchs prefigure the history of their descendants." Our lives are structured so that everything has a purpose, everything has a point where it begins and a point where it ends. Hence, doing something that has no known end can cause real anguish.

Thus, for example, one of the most frustrating things in the realm of Torah study is that there is no point at which one can say that he is finished learning. Because of this daunting infinite nature of Torah, students often create artificial endpoints for themselves. Throughout Israel, there are many batei midrash where students train to become rabbinical judges. Most of the students know that the program will not necessarily benefit them financially – they are not guaranteed a job after finishing the program. Why, then, do they enroll in such a program? In many cases, it serves to fill an emotional need: A student can feel that he is not going about aimlessly, getting nowhere. A person who dedicates his time to Torah study for five years or ten years accomplishes nothing practically but the experience of having sat and learned. And if he decides to extend his learning for another year, what does he gain? Again, only the experience of having sat and learned for one more year. A person who studies at a university for far fewer years receives a diploma. To be sure, a university diploma is not always worth more than a yeshiva diploma; even an expert in ancient Roman literature cannot always use his degree to make a prosperous living. Nevertheless, a diploma or a degree gives a student a goal to strive for. The student proceeds systematically from one well-defined station to another on the way to the ultimate goal of achieving a degree. Upon reaching the first station, one continues on to the next, and one knows where one will arrive at the end. When there are no clear stations along the way to a distinct finish line, the lack of a goal becomes a pressing problem: What is the purpose of all of this? What will happen in the end?

When a person finishes a series of concerted actions with something tangible in his hand, he has the feeling that he has accomplished something real. In contrast, the lack of clearly defined objectives and goals inherent in the nature of Torah study makes it a very difficult world in which to thrive, and poses a real problem for proponents of intense, long-term Torah study.

Walk before Me

In truth, the act of setting out without a clear goal or destination evokes the Torah's dictate to "follow God your Lord."¹¹ One may know one's starting point, but not where he will arrive. There is no assurance that if one sits for a certain period of time, then he will become wise, God-fearing, or pious. The only instruction is to "follow God" or, as we read in Parshat Lech Lecha, "Walk before Me."¹²

Others have discussed how the command "Walk before Me" is a greater test than "Follow God your Lord." The latter instruction is akin to saying to someone, "Follow me; I will go ahead and clear the way for you." But when God says to Abraham, "Walk before Me," in effect He is saying: "Clear your own path; find your own way. You have no assurances."

"Walk before Me" is a life problem. There is an aspect of Abraham in each one of us, and each one of us faces the same situation that Abraham faced. Sometimes, one stands to lose everything for the sake of walking on God's path – one's land, one's birthplace, and one's father's house; sometimes, it is not as difficult as that, but there is always an aspect of "I will go, and I will not receive anything for it." Naturally, one prefers that everything have some quantifiable end, at which one could state that he has become a little more holy. But God promises nothing of the sort; He just wants us to start walking – whether it is following Him or before Him.

Indeed, the Jewish people's excellence lies precisely in this quality:

Israel demonstrated real greatness... For they did not say to Moses, "How can we go out into the wilderness without having provisions for the journey?" Rather, they had faith and followed Moses. Of them it is stated in the traditional sacred writings: "13 Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'I remember for you the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown'."¹⁴

They simply went. The Jewish people traveled in the wilderness without a known destination, a fact that, in the end, drove them crazy. After all, they were eating manna, drinking well water and, outside of their internal quarrels, had no serious problems. So what was bothering them? The major trial over the course of forty years was the feeling that they were going around in circles: "And we circled Mount Seir for a long time."¹⁵ They were frustrated by the seemingly endless nature of their journey. They were driven mad by the lack of a point, an address, some kind of structure in their circuitous path.

The command to “go forth” is not only an instruction, but a description of how a person should go forward in life. We learn from Abraham that this is the way one must proceed, as Rabbi Judah HaLevi put it, “I will not question, I will not test.”¹⁶ That is how one follows God: without a destination and without an aim. God’s great call to man, the first call and the last, is a call without a destination. God says, “go forth,” and one must get up and go, without knowing where one will arrive, without knowing one’s objective, and without knowing one’s aim. This path, with all its difficulties, is the proper path for the beginning of a person’s life, for that is how Abraham’s story begins. Despite all the blessings and promises, this is Abraham’s first trial that appears explicitly in the Torah: to follow God and not to question; to go, without the comfort of physical space to call his home.

On this path, there is only one real request that Abraham makes throughout all the trials – and it is an eminently reasonable one: that he should know that it is God who is speaking with him, that it is He who is instructing him to go forth. Abraham needs only the assurance that God is always with him to justify his actions. Following God is the point; it justifies itself.

The truth is that, often, when a person follows God – whether through mitzvot, prayer, or diligent Torah study – something changes within him. The stone softens, the iron cracks, something happens. However, there is no assurance that a particular series of godly actions will lead to these formative changes. We know that if one follows God, this naturally leads to inner development – in one’s self-purification, refinement, and connection to God – but there is no guarantee that this will happen.

If a person feels that he is not ready for this call, then perhaps he is not yet ready for Parshat Lech Lecha as well. He is still languishing in Parshat Noach, sitting with Noah and his concerns – to drink or not to drink; to do or not to do. The story of Noah is completely different from that of Abraham. Noah, as his name implies, is the type of person who rests (nach); all he wants is to be at ease (noach).

In order to be like Abraham, one must be willing to depart “from your land, from your birthplace and from your father’s house,” each individual according to his capacity. Every person must undertake this departure, some in a very real way, and others for whom it is only a partial departure – but a departure nonetheless.

One who follows God, by his very nature, cannot be found in his land, in his birthplace, or in his father’s house. Psalms 135 states: “O house of Israel, bless the Lord; O house of Aaron, bless the Lord; O house of Levi, bless the Lord; you who fear the Lord, bless the Lord” (19–20). There is a “house of Israel,” a “house of Aaron,” and a “house of Levi,” but there is no “house of you who fear the Lord.” Ultimately, those who fear God have no house. They follow God.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Gen. 6:6.
2. Avot 5:2.
3. Tanchuma, Lech lecha 9; Nachmanides on Genesis 12:6.
4. Avot 5:3.
5. Gen. 12:1.
6. 21:12.
7. Gen. 22:2.
8. Gen. 12:1–3
9. Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 26.
10. Leviticus Rabbah 32.
11. Deut. 13:5.

12. Gen. 17:1
13. Jer. 2:2.
14. Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Beshalach.
15. Deut. 2:1.
16. Reshuyot 22.

* Rabbi Adin Even-Israel (Steinsaltz) (1937-2020) was internationally regarded as one of the leading rabbis of this century. The author of many books, he was best known for his monumental translation of and commentary on the Talmud.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/4942507/jewish/The-Challenge-of-Blind-Faith.htm#footnoteRef1a4942507

Lech Lecha: To Shine Like the Stars

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnfsky * © Chabad 2021

G-d took Abraham outside his tent and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars—if you can count them!... That is how your descendants will be." (Genesis 15:5)

Although the plain meaning of this statement is that the Jewish people will eventually be as numerous as the stars, its metaphorical meaning is that they will sparkle like the stars; their light is so bright that even those walking in the thick of night will not stumble.

We are all Abraham's "shining stars," possessing sufficient moral and spiritual fortitude to prevent those around us from stumbling and to exert a positive influence on them.

* — from *Daily Wisdom #1*

Gut Shabbos,

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Shabbat Parashat Lech Lecha

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

How Perfect were the Matriarchs and Patriarchs?

In an extraordinary series of observations on this week's parsha, Ramban (Nahmanides, 1194 – 1270) delivers harsh criticisms of Abraham and Sarah. The first has to do with Abraham's decision to leave the land of Canaan and go to Egypt because "there was a famine in the land" (Gen. 12:1). On this Ramban 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 the lie that she was Abraham's sister not his wife, and consequently 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.

Further in the parsha, Ramban also criticises Sarah's actions. In her despair that she might never have a child of her own, she asks Abraham to sleep with her handmaid Hagar in the hope that she might bear him a child. Abraham does so, and Hagar becomes pregnant. The text then says that Hagar "began to despise her mistress" (Gen. 16:4). Sarah complains to Abraham, and then "afflict[s]" Hagar (Gen. 16:6), who flees 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. (Ramban, Commentary to Genesis 16:6)

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 do 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 to the household, 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" (Commentary to Gen. 12:6), 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" (Ex. 34:7) but not beyond. The Rabbis further restricted this to cases where "the children continue the sins of the parents." (Rashi to Ex. 34:7, Jeremiah 31:28, and Ezekiel 18:2) 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 our biblical ancestors 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 the Rabbis' systematic reinterpretation in Midrash so that black and white take the place of subtle shades of grey.

For example, the words "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian ... mocking" (Gen. 21:9), 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? He gives three reasons.

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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 Tanach 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 importantly, 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.[2]

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." [3] There never was a cult of Moses or any other biblical figure. That is why "no man knows Moses' burial place to this day" (Deut. 34:6), 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 towards others. This unique blend of idealism and realism is morality at its most demanding and mature.

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

[2] Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 187-88.

[3] Ibid., p. 188

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"Now I know that you are a beautiful woman, when the Egyptians will see you, they will say, 'This is his wife,' and they will kill me, while they will keep you alive. Please say that you are my sister, so that they will be good to me for your sake and that my soul may live because of you" (Gen. 12:11-13).

The concept of "ma'asei avot, siman la'banim" (the experiences of the parents are an omen for the children), which runs throughout the Book of Genesis, is not limited to one or two generations; the great commentator Nahmanides notes continuous allusions to the events of subsequent Jewish history in the narratives of the Torah.

In the case of Abram and Sarai, who left Israel for Egypt because of famine, one sacred text records, "the first Hebrew couple committed a sin, albeit inadvertently," and it is because of this sin that their descendants had to be enslaved in Egypt [cf. commentary of Nahmanides].

A careful reading of these verses will reveal an even deeper connection between the earlier experiences of Abram and Sarai in Egypt and the eventual Jewish enslavement by the Egyptians, with major lessons for us today.

For example, in Genesis, Pharaoh takes Sarai into his harem, where he intends to enslave her. In Exodus, Pharaoh takes the Jewish people into Egypt, where he enslaves them. To ensure the conclusion of Sarai's enslavement before she is violated, God sends plagues (negaim gedolim) on the Egyptians. When God

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wants to put an end to the Israelite enslavement, he casts ten plagues upon Egypt. In Genesis, Pharaoh sends Abram away with gifts and material wealth; when Pharaoh finally releases the Israelites from Egypt, the former slaves carry off vessels of gold and silver.

Abram in Egypt certainly foreshadows the slavery of the Jews. If we are to find an ethical teaching in Abram's Egyptian sojourn, then the Egyptian enslavement must provide not only 'measure for measure' punishment, but also a moral message for all subsequent generations.

We have already seen that Nahmanides views Abram's leaving the land of Israel, even for reasons of famine, as an inadvertent transgression. In light of the events that took place in Egypt, it is clear that no matter how tantalizing life in exile may appear to be from an economic point of view, a descendant of Abraham and Sarah must never move away from God's holy and promised Land of Israel. If it seems difficult to survive in our own land, it will be much more difficult to make it in a land in which we are strangers! This leitmotif repeats itself throughout the Torah.

As far as Abram's actions vis-a-vis Sarai are concerned, we may justify them by saying that had he said nothing, he would have been killed and Sarai would have ended up in Pharaoh's harem in any case. However, we cannot possibly justify his inelegant language, in which he asks that Sarai claim to be his sister 'so that they may be good to me for your sake.'

Apparently, Abram anticipates that Pharaoh will also give him gifts once the beautiful Sarai is harem-bound. Even if the profit he reaps was only a post facto dividend, his choice of words conveys the notion that Sarai is being used to further Abram's ends. I believe the Torah is teaching us that here, too, Abram sinned inadvertently.

Our interpersonal relationships, especially between husband and wife, must be devoid of any of the subtle ways used to take advantage of one another, even if done unintentionally. We tend to take advantage of people, or at least to take them for granted – especially those who are closest to us. We tend to forget that each person must be seen as his or her own ultimate reality, an end unto him/herself.

Using someone else as a means to our own ends, merely in order to fulfill our goals, is a subtle form of slavery. Slavery is made possible by dehumanizing a fellow human being, seeing him or her as an object for our purposes rather than a subject in his or her own right. Thus, the parallelism between the Egyptian experience of Abram and Sarai in the Book of Genesis and the Egyptian experience of their descendants in the Book of Exodus conveys two crucial lessons.

First, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah must learn that no foreign country will ever provide a political and cultural homeland for the nation of the covenant. Joseph's family settled in Egypt with great expectations for security and respectability, only to be enlisted in Pharaoh's slave-based systematic design that ultimately robbed them of their elementary rights to freedom and life itself.

Second, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah must have seared into their consciousness that slavery is fundamentally evil in any and all of its forms, and to always be mindful of the humanity of every person. "You must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt," declares the Torah [Deut. 10:19].

Faithfulness to our homeland and respect for every human being as an end in and of him/herself are the principles upon which our nation was formed. Have we learned these lessons?

The Person in the Parsha **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

Ancestral Decisions

Most people do not give much thought to their ancestral origins. But some do, and I am one of them. I often wonder about my grandparents and their grandparents. Who were they? What was their world like?

Most of all, I wonder about the decisions that they made, and whether those decisions had any bearing upon my life. Suppose they had made different decisions? Would my life be any different? Would I even be here to wonder?

In my case, I knew all my grandparents and even one great-grandmother. I know a little bit about some of my other great-grandparents, including the man after whom I was named. His name was Tzvi Hersh Kriegel, and I will always remember the portrait of him in a derby hat and long red beard, prominently adorning the dining room wall in my grandparents' home.

Somewhere back in the late 19th century, he made a decision. I know nothing of the details of that decision. He chose to leave the eastern European shtetl where he was born and raised and made his way to the United States. Because of that decision, he and his descendants escaped the fate of most of the rest of his family. Had he not made that decision, I myself would have been one of the millions of Hitler's victims. I would not be sitting at my desk writing this column.

Many of my other forbearers, and many of yours, dear reader, made similar decisions in their lives that determined the futures of their children and grandchildren. Reflecting upon this fact leads to many important life lessons, including the need to take one's own decisions very seriously.

In my case, I cannot go back more than three generations, so I'm not familiar with the decisions made by my ancestors much before the late 19th century. Others, like my wife Chavi, routinely refer to ancestors who lived in the 18th century and even earlier. They are still influenced by decisions made by those who came before them more than two centuries ago.

It remains true, however, that all Jewish people can trace their ancestry much further back than a couple of centuries. I am reminded of the retort uttered by the late Lubavitcher Rebbe to a disciple who proudly reported that he was tutoring several "Jews with no Jewish background." The Rebbe insisted that there was no such thing. "Those Jews," he exclaimed, "have the same Jewish background as you do. They are all children of Abraham and Sarah."

Indeed, we are all children of Abraham and Sarah, and we remain influenced by the consequences of their decisions. Study the weekly Torah portions beginning this week, and you will discover the extent to which we remain influenced by the decisions made by our patriarchs and matriarchs millennia ago.

This week's parsha, Parshat Lech Lecha (Genesis 12:1-17:27), begins with one such decision: Abraham and Sarah's resolve to leave their "native land and father's house" and proceed to the "land that I will show you," the land of Canaan. That decision which reverberated across the generations still sustains our commitment to the Holy Land.

There are some lesser-known decisions made by Abraham in this week's Torah portion. The first was his decision to personally intervene in a war conducted by four great world powers against five other kingdoms. What prompted Abraham to do so was the report that his kinsman, Lot, was taken captive by the invaders. Unlike some contemporary world leaders, Abraham immediately sprang into action.

Not having access to jet fighters and long range missiles, he "mustered his retainers, chanichav." He enlisted the help of 318 of those who had been "born into his household," raised and educated by him. He made the decision to draft his disciples into military service.

Was that a good decision? Not according to one view in the Talmud, Tractate Nedarim 32a: "Rabbi Avahu said in the name of Rabbi Elazar: Why was Abraham punished so that his children were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years? Because he used Torah scholars as his army!"

In Abraham's judgment, enlisting 318 of his disciples to help rescue innocent victims was a no-brainer. For Rabbi Avahu, however, Abraham's decision was a disaster of historical

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proportions. There is no doubt that Abraham's decision remains relevant down to this very day, perhaps even more urgently than ever before.

Our Torah portion continues with the narrative that describes the offer of the King of Sodom (whom Abraham defended and who had Abraham to thank for his survival) to "give me the persons, and take the booty for yourself." Abraham, ever meticulously ethical, declines the booty but also yields the persons to the king of Sodom.

A wise decision? Not according to another opinion in that Talmudic passage: "Rabbi Yochanan said that [Abraham's children were eventually enslaved in Egypt] because he impeded the ability of those persons from taking refuge under the wings of the Shechinah." That is, had Abraham insisted that the King of Sodom yield those "persons" to Abraham's care, they would eventually have converted to Abraham's monotheistic way of life.

Abraham had a dilemma. Was he to insist on his ethical principles and take no reward whatsoever, not persons and not booty, from the king of Sodom? Or should he have engaged in spiritual outreach and taken those prisoners into his own household? For Abraham, his ethical principles trumped his goal of encouraging pagans to convert to monotheism. For Rabbi Yochanan, on the other hand, Abraham missed a critical opportunity. This is yet another of Abraham's decisions with great implications for us today.

We are all children of Abraham and Sarah. In so many ways, their dilemmas remain our dilemmas. Rabbi Avahu and Rabbi Yochanan taught us that we cannot merely emulate their choices. We must assess their decisions, determine their validity, and then consider the extent to which our circumstances conform to theirs.

As we study the parsha each week, we must remember that we are not just reading Bible stories. We are studying ancestral decisions which continue to affect our daily lives in an uncanny way.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Maran Rav Ovadia Yosef, zt"l [1920-2013]

The pasuk says in Parshas Lech Lecha "Look please to the heavens and count the stars, if you can count them, thus will be your seed" [Bereshis 15:5]. In this famous pasuk, the Ribono shel Olam takes Avraham Avinu outside and promises him that his descendants will be (according to the simple p'shat) as numerous as the stars. Rabbeinu Bechaye provides a very unique reading of this pasuk which is not its straight-forward interpretation.

