

Potomac Torah Study Center

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Note: Kristallnacht Remembrance will be this coming Wednesday evening, November 9.

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 more than 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 archives.

Mazel-Tov to Lisa Murik on her special birthday!

Lech Lecha opens as God tells Abram to go for himself, leave behind his family, home, and father's place, and to go to a land that He will show him. Two obvious questions arise. Why did God select Abram? And why would Abram leave all his connections to travel to some unspecified place, especially the first time that he receives a message from Hashem (when he is 75 years old)? I'll focus on the first question and hopefully return to the second some time soon.

When the parsha opens, all we have heard about Abram is that his father is Terach, his brother Haran died young, and Abram and his surviving brother Nachor marry Haran's daughters, Sarai and Milcah. We are familiar with many stories about Abram as a child and younger man, but none of them are in the Torah – they all come from Midrash. I am attaching (by E-mail) Rabbi Yitz Etshalom's brilliant essay on Avraham's Early Years, where he summarizes the stories from Midrash and shows how one might infer each of the stories with some information in the Torah.

God's instructions to Adam and Chava when leaving Eden are "pru urvu" – be fruitful and multiply. After the flood, God gives Noach and his family the same instructions and also tells them to move around and populate the land. The generation after the flood, however, settles in the plain of Shinar, decides to build a city, and works to build a tower to glorify themselves.

Rabbi David Fohrman (Alephbeta.org) shows many ways that Abram is a tikkun for problems that arise during the two thousand years before Lech Lecha. The story immediately preceding Hashem's call to Abram is the incident in Shinar (11:1-9). The people of Bavel (Babylon) find that they can form bricks, heat them in fire, and make solid bricks. They then decide to develop a city and build a tower to the sky to make a name for themselves. God becomes angry, descends, separates the people physically (geographically), and confuses their language so they cannot communicate. Rabbi Fohrman observes that the problem that concerns God is technology getting out of control.

The first concern with technology, however, arises before the flood (4:19-23). Lemech, Noach's father, has a grandson named Tobal-cain, who sharpens cutting implements of copper and iron. Lemech, a direct descendant of Cain, kills Cain (accidental manslaughter) and his son Tobal-cain (an accident). Lemech shows no remorse at killing these relatives (cousins of Noach).

Technology therefore leads to manslaughter and careless fatal accidents before the flood. In the post-flood world, God sees technology again working in a dangerous pattern. Ham's grandson Nimrod establishes the city of Bavel and then more cities to create the first kingdom (10:8-12). Nimrod becomes mighty, and the Midrash infers that he is a cruel leader. Again, the Torah suggests trouble coming from technology.

Rabbi Fohrman shows another connection with the Shinar story. “Hava nilbenah leveinim” (“come let’s do this – [build a tower]”). The only other time the Torah talks about making bricks, we also have “Hava” – “Hava nitchakma lo” – “let us deal wisely with them” (the Jews). Paro, concerned about rapid population growth of the Jews, forces them to make bricks and build large structures. By using parallel language, the Torah hints that the technology from Shinar, if left without control, could lead to slavery and oppression. The apparent danger from Nimrod returns many years later with another leader of an empire (Paro), this time oppressing the Jews.

When the Torah introduces Abram, he is a man from a close family. He and his brother both marry the daughters of their deceased brother, an extension of the mitzvah of Levirate marriage (which becomes one of the 613 mitzvot at Har Sinai). In this later mitzvah, when a married man dies without a son to care for his wife, a brother marries the widow. The first born son from this marriage carries the name and property of the deceased brother, to preserve his legacy and care for the former widow. Abram and Nahor carry this mitzvah to another level by marrying their brother’s daughters, and Abram also adopts Haran’s son (Lot). Rather than settling in a city, Abram moves around. Instead of building a home, Abram lives in a tent and builds alters to spread the message of Hashem. Abram’s interest in protecting his brother’s legacy, and his focus on chesed, show an interest in correcting the sins of previous generations. What the Torah has already presented, when viewed closely, shows that Abram is an excellent choice to bring proper values into the world.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z”l, taught the virtues of chesed throughout his life. In his Torah discussions, private conversations, and actions, concern for mitzvot, family, fellow Jews, and disadvantaged members of society were always in the forefront of his words and actions. These values have become part of who I aim to be, and Hannah and I try to teach them to our children and grandchildren. Our religion teaches us the importance of making and leaving this world a better place than it was before our time.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

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 Shlemah for Yehoshua Mayer HaLevi ben Nechama Zelda, Yonatan Ophir ben Ilana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, who need our prayers. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,
Hannah & Alan

Dvar Torah: Lech Lecha: The House that Truth Built by Rabbi Label Lam © 2001

And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. And those that bless you will be blessed, and those that curse you will be cursed, and through you will be blessed all the families of the world. (Breishis 12:2-3)

Babe Ruth hit 714 home runs but only one stands out in legendary proportion. That is the home run he is reputed to have hit for a sick child, but not before having first pointed his bat towards center field. Why is that one distinguishable from all the hundreds of others? The one who hits the most home runs is also usually the one who strikes out the most since he swings the hardest. Sometimes he hits it big and sometimes he misses it big. However, when he calls the shot and hits it there that shows some modicum of control.