When we look at the stars from our vantage point, they all look the same. However, someone who looks through a telescope

notices that each star is vastly different from one another – in color, in brightness, in shape, etc. Rabbeinu Bechaye interprets G-d's promise to Avraham as follows: Just as the stars are each different from one another and totally unique, so too the "Chachmei Yisrael" (the Sages of Israel) will be unique. No Gadol will be an exact replica of any other Gadol. Gedolim are not cut from the same cloth. They are all different in their personalities, in their approaches, in their hashkafos, and in their spiritual achievements.

Rabbeinu Bechaye takes the pasuk totally out of context and sees a different insight in it. It is not merely referring to the multitude of descendants of Avraham Avinu. Rather, it is referring specifically to the Gedolim of each generation and is stating that they will each be unique as each star is unique.

Gedolim are not clones of one another and they do not mimic one another. That is what gives Klal Yisrael its diversity and its character. Different Manhigim have different approaches, each according to his nature and makeup. I believe this is an appropriate segue to speak of the tremendous loss Klal Yisrael has suffered this week in which we have lost HaRav Hagadol HaGaon HaChacham Rav Ovadia Yosef, zecher Tzadik l'Bracha.

In almost every area of life — every business, every profession — times have changed and people no longer conduct their affairs the way they previously did because of the change of technology. When I go to my doctor, he does not sit with a note pad and take notes of my medical history. He is typing onto his laptop. When someone goes to the dry cleaner, they no longer fill out that little pink slip and hand it to the customer. Your shirts and pants are registered into the customer database by computer. Your mechanic determines what is wrong with your car by plugging the engine into his computer. In recent years, computers have changed the way the world does everything!

And computers have impacted my shiurim as well! I have been giving this shiur, bli ayin haRa, for 32 years now. I do not remember exactly when I switched to using computers and computer programs to do my research, but it may already be for ten or twenty years that I make heavy use of the Bar Ilan program, the Otzar haChochmah database, the Otzar ha'Shu't, and so forth. The question is – how did I prepare my shiur before computers, before I had fingertip access to thousands of seforim of halachic and Responsa literature?

The answer is that I had a computer! It was called the Yabia Omer. It was one of the first sefarim of Rav Ovadiah Yosef, called *Shaylos U'Teshuvos Yabia Omer*. That was just as good as a computer. He cited any Teshuva that ever spoke about a subject. If I would chance upon a sugya in which there was a Siman in Yabia Omer – it would be an easy shiur for me to

create. It was all there. All I had to do was to sift through it (which was not that easy because there was so much to go through).

For years and years, the two sefarim that I used extensively in the earlier days of this shiur were the *Yabia Omer* and the *Tzitz Eliezer* (Rav Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg (1915-2006)), two Gedolei Yisrael from Eretz Yisrael. But for tonight's purposes, I am going to talk about the *Yabia Omer*. I and you and everyone who has ever come to this shiur or has ever listened to a recording of it is a Talmid of Rav Ovadiah Yosef. I cannot even begin to count how many times over the years I have quoted him. We are all his students! We lost our Rebbe, whether you have ever laid eyes upon him, whether you have ever met him, we were all Talmidim of Rav Ovadiah Yosef by virtue of his Sefarim which I use so much.

In the earlier years, there were six volumes of *Yabia Omer*. They were all tall and thick. I could only get two volumes – *Chelek Aleph* and *Chelek Vov*. The other *Chalakim* were out of print. I could not get my hands on them. There was a student in the Yeshiva from Brazil who had the entire six volume set. I asked him to go to a Speedy Print shop and photostat for me the entire four volumes of the *Yabia Omer* that I was missing. I kept them in these huge boxes. They were so invaluable to me that whatever it took, I had to get my hands on these sefarim – which did not otherwise exist in the entire city!

The encyclopedic knowledge and *bekius* that are contained in these volumes are mind-boggling. Someone could make the statement that this week the Jewish community lost the biggest Talmid Chochom in the world. Some people may argue "X" or "Y" are bigger Talmidei Chachomim, but it is certainly not a crazy statement to make that "the biggest Talmid Chochom in the world died this week!" Certainly, he was the world's biggest expert on *Teshuva Seforim* (Responsa literature). Nobody else even came close.

Whether someone agreed with all his halachic opinions or whether someone agreed with all his pronouncements, does not make a difference. He is a person that every person who learns Torah and appreciates Torah must respect.

Thirty-two years ago, in 1981, Rav Ovadiah Yosef came to Baltimore. I do not remember the exact circumstance but I know the Associated Jewish Charities of Baltimore invited him to come speak while he was the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel (*Rishon L'Tzion*). He came to Ner Israel and gave a shiur in the Yeshiva. *K'Darko b'Kodesh*, it was like listening to a phone book recitation of Sefarim. There was a Jew in this town that older Baltimoreans will remember — a great Talmid Chochom named Rav Yitzchok Sternhell. Rav Yitzchok Sternhell wrote a sefer

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called *Kochav Yitzchok*. He was a Munkatcher Chossid. Without going into the particulars, Munkatch is anti-Zionist. Rav Sternhell, who was the embodiment of Munkatch, was an anti-Zionist, but when Rav Ovadiah Yosef came to the Yeshiva, Rav Sternhell came to listen to the shiur. He was so enamored by Rav Ovadiah's Torah that he ignored the "Rav HaRoshi thing" and all the trappings of an official State visit by the "Rishon L'Tzion". Rav Ovadiah was a Talmid Chochom. Not just a Talmid Chochom – this was a world class Talmid Chochom.

Rav Sternhell himself was a great baki (he had vast proficiency in Talmudic and Responsa literature) and Rav Ruderman (Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel) was an even greater baki. They were both amazed at Rav Ovadiah Yosef. In a meeting in the Rosh Yeshiva's house, they were going around introducing everyone to Rav Ovadiah. When they introduced Rav Sternhell to Rav Ovadiah Yosef, they mentioned that he authored the *Kochav Yitzchok*. Rav Ovadiah immediately commented "Oh, the Kochav Yitzchok. I cite you in the third chelek of *Yabia Omer* in a *Teshuva* about life insurance!" That was Rav Ovadiah. His memory was photographic. He saw something, he remembered it! He must have cited 100,000 sefarim in his collection of responsa.

But besides the learning, Chacham Ovadiah was an historic transformative figure. It is very important to realize that when we talk of a transformative figure, we mean people that transform society. Throughout Jewish history, there have been thousands of Gedolim, but not every Gadol is a transformative figure. The Vilna Gaon and his Talmid, Rav Chaim of Volozhin, were transformative figures. The entire mesorah of Litvishe Yeshivas and the Litvishe world came from the Gaon and his disciple. The Baal Shem Tov was a transformative figure. He introduced Chassidus into the world. Rav Yisroel Salanter was a transformative figure because he started a movement called the Mussar movement. Rav Aharon Kotler was a transformative figure because he changed the face of America and indeed the world.

Rav Ovadiah Yosef was a historic transformative figure because he transformed Israeli society. Sephardim in Eretz Yisrael were at best second-class citizens, if not third-class citizens. They were discriminated against. They were abused. They were the down-trodden of society. Rav Ovadiah Yosef, single-handedly, resuscitated an entire community within Klal Yisrael. Today, Sephardim are perhaps the most powerful group in Israel. Rav Aharon Feldman (current Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel) said that when he came to Eretz Yisrael fifty or sixty years ago, there were just a handful of Sephardim learning in yeshiva. All the Yeshivas were either Litvishe or Chassidische Yeshivas, but they were all Ashkenazic. Today, there are thousands and thousands of Sephardic young

men learning in Yeshivot. That can be credited to Rav Ovadia Yosef.

But it was not only the Chareidi world that Rav Ovadia impacted. Rav Ovadia had a tremendous influence on the entire Sephardic community – Dati, Chiloni, Charedi – it does not make a difference. The proof of the matter is that the turnout at his funeral could not have come from the frum world alone.

According to the secular press, there were 850,000 people at his funeral! According to the frum press, it was closer to 1,000,000. That is either 14 or 17 percent of the Jewish population of Israel! There are 6,000,000 Jews in Eretz Yisrael. The estimates of the size of Rav Ovadia's funeral ranged from 14 to 17 percent of the Jewish population. Projecting these percentages to America with 350,000,000 people would be a funeral procession with 47 million people coming to the levaya.

That is what happened. I have a friend living in Ramot, a suburb of Jerusalem. He wrote to me with a description of his experience. He boarded a bus trying to come into Yerushalayim for the funeral. There were 100 buses backed up trying to get into Yerushalayim. He had to walk 3 miles up hill just to get into the city and then he had to walk another mile to get at least close to Porat Yosef, from where the funeral procession departed. The Yeshiva here in Baltimore had a live hook-up of the levaya. Such a diverse group of people were there. There were Chassidim, there were Misnagdim, there were Yeshiva bochrim, Sephardic Yeshiva bochrim, but there were also people that came to that levaya without Yarmulkas – by the thousands! Chilonim! It is because of what he did for them.

They may never have seen a Yabia Omer in their life but this was a man they knew cared for them, a person who could speak to the biggest Talmid Chochom and yet he could also speak to the simplest Jew. "From your wood-choppers to those who draw water." (Devorim 29:10). He cared for them. He worried for them. He gave them money. He elevated them. He went to them. He spoke to them. He made them feel "You are somebody." He did this all with great Mesiras Nefesh.

One of the stories mentioned in the Hespedim which I heard in the Yeshiva was that 14 years ago, he had a heart attack. He went to the hospital and the doctors wanted to perform emergency bypass surgery. He said, "I need to go home for three hours and then I will return for the surgery." He had just suffered a heart attack and he told the doctors he needed three hours before they could proceed. What did he go back home for, for those three hours? There was a woman, an agunah, who he wanted to permit to remarry. He was in the middle of writing a lengthy Teshuva and he had to finish the Teshuva. He did this at the risk of his life.

He did not know for sure if he would survive the surgery and therefore if the Teshuva was not finished, the woman would remain an agunah. Therefore, he went home to finish writing the Teshuva.

People throughout Eretz Yisrael felt this love he had for them. There are Iranians in the Yeshiva that I am confident never met Rav Ovadia Yosef. They were sitting there during the levaya hookup crying for someone they never met. He was not only Maran of the Sephardic world. He was the father of the Sephardic world. That is why men, women, and children lined the streets of Yerushalayim crying for him. You cry when your father dies. That is what he was. He was the father figure of Sephardic Jewry.

There are many clichés that are usually said during eulogies. "We are orphaned, our father is gone." "Woe to the ship who loses its captain." "Who will give us his replacement?" These are expressions of speech. With Chacham Ovadia, they are literally true. Yesomim Hayeenu v'Ain Av. He is the father – we have no more father. "Woe to the ship..." Who is going to lead the Sephardic world now? They have lost their captain. "Who will give us his replacement?" A man like this comes along maybe every 300 years!

His sons are great Talmidei Chachomim. But not like this. This was someone who comes along once in many generations. There is talk of "a 100-year flood" – this is a "200-year Gadol". If I had to pick one pasuk that summarizes Chacham Ovadia, it would be the pasuk at the end of Koheles [12:9]: "And besides being wise, Koheles also imparted knowledge to the people, he listened, and sought out, and arranged many proverbs."

Shlomo HaMelech was the wisest of all men, but even more praiseworthy than the fact that he was wise, was that he taught the people, he made Torah accessible to the masses, and he created and spoke with many proverbs. This is how Rav Ovadia used to speak. He would not give lofty discourses, which would be comprehensible only to the "cream of the crop." He spoke to the masses in a language that they understood and appreciated.

One of the other clichés that we use is "woe to us that we have lost and will never find again." That could aptly be said on HaGaon HaTzadik HaRav HaChacham HaRav Ovadia Yosef, zecher Tzadik, l'Bracha.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

What is the saddest verse of the Torah? Unfortunately there are many verses which could come into contention for such a description, including one in Parshat Lech Lecha.

Avram and Sarai had made aliyah to the land of Canaan. They were accompanied by

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Avram's nephew Lot and many followers. Both Avram and Lot were blessed with immense wealth, and what happens in some families happened to them: On account of all of this wealth there was a lot of tension between them and their shepherds. And then we come to our very sad verse.

"Vayehi riv bein roei miknei Avram uvein roeh miknei Lot." – "There was a conflict between the shepherds of Avram and the shepherds of Lot."

"VeHaKenaani vevaPrizi az yoshev baaretz." – "And the Canaanites and the Perizzites were then living in the land."

Now the entire narrative is exclusively about Avram and Lot and their relationship. Indeed immediately after this verse we're told how Avram turned to Lot and said to him, "Let there not be any strife between me and you. After all we are brothers. We are one family."

So why therefore, right in the middle of this narrative are we told that the Canaanites and the Perizzites were then living in the land?

And we can add to that – isn't it obvious? Where else should the Canaanites be? This was the Land of Canaan!

The Torah must be wanting to impart here a crucially important lesson for the Jewish nation.

You see after Avram and Sarai made aliyah, the local population didn't warm to them and indeed the Canaanites and the Perizzites in the land presented a hostile environment for them. And what was happening within their own family at the time? There was strife.

Time and time again throughout our history when there has been danger from without, we have been divided within. This is what led to the split of the Jewish nation into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah, resulting eventually in the disappearance of ten of the tribes of our people. This is what led to the destruction of our temple followed by many tragedies all caused by disunity within our ranks, leading to that tragic day 25 years ago in 1995 when a Jewish person assassinated Yitzchak Rabin the Prime Minister of Israel.

We still haven't properly learned the lesson of how crucially important Jewish unity is for us.

Let us therefore heed those words of Avram to Lot when he said to him, "Al na tehi meriva beini uveinecha," – "Let there not be strife between me and you," "ki anashim achim anachnu." – "because we are one family."

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Brit Milah and Modern Antisemitism

by Rabbi Avichai Apel

Concurrent with all the beauty and glory of European Jewry's renaissance following the

horrors of the Holocaust, a renaissance that would have been even more glorious had it taken place in our Holy Land, another process is taking place. Wide swathes of the local gentile population are going out of their way to strengthen the Jewish communities living among the nations at this time.

It is not only Jews who know that the return of the Jewish people to its land and a strong Israel is the anchor for strong Jewish life in the Diaspora. The nations are also aware of Israel's role in the identity of every Jew. It does not matter whether their criticisms of Israel stem from love, or whether the criticism is addressed to Israel's leaders and its citizens who have forgotten their European manners.

The nations are also aware that waves of Aliya reduce the size of the Jewish communities in their country. Homes filled with life, unity and friendship, acceptance of the other and initiatives for interfaith activities will become homes filled with memories of what was and is no longer.

There is nothing new in the nations' jealousy about the role and place of the Jewish people and its practice of Judaism. However, there is a new attempt to harm basic values sacred to the Jewish people and thus prevent any possibility of life in Jewish communities in the Diaspora. The issue of circumcision (Brit Mila) reaches media headlines from time to time in various countries. Children's rights organizations challenge parents' rights to educate their children, and they encourage the medical profession and the public to criticize those parents who circumcise their male newborn, thus weakening the resolve of those Jewish parents for whom circumcision is a mere physical act and who are less aware of the significance of circumcision. For those parents who do have a strong Jewish awareness, these criticisms cause them to reconsider the land they are living in and ponder whether they are living at a time of rebirth or at a time of packing up and moving out.

We were commanded to perform circumcision and remove the foreskin (Orla) in this week's parsha, even before we became a nation, and this is a unique commandment. Although it is a one-time act, it remains imprinted on us for life. Symbolically, there is a connection between the covenant (brit) that is made through the performance of circumcision, and the remembrance of the covenant which is an ongoing act that accompanies man wherever he goes. The one cannot exist without the other (Rabbi Samson Refael Hirsch) and just as not performing circumcision severs the connection between a person and his uniqueness as a Jew, so circumcision of the foreskin connects a person to the eternal and deep covenant with his God, his people and with the first member of his nation – the father of a multitude of nations – Avraham Avinu.

The creation of the foreskin in the sons of the father of all humanity, in all of the human race, does not mean that the creation is faulty. When the sons of Avraham remove the foreskin, they are correcting and completing. We will explore this further.

The organ through which the human body gets rid of its waste has an additional function, that of reproduction and the ability to give life to new generations that will fulfill the blessing of I will make you into a great nation, a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. The removal of waste from the body means that whatever is not needed for human existence is gathered in this organ and flushed out. Unwanted thoughts have the potential to link with lofty acts in such a place. The uniqueness of reproduction is that it channels man's greatest strengths and transmits them to a fertile breeding place where they can develop and give rise to high quality humanity. Reproduction must take place in cleanliness and with a purity of traits. The more calculated the reproduction is, the more fruitful it is. To prevent the linking of unworthy matters with the act of reproduction and the birth of the nation, Avraham, and with him we, the Jewish people, are commanded to remove the foreskin and balance the force of giving birth. Giving birth with thought, with a fitting intent and goal. Heavens forbid, we do not want a positive force of building to be linked with unworthy acts simply because of lust and the intervention of negative thoughts and intents.

The Jewish nation is charged with building a nation that cannot be counted. This does not mean a life of abandonment and birth that is not monitored. This nation will be fruitful and multiply like the sand at the seashore and the stars in the heaven. Each and everyone of us is to be found in this connection between heaven and earth. Our task is to take the earth heaped up in our body and give it a form and meaning that we received from heaven. We do not enslave ourselves to the earth. We carefully separate the good from the waste and rid ourselves of the waste on the eighth day after our birth. Each one of us grew up with this understanding that we will one day start our own family and reproduce, but we will make sure to distinguish between what is good and what is not.

The multitude of nations were not commanded to perform circumcision. Their role is to ensure the continued existence of the human race in the world, which is upheld with the birth of each new person. Without lust and desire, even chickens will stop laying their eggs. Desire is a blessing in the world and the nations of the world have to protect it in their own way and, as they were commanded in the Seven Noahide laws, to preserve the family unit.

An additional part of the act of circumcision is the uncovering and pulling back of the inner membrane covering the foreskin (periah). We

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invest great effort into discovering the inner aspects of our lives. Our efforts to realize our potential in life are blanketed by many covers. Removal of the foreskin (orla) during circumcision is not the only impediment. The word orla appears in other contexts in the Tanakh. "I [Moses] am a man of impeded speech" (Ex. 6:12); "Their ears are blocked" (Jer. 6:10); "Uncircumcised in spirit" (Ezek.44:9). Various organs that are the gateway for absorbing information and distinguishing between what is good and what is not are covered by a foreskin. As a result, we are not able to immediately differentiate between what helps and what impedes. Removing the orla, the foreskin, in the act of circumcision is the first step in a person's life during which he will have to continually discover the truth and divest himself of falsehood. He is given this task at the very start of his life. Now he has to live up to his designation and remove the impediments that stand in his way to realizing his goal in life.

With our hands and mouths we are unable to speak to blocked ears and explain what we mean by the essence of our existence. With a wise person, use your wisdom ... and we know how the sentence continues.

It is incumbent on us to bring our Jewish brethren closer to the performance of this commandment, for our entire existence is dependent on it. Failure to circumcise is not uncommon. Some parents succumb to societal pressure and do not take responsibility for their children's education to enable them to proudly carry the sign of the covenant on their bodies. These parents leave the decision of whether to be circumcised to their sons when they reach adolescence and are integrated into general society but these young men are lacking a Jewish self-identity.

Let us be strengthened in this time and that those who choose life will merit to reveal the coverings and reach the land of the living.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah

by Rabbi Label Lam

To Hear with Our Heels

And HASHEM said to Avram, "Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you." (Breishis 12:1-3)

The Ramban asks an important and almost obvious question on these initial words that were spoken to Avraham Avinu. Why is there no prior introduction to explain why HASHEM is talking to him? Suddenly HASHEM is speaking to this individual without the reader of the narrative having any

clue or hint as to what he did to deserve to be in the spotlight of history.

Sure we have loads of information in the Oral Torah about Avram's youth and his search for G-d, courageously destroying idols in his father's shop, and his willingness to go into a fiery furnace rather than submit himself to idolatry. These events are not explicitly spelled out. Where do we see a hint of the merit that made him worthy of HASHEM giving the directive, "Lech Lecha"?

The Sefas Emes offers a stunning explanation to this question. He quotes a Zohar that states, "Woe to those people who sleep in their caves, while Avraham Avinu of Blessed Memory, heard and accepted." The Sefas Emes sees a profound implication in that Zohar. He says that those words "Lech Lecha" that launched our national mission, was not only said to Avraham.

It was announced then and is announced constantly ever since to everybody, and this was the great praise of Avraham that made him worthy. The fact that he heard and responded makes it as if HASHEM was speaking only to him.

Sometimes a child will come home and say, "My Rebbe said to me..." A parent might ask, "Did he speak only to you?" The child answers, "He was talking to the class but I felt he was talking to me!"

It can work the other way around as well. A Rebbe or a lecturer, or a teacher imparts an important message and for whatever reason only one student shows that he gets it. He was essentially saying what he said and it was well worth his while to say it just for that one student. "And HASHEM said to Avram, Lech Lecha..."

One of my teachers once relayed to us the results of a study. I don't know how the study was done or if the results are truly scientific but even if it is nearly correct, it reflects a serious point worth pondering. 1% of people think. 5% of people think they think, and 94% of people would rather die than think.

Perhaps a huge portion of humanity did not even hear the broadcast of this message. Maybe there were a few that heard it but did not respond. Avraham Avinu was a seeker of truth. He was a thinker and a persistent researcher. Avraham was not only the greatest iconoclast of all time, shattering the myth of idolatry and exposing their lies, but he was also the greatest ideologue as he became completely convinced of HASHEM ECHAD, One G-d! So not only did he hear "Lech Lecha" and let it remain an intellectual proposition, he accepted it, he was ready and he literally leapt into action. His great merit and praise was that he heard it and took immediate and appropriate action.

V'haya EIKEV Tishm'un... (Devarim 7:12) It will be when you hearken to the laws... V'haya introduces blessing. "Eikev" is a heel. I would like to say, "When you listen with your heels..." When you are so clear and sensitized, as in the Ikva D'Mashicha, the heels of Moshiach we too will be able to hear with our heels.



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Lech Licha –

Avraham Is Challenged To Wipe His Hard Drive Clean

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1222 – Milah for The Son of a Jewish Father and a Non-Jewish Mother. Good Shabbos!

Avraham Is Challenged To Wipe His Hard Drive Clean

In the Medrash Rabbah (Chapter 39), Rav Yitzchak comments on the first pasuk in our parsha – “Go forth from your land, your birthplace and the house of your father to the Land that I will show you” (Bereshis 12:1) – by citing a pasuk from Tehillim (45:11): “My daughter listen to me and see; turn your ear and forget your nation and the house of your father.” This is how Rav Yitzchak would begin his exposition on Parshas Lech Lecha. He would reference this pasuk from sefer Tehillim. The question is – what does this pasuk in Tehillim Chapter 45 have to do with Parshas Lech Lecha?

I saw an idea in a sefer called Nachlas Eliezer from Rav Eliezer Kahan, who was a Mashgiach in Gateshead:

Rav Yitzchak is coming to answer a question that many meforshim ask: The pasuk “Lech lecha m’artzecha u’mi’moladetecha u’m’beis avicha...” contains an inherent problem.” The Ribono shel Olam is asking Avraham to go away from his country, his city, his father’s house and to go to Eretz Yisrael. As we all know, if we go anywhere – especially if we go out of the

country – the first place that we leave is our home. Then we leave our city. Then when we get to the airport and take off toward our destination, we ultimately leave our country. The pasuk should therefore have really been written in the reverse sequence: Go forth from your father’s house, your birthplace (i.e. – your city), and from your land (i.e. – your country); not vice versa as the pasuk states.

The famous answer to this question is that the Almighty is not requesting a change of location, venue, or zip code from Avraham over here. Rather, the Ribono shel Olam is asking for Avraham Avinu to become a different person, literally to go ahead and wipe the slate clean to the extent that there is no remnant of his past existence.

To what can the matter be compared? A while back, my laptop started to run very slowly. I went to my computer guy and said, “You need to do something about this laptop.” He told me “The laptop is so old, and it has so much stuff on it that the only way to get this up to speed is to wipe the hard drive clean. We would need to get rid of everything, bring it back to ‘Bereshis’, then reload all the software onto it and then it would perform like new. But guess what? It is cheaper to buy a new laptop than to have me do all that for you.” Which I did.

HaKadosh Baruch Hu is asking Avraham “Wipe your hard drive clean.” There should be no zecher (memory) left of your previous existence, of who you were. “I want a fresh start. I am going to build a new nation from you and therefore everything in your past needs to be deleted.”

Now the pasuk makes eminent sense. We are all Americans (at least most of us). So as Americans, there is a certain influence that the country we live in has on us. Americans are different from Israelis, Israelis are different from Russians, and Russians are different from Iranians. Everyone is different based on the cultural practices of the country where they grew up. This is the reality of things.

But the influence that a person’s country has on him is not in his bone marrow. That is the easiest influence to get rid of. That can be accomplished in quick order. Therefore, “Go out of your land” (Lech lecha m’artzecha) comes first in the pasuk. Next comes “and from your birthplace”. We are all influenced by the cities we live in. Different cities have different cultures. We are Baltimoreans, which we consider a badge of honor. People in other towns may turn down their noses at the idea of being “Baltimoreans”. For better or worse, there is a certain culture here. We are influenced by living in Baltimore, Maryland. This influence has a little more profound impact on a person’s identity than “your country”, but again it is not part of the person’s DNA.

But then there is a person’s family – Beis Avicha. This is part of our very essence. This influence comes along in our mother’s milk. This is the hardest thing to get rid of – the walls that we were raised in, what we heard as children from our parents and our siblings. That is really who we are.

Therefore, HaKadosh Baruch Hu is not really telling Avraham to change location but to become a different person and to delete all former influences. The way to do that is Artzecha, Moladetecha, and finally Beis Avicha.

This now helps us understand what Rav Yitzchak was saying by linking the opening pasuk of the Parsha with the eleventh pasuk in Chapter 45 of Tehillim: “My daughter listen to me and see; turn your ear and forget your nation and the house of your father.” This is exactly what was occurring at the beginning of Lech Lecha. Avraham was commanded to forget his nation and then forget his father’s house – in that order!

With this understanding, we can also resolve another problem in the first pasuk of our parsha. Rashi comments on the words Lech Lecha (Go for yourself) – for your benefit and for your own good! This is another famous question that everyone asks: This is supposed to be a test for Avraham. There is a difference of opinion whether it is the first or second of the famous Ten Tests that Avraham was given, but it certainly is considered a “Test” and a challenge. So G-d is telling Avraham: Guess what? Here is a test. If you pass this test, are you going to be in good shape!

If “Go where I ask you to go” is supposed to be a Nisayon, why isn’t the challenge being given without any promises? Let the promises come after

Avraham passes the test and gets to “the Land he will be shown”? The Nachalas Eliezer addresses this problem by citing a fundamental principle of Rav Yisrael Salanter in terms of how to live life. Rav Yisrael Salanter said that to successfully pass a Nisayon, a person needs two elements: A person must have Yiras Shamayim. That is, if the Ribono shel Olam asks you to do something, you must comply because you fear the Ribono shel Olam. But the key to passing a Nisayon is to minimize the test and make the challenge seem less great than it really is.

A person needs to convince himself – “psych himself out” – that it is not the highest mountain to climb, it is merely a hill. We can give an example. Let’s say that someone needs to exercise every morning. The only way a person can exercise every morning is by getting up at 5:00 am. That is the only time when it might fit into the daily schedule. Now, who wants to get out of bed at 5:00 am? Why do you need to do exercise? Because you need to lose weight and it is good for your cardio-vascular system. So you tell yourself – why am I getting up so early? It is because it is good for my weight. It is good for my heart. (That is why we are all overweight.)

You make a “deal” with yourself. You say, if I get up at 5:00 am in the morning, I am going to treat myself to a cup of “Keurig-made coffee”, if I don’t get up at 5:00 o’clock then it is Nescafe. So why am I getting up then? I am not getting up because I want my heart to be better or because I want to lose weight. I am getting up because of the geshmak of having some Keurig-made coffee. I love that coffee.

Rav Yisrael says this is the approach a person needs to use in Yahadus. Do not make it hard on yourself! Make it easy in your mind. HaKadosh Baruch Hu is telling Avraham – become a different person. Do you know how hard that is? Avraham Avinu is not 15 years old at the beginning of Lech Lecha. He is 75 years old. It is not easy to “erase a person’s hard disk” at the age of 75! In order for Avraham Avinu to pass this test, it was necessary to minimize the challenge. Therefore, he was promised that this move would be “for your benefit, and for your own good.”

One final point: The pasuk says “And be a blessing” (Bereshis 12:2). Rashi explains: “The blessings are given over into your control. Until now, blessings were in My Hand. I Blessed Adam and Noach. However, from now on, you will bless whomever you desire.” This gift was unprecedented in the history of the world. The keys to blessing were given over to Avraham Avinu.

We can again provide a contemporary example: Imagine a billionaire who is fantastically wealthy. He gives out charity most generously, but he appoints a Gabbai Tzedakah to oversee his charitable contributions. Now if he tells this Gabbai Tzedakah – not only will you oversee my contributions, but I am no longer going to even sign the checks. You will be the one who gives out my millions of dollars based on whatever you think is appropriate. No strings attached. No oversight on my part. This is the nature of the blessing “V’Heyei Beracha” as Rashi describes it.

The reason the Ribono shel Olam gave this gift to Avraham was because Avraham became a different person. He wiped his entire previous life experience clean and became “Kulo l’Hashem” – totally devoted to the Almighty.

Now we can understand something that is truly mind boggling. The pasuk says in Chayeis Sarah: “And it was after the death of Avraham, Elokim blessed Yitzchak his son...” (Bereshis 25:11). Rashi asks – why was it necessary for the Ribono shel Olam to bless Yitzchak – after all, He had given the “keys to blessing” to Avraham to bless anyone he wanted. Why didn’t Avraham bless Yitzchak himself while he was still alive? Rashi answers: Even though the Holy One handed over the keys of blessing to Avraham, Avraham was afraid to bless his son because he saw that Eisav would descend from him. Avraham said, “Let the Master of Blessing come and Bless who ever finds favor in His Eyes.” And the Holy One came and blessed Yitzchak.

Which of us, if we controlled the power of blessing in this world, would withhold it from our own son – even from the “Yitzchak that you love” (Bereshis 22:2)? Yitzchak is a Tzadik Yesod Olam! He was prepared to be

offered as an unblemished offering at the Akeidah! Avraham Avinu said, “No. I am not going to take the responsibility of giving a Bracha to Yitzchak because Eisav is going to come out from him.” How selfless can a person be? How does a person get to such a spiritual level?

A person gets to that level by working on himself and allowing himself to depart from his land, from his birthplace, and from the house of his father. He becomes a new person – a person the Almighty trusted with the Power of Bracha.

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Covenant and Conversation

How Perfect were the Matriarchs and Patriarchs? (Lech Lecha)

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l

In an extraordinary series of observations on this week’s parsha, Ramban (Nahmanides, 1194 – 1270) delivers harsh criticisms of Abraham and Sarah. The first has to do with Abraham’s decision to leave the land of Canaan and go to Egypt because “there was a famine in the land” (Gen. 12:1). On this Ramban 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 the lie that she was Abraham’s sister not his wife, and consequently 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.

Further in the parsha, Ramban also criticises Sarah’s actions. In her despair that she might never have a child of her own, she asks Abraham to sleep with her handmaid Hagar in the hope that she might bear him a child. Abraham does so, and Hagar becomes pregnant. The text then says that Hagar “began to despise her mistress” (Gen. 16:4). Sarah complains to Abraham, and then “afflict[s]” Hagar (Gen. 16:6), who flees 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. (Ramban, Commentary to Genesis 16:6) 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 do 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 to the household, 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" (Commentary to Gen. 12:6), 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" (Ex. 34:7) but not beyond. The Rabbis further restricted this to cases where "the children continue the sins of the parents." (Rashi to Ex. 34:7, Jeremiah 31:28, and Ezekiel 18:2) 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 our biblical ancestors 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 the Rabbis' systematic reinterpretation in Midrash so that black and white take the place of subtle shades of grey.

For example, the words "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian ... mocking" (Gen. 21:9), 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? He gives 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 Tanach 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 importantly, 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.[2]

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." [3] There never was a cult of Moses or any other biblical figure. That is why "no man knows Moses' burial place to this day" (Deut. 34:6), 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 towards others. This unique blend of idealism and realism is morality at its most demanding and mature.

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Rabbi Yakov Haber Creating Jewish History

The founding fathers of Klal Yisrael, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, forged and solidified a new path in Jewish and world history. Partnering with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, they brought the Divine presence back down to the world after the corruption of the generation of the Flood and of the tower of Bavel. Their foundational contribution to all of their descendants, physically and spiritually, reverberates throughout all of history. Chazal succinctly state

the deeds of the fathers is a sign for the children - 1] מעשה אבות סימן לבנים], meaning that events in their individual lives would harbinger similar events in the communal lives of the nation they would found.

Ramban (Bereishis 12:6) significantly expands upon, and even redefines, this theme. At first glance, one would understand the above teaching to mean that Hashem arranged the events in our illustrious ancestors' lives to parallel the events which He designed for their descendants. According to this model, the actions of the avos indicated what would occur in the future. By contrast, Ramban explains that the avos, through their actions, caused future events to occur to their progeny and were prophetically shown at each event in their lives the future national event that they were sealing into the fabric of history. Ramban coins the term *po'eil dimyon*, a demonstrative, physical act, presenting several examples throughout Tanach whereby Hashem often utilized this technique with other prophets to cause a decree to definitely occur.[2] Consequently, in a very real sense, the avos, the root and foundation of b'nei Yisrael, created all of Jewish history.

Perhaps we can suggest that this enormous power to affect others' lives, even in subsequent generations was granted even to more "ordinary" Jews. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 19b) quotes R. Yochanan who compares the challenges which Yosef, Boaz, and Palti ben Layish respectively overcame. Yosef's difficult triumph over the advances of the wife of Potifar pales in comparison to Boaz's overcoming of the temptation presented to him by Ruth, an unmarried woman who lay at his feet. Similarly, Palti ben Layish's constant, years-long refusal to sin with Michal, the wife of David - after King Saul had given her to Palti in marriage, having questionably invalidated David's marriage to her - eclipsed Boaz's overcoming his temptation. I recall hearing (any error in transmission is mine) from my great Rebbe, Rav Chaim Ya'acov Goldwicht zt"l, founding Rosh Hayeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, that it is not the purpose of this teaching to downplay the enormous spiritual accomplishments of Yosef, who is called *hatzadik* for overcoming this temptation and in whose merit the splitting of the sea occurred, and of Boaz, the illustrious ancestor of King David and ultimately of the melech hamashiach. Rather, R. Yochanan is teaching us the powerful effect of each spiritual heroic act. It was because Yosef overcame his great, but relatively lesser, temptation and wove into the spiritual fabric of the Jewish people that ability to overcome such temptations that in a later generation, Boaz was able to triumph over an even greater trial. And because Boaz overcame the temptation presented to him, Palti was able to overcome his trial of even greater magnitude. Thus, each heroic figure affected not only his own spiritual stature but those of future generations.

Based on the above, each Jew also somewhat shares this enormous power granted to the avos to create Jewish history by having the ability, through their heroic acts of Divine service, to pave the way for subsequent spiritual accomplishments. A penetrating awareness of the enormous effects of our actions should inspire and propel us ever higher in overcoming our own challenges and striving to serve our Creator with zeal, enthusiasm and vision.

[3]

[1] Interestingly, this exact phrase does not directly appear in the words of Chazal but is a paraphrase of the original statement of Arur Yisrael (לאברהם) ארע לביי (Tanchuma 9), quoted by Ramban.

[2] Interestingly, Maharal (Be'er Hagola 2:7) explains the custom of eating simanim on Rosh Hashana based on this principle.

[3] See also The Enormous Effects of Human Action and The Immense Effect of Mitzvot for further elaboration of this theme.

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We recognize that in many ways our father Abraham is an innovator, a one-of-a-kind individual, someone who is original, unique, and fearless in his quest for the betterment of the human race and the creation of the Jewish people. Among all his other achievements, if we look carefully at the opening chapters of the Lech Lecha, we find that our father Abraham is also the first human being recorded as having a normal conversation with his Creator.