3700 years have passed since Avraham walked on the earth and a lot of history has transpired since such broad sweeping and open projections were made, such as “through you will be blessed all the families of the world.” Innings later, but not quite a post-game report, let’s check at least anecdotally the veracity of that statement.

Not less than John Adams the 2nd president writes in a letter in 1806; “I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation. If I were an atheist and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing nations. I should believe that that chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all Mankind the doctrine of a supreme intelligent and wise Almighty sovereign of the universe which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality and consequently of all civilization. They have given religion to three-quarters of the globe and influenced the affairs of Mankind more and more happily than any other nation, ancient or modern.”

Maybe some people remember that during the Yom Kippur war in 1973, there was an oil embargo, oil prices sky-rocketed and bumper stickers began to appear reading, “We don’t want Jews! We want oil!” A gentile named William Ikon wrote a letter to the editor of the Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph that was subsequently published in 250 dailies throughout America. He wrote the following:

“Jews go home, G-d forbid that you should think that these remarks made by a few sick people expresses the opinion of all the people of America and you would pack your belongings and go. Jews go home. We do not want Jews. We want oil. But before you leave, could you do us a favor?! Could you leave behind the vaccine formula of Dr. Jonas Salk before you go?! You would not want our children to be paralyzed by polio. Will you leave behind the capability you have shown government, in politics, your influential prowess, your good literature and your tasty food.

Please have pity on us. Remember it was from you that we learned the secret of how to develop great men as Einstein and Steinmetz and many others who are of great help to us. We owe you a lot for the atomic bomb, research satellites and perhaps we owe you our very existence. Instead of observing from the depths of our graves how Hitler old but glad passes through our streets relaxed in one of our Cadillacs if he would have succeeded to reach the A-bomb and not us.

On your way out Jews, could you do me one more favor? Could you pass by my house and take me with you? I’m not sure I could live a secure life in a land in which you are not found. If at any time you will have to leave, love will leave with you. Democracy will leave with you and essentially everything will leave with you. G-d will leave with you. If you pass by my house, please slow down and honk, because I’m going with you.”

A reputation like this is not made in a single swing, a season, or a news cycle. It is a record perhaps more impressive than pointing or predicting a series. Its promise produced a more enduring dynasty and a history grander than that that built the house of Ruth. When it will be our time to “go home” for real it will become clear that it is not for a lack of oil or an abundance of desperate hate, but rather to revel and cheer aloud again in the house that truth built.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5762-lechlecha/>

Nature and Torah: Thoughts for Parashat Lekh Lekha

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

In Chapter 2 of his *Laws of Foundations of Torah*, Maimonides discusses the commandments to love and fear God:

What is the way to love and fear Him? When one contemplates His wondrous and great works and creations and sees in them His infinite wisdom, immediately he loves and praises and exalts and yearns with an overwhelming yearning to know His great Name....On meditating these very

things, one immediately recoils, fears and trembles, realizing that he is a tiny, low and obscure being of small intelligence standing before the One with perfect wisdom...

Significantly, Maimonides locates love and fear of God in a universal context. Every human being can contemplate the wonders of nature and detect the greatness of the Creator. Maimonides might have written that one learns love and fear of God by studying the Torah...God's word. But by specifically including this passage in his section on Foundations of Torah, he was teaching us that we are not only Jews with a Torah...but we are human beings who share in the universal human spiritual adventure.

This week's Torah portion begins with God's command to Abram to leave his land, his birthplace, the house of his parents. Abram was to go to a land that God would show him and start a new chapter in the history of humanity.

The Torah does not indicate why God chose Abram for this awesome challenge. Rabbinic tradition filled the void with various Midrashic stories that highlight Abram's spiritual greatness. Although his father Terah was an idolater, Abram repudiated idolatry and shattered his father's idols. Abram did not inherit faith in One God, but discovered God through philosophical questioning. In viewing the wondrous and great works and creations, he concluded that these things could not have just happened on their own. There must be a Creator who set things in order.

Abram discovered God centuries before the Torah was revealed to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The Midrashim underscore that God is accessible to us through our universal human capacities.

The opening chapters of the Torah, from the creation story, through Noah and Abram/Abraham, are directed at humanity at large...not just at the Jewish People. The message is: through philosophy and science, human beings can attain love and fear of God.