Adam, original man, makes excuses for his failings, but does not engage God in a discussion regarding the essence of sin, reward, and punishment. His son, Kayin, whines and complains to justify his murderous behavior, and does not understand the true nature of his sin, and cannot relate properly to the criticism of Heaven.

Even the righteous man, Noah, the father of the only family that survives the Great Flood, and through whom humankind will be rebuilt and repopulated, does not engage in a conversation with the Creator regarding the impending flood and its aftermath. In fact, we hear almost nothing from Noah, except for his statement about his future and destiny.

All the twenty generations, prior to Abraham's arrival, apparently have nothing to say to God. They may fear His power and even rebel against His rule, but they have no thoughts or communication about the relationship of how human beings can coexist with infinity and God.

Throughout the description of Abraham's life, he seems to be constantly in communication with Heaven. He obeys its orders to leave his homeland and circumcise himself at an advanced stage of life. He proclaims the name God – one and only God – wherever he travels, no matter the risks involved in so doing. He even disputes the decision of Heaven regarding destruction of the cities of Sodom. He even argues that the God of justice in such a fashion that it be visible and understood by ordinary mortals.

We are witnesses that Abraham has a complete attachment with God, a relationship that cannot and will not be severed or compromised. That is the basis of Abraham's founding the Jewish people, who will also maintain such a relationship of attachment overall of the centuries of human civilization. Whereas previous generations were afraid to deal directly with the Almighty, this became the basis for oral paganism and other religions that always rely upon intermediaries.

Abraham and the Jewish people attach themselves inexorably and directly to the Creator for good or for better, no matter what the circumstances are that exist at that very moment. This fundamental difference in approach to the relationship between human beings and their God remains, until today, the identifiable hallmark that differentiates Judaism from other philosophies and beliefs.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

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Insights Parshas Lech Lecha - Cheshvan 5782
Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim / Talmudic University
Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig
*This week's Insights is dedicated in memory of Reuven ben Yosef.
"May his Neshama have an Aliya!"*

Mo' Money

Hashem said to Avram, "Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation; I will bless you and I will make your name great" (12:1-2).

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (5:3) states that our forefather Avraham was tested with ten different tests. While there is some discussion by the commentators as to which events in Avraham's life constitute an actual test, Hashem asking Avram to leave his home and go to Eretz Canaan is universally agreed upon as one of the tests.

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Weekly Parsha LECH LECHA 5782

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

A frequently asked question is: Seeing how Hashem had promised Avram all kinds of benefits – Rashi (ad loc) says that Hashem promised him children, wealth, and fame – what kind of test was this exactly? With those guaranteed rewards as incentive, who wouldn't agree to travel to a distant, even unknown, land?

One of the classic answers given is that the test was one of intention; would Avram go because Hashem asked him to go or because Hashem promised him great rewards? We see in the following verse (12:4) that “Avram went as Hashem had spoken.” This is used as proof that Avram decided to travel because Hashem asked him to, not because of the rewards promised, and therefore he passed the test.

There are several troubling points to contend with if we are to accept this as a working hypothesis of what took place. First, there seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of a test. Hashem doesn't administer a test to gauge a person's loyalty; for Hashem knows exactly how loyal someone is. A test from Hashem is to give one an opportunity for personal growth. Second, this understanding actually contradicts what Hashem tells Avram. Hashem very clearly tells Avram in the first possuk: *Lech lecha – go for your own sake*. If the incentives were only offered as part of the test, Hashem would have simply said “lech – go.”

So we are left with our original question: What kind of test is this that Hashem is promising money, fame, and nationhood? Every single one of us would be thrilled to have that offer!

The answer lies in our shallow understanding of these gifts and the responsibility that comes with them. Superficially, one might think it would be great to have a billion dollars – “I could buy the most amazing houses and boats and not have to worry about paying bills and having to work.” Similarly, “if I were famous I would be the toast of the town. I would constantly get comped clothes and meals and get invited to the most amazing parties. Everyone would want to be my friend. I would have enormous power.” Additionally, who hasn't dreamed in living in their own country where they make the rules and live how they want doing whatever they want?

This is exactly the test. Are you going to use these gifts for yourself or will you employ them to better humanity? When you recognize that we live in a theocentric world and not an egocentric world, then you understand that all of your resources are to be used to further Hashem's plan for the world.

Having enormous wealth, fame, or power doesn't mean you can do more for yourself; it means you have been “gifted” a ginormous responsibility. In fact, most people, upon realizing that these gifts aren't for personal use, would run in the other direction rather than receive them. This is because properly administering these gifts is a lot of (and usually thankless) hard work. But, if you are able to succeed in doing the right thing with the resources entrusted to you, then you will feel an incredible sense of accomplishment and this is an enormous personal pleasure. Accomplishment is the source of everlasting pleasure and the reason we were created. This is what Hashem meant when he said to Avram – go for your sake.

Family Ties

There was a quarrel between the shepherds of Avram and the shepherds of Lot [...] And Avram said to Lot: “Please let there not be strife between me and you [...] for we are brothers. Please separate from me; if you go to the left I will go to the right, and if you go to the right I will go to the left” (13:7-9).

Rashi (ad loc) explains that there was an ongoing philosophical argument between the shepherds of Lot and those of Avram. Avram's shepherds criticized Lot's shepherds for grazing their herds in fields that didn't belong to them. Lot's shepherds retorted that all the lands were eventually going to be given to Avram and, at this point, Lot was the only heir to Avram. Therefore, they reasoned, Lot was really the rightful owner and his sheep could graze wherever they pleased. But the Torah refutes their argument by saying that Avram had not yet come into possession of the land; therefore Lot had no rightful claim to the land at all.

Avram's comments to Lot (see above), and his resolution to this conflict, seem to be fairly straightforward. Avram appears to be telling Lot, “We need to separate, you go one way and I will go other.” This seems like a very reasonable way to avoid further strife and confrontation. But Rashi (13:9) interprets Avram's words in a puzzling way, and in fact, Rashi's interpretation seems to directly contradict what Avram actually says.

Rashi explains that Avram told Lot: “Wherever you dwell I will not distance myself from you. I will stand by as a protector (for you) and to be of service.” How can Rashi possibly see this in Avram's words? Avram seems to be telling Lot the exact opposite!

This Rashi is a terrific example of how carefully Chazal read the pesukim; which in turn, allows them penetrating insight to determine what is really being said.

Rashi is bothered by the subjective terms that Avram uses; “If you go left I will go to the right, and if you go to the right I will go to the left.” Right and left aren't really opposite directions – in fact it totally depends on which direction you're facing. In other words, if two people are facing each other, the right of one is the left of the other. Had Avram truly intended that they go opposite ways he should have said, “you go north and I will go south” or “you go east and I will go west.” By using the subjective right and left, Avram was telling Lot that they were both the right and left of a single entity.

Interestingly, Avram doesn't tell Lot he is wrong and that he has to change. In fact, Lot may have a point: Sarah was physically unable to produce an heir; Lot and Avram's fates are, at this point, inextricably tied. Thus, Avram is allowing for Lot to have his own point of view. In effect, Avram is telling Lot: “You can have your own perspective; but because we are really ‘brothers’ the most important thing is that we don't fight. Therefore, we need to separate.” But this was only a separation, not an amputation. This is why Rashi asserts that Avram was telling Lot that he would always be there to protect him. Because when you're a single entity an attack on the right is also an attack to the left; after all, brothers need to have each other's back. Avram's message to Lot is remarkably relevant to today's world situation: Whether one is a Republican or a Democrat, Charedi or Chiloni, it doesn't really make a difference. We need to remember that at the end of the day we all need each other, and that we are all different elements of the same body. After all, the very fact that we all exist is a message from Hashem that, in the grand scheme of things, we are all necessary for His plan.

Did You Know...

This week's parsha proclaims (12:3) that the world population will be blessed through the children of Avraham. We decided to take it literally and create a partial list of Jewish contributions to mankind:

By way of introduction, between 1901 and 2020, 208 Nobel prizes have been awarded to Jews, more Nobel prizes than any other ethnicity. This accounts for over 22% of all Nobels awarded. This is startling considering Jews only account for less than 0.2% of the world population.

Simply put, we have achieved more than a hundred times what our population should statistically account for. Perhaps more remarkably, some famous Jewish contributors to the fields of science and medicine never even won: 1. Sigmund (Shlomo) Freud – arguably the father of the field of psychoanalysis 2. Jonas Salk – creator of the Polio vaccine that saved millions from death and the devastating effects of Polio 3. Claude Levi-Strauss (not the guy who invented jeans – though he probably wished he had) who is considered the father of modern Anthropology.

Here are some other famous contributions to the world by Jews: Robert Oppenheimer – father of Atomic bomb; Edwin Teller – father of Hydrogen bomb. No matter what you think of the “Bomb” – imagine how horrific it would have been had Russia or China or, God forbid, Germany, developed it first.

Laszlo Biro, a Hungarian Jew, invented the ball point pen; Morris Michtom invented the Teddy Bear; Ruth Handler created the Barbie Doll.

Sergey Brin and Larry Page are the co-founders of Google and are both Jewish. Michael Bloomberg, who was estimated by the NY Times as

contributing over 700 million dollars to the city of New York while he was mayor, is also Jewish. We would have added Mark Zuckerberg to this list but, alas, the DYK editorial board does not consider Facebook much of a contribution to society. In fact, it may be a stupefying liability to society. Time will tell...

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Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parsha Insights
For the week ending 16 October 2021 / 10 Cheshvan 5782
Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parashat Lech Lecha

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

Many years ago in a more naive and somewhat safer world, I once hitchhiked from Amsterdam to Pisa in Italy.

Only the young and the reckless (and I was both) would climb aboard the rear seat of a BMW 900 motorcycle on a night of driving rain with a 50 pound pack strapped to one's back. (This placed my center of gravity somewhere past the outer extremity of the rear wheel.) Every time the rider accelerated, the backpack dragged me backwards off the bike. The autobahn was a sea of rain. It was King David who taught us that G-d "protects fools." And that night I certainly qualified for protection.

However, hitchhiking taught me something other than G-d protects the foolish; hitchhiking taught me what is called in Hebrew "menuchat hanefesh", literally the "repose of the spirit."

We live in a world where stress can literally eat us up if we let it. How do we combat this killer?

There's an elderly lady who sits in a nursing home in New York City and every day she says the following:

"Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift from G-d — that's why we call it the present."

When you stand by the side of the road waiting for a ride, you have no idea whether someone will pick you up in a minute, an hour, or next week.

You are not in control. It's wonderfully relaxing.

No one in his right mind hitchhikes to an important business meeting or to catch an airplane. The very act of hitchhiking says, "I'm prepared to be where I am. I don't need to be anywhere else."

A hitchhiker feels the presence of hashgacha (Divine supervision). My life is not in my control. All I have is the present. And therefore I must live in this moment and be here now.

That is why hitchhiking is a great calmer. (No, I don't mean karma.) A Jew's job is to live in the present, but not for the present. Much of our lives are spent thinking about what might happen, or what might not happen, or where I could be/should be now, or what went wrong or what went right. What a waste! This moment is unique. It will never be here again.

Sometimes, I just close my eyes and think, "I'm alive!"

The little agenda pilot that lives in our head can steal our lives away without our even noticing, unless we heed our little hitchhiker's guide to eternity saying, "G-d gave you this moment; live it to the full!"

At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, G-d said to Avraham, "Go for yourself..." Actually, the Hebrew translation is "Go to yourself..."

Avraham is the personification of kindness in the world. The essence of kindness is giving, and only a person who is totally at one with where he is can give fully of himself. Avraham had the ability to "go to himself", to connect every G-d-given second in his life to eternity.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

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Dvar Torah Lech Lecha: Jewish History in a Nutshell

Jewish history in a nutshell. This is what is presented to us at the commencement of Parshat Lech Lecha (Bereishit 12:3), when Hashem gives seven blessings to Avraham, the founder of our faith. Two of those blessings are:

"Umekallecha a'or," – Hashem says, "I will curse those who curse you," "Venivrechu becha kol mishpachot ha'adamah." – "and all families on earth will be blessed by you and your descendants."

Why do these two blessings appear alongside one another? The sefer Mayana Shel Torah suggests that sometimes we might be exceptionally kind to a person – sometimes that person might even depend upon our kindness for his or her existence – yet not only is there no appreciation for that kindness, but they actually give us a lot of trouble. This, Hashem says, is what will happen to the Jewish people through the ages.

"Umekallecha a'or," – "I will curse those who curse you."

Sadly there will sometimes be nations who will curse the Jewish people; who will hate us and resent us for our very existence.

"Venivrechu becha kol mishpachot ha'adamah,"

This will happen even though we, the Jewish people, give a contribution of inestimable value wherever we are in the world. Here we have Jewish history in a nutshell. So very often there will be deep appreciation and true friendship that we will benefit from, but sometimes there will be darkness for the Jewish people as a result of the trouble that we will endure. But don't worry, says Hashem! You can't have light without shade, and no shade can destroy that light.

Despite the darkness that the Jewish nation will endure, I will guarantee, says Hashem, that you, the Jewish people, will continue to shed shine a light for the world indefinitely. Am Yisrael Chai, the Jewish nation will live on forever.

So therefore let us not allow the ingratitude of some to stop us from giving kindness to others and let us, as a nation, not allow the darkness that sometimes exists for us to stop us from fulfilling the blessing given to Abraham: Venivrechu becha kol mishpachot ha'adamah; for us to be a continuous blessing for everyone on earth through the contribution that we must give always to our environment.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

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Parsha Parables By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Drasha Parshas Lech Lecha

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Long Distance Call

Good deeds deserve good dividends, but there is one deed mentioned in this week's portion that is veiled in anonymity. However, its dividends lasted so forcefully that the impact was realized almost 500 years later.

The Torah tells us about a war that took place. Avram's nephew Lot was captured. The Torah tells us "Then there came the fugitive and told Abram, the Ivri, who dwelt in the plains of Mamre..." (Genesis 14:13) It obscures the name of the refugee and does not even directly state his message. The next verse, in a seemingly disjointed manner, tells us, "and Abram heard that his kinsman was taken captive, he armed his disciples who had been born in his house — three hundred and eighteen — and he pursued them as far as Dan" (ibid v.14). The Medrash tells us that the refugee was Og, a giant of a man who escaped an attack on his fellow giants. He informed Avram that his nephew was alive, albeit taken prisoner with malevolent intent. He figured that Avram would try to liberate Lot and be killed in battle. Og would then

marry Sora. (Perhaps that is the reason that the Torah seems to separate what Avram heard from what the refugee told.) For this piece of disguised information, Og receives a seemingly disproportionate reward. He is granted not only longevity, as he lived until the final days of the Jews' sojourn through the desert, but also the impact of his deed was so potent that Moshe was afraid to attack him before entering the Land of Canaan! Imagine. Og lived for 470 years after the deed, and then Moshe had to be reassured that he need not fear his merits!

Rabbi Berel Zisman, one of the few remaining from his illustrious family of prominent Lubavitch Chasidim spent a portion of World War II in a concentration camp in Munich. After the war, he was allowed entry to the United States, but had to wait in the town of Bremerhaven for six weeks. During that time he decided to travel to Bergen-Belsen the notorious concentration camp which was transformed to a displaced person camp to visit a cousin who was there. Dozens of inmates came over to him with names of loved ones scattered across the free plains of the USA. They wanted to get them messages. Berel took their messages. To Sam Finkel from Abraham Gorecki: "I am alive and recuperating. Please try to guarantee employment to allow me to enter the US." And so on. One card was for Jacob Kamenecki from a niece from Minsk. "Please be aware that I survived the war and will be going back to Minsk."

Armed with lists of names and some addresses, Berel arrived in the US where he became a student in the Lubavitch Yeshiva in Crown Heights. Knowing no English, upon his arrival he asked a cousin to address postcards. Each had a message written in Yiddish "My name is Berel Zisman. I have just arrived from Europe – and have regards from..." He filled in the blanks and ended the brief note on each card with, "for further information, I can be contacted at the Lubavitch Yeshiva, corner Bedford and Dean in Crown Heights."

Rabbi Zisman does not really know how many people received his cards, but one person who lived in a basement apartment on Hewes Street definitely did. When Rabbi Jacob Kamenecki, one of the United States' leading sages, came to the Lubavitch yeshiva looking for Berel Zisman, a war refugee who had arrived at the yeshiva only a week ago, no one knew why.

Berel was called out of the study hall and met the elderly man, filled him in on all the particulars about the status of his relative, and returned to his place. When the young man returned to his seat, he was shocked at the celebrity treatment he once again received. "You mean you don't know who that Rabbi was? He is the Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Voda'ath!" Berel shuddered, feeling terrible that he made the revered scholar visit him. A while later, he met the Rosh Yeshiva and approached him. "Rebbe, please forgive me, I had no intention to make you come to me to get regards. Had I known who you were I would surely have gone to your home and given the information to you in person!"

Reb Yaakov was astounded. He refused to accept the apology. "Heaven forbid! Do you realize what kind of solace I have hearing about the survival of my relative. I came to you, not only to hear the news, but to thank you, in person, for delivering it!"

Imagine. Avram was nearly 80 years old, he had no descendants, and the only link to the house of his father's family — at least documented as a disciple of Avram's philosophies — was Lot. Now even the whereabouts and future of that man were unknown. And when Og delivered the news of his whereabouts, perhaps Avram's hope for the future was rekindled. Perhaps his gratitude toward Og abounded. And though Og spoke one thing, and Avram heard another, the reward for the impact on Avram's peace of mind was amazingly powerful.

We often make light of actions and ramifications. The Torah tells us this week, in a saga that ends five books and some four hundred years later, that small tidings travel a very long distance.

Dedicated by Mark & Deedee Honigsfeld in memory of Joseph Gross — Yoseph Zvi ben Dovid Yaakov 7 Marcheshvan and Bluma Honigsfeld, Bluma bas Shlomo Chaim 10 Marcheshvan and by

Linda and Sheldon Pfeffer in memory of Benjamin Levine — Binyamin Ben Zvi Hirsh — 11 Marcheshvan
Rabbi M. Kamenetzky is the Dean of the Yeshiva of South Shore.
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Lech Lecha: Blinded by Reality
Ben-Tzion Spitz

You too must not count too much on your reality as you feel it today, since like yesterday, it may prove an illusion for you tomorrow. - Luigi Pirandello
Abraham's first documented encounter with God is when God addresses him and commands him to leave his land (literally, "go for you from your land"), his birthplace and his father's home to the ambiguous "land which I will show you." Abraham, full of faith, obediently complies, and does leave his life in the advanced and cosmopolitan Mesopotamian Empire. He leaves his homeland, leaves his father and treks to the relative wilderness of the land of Canaan; the rural, rough and uncultivated land bridge that connected the two ancient major political, economic and cultural powers of the Ancient Near East – the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian Empires.

That command starts Abraham's journey. We see the development of his relationship with God. We see Abraham's kindness and generosity. We see his bravery and faith. We see his devotion and sacrifice. It all started with Abraham leaving his land.

The Chidushei HaRim on Genesis 12:1 reads more deeply into the command of "go for you from your land." The word "from your land," in Hebrew, "Me'artzehah," can also be read as from your landedness, from your materiality, from your obsession with the material world and material things. The Chidushei HaRim explains that in order to serve God, the first step is to leave the trappings of the physical world which blind us to the evil, to the materiality that we're submerged in. We have to leave that mindset of preoccupation exclusively with the corporeal, even if we don't know where we're going.

Once we've become free of our fixation on material things and approach God without pretense and in truthfulness, then God will lead us to "the land which I will show you," – to a more elevated existence, to a deeper relationship with God and the truth of our existence, to the development of our soul and our own personal, divine missions on Earth.

May we loosen our shackles from the "realities" that both bind us and blind us, and may we follow in the footsteps of our patriarch, Abraham.

Dedication - To William Shatner's real star trek!

Shabbat Shalom

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Rav Kook Torah

Rav Kook on Tehillim 140: The Tzaddik and the Yashar
Rabbi Chanan Morrison

"אֵך צְדִיקִים יוֹدָעַ לְשָׁבֵב יְשָׁרִים אֶת-תְּפִיקָה "

"Surely the righteous (tzaddik) will give thanks to Your Name.

The upright (yashar) will dwell in Your Presence." (Psalms 140:14)

What is the difference between a tzaddik and a yashar? Which is on a higher spiritual level?

The tzaddik loves goodness and virtue. He "gives thanks to Your Name." He appreciates and values God's true justice.

But the yashar has a higher aspiration: he yearns for God's goodness to reach all realms of life, even spheres that are distant from spiritual matters.

The Sages referred to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as yesharim (Avodah Zarah 25a). They rejoiced in all the good that God bestows to the universe. As yesharim, they did not dissociate themselves from worldly matters. On the

contrary, they were deeply involved in material occupations. They sought to elevate the world to its ultimate goal of true perfection. That is how the Torah depicts the lives of the Patriarchs: full of positive, creative activity. The inner harmony of the yashar guides him, enabling him to attain perfection in all matters. He is able to contribute to the world's progress while remaining focused on inner spiritual growth. How does the yashar achieve this?

Dwelling after Prayer

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levy taught that one should wait an hour after praying, as it says, "The yashar will dwell in Your Presence." What is the purpose of this post-prayer meditation?

Prayer helps us raise our sights beyond day-to-day worries and concerns. But the positive impact of prayer should not be limited to the time of prayer. Ideally, the spiritual influence of prayer should extend to all aspects of our lives. All of life should be holy, directed towards goals of truth and righteousness. As it says, "Know Him in all of your ways" (Proverbs 3:6). If we wish to expand the lofty emotions and insight experienced in prayer to the rest of our lives, we need to take time after praying to contemplate the import of that encounter. That is the essence of Rabbi Yehoshua's teaching that one should wait an hour after praying. We need this time to internalize the prayer-experience and apply it to all aspects of life.

This is the service of the yashar. "The yashar will dwell in Your Presence." He extends the holy light of God's Presence to all spheres of life. He recognizes that the most profound praise of God comes from the beauty of a developed world, a world that gives pleasure to the spirit and uplifts the soul.

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subject: Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Lech Lecha

פרק ל' ל' תשפ"ב

ואברם כבד מאד במקנה בכסח ובזהב

Now Avram was very laden with livestock, silver and gold. (13:2)

The mere mention of the word *Ruzhin* conjures up images of wealth and royalty. Indeed, the saintly *Ruzhiner Rebbe*, zl, was a legend in his own time. Everything about him, from his clothes to his living quarters to his total demeanor was resplendent with wealth and monarchy. Nonetheless, he was regarded as one of the greatest *tzaddikim*, righteous leaders, of his time. The greatest *gedolim*, Torah giants, of his generation would travel for weeks just to spend a brief visit with him. They viewed him as a Heavenly agent, dispatched to this world on a Divine mission to reach out and inspire *Klal Yisrael*, to infuse them with love for the Almighty, His Torah and to glorify His Name.

The *Rebbe*'s fame spread far and wide, and people from all over came to him just to bask in his greatness. Once, when the *Ruzhiner* visited Germany, the distinguished *Rav* of Frankfurt, the saintly *Horav S. R. Hirsch*, zl, came to visit him. Following the visit, *Rav Hirsch* was asked his impression of the *Rebbe*. *Rav Hirsch* replied, "It is quite unbelievable to see how all the money and honor is brought to him, and he himself is totally disinterested in it. His one and only concern is how to increase *kavod Shomayim* and the *kavod* of *Klal Yisrael*."

The *Maskillim*, members of the Enlightenment – self-loathing Jews who looked for every opportunity to demean and denigrate Judaism, its religious adherents and especially its expositors and disseminators – found in the *Ruzhiner* an example of one whom they viewed as pretentious and insincere. How could the *Rebbe* reconcile piety with ostentatious wealth? Clearly his saintliness (they felt) was a sham, conjured up to curry favor and amass even greater wealth from his unsuspecting *chassidim*.

The holy *Ruzhiner* responded to their hate-filled critique by citing Avraham *Avinu*'s method of outreach as an example of employing wealth as a means for garnering the esteem of people. When Avraham commenced his journey

of outreach, he took with him a large cache of wherewithal with which he hoped to impress people. "Why did he do this?" the *Rebbe* asked. "Our Patriarch was well aware that simple people gravitate to those who are blessed with material abundance." Our society is obsessed with materialism, to the point that the more someone earns, the more they are likely to be admired by strangers and perceived to be interesting, exciting and even erudite. Respect appears all too often to be directly correlated to one's earnings. Concomitantly, one who does not have high earning power struggles to convince his peers to take his views or character seriously.

The *Rebbe* quoted *Chazal* (*Gittin* 59a), "From the days of Moshe *Rabbeinu* until the days of Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi*, we do not find unparalleled greatness in Torah knowledge and unparalleled greatness in secular matters, including wealth and high political office, combined in one place, i.e., a single individual (*Torah u'gedulah b'makom echad*). Likewise, from the days of Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi* until the days of *Rav Ashi*, we do not find *Torah u'gedulah b'makom echad*." "Why specifically these three?" the *Rebbe* asked. "Were these Torah giants the only ones who had achieved *Torah u'gedulah b'makom echad*? The *Rebbe* explained that each one of these giants was a *nosein ha'Torah*, disseminator of Torah without peer. Moshe gave us the Torah. Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi* redacted the *Mishnah*. *Rav Ashi* compiled the *Talmud*. It is one thing to put forth the effort and prepare the redaction and compilation, but how does one ensure its acceptance? People are fickle and have large egos. They could contend that if they would have prepared it, they would have done a better job. When one is wealthy, however, people listen to him. Wealth begets esteem and power which, in turn, generate acclaim and acceptance by the masses. Sadly, this external caveat was necessary in order to achieve immediate acceptance by the people.

In an alternative exposition, the *Maharam Shif* writes that anyone who completes a component of the Torah in such a manner that (upon his completion) no one will dispute it, it is critical that he possess the qualities of *Torah u'gedulah b'makom echad*. He must be the greatest and wealthiest, because if someone supersedes him either in erudition or in material bounty, he may feel that he can impugn the integrity of his predecessor's teaching. The Torah was concluded by Moshe, leaving no room for opposition. Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi* redacted the *Mishnah*, so that no one may dispute or append it. Likewise, *Rav Ashi* sealed the *Talmud*, circumventing the opportunity for challenge. The *Chasam Sofer* adds that this is why the despotic Korach raved about his enormous wealth. He felt that if he could demonstrate to the people that his wealth superseded that of Moshe, then Moshe would no longer represent *Torah u'gedulah b'makom echad*, thus allowing the opportunity for Korach to oppugn his teachings. This was another area in which Korach confirmed his shortsightedness.

Perhaps we might suggest another approach which focuses more on the Torah than on the *gedulah*. Moshe *Rabbeinu*, Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi* and *Rav Ashi* represent the ultimate achievement of Torah study in that they took the enjoinder of *lilmod u'le'lameid*, to learn and to teach, to its apex. Hashem wants us not only to study Torah, but to see to it that every single person in *Klal Yisrael* studies it. *Le'lameid*, teaching Torah, defines the *mitzvah* of *limud ha'Torah*, study of Torah. Each of these giants reached the apogee of Torah learning, because he personally saw to it that the Torah was available to the masses. Each of them ascertained that Torah would never be forgotten, as it was accessible to everyone, anywhere, all the time.

Avraham *Avinu* studied Torah, but until he reached out to the masses, the period of *tohu*, void, in the world continued to exist. It was only after *v'es ha'nefesh asher asu b'Charan*, that he reached out to the multitudes and brought them under the protective wings of the *Shechinah*, in order to usher in two thousand years of Torah.

ותkeh שרי אשת אברם את הגר המצרית שפחתה... ותתן אתה לאברם... ותתהר ותקל גברתה בעיניה. ותענינה שרי ותברחה מפניה... ויאמר לה מלך ד' שובי אל גברתך והתענini תחת ידייה

So Sarai, Avram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid-servant... and gave her to Avram... she conceived... her mistress was lowered in

her esteem... and Sarai dealt harshly with her, so she fled from her... and an angel of Hashem said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her domination.” (16:3,4,6,9)

The narrative concerning Sarah *Imeini* and Avraham *Avinu* regarding Hagar, followed by Sarah's anger, Hagar's running away, and the angel's instruction that she return, even if it meant submitting to Sarah's domination, is confounding. Clearly, the profundity escapes the superficial reading of the story. Sarah has been recognized in our sacred tradition as a woman who represents the epitome of all good and noble virtues. To think that all this goodness dissipated when Hagar conceived and gave birth to Yishmael, especially when it was Sarah's idea that Avraham take her on as an additional wife, is unacceptable. Furthermore, if Sarah was indeed beside herself, why would the Heavenly angel instruct Hagar to return and face the music?

Horav Aryeh Levin, zl, explains this with an analogy to a classic *Rebbe* who dispatches his *chassid* to carry out an errand for him. Ostensibly, the *chassid* feels honored that the *Rebbe* chose him to perform this task – regardless of its meniality. Nothing is too difficult, if it is at the behest of, or for, his revered *Rebbe*. If, however, this same task would come at the request of an ordinary person, with whom he does not enjoy such a relationship, the response would probably be quite negative. He would take offense and bristle, “Am I your servant?” Furthermore, if he would be compelled to carry out this ordinary person's request he would kvetch and complain constantly, whereas if he were to do it for his *Rebbe*, he would be excited and exalt in every aspect of his performance. One's attitude depends on the mission, and upon whom it is that is asking him to perform the task.

This, explains the Tzaddik of Yerushalayim, gives meaning and lends rationale to the Torah's narrative. All along, until she conceived as Avraham's additional wife, Hagar regarded Sarah for what she was: a virtuous woman whose impeccable character traits were without peer. Thus, serving her in any capacity was an untold honor for which there was no substitute. Now, in her perceived state of equality, or even superiority, to Sarah (since she was now a mother, a status that still eluded Sarah), however, her attitude changed. Now she reverted to the pagan DNA that prevailed within her. She no longer regarded Sarah as reverential and virtuous, but rather as an ordinary person, a “boss lady” who did not deserve her respect. All of a sudden the honorable Sarah *Imeini*'s work load became cruel and harsh treatment, which she would not accept. It was drudgery for her to serve Sarah, because “who” was Sarah to lord over her? Unable to bear the cruelty, she fled to the wilderness – when, in fact, Sarah's demeanor toward Hagar had not altered one iota.

This is why the angel instructed her to return home. Nothing had changed other than Hagar's attitude: “Regardless of what has transpired, you must view Sarah as your mistress. She is the same noble, righteous, exalted Matriarch as she has been in the past.” Except, Hagar's susceptible mind had rewritten the “past” in accord with a new narrative.

A Jew's positive attitude should be rooted in his *emunah*, faith, in Hashem. *Horav Mordechai, zl*, *m'Lechowitz*, teaches: “Without Hashem, one cannot cross the threshold of his house. With Hashem, however, one can split the sea.” Faith in Hashem means much more than mere lip service. It should also not be our “between a rock and a hard place, last minute ditch attempt,” when we see that the gates are closing and all our “other” endeavors have proven fruitless. Believing in Hashem should be a Jew's first address, the anchor upon which he relies, the “go to” to Whom he knows he can always turn.

Reb Lipa was the wealthiest man in a small town in Belarus. In addition to his enormous wealth, *Reb Lipa* possessed exceptional *middos tovos*, refined character traits. *Reb Lipa* shared his wealth with those less fortunate than himself. One day, as he was taking a walk through town, he tore one of his shoes. He immediately stopped at Chaim's shoe repair to have his shoe fixed. Chaim dropped whatever he was doing in order to pay specific attention to the needs of *Reb Lipa*. When he was done, he handed the shoe to *Reb Lipa*, who promptly paid him for his work. Upon leaving the shop, *Reb Lipa*

noticed that the shoe was sewn in a crooked manner. Upon further perusal, he saw that the repair was a botched up job, very unprofessional for a man with Chaim's expertise. When *Reb Lipa* complained about the repair, Chaim broke down in bitter weeping, “You do not understand. My work is a reflection of my bitterness. I have eight daughters at home, whom I must marry off. I am stretched financially to the point that days pass and there is no food in the house to sustain my family. Do you understand that when one goes to work with such hardship on his mind, his hard work will be far from appealing?”

Reb Lipa listened to Chaim's tale of woe and said that he wanted to help. “Come with me,” he said, “I will help you.” He brought him to his mansion where he took him to the vault where he kept his money. He took a gold brick, handed it to the shoemaker, and said, “This is for your immediate and all future expenses. Whenever you are in need, simply ‘slice off’ some gold from the brick and use it to pay your way.”

Understandably, Chaim was overjoyed. His newly found mirthful attitude showed in the manner that he worked and in the products that he produced. Soon, his exceptional skills became the talk of the town and the whole area. He began producing shoes of such excellent quality that people came from far and wide to purchase his wares. Chaim was no longer a *nebach*, unfortunate man. He had worked his way up the economical ladder, married off his daughters, and was now living quite comfortably.

One day, Chaim took a stroll in the market, when he chanced upon a dejected, clearly impoverished beggar. The man was crying bitterly. “How can I help you, my friend?” Chaim asked. The poor man related his tale of broken promises from would be benefactors, failed business opportunities, which had left him destitute and bitter. He had nothing with which to support his family. Chaim said to him, “Come with me. Let me help you.” Chaim figured that he could share his good fortune with someone in need, and this man was definitely in need: “Here is a gold brick which I received years ago from someone. It helped me; now it will help you.” The man was profoundly grateful, took the brick and went home. As soon as he arrived home, he took a hammer and struck the brick with it. His intention was to immediately split up the gold. How shocked he was to discover that it was actually a brick of steel with a thin gold covering. Angry, he returned to Chaim's house to complain. After all, he had been cheated!

Chaim looked at the brick, listened intently to the poor man's harangue, thought for a moment, and then spoke up: “Interestingly, years ago, I received this same brick from a kind-hearted benefactor. I believed in it; I neither asked questions, nor did I attempt to investigate whether it was truly gold or simply gold overlay. I returned to my profession with added hope and excitement, worked hard, and earned an honest and successful living. During this entire time, I never once doubted the value of the brick. To one who has faith, the brick is gold; to one who does not believe, nothing will make him happy.” The lesson for us is obvious and requires no added commentary.

ובן שמונת ימים ימול לכם כל זכר לזרחכם

At the age of eight days, every male among you shall be circumcised throughout your generations. (17:12)

The following incident, which occurred about two hundred years ago with the saintly *Chasam Sofer*, gives us a glimpse into the extraordinary greatness of the man who is responsible for saving Hungarian Jewry from the tentacles of the *Haskalah*, Enlightenment. The *Chasam Sofer* was not only the leading *posek*, *halachic* arbiter, of his day, but also a holy and righteous Torah giant, who obviously was as comfortable in the Heavenly sphere as he was in the mundane world. The story is cited by *Horav Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal, zl*, who heard it from the son-in-law of the *Rav* of Kashua, a disciple of the *Chasam Sofer*. It happened that in one of the small communities close to Pressburg, where the *Chasam Sofer* reigned as *Rav*, a gentile came to the *Rav* of the community and asked to be converted. He was tested, his background thoroughly investigated, and his character and integrity substantiated. He was sincere and deserving of a *halachic* conversion, which was performed. The problem arose as a result of the necessary *Bris Milah*. On the third day,

which is usually the most painful and critical, he became gravely ill, to the point that the doctors despaired for his recovery. The members of his family, who were no friends of the Jews, immediately revealed their anti-Semitic animus and began to instigate the gentile populace to exact vengeance against the Jewish perpetrators – a term targeting the entire Jewish community.

The *Rav* was beside himself with fear for the repercussions which might result and affect the Jews in his community and the surrounding Jewish communities. He traveled to Pressburg to seek the counsel of the *Chasam Sofer*. The sage was visibly upset with the *Rav* for using a *mohel*, ritual circumciser, whose experience was solely with eight-day-old infants, for an adult, for whom this was a surgical procedure. In any event, it was too late; what had been done could not be reversed. In order to remove the danger that hung over the Jewish community, the *Rav* and *mohel* would have to be *moser nefesh*, literally sacrifice themselves, as penance for their actions.

The *Chasam Sofer* instructed them to obtain a wagon in which they would transport the critically ill *ger* and themselves on the pretense of traveling to see a specialist. Instead, the three of them would ride into the Danube River and succumb to its waters. This way, the gentiles would consider the *ger*'s death to be an unfortunate accident and the deaths of the Jews a penance for their error, which would circumvent the decree hanging over the Jewish community.