Jews have an additional route to God: the Torah. Each morning in our prayers, we thank the Almighty for having granted Torah to the People of Israel. The teachings and commandments of Torah put us in contact with God's word and God's will...and the more we study and internalize Torah, the more we are able to deepen our connection with God.

Jewish tradition, thus, has two roads to God: the natural world, which reveals God as Creator; and the Torah, which records the words of God to the people of Israel. But the Torah itself leads us back to the first road, the road of experiencing God as Creator. The Torah and nature are bound together.

The relationship of Torah and nature is evident in Psalm 19. The psalm has two distinct parts which at first glance seem to be unconnected. It begins: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament tells His handiwork. Day unto day utters the tale, night unto night unfolds knowledge. There is no word, no speech, their voice is not heard, yet their course extends through all the world, and their theme to the end of the world." It goes on to describe the sun which rejoices as a strong man prepared to run his course. "Its setting forth is from one end of the skies, its circuit unto the other extreme, and nothing is hidden from its heat." Then the psalm makes an abrupt shift. It continues: "The law of the Lord is perfect, comforting the soul...the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes." From a description of the glory of God as manifested in the natural world, the psalm jumps to a praise of the Torah, God's special revelation to the people of Israel.

The psalm is teaching that one may come to an understanding of God both through the natural world and through the Torah.

For the Jewish People, Abraham is our father (Avraham Avinu) and Moses is our teacher (Moshe Rabbeinu)...and both lead us to God.

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

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

The Revolution of Terah and Avraham

By Rabbi Zvi Grumet *

The Revolution of Terah and Avraham

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 (Kayin, 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 Mordechai 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.

Note: Emphasis added.

* Associate Educational Director at The Lookstein Center for Jewish Education and editor of Jewish Educational Leadership. Also coordinator of the Tanakh department at Yeshivat Eretz Hatzvi and faculty member at the Pardes Institute. Reprinted from issue 15 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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

Lech Licha – Bris Milah: A Central Theme

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

Bris Milah is a mitzvah of joy. It is the open focus of the Bris Milah celebration celebrated just shortly after a baby boy is born. In a more discreet way, it is a theme which is celebrated at a Chasuna as husband and wife join together in a bond of loyalty, morality, and holiness.

The Medrash (Tanchuma Tazriya) tells us that Rabbi Akiva was asked a question. "If Hashem's understanding of a complete man is without the foreskin which is cut off during the Bris, then why did Hashem create man with the foreskin? Wouldn't it make sense for Hashem to create man complete?" Rabbi Akiva replied, "Hashem intends us to become complete through the mitzvos." Besides being a mitzva of its own, the mitzva of Bris Milah is symbolic. Just as we become complete in a physical sense by human effort, so do we become complete in an ethical and spiritual sense through effort. (Chinuch 2)

In our times there is a life approach that claims that a person should just flow with their urges and go wherever they take him. Rabbi A.J. Twerski was fond of citing the words Hashem uttered at the time of creation, "Let us make man." To whom was Hashem talking? To man! As Hashem created man, He declared, "Your perfection will not come easy. I will give you the raw material; through mitzvos and hard work you can create the great human being that I intended."

Interestingly, in an anatomical sense, the Bris Milah is done at the center of the body. For the Torah Jew, the Bris Milah is symbolic of our entire physical existence. Everything revolves on a central theme that the human being needs training, influence, and intervention to be guided to a place of holiness, greatness, and purpose. This is the function of the mitzvos, to intervene and guide us.

In contrast, there have been great minds in the field of psychology who have claimed that sexuality is the center of human motivation. They saw this energy as underlying most human activity and central to the hidden reasons for human behavior. Urges and acting upon them indiscriminately were seen by them as normal and to be expected. They did not necessarily see creating a covenant of holiness as the next step.

The lesson of Bris Milah is that, as human beings, we were created with the expectation that we would still need to perfect ourselves. Rabbi Akiva explained that in physicality and regarding all urges and in our direction of life, we must put forth effort to become great. Mitzvos guide us and intervene with clarity when we naturally might have wandered in so many ways.

Bris Milah is an open celebration as a baby boy is ushered into the covenant of Avraham, the covenant of holiness of monotheism, the covenant of holiness between man and the Creator. It is also a celebration at a Chasuna in a more discreet way, as a couple wisely commits to one another to create a sanctuary of holiness. We recognize that greatness doesn't just happen. It is what results through our efforts when we invite Hashem's presence into our hearts, our lives, and our homes.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

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 Babel, 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, 5909 Bradley Blvd., Bethesda, MD 20814. Rabbi Singer's Devar Torah arrived too late for my deadline, so I am reprinting an earlier Dvar Torah from his archives.

Survivor, Anonymous: Caution in Interpreting Midrash

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

When my daughter was in third or fourth grade in an ultra-orthodox school, she told me of an interesting exchange she had with her Humash teacher. The teacher spoke about the survivor who escaped the war in which Lot, Abraham's nephew, was captured, and said that it was Og the king of Bashan. Og is first mentioned by name in the Torah in the book of Numbers (21:33) as one who wages war against Moshe. In Deuteronomy (3:10-11) he is described as the last of the Rephaim, a gigantic people who once lived in the Cisjordan. The Torah also describes his bed as nine feet long, which would make Og about 8.5 feet tall, extraordinary yet not impossible. My daughter's teacher, however, explained that Og was of gigantic proportions, and that when Moshe went to war against him, he had to jump ten feet in the air, and with a ten feet long ax, hit Og's ankle.

On top of that, the teacher explained, according to a Midrash, that Og was the ultimate survivor. He survived the flood by sitting on the roof of Noah's ark, and he survived the very first World War, which involved nine kings and many nationalities. He also lived long enough to rule the Bashan at the time of Moshe, only to lose his life at the war against the Israelites. This story sounds fantastic, and indeed, following the Torah's timetable, it would make Og one of the longest living people in history. The flood happened in the year 1656 after the creation of Adam, so even if we assume that Og was but a baby back then, he would have been 852 years old at the time of his last battle.

It is hard to accept all these details, which suggest that not only was Og a giant of mythical proportions and of a life-span that the Torah does not mention, but that he was able to trick God and survive the flood by hitching a ride on the ark. But this is not what bothered my daughter. The teacher also said that Og reported to Abraham that his nephew was captured because he hoped that Abraham would die trying to save Lot, and then Og would be free to marry Sarah. Yes, this is also an idea mentioned in Midrashic literature and repeated by Rashi. It makes little sense, because Sarah was taken from Abraham by both Pharaoh and Abimelech, and Og could have done the same exact thing, especially with his powerful and intimidating stature. Yet that was not my daughter's concern, as she was focused on more practical terms. How could Og even think of marrying Sarah, she asked the teacher, if he was a giant. The teacher, not losing a heartbeat, answered that Abraham and Sarah were also gigantic, and that was too much for my daughter. Now she was asking me to explain how did people in the Book of Genesis interact with each other, and who was or was not a giant.

I told my daughter that the Midrash was not to be taken literally, and that the Torah deliberately kept the identity of the survivor hidden because he is only a tool and not a main character in the story. Since the ultra-orthodox school was the only option we had at the time, I dismissed the incident as part of the culture of treating Midrashic texts and Rashi's commentary as part of the revelation at Sinai, and I knew there was no point in talking to the teachers or administration about it. I have decided to return to this matter now, because I hear daily of teachers in modern orthodox schools who use Midrashic material inappropriately or where it is not necessary. That is so pervasive, that even those who want to adhere to the biblical text and logical commentaries face difficulties. Recently a teacher told me that her students asked her why didn't she say that the survivor was Og the King of Bashan. She had to defend her position (to second graders!!!) by explaining that she is following the biblical text.

Let us start by asking this question: how was the identity of the survivor determined? The answer is that Rabbi Yohanan, the author of the statement that the survivor was Og, put together several verses, which are not necessarily related. In

Genesis 14:5 we read of a war waged against the Rephaim; In 14:13 the survivor is mentioned; And in Deuteronomy 3:11 it is written that Og was the last remnant of the Rephaim. The conclusion that Og is the survivor is farfetched and unsubstantiated. Deuteronomy speaks of Og as the last remnant of a nation that has slowly disappeared and not as a survivor of a war, and a close reading of Genesis reveals that the survivor could not have come from the battle against Rephaim. That is because the military campaign of the four Mesopotamian kings waged wars against many nations before attacking Lot's city of Sodom. They fought with the Rephaim, the Zoozim, the Emim, and the Horites on the other side of the Jordan. Then they crossed the river and fought a wide-spread war with the nomad nation of Amalek, then with the Emorites who lived near Ein Gedi, and only after six battles arrived at Sodom and captured Lot. There is no logic in claiming that a survivor from the first battle, remote in both space and time, would be the one to notify Abraham about the events of the last battle.

We have four problems here. The identification of Og as the survivor relies on mixing several different stories scattered in the Torah. Og's lifespan raises questions of his age and where he was at which times. We have no definitive source for supposing that Og tricked God and survived the flood, something that the Torah does state. We must therefore to ask a different question. What was Rabi Yohanan's purpose or agenda? To this, we can offer two answers, one specific and one general. The notion of a powerful, gigantic being, who tries to steal the wife of a defenseless Jew, was all too familiar to Jews under Greek and Roman rule. It was an uplifting message to hear that no matter how hard Og tried and how long he survived, at the end he was defeated by Moshe. Moshe is the greatest prophet and the conduit of the Divine word to the people, and when the Midrash makes him jump and hit Og's ankle, it symbolizes the power of spirituality to cause the feet and the pillars of the mightiest to buckle and fall.