These righteous men humbly accepted the *Chasam Sofer*'s ruling and prepared themselves with the appropriate *vidui*, confession, preceded by immersing themselves in the *mikvah*, recitation of *Tehillim*, and a tearful plea for atonement for their souls. They placed the deathly ill man on the wagon, and all three left their homes with the intention to give up their lives for the future of the Jewish community. They reached the shore of the Danube and were about to plunge forward, when suddenly they heard a voice calling out to them in *Yiddish*, "Where are you going?" They turned to see a Jewish man chasing after them, "Yidden, where are you going?" They ignored him and trudged on. The man caught up with them, however, and put his hand on the horses that were pulling the wagon, and they came to a halt. He asked the *Rav* where he was going. The *Rav* explained their predicament and the *Chasam Sofer*'s ruling, to which the man said, "There is another way." He removed a small jar from his pocket and instructed them to sprinkle the liquid in the jar on top of the wound that had become infected. Within a few moments, the *ger* regained consciousness and began to speak as if nothing had ever happened. Clearly, they had been privy to a Heavenly miracle. They returned home to the joy of all involved. Needless to say, the danger hanging over the Jewish community was diffused. The *Rav* traveled to the home of the *Chasam Sofer* to relate the miracle to him. He replied, "Eliyahu *HaNavi* is the *Malach HaBris*, the Heavenly Angel appointed over the *Bris Milah*. Due to your willingness to accept to be *moser nefesh*, relinquish your lives, to save the Jewish community, he appeared to save you. Although, veritably, as Shlomo *HaMelech* writes in *Koheles*, *Shomer mitzvah lo yeida ra*, 'He who obeys the commandments will know no evil' (*Koheles* 8:5), you would have been otherwise protected."

Va'ani Tefillah

וְלֹמַדְלִי נַפְשִׁי תְּדַבֵּר – *V'limkaleilai nafshi sidom*. To those who curse me, let my soul be silent.

It happened in Yerushalayim that a controversy arose between two parties. As is common, it is the onlookers, the riffraff who have little to do with their lives, who intervened, reducing the debate into a bitter war of words. Sadly, one such rabble-rouser arose from the side lines and, with great audacity, insulted one of the Torah giants of Yerushalayim. The *Rav* was not only a gentleman, he was a *tzaddik*, a righteous man, and, as a result, he did not respond, allowing for his humiliation to go unrequited. One of the bystanders, himself a learned man, questioned the *Rav*'s lack of response, "Does it not say (*Yoma* 53a), "Any Torah scholar who does not take revenge like a snake, is not a Torah scholar?" If the Torah is impugned, the *Rav* has an obligation to put the offender in his place. The *Rav* explained that *Chazal* had reason to select the snake as the paradigm of how to avenge oneself. The

snake is unique in that he derives no pleasure from what he eats. Everything tastes like dirt to him. Thus, *Chazal* guide us in how to avenge oneself: One must derive absolutely no pleasure from his vengeance. The *Rav* concluded, "I am unable to say that, after such an humiliation, I would not have a vestige of pleasure upon issuing my rejoinder."

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The Talis Exchange and Other Lost Stories

Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

teach us that in the merit of Avraham saying to the king of Sodom that he would not accept even a thread from him, his descendants received the mitzvah of tzitzis.

Question #1: THE TALIS EXCHANGE

Dovid asked me the following shaylah: "I put down my talis in shul and, upon returning, discovered that it had been replaced with a similar-looking talis. I left the talis undisturbed, and hung up a sign noting the exchange. Unfortunately, no one responded, and, indeed, the owner may not even realize that he has my talis. Should I take his talis home? May I use it, or must I purchase a new one and leave his until he claims it, which may never happen?"

Question #2: THE LAUNDRY EXCHANGE

A laundry returned the correct quantity of items that had been brought originally; however, the customer, Reuvein, later realized that one sheet was not his. A different customer, Shimon, picked up his laundry and was missing some items; however the laundry insisted that it had returned whatever was brought. Shimon subsequently discovered that Reuvein had one of Shimon's missing sheets and he clearly identified his missing sheet. Reuvein claimed that the sheet was a replacement for his sheet that was lost and that he is therefore not required to return it. Must he return the sheet?

Question #3: THE WEDDING EXCHANGE

Someone went to a wedding wearing one coat and mistakenly returned home with a different one. May he use this coat and assume that the other party is agreeable to the exchange? Does this depend on which coat is more valuable?

Question #4: AN UMBRELLA ON THE SUBWAY

On the subway you see a frum, unfamiliar person rush off the car, forgetting her umbrella. May you keep or use the umbrella, knowing that the owner will soon realize her loss?

SHO'EL SHELO MIDAAS

The concern in all these situations is that one is using someone else's property without permission. This is called *sho'el sheloh midaas*, borrowing without the owner's knowledge, which is usually halachically equivalent to stealing (*Bava Metzia* 41a; 43b)! In general, one may not use an item until one receives permission from the owner.

CAN'T I JUST ACCEPT THE TRADE OF THE TWO ITEMS?

Since the loser is wearing my talis, why can't I simply assume that we have traded *taleisim*; I'll keep his talis and allow him to keep mine? (Although the correct Hebrew plural is *taliyos* or *talisos*, I will use the colloquial *taleisim*.)

Although Dovid may grant permission to the other person to use his talis, can he assume that he has permission to use the other person's talis? Let us examine a relevant discussion:

EXCHANGED ITEMS AT THE TAILOR

Someone whose clothes were replaced with someone else's at a tailor may use what he received until his garment is returned. However, if the exchange transpired at a shiva house or a simcha, he may not use the garment he received but must hold it until the owner claims his property. What is the difference between the two cases? Rav answered: "I was sitting with my uncle, and he explained to me, 'Sometimes people tell the tailor to sell the item for them'" (*Bava Basra* 46a).

We see from this case that if I exchanged a coat with someone else at a simcha or at a shiva, I may not wear the coat, since I am "borrowing" it without permission. The fact that the other person is using my garment, knowingly or unknowingly, does not permit me to use his. I may have to purchase a replacement, even though a perfectly nice garment is sitting unused in my closet, since the garment is not mine.

However, if the exchange happened in a tailor shop, I may use the replacement. **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A TAILOR AND A WEDDING?**

Why is the tailor shop different? The Gemara presents a rather cryptic answer to this question: "Sometimes people tell the tailor to sell the item for them." What does this mean?

The early poskim explain that when the exchange transpired in a repair shop, one may assume that the following situation occurred:

Someone brought a garment to the tailor, asking him to sell it for him. The tailor erred and sold your garment instead and then paid the money received (minus his sales commission) to the original owner of that garment. When you came to claim your garment, the tailor realized his error, and also realized that he must compensate you for your item, since he probably has no way to retrieve it. However, he had no cash available, so he gave you a replacement instead – the garment that he was supposed to sell (Tur and Sma, Choshen Mishpat 136:1). Since the tailor already paid the original owner for his garment, he now owns it and he is fully authorized to give it to you as a replacement for your lost garment. This case is referred to as *nischalfu keilim beveis ha'uman* (items that were exchanged in a craftsman's shop).

The next passage in the Gemara's discussion is now almost self-explanatory:

Rav Chiya the son of Rav Nachman explained that the ruling of *nischalfu keilim beveis ha'uman* applies only if the repairman himself gave you the different garment, but not if his wife or children gave them to you.

Obviously, if the tailor's wife or child gave you the wrong garment, you cannot assume that this was because of the tailor's earlier error. It is more likely that they simply mistakenly gave you the wrong garment, which needs to be returned.

Similarly, the following concluding passage of this discussion is clear.

Rav Chiya the son of Rav Nachman continued: The halacha of *nischalfu keilim beveis ha'uman* applies only if the repairman told you, "Here is a garment." However if he said "Here is your garment," we assume that he erred, since he is not giving you your garment.

If the tailor had sold your garment in error and is now sheepishly providing you with a replacement, he would not tell you, here is your garment. Therefore, if he says here is your garment, we assume he must have mistakenly given you the wrong garment, and you must return it.

We see clearly that the ruling of *nischalfu keilim beveis ha'uman* applies only when I can assume that a tailor or other repairman inadvertently sold or disposed of my item and can legitimately offer me the replacement. Otherwise the situation is comparable to the case of garments exchanged at a simcha, where one may not use the received garment without permission.

At this point we can analyze Question #2.

A laundry returned to Reuvein the same number of items he had brought originally; however, one sheet is not his. Shimon claims to be missing some items, which the laundry denies. Shimon proves that the sheet is his, yet Reuvein claims that the laundry gave it to him as a replacement for what they lost and that he is therefore not required to return it. Must he return the sheet?

Answer: Shimon did not give the sheet to the laundry to sell. Therefore, the laundry gave Shimon's sheet to Reuven without authorization and he must return it to its rightful owner, even if Reuven has no other way of being compensated for his loss (Terumas Hadeshen #319; one of the interesting and surprising aspects of this shaylah is that this actual case was asked over 600 years ago!!).

The reason for this is obvious: Laundries do not usually act as agents to sell people's clothing, and in any case, Shimon clearly denies ever making any such arrangement.

SO, WHAT IS THE STATUS OF THE TALIS?

Let us return to our original question. Someone took Dovid's talis and left behind a similar-looking one. The owner has not responded to any of his notices, and Dovid suspects that he does not even realize that an exchange transpired.

Based on the above discussion, it would seem that Dovid has no choice but to consider purchasing a new talis. However, there is another Gemara discussion that affects our case, so don't run to the store just yet. Let us examine the following passage:

Shmuel said, "Someone who finds tefillin in the street should estimate their worth and may wear them himself" (Bava Metzia 29b). If the finder has no need for a pair of tefillin, he may sell them and put the money aside for the owner. The Rosh (Bava Metzia 2:16) rules that the finder may even use the money in the interim.

Shmuel's statement presents some obvious questions:

His ruling seems to contradict the principle that borrowing an item without permission is tantamount to theft. Why can the finder wear (or sell) these tefillin? As we are all aware, one of the Torah's mitzvos is to return a lost object to its owner (Devorim 22:1-3; Shemos 23:4). How does the Gemara permit the tefillin finder to wear them and not return them to the owner? And even if we correctly assume that "estimating their worth" means that he is responsible to return the value of the tefillin to its owner if and when he locates him, why is this case different from the normal obligation of returning the actual lost item itself to its owner? Obviously, there must be something about tefillin that permits the finder to keep them and simply repay their estimated value.

Some poskim contend that this ruling applies only to a mitzvah object, where the owner wants someone else to use his tefillin rather than have them sit unused (Shach 267:16, in explanation of the Rambam, Hilchos Gezeilah 13:14). However, most authorities imply that this ruling also applies to non-mitzvah items, in cases where the owner is satisfied with simply receiving back their value (see Tur and Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 267:21). The basis for this second opinion is the continuation of the Gemara's discussion:

TEFILLIN VERSUS SEFORIM

The Gemara asks why someone finding tefillin may wear them, since this ruling appears to contradict a statement that someone who found books may not use them, but must hold them for the owner. Why are tefillin different from seforim? The Gemara answers that a person wants to receive back his own books, whereas he can always purchase new tefillin. This implies that people have no strong attachment to any specific pair of tefillin, whereas they have tremendous interest in seforim that are difficult to replace. From this one could infer that there is a difference between finding an item that the owner does not mind replacing and finding an item that he does not want to replace, and this would seem to have ramifications for someone who finds a talis, an umbrella, or some other easy to replace item.

Although this seems to be the obvious point of this Gemara, elsewhere the Gemara seems to rule otherwise. If someone found coins placed in a deliberate fashion, the finder may not spend this money and replace it with other coins, but must hold these very coins and return them to their owner (Bava Metzia 29b). Obviously, the owner is not concerned about receiving back these specific coins, and would be very satisfied with receiving replacement money. Why is it not sufficient to simply return coins of the same value? We see that returning replacement value is not satisfactory, even when the owner does not care.

The answer is that in the case of lost tefillin, two factors must be met before one may use them. In addition to the point mentioned above, another consideration is that someone who finds tefillin must occasionally air them out and ensure that they are kept dry (Rosh, Bava Metzia 2:18). (When a person wears tefillin daily, he automatically airs them out at the same time, which benefits them.) Thus, the owner of the tefillin actually benefits more if the finder sets aside money, since the tefillin will become ruined if no one takes proper care of them. This is qualitatively different from finding lost coins, which require no care other than storing them in a secure place. We can therefore derive the following principles:

If taking care of a lost item requires some effort, and the owner does not care whether he receives back the original item, the finder may estimate the value of the lost item and plan to repay the owner this amount. Otherwise, the finder should hold the lost item and await the owner's return.

Having established the rule, let us see which cases fit the rule and which do not. Clothing does not usually fit this rule, since people are interested in receiving back the same garment. A person is comfortable with his own clothes, and often purchasing something to one's taste is not a simple matter. Therefore, someone finding a lost garment may not sell it and hold the money for the owner.

ARE UMBRELLAS AND TALEISIM LIKE TEFILLIN?

On the other hand, the average person does not develop a personal attachment to his umbrella and is perfectly satisfied to have a usable replacement umbrella. Similarly, a man is usually not that concerned about his specific talis and is satisfied with a replacement. In addition, both of these items are comparable to tefillin and not to coins, since if they are never used they become musty. (Normal use of an umbrella airs it out.) Therefore, someone who locates a lost umbrella may use it after estimating its value.

We are now prepared to answer Question #1 and also Question #4. I will answer Question #4 first: On the subway you see a frum but unfamiliar person rush off the car, forgetting her umbrella. May you keep or use the umbrella, knowing that the owner will soon realize her loss?

Clearly, she will despair of recovering her umbrella as soon as she realizes her loss (yi'ush), and if pick it up after she realizes that she left it on the subway, you are not responsible to return it or its value. Nevertheless, in this subway scenario, you will be picking up the umbrella before she realizes her loss. In that case, the umbrella is still the property of the person who lost it and someone picking it up is responsible to return it.

However, a person is usually not concerned about owning a specific umbrella, but is satisfied with money to purchase a replacement. (Indeed, if the umbrella that was lost appears to be a designer umbrella, the halacha will be different.) Therefore, even though the owner still owned the umbrella when you found it, you may claim the umbrella as your own, and simply make a mental note how much it is worth. Should you ever meet its owner and she proves that the umbrella was hers, you must compensate her.

And now our analysis of our opening question, The Talis Exchange

Dovid had put down his talis in shul, and it was replaced by a similar-looking talis. His attempts to alert the owner were unsuccessful, and, indeed, the owner may not even notice the exchange. May Dovid use the other talis or must he purchase a new one? I believe that most men do not feel attached to their particular taleisim, and this case is therefore comparable to the tefillin case of the Gemara. Assuming this to be true, someone who finds a lost talis may estimate its value and then either wear it or sell it. Either way, he should record the value of the talis and intend to return it to the owner, should the owner ever return for it. When I first published this article, I received several responses disagreeing with me, contending that most people are more possessive of their taleisim than I felt.

PECULIARITIES

The careful reader may have noted that our discussion is heading to an unusual conclusion. Although the Gemara's rules that the owner is less concerned about retrieving his tefillin than retrieving his seforim, today the opposite is generally true – an owner is usually not concerned about receiving back the same sefer since one can usually purchase it again in a bookstore. (However, the Gemara's halacha would remain true if he had written notes in the sefer, or it is a special edition that the owner would not be able to readily replace.)

On the other hand, many people own hand-picked tefillin and want their specific pair back (Minchas Elazar 4:9; see Pishei Choshen, Aveidah 6:fn23). They may have purchased tefillin whose parshis were written by a specific sofer who no longer writes, or made by a specific batim macher who has a long waiting list. After analyzing the principles of the above-mentioned Gemara, the Minchas Elazar decides that the original owner gets his tefillin back. Thus, although the principles of the Gemara are infinite, the specific cases that match them change with society. Returning lost items is a beautiful and important mitzvah. As we now see, the details of observing this mitzvah are often very complicated – and can vary from item to item.

<https://www.theyeshiva.net/jewish/8268/essay-noach-a-tale-of-three-noachs>

A Tale of Three Noachs

What I Heard from Benny Fishoff About Holocaust Survivors

Rabbi YY Jacobson

1 Cheshvan 5782

Three Lives, Three Worlds

There is a fascinating and insightful Midrash on the opening of this week's portion. The Torah begins:

Genesis 6, 9: These are the generations of Noach, Noach was a righteous man; he was perfect in his generations; Noach walked with God.

The Midrash, always sensitive to nuance, wonders why the single verse mentions Noach not once, nor even twice, but three times? The repetition of a name three times in a single sentence is obviously superfluous. The Torah could have stated: "These are the generations of Noah, who was a righteous man, perfect in his generations. He walked with G-d."

The Midrash offers the following extraordinary insight.

The Torah is intimating that there was not one Noach; there were three Noach's. We are being introduced to three distinct Noach's. There is Noach before the flood, during the flood, and after the flood.

Noach, explains the Midrash, was one of the few individuals in history who lived three lives, in three completely different worlds. First, Noach saw a settled, safe, and predictable world. That was Noach #1. Then Noach saw his entire world destroyed by the flood—that was Noach #2. And then he saw the world rebuilt and civilized after the flood. That was Noach #3.

To survive and thrive in each of the three eras, you need a completely different set of skills and resources. The first Noach grew up and came of age in a world that he, his father, grandfather, and great grandfather were accustomed to. There is routine, order, and comfort.

But then Noach encounters a new reality—one that reduced the entire planet to an ocean, without a single survivor, not among humans, or animals, birds, insects, or even trees or bushes. Just imagine what that does to a person. Everything you knew is suddenly gone. The "skills" required to cope and survive in such a world are of a different nature; it is about resilience and alertness.

But then Noach was forced to reinvent himself yet a third time, as he was summoned to leave the Ark and rebuild the world; to get back into normal life. How do you do that after living on the edge in a world gone mad? How do you integrate back into normal living after you faced the abyss and

watched your boat submerged in a titanic flood, and your planet consumed in the waters? How do return to civilization as a normal person?

Now you need a new set of skills—the ability to recover after such devastation; the power to smile again, not the innocent idyllic smile of youthful innocence; rather the joy that comes from conviction and resolve to still believe in the possibility of love, joy, and kindness.