In the wider context, the identification of the survivor with Og is part of the Midrashic discipline, which does not like anonymous people or unidentified places. The Midrash also likes to merge two names into one person, thus creating more information for each. The motivation of the rabbis to engage in such practice was in large measure a reaction to Greek culture. Greek folktales, such as the Iliad and the Odyssey, were meticulously detailed, and Jews who were exposed to these works expected similar detail in the Torah. The rabbis responded to the demand by expanding and embellishing the biblical narrative, filling in the gaps, adding biographical and historical details, and yes, identifying the anonymous.

There are numerous instances of such practice in Midrashic literature, most of which present tremendous textual and logical problems. For now, though, here is a brief list of such examples from Rashi's commentary on Genesis [the biblical text is in bold]:

Gen. 2:11: **Pishon** [one of the rivers of Eden] is the River Nile; 4:22: **The daughter of Lemekh, Naama**, is the wife of Noah; 6:4: **The people of renown** are Irad, Mehuyael, and Metushael; 10:2: **The nation of Tiras** is Persia; 11:29: **Yiska** is Sarah; 14:1 **Amrafel** is Nimrod; 14:13: **The survivor** is Og; 14:18 **Melchizedek** is Shem; 16:1: **The Egyptian maidservant** – she was the daughter of Pharaoh; 25:1: **Qeturah** is Hagar; 28:11: **The place** is Mount Moriah; 36:43: **A man fought with him** – it was Magdiel, the angel in charge of Esau; 37:15: **A man found him** – it was Gabriel; 38:24: **Tamar** was the daughter of Shem; 41:45: **Poti-Phera** is Potiphar; 42:23: **The translator** – it was Menashe; 42:27: **One of the brothers** – Levi; 46:7 **His granddaughters** – Serah and Yokheved; 46:10: **The son of the Canaanite woman** - this is Dinah; 48:1: **The messenger told Yosef** – it was Ephraim;

There are hundreds more examples in Midrashic literature, many of which contradict each other or the bible itself. That, and the sheer quantity of examples from Rashi's commentary alone, prove that the practice of identifying and merging people and places became sort of a literary genre. As such, we have to be extremely careful in our choice of commentaries and rabbinic literature. We should examine the textual prove and put the interpretation to the test of reason and logic. By teaching our children ideas that are contradictory to the narrative of the Torah, when we cast logic aside, and when we insist that every word of the rabbis is tantamount to prophecy, we are risking a loss of faith among intellectual people.

The survivor? No one knows his name! He was just the messenger.

Shabbat Shalom

* Torah VeAhava (now SephardicU.com). Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD) and faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school). **New: Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets>** . The Sefaria articles include Hebrew text, which I

must delete because of issues changing software formats.

NOTE: Mazel-Tov to Rabbi Haim and Rebbetzin Edna Ovadia, honorees at the Torah Veahava First Annual Gala dinner Sunday evening, November 6.

Lech Lecha: Emerging from the Flames

By Dvir Cahana *

My grandmother, Alice Lok Cahana, Hinda Aliza bat Yosef, was thrown into the gas chamber. Though she was crunched between 200 terrified people, at that moment she was completely and utterly alone. Staring death in the face, she contemplated her 15 years on earth. How cruel it is to have them taken away so quickly. The Nazis took everything from her — her family, her home, her innocence. The only thing she withheld from them was her life. Now, they wanted that, too.

She waited — flinched — expecting death's arrival in any instant, but it never came. The tension was broken with a fit of rage. Several S.S. Guards opened the door and threw clothing at those inside and herded them back to their barracks.

This was the only time that the ruthless death machine — the genocidal project of the Holocaust — sputtered. Those who had worked in the labor camp creating artillery for the Germans had slowly been accumulating little bits of gunpowder that they snuck in the seams of their clothing. When they had acquired enough, they used it to blow up the ovens used to cremate the bodies. Without a working crematoria, they could not be efficient. It is on account of this heroic effort that for one brief moment the final solution was put on pause. Though still in Auschwitz, in which every breath was death-defying, this encounter with the Malach Hamavet was a moment when my grandmother's life was spared. She slipped through the cracks of a glitch.

Though the flame from the Shoah remains in the twentieth century, we, in the 21st century, are still scorched by the pain and loss that it left in its way. Two generations later, though not a reality I could ever comprehend, it is one that continues to affect my life.

Leading into this week's parsha, we are told of a midrash of how Avraham walked into the fire of an oven and emerged on the other side. Though he survived, his brother Haran perished in the inferno (*Genesis Rabbah* 38:11). Surviving is no less of an albatross. Avraham carried the scars of that moment for the rest of his life. He bore the responsibility of taking on his brother's legacy. He adopted Lot, Haran's son, and married Sarah, who according to midrash was Haran's daughter Yiscah.

Perhaps this was the catalyst of Avraham's Lekh-Lekha, departure from the known. Though the story quickly transitions to the more heroic chapters of Avraham's life, he can never shake off where he came from — Ur Kasdim, translated in the midrash as "the fire of the oven." Much like my grandmother, Avraham was no longer able to be in the land which held the source of so much of her trauma. And though, just like my grandmother, this cataclysmic event brought him to Eretz Yisrael, the yoke of this origin story was passed down for generations beyond Avraham.

In the Akedat Yitzhak, the pasuk tells us "Avraham carried the wood of the olah [offering]". The olah offering has the unique property in which it consumes the korban entirely, leaving nothing in its trace. The pasuk continues to say that Yitzhak carried in his own hands — the fire, — usually translated as a knife, this word is the noun form of the root — to eat. In other words, Yitzhak held in his hands both the blaze and that which consumes (Gen. 22:6).

We see that in a post-Ur Kasdim world, both Avraham and Yitzhak carried the burden of the trauma. But it doesn't stop there. It continues past Yitzhak's generation. Rashi pulls the language from Ovadia 1:18 to describe Yaakov and Esau's archetypal character traits.

"The house of Jacob bore the fire...and the house of Esau, the burning material, and they were ignited and consumed."

Perhaps slightly distanced from the epicenter of trauma, Yaakov and Esau are shackled differently by Avraham's transmitted furnace. By sharing the grief, we see that the pain is somewhat diluted over time. Avraham held it alone until it

was shared between him and Yitzhak, and in the subsequent generation both Yaakov and Esau distributed the load together. Each holding onto different aspects of the trauma and holding one another in each other's healing. But the pasuk still concludes by using the [same] root, insinuating that even two generations later both Yaakov and Esau are consumed by the gravitas of their family story.

I am amazed by the life that my grandmother was able to create for herself and our family in spite of the trauma of the Holocaust. Though tattered and bruised and continuing to work through our healing process, the dream has never wavered, our people have never died. Somehow my grandmother resolved to flip her Lok-Leikah to a Lekh Lekha, and to see her gift of life to produce two rabbinic sons and a family of healers through art, medicine, and Torah.

As we remember the souls that were lost in Kristallnacht next week, let us also remember the incredible resilience that it took to not be shattered that night.

Am Yisrael Chai.
Shabbat Shalom.

[note: Hebrew omitted because of software issues with Hebrew going across several word processing programs]

The following is a poem that my grandmother wrote upon liberation from Bergen Belsen:

THE SHADOWS AT NIGHT

The shadows in the dark question me
Are you defeated?

I answer — Oh no! Not me!

Then you must be mad, child!

Don't you see the long line...

Children, grown-ups, in the endless night
The fire around them engulfs their faces

But they still whisper prayers.

And you who got life instead

What will you do with the memories of that long night?
Will you listen to casual chatter,

Or will you scream, that does not matter!

The people — the people in the line,

Their eyes and faces; they pray for help

They pray for forgiveness

Of sins they never committed!

They hoped for an answer, they hoped for help

And their eyes pierced through the iron gates
Their hands reached to heaven with request:
Where are our brothers,

The strong free men?
But the silence was
Choking and bold
And the rain brought
The unexpected cold
The flames killed the soul of all men
Silence was the answer of the free man.
The shadows at night talk to me.
Why are you not mad?
They question me...

Shabbat Shalom.

* Born in Goteborg, Sweden, Dvir Cahana grew up in Canada. He taught for a decade at the Satmar Yeshivat Toras Moishe, founded the Moishe House in Montreal, and started The Amen Institute, where artists and rabbis come together to inspire and create sermons and art work. He is a rabbinical student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and a graduate student at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

<https://library.yct Torah.org/2022/11/emerging-from-the-flames/>

Shavuon Lech Lecha

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

I was almost killed by cows this week!

Whilst hiking through Totara Park, I came upon some great views of the city and large expanses of hilly, meadowy green landscapes. It was a beauty but not so far from civilization that there weren't telephone poles running through it. But one feature of the park that is unique is that it has herds of cows wandering around giving the grass a natural haircut.

But I didn't know about the cows at first as I entered through a side entrance where the Puhinui Forest Stream Trail would start. So when I came upon the cows during my excursion I was fascinated. In America, you never can get so close to 400 pound animals. As I got a little closer to them, I saw that they all turned and stared at me. Or maybe they stared through me. It was this straight gaze that never wavered creating in my mind a sacred connection between cow and human.