It was far from simple. The only story we know of Noach after the flood is that he planted a vineyard and became inebriated. Did Noach suffer from PTSD? Did Noach need to numb his tremendous pain from the devastation?

An Entire Generation

An entire generation of Jews understood this Midrashic insight all too well. Many of our parents, grandparents, or great grandparents have grown up in pre-War Europe. Despite the many challenges facing them in the beginning of the 20th century, many of them enjoyed a relatively calm childhood. The world was not a perfect place, but it was a fine place, with many pleasant moments and experiences.

And then, as Adolf Hitler took Europe by storm, their entire universe was shaken up and brutally destroyed, as Germany unleashed its torrents of genocide, abuse, and brutality against our people. Some of our relatives watched parents, children, siblings, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, relatives, and friends, be sent to breathe their last breath ingesting Zyklon B and their bodies burnt in the crematoriums. Six million vibrant lives were cut down through bullets, fire, gas, beatings, hanging, torture, disease, or live burial. Nobody prepared anybody for this harrowing experience. As I once heard from former Chief Rabbi of Israel Rabbi Yisroel Meir Lau, when he tried describing his experience in Buchenwald, at the age of six: "I was six-year-old, surrounded by the stench of death. I would compare myself to a cockroach or a little bug. They may not have large brains, but they have an instinct to do anything they can for survival. They will try everything. And that is what I also understood and did."

And then the survivors had to yet reinvent themselves, a third time. The survivors of the War now faced the challenge of "normalcy." Can you ever be normal again? Can you ever laugh again as though the world was a fun place? How do you transform yourself from a creeping insect, trying to find a droplet of water, or a crumb of bread, without an SS guard shooting you, into a dignified human being who has the freedom to live, breathe, and love? This was not easy—and will one day be recorded as one of the great miracles in the annals of human history. For the most part, the survivors recreated a new world for themselves and all of us, a world of generosity, love, and moral dignity.

From the Furnace

Last week the Jewish world lost a unique and extraordinary individual, a personal family friend, a philanthropist, an activist, and a Holocaust survivor, Mr. Benny Fishoff, at the age of 97. Born in Lodz, Poland he lost his entire family during the Second World War.

He once shared with me the following moving reflection:

The third chapter of the book of Daniel describes the Jewish exile to Babylonia. The king of Babylonia (present-day Iraq), Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed the First Temple in 586 BCE had three Jewish attendants, Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah. When they refused to bow down to a Pagan idol which he erected for people to worship, the king had them thrown into a burning furnace to be burnt alive. Yet miraculously they emerged unscathed. From that moment on, their names are not mentioned any longer in the Tanach as part of Jewish life in Babylonia.

The Talmud asks this question:

What happened to the three sages? The Talmud offers three explanations. The third was offered by Rabbi Yochanan: "They went up to the Land of Israel; they married, and they gave birth to sons and daughters."

The Talmud states this as a novelty because it was no small feat. When people have a near-death experience, and they are saved by a hairs-breadth, the trauma often leaves them paralyzed. They can't function normally in the world. Here, three Jews were plunged into the burning furnace because of their loyalty to Judaism and the G-d of Israel. What did they do afterward?

They did not withdraw; they did not give up on life and on Jewish destiny. They returned to the Holy Land from where they were exiled, they got married, and they brought a new generation of Jews to the world.

Benny said to me words I will never forget: You want to know the greatest miracle of the generations of survivors? That we tried to rebuild normal lives! Yes, we were not always successful; yes, we have our share of challenges that we transmitted to our children. But we try our best to be normal. We try to smile, to be happy, to love, to help people, to give our children a dignified future.

Think about it: Unlike Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah who emerged unscathed, the Jews who survived the holocaust watched the burning furnaces of Auschwitz and Treblinka consume their loved ones. Their families were not saved from the crematoriums of Belzec, Chelmno, and Majdanek. Here then is a far more dramatic question: What did the survivors of this unspeakable calamity do when they came out of Hitler's furnace? The words employed in the Talmud provide the best answer: "They went up to the Land of Israel; they married, and they gave birth to sons and daughters!"

The generation which exited the gates of the Nazi hell rebuilt the Land of Israel, literally and figuratively—rebuilding Jewish life the world over.

Second, most of them got married, and third, they chose to give birth to a new generation of Jews.

And this, Benny, told me, is the greatest miracle in human history.

We often lament about our parents and grandparents, who surviving the Holocaust, often did not lead the most emotionally functional lives. Children of survivors have suffered from the silence, from the repressed pain, from the mid-night screaming, from the PTSD. The pain is deep and real. What we sometimes fail to realize is that after the hell they have been through, that was expected. The miracle is that most of them fought courageously to lead normal lives—to find love once again, to raise families, to trust, to be happy, to celebrate life. And because they did it, we are here today.

From the ashes, they recreated life.

Our Own Three Worlds

In a far different way, this remains a challenge for many of us, even if in a far more benign way.

Many of us, in our own little or big way, experience three worlds, demanding of us to reinvent ourselves again, and again, and yet again. We live not one life, but at least three lives.

We begin our youth often in a "civilized, settled world." We enjoy the innocence, calmness, stability, and security of youthfulness. We expect things to be a certain way, we rely on routine, and we are sheltered by the feeling that life is good, beautiful, and fragrant.

If you can stay in this world forever—by all means! Do not leave!

But not all of us get this privilege. Sooner or later, spaghetti hits the fan.

Some of us encounter a new reality, where our old world is devastated. Our sheltered cocoons blow up and we become vulnerable to sadness, madness, suffering, and loss. The loss of a loved one; the divorce of our parents and the breakdown of our family; mental or emotional challenges; financial crisis; broken relationships; trauma and anxiety—all leaving our hearts shattered into one thousand pieces. Some of us have known the pain of abuse and molestation, physical, verbal, or emotional. Some of us have known the pain of addiction and self-destruction, following or preceding the experience of our world inundated by a massive "flood." All we search for is an Ark, where we can run and hide.

But then we must have the courage to reinvent ourselves yet a third time—to become yet a new "Noach," one who can create a new world—a world of laughter, love, light, hope, and promise; a life of healthy attachments, faith, and joy; a life filled with the conviction that goodness is more powerful than evil, and light can dispel darkness.

Yes, this new world lacks that idyllic innocence and ignorance of childhood, but it contains a depth, maturity, and profundity that allows it to become a real foundation that can't crumble.[1]

G-d says to Noach, "go out of the ark," and build a new world. Even when it is raining outside, look up and you might see a rainbow, knowing that above the clouds, the sun is always shining. At every moment, you are a manifestation of the infinite light and love of the Divine. The clouds will pass, and your sunlight and sunshine will emerge.

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'halel was 65; Yered was 62, Hanoch was 65; Metushelach was 87 and Lemekh was 82.

Noa'ch 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 Avrahamian) 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; Arpachshad 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 (*haNimtz'a'ot*)..." (19:16)

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

"I have found (*Matza'ti*) David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him," (T'hillim 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 *Nimtzot* 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 known, 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'foro (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." (Yehezqe'el 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 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 Bavel.

That pattern of stories relating to 'sin & punishment' abruptly changes at the beginning of Parshat Lech Lcha, 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 in 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 Bavel 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'Btirim [*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 "behcira" [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 "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'retz" remains.

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

BRIT BEIN HA'BTRIM - THE FIRST COVENANT

The next time God speaks to Avraham is in chapter 15 - better known as "brit bein ha'btranim". There again, God promises "zera v'retz" (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'btranim". 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 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 Kaskim, 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 ay'dah 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 ay'dah 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 eydah" - 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 ay'dah 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'eyra (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'btraim 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'retza" 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.

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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".

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 Sodom 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 Cana'an 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 Cana'an. [Actually, the end of Parashat Noah seems to imply that Terah, Avraham's father, led the family out of Ur Kasdim towards Cana'an, 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 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 Sodom. Hashem is reassuring him that despite his refusal of the king of Sodom'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 Sodom, 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 goyyim"]. 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 Cana'an 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 rôle, 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

OH RNET

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Visiting One's Self

“Go for yourself...” (12:1)

Many years ago in a more naive and somewhat safer world, I once hitchhiked from Amsterdam to Pisa in Italy.

Only the young and the reckless (and I was both) would climb aboard the rear seat of a BMW 900 motorcycle on a night of driving rain with a 50 pound pack strapped to one's back. (This placed my center of gravity somewhere past the outer extremity of the rear wheel.) Every time the rider accelerated, the backpack dragged me backwards off the bike. The autobahn was a sea of rain. It was King David who taught us that G-d “protects fools.” And that night I certainly qualified for protection.

However, hitchhiking taught me something other than G-d protects the foolish; hitchhiking taught me what is called in Hebrew “*menuchat hanefesh*”, literally the “repose of the spirit.”

We live in a world where stress can literally eat us up if we let it. How do we combat this killer?

There's an elderly lady who sits in a nursing home in New York City and every day she says the following:

“Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift from G-d – that's why we call it the present.”

When you stand by the side of the road waiting for a ride, you have no idea whether someone will pick you up in a minute, an hour, or next week.

You are not in control. It's wonderfully relaxing.

No one in his right mind hitchhikes to an important business meeting or to catch an airplane. The very act of

hitchhiking says, “I'm prepared to be where I am. I don't need to be anywhere else.”

A hitchhiker feels the presence of *hashgacha* (Divine supervision). My life is not in my control. All I have is the present. And therefore I must live in this moment and be here now.

That is why hitchhiking is a great calmer. (No, I don't mean *karma*.)

A Jew's job is to live in the present, but not for the present. Much of our lives are spent thinking about what might happen, or what might not happen, or where I could be/should be now, or what went wrong or what went right. What a waste! This moment is unique. It will never be here again. Sometimes, I just close my eyes and think, “I'm alive!”

The little agenda pilot that lives in our head can steal our lives away without our even noticing, unless we heed our little hitchhiker's guide to eternity saying, “G-d gave you this moment; live it to the full!”

At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, G-d said to Avraham, “*Go for yourself...*” Actually, the Hebrew translation is “*Go to yourself...*”

Avraham is the personification of kindness in the world. The essence of kindness is giving, and only a person who is totally at one with where he is can give fully of himself. Avraham had the ability to “*go to himself*”, to connect every G-d-given second in his life to eternity.

Q & A

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?

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.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

Seeking Completion

All three patriarchs of the Jewish People are referred to as "complete": G-d told Abraham that when he circumcises himself, he will become *tamim*, "whole" (Gen. 17:1); G-d told Isaac that he is an *olah temimah*, "an unblemished burnt-offering" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 64:3); and Jacob is described as an *ish tam*, "a wholesome person" (Gen. 25:27). These three words are clearly derived from the biliteral root TAV-MEM, but that's not the whole story. There is another word in Hebrew that also means "complete" / "whole" — *shalem*. In this essay we study these two different words for "completion" and explore how they differ from one another.

Rabbeinu Bachaya (to Gen. 17:1) offers two important points that help us understand exactly what being *tamim* entails. Firstly, he notes that *tam* refers to something that is "complete" in the sense that it does not have any deficiencies or superfluities. To illustrate this point, he uses the example of the Torah, which is called *temimah* (Ps. 19:8) because it is perfectly complete, such that one cannot add or subtract to the Torah's completion (Deut. 13:1). Secondly, Rabbeinu Bachaya writes that when a person is *tam*, his inside is like his outside. Meaning, there is *complete* congruency between what the *tam* believes in his heart and what he says with his mouth.

The upshot of Rabbeinu Bachaya's understanding is that *tam* refers to equivalence. When referring to a righteous person, *tam* means that this person is *precisely equal* to that which is expected of him. He neither falls short of those expectations nor exceeds them. Moreover, the *tam*'s inner spirit *precisely matches* his outer veneer. This fits with the meaning of the related word *teomim/tomim* ("twins"), who are a matching pair in which one person is understood to be *precisely equal* to the other.

Malbim (1809-1879) explains that *tamim* in the sense of righteousness refers to the "completeness" of intention. In other words, the righteous person performs acts with wholesome motives and does not have ulterior, selfish motives, such as receiving reward or avoiding punishment. Malbim further notes that *tamim* implies complete agreement between the different parts of one's psyche to the extent that the righteous person's entire being resolves to perform good deeds without any inner conflict or dissent that must be appeased.

Along these lines, Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) explains that *tam/tamim* refers to "completion" in a spiritual sense (e.g., a righteous person), in a physical sense (e.g., an unblemished animal), and in a quantitative sense (e.g., a full measurement). The word *tam* also refers to an "innocent" or "wholesome" person whose range of knowledge is "complete" and does not seek to enlighten himself beyond what he already knows. Note the appearance of *whole* in the English word *wholesome*, which points to a semantic affinity between those English words and the Hebrew *tam/tamim*. The result of this is that *tam* often refers to a simpleton, like the *tam* of the Four Sons in the Passover Haggadah. (Interestingly, the *Zohar* to Bamidbar 165b explains that *tam* refers to a higher level of completion than *tamim*.)

After banning Jews from being augurs, diviners, sorcerers, and necromancers, the Torah commands that one should "be *tamim* with G-d" (Deut. 18:13). This means that one ought to be "innocent" and "wholesome," without appealing to outside forms of wisdom, such as the dark arts, to know the future. The *Kedushat Levi* does not explain *tamim* as "wholesome," but instead understands the word as a reference to the "completeness" of one's trust/belief in G-d. He explains that this verse means that one should view

G-d as He who always provides whatever is lacking.

Targum Onkelos on that verse translates the word *tamim* as *shelim* – an Aramaic cognate of *shalem*. In fact, the early Kabbalistic work *Sefer HaBahir* (137) uses this source to prove that *tamim* means *shalem*. This suggests that the words *tam* and *shalem* are synonymous, at least in a colloquial sense.

Rabbi Pappenheim traces the word *shalem* to the biliteral root SHIN-LAMMED, which he defines as “removed” or “cast away.” This meaning is best illustrated by the verse in which G-d tells Moshe at the Burning Bush, “Remove (*shal*) your shoes from upon your feet” (Ex. 3:5). Other words derived from this root include *sheol* (“grave”), because death marks entering a domain that is “away” from the realm of the living; *shallal* (“booty/spoils”), because looting involves taking property “away” from its previous owners as the spoils of battle; and *shalvah* (“tranquility”), because it describes a state in which all disturbances or troubles have been “removed” or “taken away.”

Another derivative of this core root is the word *shalem* (“complete,” “finished,” or, in a financial context, “paid”), which Rabbi Pappenheim explains as referring to the completion reached after everything that has been “removed” from something has already been returned. In a word, *shalem* means that right now, nothing is lacking. In Rabbi Pappenheim’s estimation, the word *shalom* (“peace”) also implies the presence of all the positive factors required for prosperity, such that nothing extra is lacking.

Although he admits that *tam* and *shalem* may colloquially mean the same thing, Rabbi Pappenheim proposes a fundamental distinction between them: *shalem* refers to quantitative “completion,” while *tam* refers to qualitative “completion.” Based on this, he explains that *shalem* is used when the Torah commands a person to be honest in their business dealings by maintaining “complete” (Deut. 25:15) weights that are accurately calibrated and are not missing any part of their declared weight. Similarly, *shalem* is used when the Torah commands that the Altar be built from “complete” stones (Deut. 27:6, Joshua 8:21), which are not chipped or otherwise notched. Additionally, G-d allotted the Canaanites a sort of

“allowance” for their sins, which would allow them to remain in the Holy Land until that quota had been filled. When relating that the Canaanites’ quota of sin had not yet been filled/complete in the time of Abraham, the Bible again uses the word *shalem* (Gen. 15:16). All of these cases refer to “completeness” in a quantity: the stones in terms of their weight, and the Canaanites in terms of their amount of sin.

On the other hand, Rabbi Pappenheim explains that *tam* refers to “completeness” in quality. For example, when the Bible prescribes that a sacrificial animal be *tamim* (Lev. 1:3, 22:21), this means that its body must be qualitatively pristine – with nothing extra or missing. This refers to a non-quantifiable form of “completion.” The same is true of the Red Heifer, whose redness ought to be *temimah* (Num. 19:2).

Based on this distinction, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865) writes that we can gain a better appreciation of an exegetical homily concerning the Counting of the Omer. The Torah commands that we count the weeks from Passover to Shavuot, saying: “They shall be seven ‘complete’ (*temimot*) weeks” (Lev. 23:15). In explaining this verse, the Rabbis teach that weeks are considered *temimot* only when the Jewish People act according to Hashem’s will (*Vayikra Rabbah* 28:3). As Rabbi Mecklenburg explains it, the Rabbis saw this idea hinted at in the word *temimot*, which refers to *qualitative* completeness, and thus cannot just be a reference to counting the passage of time which is a *quantitative* process. Because of this, the Rabbis explained that this verse is not just talking about counting days, but about bettering oneself *qualitatively* and bringing one’s actions in line with the Divine will.

Shalem refers to anything that is not lacking anything towards its completion, but this does not preclude it from having *more* than needed. For example, *l’shalem* means “to pay” or “to compensate” by giving money to somebody. If, for whatever reason, somebody paid *more than the price* of his purchase, then the verb *l’shalem* still applies to his act of payment. By contrast, when it comes to the term *tamim*, this verbiage cannot apply if there is no *exact* match. Anything having

something missing or extra is considered imperfect and is precluded from being termed *tam*.

Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866-1935) takes a similar approach, but differs in that he explains that *shalem* refers exclusively to “quantitative completion,” while *tam* refers to “qualitative completion” that also includes “quantitative completion.” Interestingly, Rabbi Avraham Bedersi (a 13th century Spanish sage) seems to understand that both words refer to “completion,” but *shalem* is a neutral word that contains no value judgment, while *tam* implies a *positive* form of “completion.”

When the Bible reports that the Jews cried over Moses’ death for thirty days, it then reports “and the days of crying for Moses’ bereavement finished” (Deut. 33:8), using a cognate of *tam* to denote the completion of that mourning period. The commentators are bothered by the presence of this word instead of a cognate of *shalem* in this context, given that the Bible here describes the completion of a certain amount of time, which is a *quantitative* measurement.

To answer this question, we may accept Rabbi Wertheimer’s supposition that *tam* can mean quantitative and qualitative completion, while *shalem* refers only to quantitative completion.