But all that mysticism and love of animals evaporated when they all started walking towards me. Not all at once. But one black cow who I assumed was the alpha ox started a slow trot toward me with the other ones following close behind.

Having never been this close to cows before by myself, I assumed the worst that they were planning to defend their territory. So I turned around and started to walk away. (I didn't want to run because I thought that might tempt them to run and chase me. Do cows run?) I looked around, and the whole herd was following me. I quickened my pace and made it to a fence which I went over, and I kept walking. The cows kept staring at me through the fence, which I assumed meant they were thinking, "We'll get you next time." Suffice to say that I am now questioning every "vegan-esque" part of me. Maybe we need to get them before they get us.

This led me to wonder whether Abraham had this issue. Our Torah goes out of its way to say how many animals Avraham received from Pharaoh and even says Abraham was "heavy" with flocks of cattle and sheep. Did Avraham ever have issues with cattle becoming violent? Did those heavy cattle ever gang together and lean their hundreds of pounds over a much lighter human?

Maybe the Rabbi Moshe of 5 years ago would be more concerned with parsing all the mystical allusions and Abrahamic theology that may be tucked away in the words. But now all I'm interested in is Abraham's animal life. We know that his animals had grazing issues with his nephew's animals. But I want to also hear about a day in the life of how Abraham cared for his animals. I want to hear every detail. The long days. The days where very animal seems to be complaining. The days where the sheep were milking well but the cows were in no mood. Did Abraham have to pay taxes on his animals? Did he ever get injured by one?

When we talk to our grandparents, even the tiniest details become special because it's all apart of their world which we want to know about. Rather than hearing life lessons dictated from them, we sometimes just want to inhabit their world in the most real way we can. And then whatever lessons we reap come to us not by dictation but the organic process of inhabitation.

And I wish I could have learned about this sooner. Because Abraham could have told me the same thing everyone else has told me when I told them this story. "Cows won't hurt you. They were just curious."

Shabbat Shalom!

* Rabbi Rube recently moved from Alabama to Auckland, NZ, where he is Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation.

Rav Kook Torah

Lech Lecha: Mamrei's Advice

The Sages made an astounding statement about Abraham and the mitzvah of brit milah (circumcision). According to the Midrash (Tanchuma VaYeira 3), Abraham only circumcised himself after consulting with his friend Mamrei.

"Why did God reveal Himself to Abraham on Mamrei's property? Because Mamrei gave Abraham advice about circumcision."

Could it be that Abraham, God's faithful servant, entertained doubts whether he should fulfill God's command? What special difficulty did circumcision pose that, unlike the other ten trials that Abraham underwent, this mitzvah required the counsel of a friend?

Abraham's Dilemma

Abraham was afraid that if he circumcised himself, people would no longer be drawn to seek him out. The unique sign of milah would set Abraham apart from other people, and they would naturally distance themselves from him. Additionally, people would avoid seeking his instruction out of fear that Abraham might demand that they too accept this difficult mitzvah upon themselves. As the Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah (sec. 47) says:

"When God commanded Abraham to circumcise, he told God, 'Until now, people used to come to me; now they will no longer come!'"

This side effect of brit milah deeply disturbed Abraham. It negated the very goal of Abraham's life and vision — bringing the entire world to recognize "the name of God, Lord of the universe" (Gen. 21:33). If isolated, Abraham would no longer be able to carry on with his life's mission.

This then was Abraham's dilemma. Perhaps it was preferable not to fulfill God's command to circumcise himself. On the personal level, Abraham would lose the spiritual benefits of the mitzvah, but the benefit to the entire world might very well outweigh his own personal loss.

Mamrei's Advice

Mamrei advised Abraham not to make calculations regarding a direct command from God. God's counsel and wisdom certainly transcend the limited wisdom of the human mind.

For his sage advice, Mamrei was rewarded in like measure, *midah kneged midah*. Since Mamrei respected the ultimate importance of God's commands, placing them above human reasoning, he was honored with the revelation of divine prophecy on his property.

God's Plan

In fact, Abraham's fears of isolation were realized. From the time of Isaac's birth, people began to avoid him. Abraham himself sent away the children of his concubines "from before his son Isaac" (Gen. 25:6), and God commanded him to send away Ishmael.

All of this was the Divine plan. God wanted Abraham to concentrate his energies in educating Isaac. For in Isaac resided the seed for repairing and completing the entire world. It was necessary, however, to first nurture the initial sanctity of the Jewish people. The enlightenment and elevation of the world that Abraham so desired would be realized through the spiritual influence of his children.