Alternatively, we may answer that the “completion” of this period of mourning refers not to the quantitative measurement of time, but to the qualitative nature of their mourning. Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762-1839) explains that the mourning of Moses’ death was “completed” when the Jewish People compounded the loss of their leader with the realization that they could have become his pupils in the same way that Joshua was if they had not been so lazy. Thus, *tam* in this case refers to a *quality* of their mourning, and not necessarily to just the completion of a certain amount of days.

If I understood him correctly, Rabbi Shimon Dov Ber Analak of Siedlce (1848-1907) explains that *tam* refers to “completion” in one particular aspect, but not necessarily in all aspects, while *shalem* implies a more overall sort of “completion.” When the Bible reports that Jacob arrived *shalem* at Shechem (Gen. 33:18), the Rabbis (*Shabbat* 33a) expound on the word *shalem* to mean that Jacob was “complete” physically (i.e., his body was healthy), intellectually (i.e., he amassed Torah knowledge) and financially (i.e., he amassed wealth). This demonstrates the broader implications of the word *shalem*. The term *tam* – on the other hand – almost exclusively denotes “completion” in the spiritual realm, but not in the physical, intellectual, or financial sense.

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COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

THE BLESSINGS OF THE SHEMA: (PART 3)

“The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched
– they must be felt with the heart.”
(Helen Keller)

The second blessing begins: “*With an abundant love have You loved us, Hashem, our G-d, with exceedingly great pity have You pitied us.*”

The Avudraham points out that the theme which wends its way throughout the second blessing before the Shema is a message of Hashem’s love for us. The Talmud (*Berachot* 11b) discusses the correct phrase to use when beginning the second blessing. The Sephardic and Chassidic custom is to open the blessing with the words *Ahavat Olam* – eternal love – for both the Morning Service and the Nighttime Service. The phrase *Ahavat Olam* comes from Jeremiah, 31:2. However, the Ashkenazic custom is to begin the blessing in the morning with the words *Ahavah Rabbah* – abundant love – and to use the phrase *Ahavat Olam* for the recitation of the Shema at night. Interestingly, the phrase *Ahavah Rabbah* does not appear anywhere in Tanach, and was incorporated into the blessing only during the Gaonic period. (The Gaonic period lasted for just over four hundred years, until a little after the year 1,000 CE. The *Gaonim* were the undisputed leaders of the Jewish community in Babylon and served as the heads of the two largest and most prestigious Yeshivahs at the time – Sura and Pumbedita.)

What is the intrinsic difference between these two phrases, such that the *Gaonim* felt a need to compose a new description for Hashem’s love for us? The Rabbis explain that the phrase “abundant love” implies that the love exists due to the strength of the merits of the one who is loved. Eternal love, on the other hand, denotes a love that is not dependent on the here-and-now. Eternal love is unconditional. Or, in the timeless words of *Ethics of the Fathers*, it is “love that is not dependent on anything.” Even if the “loved one” is currently lacking in virtues, the love transcends

everything. Perhaps this explains why according to all opinions we begin the blessing with *Ahavat Olam* at night. In Jewish tradition, the night is the beginning of the next day. In effect, we are commencing each new day with the declaration that Hashem’s love for us is unconditional and eternal.

The Vilna Gaon explains that the Nighttime Service focuses on the exile and our spiritual darkness, while the Morning Service concentrates on the Redemption and the glorious light that awaits us. Accordingly, the blessing for the morning prayer is *Ahavah Rabbah* because, when the time comes, we as the Jewish nation will be redeemed on our own merits. However, this is not applicable to the nighttime prayer, which symbolizes the darkness and the exile. As of right now, it seems that we have not yet reached the point where we warrant the Redemption. If so, we must use the phrase *Ahavat Olam*, since Hashem loves us *despite* the fact that we are lacking in merits. We are loved simply because we are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

But there is another interpretation of the phrase *Ahavah Rabbah* which adds a whole new, beautiful dimension of meaning. The root of the word “*rabbah*” is “*rav*” – many or much. The word *rabbah* carries with it the connotation of something which continues not just to manifest itself, but also that its intensity continues to increase commensurately. If so, the opening words of our blessing convey to us the most stirring and heartening message of all: Hashem’s love for us will continue to develop and increase until the very last moment before we are redeemed.

To be continued...

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Beitzah 35-40

Is Kiddushin a Mitzvah?

“Any activity forbidden on Shabbat is forbidden on Yom Tov. For example: It is forbidden to climb a tree... or make kiddushin... or to consecrate an object... The only difference between Shabbat and Yom Tov is the preparation of food.”

This mishna enumerates a variety of activities that are forbidden on Shabbat and Yom Tov, dividing these activities into three distinct categories: acts forbidden by rabbinical decree (*shvut*); voluntary acts (*reshut* – not forbidden, and close to being a mitzvah, but not a real mitzvah – Rashi); and mitzvah acts.

The *gemara* asks regarding the case of kiddushin: “Is *kiddushin* not a mitzvah?” Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam explain this question in two different ways. Rashi explains that *gemara*’s question as being, “Why is *kiddushin* not included in the *mishna*’s list of mitzvah acts that are nevertheless banned on Shabbat and Yom Tov? On the other hand, Rabbeinu Tam explains the *gemara*’s question as being, “Why on earth did our Sages forbid *kiddushin* on Shabbat and Yom Tov, given that it is a mitzvah to make *kiddushin* and be fruitful and multiply?”

The *gemara* answers that the *mishna* is specifically speaking about a case when the man already has a wife and children. According to Rashi’s view of the question, this answer explains why *kiddushin* is listed in the *mishna* under the category of *reshut* and not mitzvah. This seems to imply that *kiddushin* is indeed a mitzvah for a man without a wife and children, but would still not be permitted on Shabbat and Yom Tov. According to the view of Rabbeinu Tam, the *gemara* answers that the ban against *kiddushin* on Shabbat and Yom Tov is only for one who already fulfilled the mitzvah “to be fruitful and multiply.” In addition, a person who has not yet fulfilled this mitzvah would be permitted to make *kiddushin* on Shabbat and Yom Tov.

An interesting question that seems to be taught in our *sugya* is to determine whether the act of *kiddushin* in general is in fact a mitzvah. It appears that at least if the man is not married and has not fulfilled the obligation to procreate, the act of *kiddushin* is a mitzvah. The ruling of the Rambam in his *Mishneh Torah* seems to clearly state that *kiddushin* is a mitzvah. (Hilchot Ishut 1:2)

In fact, when I stood under the *chuppah* and was about to give my dear *kallah* a ring for *kiddushin*, something a bit unexpected occurred. One of the witnesses, Rav Avraham Mordechai Isbee, *zatzal* (my words cannot begin to describe his seemingly superhuman dedication to Torah study and dissemination, not to speak of his Torah-based humility and piety) leaned towards me and whispered so no one else could hear (so as not to embarrass me), “Have in mind to fulfill the mitzvah of *kiddushin* according to the Rambam[’s view].”

However, it appears from the writings of other Rishonim, such as Rabbeinu Asher, that *kiddushin* is not a mitzvah, but rather a prerequisite for the ability to fulfill the Torah mitzvah to procreate. He writes that for this reason there is no “blessing for a mitzvah” said for the act of *kiddushin*. There is much discussion on this topic, and to be intellectually honest, some commentaries explain that even the Rambam does not mean that *kiddushin* is a mitzvah. (For example, the Maggid Mishneh writes that although *kiddushin* is the *start* of the mitzvah to marry in order to procreate, the marriage-mitzvah is complete only with a later and separate act of *nesu'in* – a topic for another time, *iy'H*.)

▪ Beitzah 36b

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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LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Hershman

Count to Ten

When Avraham returns triumphant from his battle against the four kings, Malki Tzedek, a priest to Hashem, greets him with bread and wine, blessing both Avraham and Hashem for the miraculous victory. Avraham then gives Malki Tzedek *maaser*, a tenth of the spoils of war, as a tribute to Hashem.

This is the first mention of *maaser* in Scripture. Later, the Torah will set forth the obligation to tithe produce and give it to the Kohen and the Levi (and also to the poor). One who gives this tenth to the Levi expresses the following: "Hashem, Whose Name you proclaim, is the One Who gave me these possessions." By giving the tithe to Malki Tzedek, Avraham acknowledges that Hashem, Whose Name Malki Tzedek proclaims, is the One Who graced him with victory.

As a rule, the word for "tenth" is *asirit*. But in this sense of tithing, it is called *maaser*. Had the tithe been called *asirit*, the tenth would have no special significance. It could just as well have been any other fraction. In dedicating assets to Hashem, it is not the fraction that is significant, but it is the act of giving, and specifically the act of giving the concluding tenth of each unit. This is why the verb form is an active form — *maaser* means to 'make the ten.' Ten is a significant number, conceptually and mathematically. It always represents a unit, a whole. There are nine digits and then the tenth concludes the first unit and also begins the next. We round to the nearest ten, count years in decades, and count all material things

in tens. This is one of the reasons why a *minyan* is a minimum of ten individuals — it is the smallest unit that can represent the whole.

The obligation to tithe animals and produce was effected in this manner: Each tenth animal that passed under the staff would be separated as *maaser*. When tithing produce, they would not measure the whole quantity and then designate a tenth. Rather, they would designate every tenth measure as *maaser*. *Maaser*, then, does not mean *a tenth part*, but rather *every tenth one*. In this way, both the first and the concluding separation of property to the Kohen or Levi were dedicated to Hashem: The "first" — the first fruits, the first-born animal, and the "last" — the concluding tenth. This served as an ever-present reminder that all property belongs to Hashem.

When a person earns his first penny, he is still humble. With the memory of his previous state of need still fresh in his mind, he knows well that his success depends on the grace of Hashem. But the tenth, the one-hundredth, the thousandth, appear to him as natural as the ninth, or ninety-ninth, or nine hundred and ninety-ninth that came before. The commandment to give *maaser*, every tenth one, is to preserve his awareness that every unit is a direct gift from Hashem.

- Sources: Commentary, Bereishet 14:22-24

Perek Shira: The Song of Existence

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

Lech Lecha

The Song of the Heavens

The Heavens say: "The Heavens tell Hashem's glory, and the sky relates His handiwork."
(*Tehillim 19:2*)

Across the globe, the grand Heavens sing of Hashem's glory and His handiwork.

The sky is blue, a recognized color of majesty, which represents Hashem's attribute of kingship. For this reason, Hashem's throne is made of blue sapphire. There is an allusion to this in the verse of this song, as *mesaprim* (telling) has the word-root of *sapir* (sapphire).

The brilliant sun crosses the sky daily, benefitting all flora and fauna indiscriminately. The softly glowing moon and stars soften the effect of the darkness of the night. The endless space and countless stars sing of the honor of the Creator. The constellations tell of Hashem's reign through the language of astrology. Clouds tell of Hashem's desire to bestow life upon the Land. Their absence indicates His disapproval.

The Heavens draw to our attention that there is a King Who supervises His world, and they add an element of majesty to all the inhabitants of Earth. Their loftiness speaks of Hashem's loftiness and inspires awe of Him. Hence, one who fears Hashem is said to have "fear of Heaven." Their depth appears endless in the same way that Hashem is endless. Their breadth is inescapable in the same way one cannot leave the presence of the Omnipresent. In fact, it is a mitzvah to look at the Heavens and their constellations to contemplate their Creator and to bless Him — joining their song.

Sources: *Zohar* (Introduction 2a; *Shlach* 226b), *Rashi*, *Malbim*, *Mesaprim Tehilos Hashem*, *Eved HaMelech* (*Ha'azinu*)

*In loving memory of Harav Zeev Shlomo ben Zecharia Leib

Hero or Thief: Revisited

by Rabbi Gavriel Rubin

The Bomb Thief: Revisited

In the previous issue of Ohrnet Magazine we presented the story of Motti Ashkenazi, who in 1997 stole a bag from a beach in Tel Aviv, only to discover that it contained a bomb. Thus instead of the crime he intended to commit, what Motti actually did was to save dozens of lives! The question we left off with was: How are we to look at Motti now – as a [Hero or Thief?](#)

This question is not merely academic. It can have practical ramifications as well. One of these, for example, is whether or not Motti needs atonement. Let's see what the classic sources have to say about the matter:

Happy Accidents

A good place to begin is with a passage in the Talmud (*Menachot* 64a) discussing the scenario in which a fisherman spreads out his net on the Sabbath, a prohibited activity, and hauls in an unexpected catch – a live infant that had fallen into the sea!

Now, it is a well-known principle that the saving of human life overrides all the Sabbath prohibitions. If saving the baby had been the fisherman's intention, his act would have certainly been permitted, even if he caught a few fish at the same time. So, now the question here, as in the case of the bomb thief, is: Do we look at the intention or the result?

The Talmud tells us that this was the subject of a disagreement between two of the Sages, Rabbah and Rava. Rabbah says that we look at the result. Therefore, since a life was saved, the fisherman is off the hook. Rava, on the other hand, says that we look at the intention, which in this case was to violate the Sabbath. Therefore, in his view, the fisherman is guilty.

When the Rambam codifies this case he follows the lenient view (*Hilchos Shabbat* 2:16). This seems to bode well for Motti, since in his case, too, the result was the saving of lives.

The Tzaddik and the Temptress

There are, however, a number of other sources that call into question the Rambam's ruling. For instance, the Talmud relates elsewhere (*Kiddushin* 81b) that Rav Chiya bar Ashi's wife once heard him praying to be saved from the Evil Impulse. This left her very perplexed, because her husband had not had physical contact with her for years, which she presumed was due to the weakness of old age.

Determined to get to the bottom of the matter, she dressed herself up in her most alluring outfit, being careful to disguise her appearance, and then passed back and forth before the garden.

“Who are you?” asked Rav Chiya.

“Charusa,” his wife answered, giving the name of a famous woman of ill-repute.

At that moment, Rav Chiya was unable to resist and immediately sought the woman’s services. The woman agreed, but for her fee she demanded a pomegranate from the top of a nearby tree. Not in the least deterred, Rav Chiya leapt to the top of the tree and plucked for her a piece of the fruit.

Sometime later a remorseful Rav Chiya returned home. Seeing that in the meantime his wife had kindled their large baking oven, and seeking atonement for his deed, Rav Chiya climbed into the oven, sat down and awaited his fate.

Fortunately, his wife arrived shortly thereafter. “What’s this all about?” she inquired, whereupon he confessed to her the entire affair. “You have nothing to worry about,” she assured him. “It was me.”

Nevertheless, Rav Chiya was not consoled. “That may be true,” he said, “but I *intended* to commit a sin!” So he spent the rest of his life in fasting until at last he died of weakness.

Pardon for What?

To prove that Rav Chiya’s response to seek atonement was justified, the Talmud cites a verse concerning a woman who has made a vow, which her husband subsequently annulled without her knowledge. The verse reads: “[The vow] is not sustained, and Hashem will pardon her” (*Bamidbar* 30:13). From the words, “Hashem will pardon her,” our Sages infer that although the vow was annulled, the woman is still in need of pardon for any violation thereof. This shows that the *intention* to commit a sin is itself a sin requiring atonement even though no forbidden act was actually done.

This seems to be directly at odds with the Rambam’s ruling that the fisherman who saved the baby is *not* liable for violating Shabbat since in the end no forbidden act was done. So, the question we must now try to answer is: When do we say that the mere intention to sin requires atonement and when not? But, before we do so, let us see one more source.

The Fortuitous Kidnapping

The following story may ring a bell:

A group of brothers once decided for various reasons that another brother was deserving of death. Before the sentence could be carried out, however, one of the brothers, anxious to save his sibling’s life, suggested that he be sold into slavery instead. This proposal found favor in the eyes of the others, and the deed was soon done.

Despite his situation, the enslaved brother did not despair, but threw himself into his chores with all his ability. Very soon he proceeded to rise from his lowly position, withstanding awesome trials along the way, until at last he was appointed viceroy over the entire kingdom.

I am referring, of course, to the story of Yosef and his brothers. Now, Yosef would never have reached his lofty position had he not been sold into slavery. So, if one looks at the result, the brothers' deed had a very positive outcome. On the other hand, that was certainly not their intention. They had meant to punish Yosef, but Hashem turned their action to His own purposes, a fact that Yosef himself pointed out to them after their father's death.

A Bittersweet Cup

According to the *Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh* this episode can be likened to the case of a man who intended to give his fellow a cup of poison but accidentally gave him wine instead. In such a case, says the *Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh*, the wine-giver would be free of guilt even in Heaven's eyes.

This seems to indicate that as long as the result is good, there is no need for atonement, just as in the case of the fisherman. How then are we to understand the cases of Rav Chiya and the vowing woman, which seem to indicate that a person requires atonement for the mere intention to sin?

A Happy Ending

One resolution given by the commentaries is that in the case of fisherman, as in the case of Yosef's brothers, the result of the deed was actually positive. By contrast, in Rav Chiya's case and in the case of the vowing woman, while no crime was committed, nothing positive was done either.

A Crime Against Whom?

A second resolution is to distinguish between sins towards G-d versus sins towards other people. In the case of sins against God, since He knows what is in a person's heart, it is enough that the person merely *intended* to sin. By contrast in the case of a sin against a human being, all the victim really cares about is the result.

This approach explains why Rav Chiya and the vowing woman were in need of atonement, while Yosef's brothers were not. It does not explain, however, why the fisherman also seems to have been let off. After all, violating the Sabbath is a sin towards G-d!

The answer, say the commentaries, is that we are mixing up two different issues. The Talmud says that the fisherman is off the hook only for the actual *deed*. Nevertheless, he is still in need of atonement for his *intention*. In the case of Yosef's brothers, on the other hand, since the crime they intended was against a human being, they do not even need atonement.

What About Motti?

In Motti's case, the result was a great mitzvah – the saving of many lives. Moreover, his attempted crime, theft, is a matter between human beings. So, it seems that according to both these resolutions he should not need atonement.

Of course, nothing in life, or in Torah, is virtually ever that simple. According to the Chafetz Chaim, *whenever* a person intends on sinning he is in need of atonement (*Hilchot Lashon HaRa, Klal 4*). How he resolves the contradiction is a question we will just have to think about on our own!

(Editor's note: This case appears in Rabbi Rubin's new *sefer* available via Amazon: [The Bomb Thief and Other Curious Cases: Leaves from the Jewish Logic Tree](#))

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