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 42-43. Adapted from Midbar Shur, p. 197.)

https://www.ravkooktorah.org/LECH_65.htm

The Courage not to Conform (5774, 5781)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

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

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

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

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

To be a Jew is to be willing to challenge the prevailing consensus when, as so often happens, nations slip into worshipping the old gods. They did so in Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. That was the age of nationalism: the pursuit of power in the name of the nation-state that led to two world wars and tens of millions of deaths. It is the age we are living in now as North Korea acquires and Iran pursues nuclear weapons so that they can impose their ambitions by force. It is what is happening today throughout much of the Middle East and Africa as nations descend into violence and into what Hobbes called "the war of every man against every man."^[1]

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

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

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

Why? Because he was prepared to be different. As the Sages say, he was called ha-ivri, "the Hebrew," because "all the world was on one side (be-ever echad) and he was on the other." [3] Leadership, as every leader knows, can be lonely. Yet you continue to do what you have to do because you know that the majority is not always right and conventional wisdom is not always wise. Dead fish go with the flow. Live fish swim against the current. So it is with conscience and courage. So it is with the children of Abraham. They are prepared to challenge the idols of the age. After the Holocaust, some social scientists were haunted by the question of why so many people were prepared, whether by active participation or silent consent, to go along with a regime that was committing one of the great crimes against humanity. One key experiment was conducted by Solomon Asch. He assembled a group of people, asking them to perform a series of simple cognitive tasks. They were shown two cards, one with a line on it, the other with three lines of different lengths, and asked which was the same size as the line on the first. Unbeknown to one participant, all the others had been briefed by Asch to give the correct answer for the first few cards, and then to answer incorrectly for most of the rest. On a significant number of occasions the experimental subject gave an answer he could see was the wrong, because everyone else had done so. Such is the power of the pressure to conform: it can lead us to say what we know is untrue.

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

That is why Abraham, at the start of his mission, was told to leave "his land, his birthplace and his father's house," to free himself from the pressure to conform. Leaders must be prepared not to follow the consensus. One of the great writers on leadership, Warren Bennis, writes: "By the time we reach puberty, the world has shaped us to a greater extent than we realise. Our family, friends, and society in general have told us – by word and example – how to be. But people begin to become leaders at that moment when they decide for themselves how to be." [4]

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

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

Judaism is the counter-voice in the conversation of humankind. As Jews, we do not follow the majority merely because it is the majority. In age after age, century after century, Jews were prepared to do what the poet Robert Frost immortalised:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.* [5]

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

It is what makes a nation of leaders.

FOOTNOTES:

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

[2] Thucydides, 5.89.

[3] Genesis Rabbah 42:8

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

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR LECH LECHA

1. When Abraham began his journey, what was he following and how was he leading?
2. When is it a good idea to take the road less travelled by?
3. Does Abraham's story inspire you to challenge the idols of today? If so, what do you see as today's idols?

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/lech-lecha/the-courage-not-to-conform/>

Note: Monday, November 7, will be two years since Rabbi Sacks, z"l, passed away (on the secular calendar).

Are We as Numerous as the Stars?!

By Yossy Goldman * © Chabad 2022

Moshe Dayan was driving down a highway in Israel in a big rush, so he floored the accelerator and, much to his chagrin, got stopped by a traffic officer for speeding.

"I know who you are, sir. With your black eye patch, you are famous and unmistakable. You are a renowned war hero of our country," said the officer. "But I am giving you a ticket anyway. You, of all people, should be setting a better example."

"Look here," says Moshe Dayan. "You see I have only one eye. Do you want me to look at the road or the speedometer?"

We Jews have never looked at the speedometer.

What do I mean?

In Parshat Lech Lecha, G d promises Abraham (who was still childless at the time) that he will go on to father a great nation.

"And He took him outside and said, "Gaze now toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them."1

G d was promising Abraham that not only would he bear a son, but that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Can you count the stars? Of course, as kids we always tried to. But we know it's actually impossible.

Now, Abraham did of course become the founding father of our nation, but are we really as numerous as the stars? It is

believed that there are 200,000,000,000,000,000,000 (200 billion trillion) stars in the universe. Just a single galaxy has some 100 billion stars. Even if you add up every Jew that ever existed in our 3000-year history, we've never even come close to that number! So how did G d make a promise that seems so wildly exaggerated?

Rabbi Meir Shapiro, respected founder of the Yeshivah Chachmei Lublin in Poland, answered this question as follows:

[Note: text missing in original]

A few verses later,² it becomes clear that the sun only set after this dialogue took place, which means that G d was speaking to Abraham when it was still light outside. No wonder he couldn't see the stars! The radiant sun made it impossible to see a single other star.

In other words, G d's message to Abraham was not that we would be greater than others numerically, but that, like the sun, we would outshine others, regardless of our numbers. All the stars in the universe cannot compete with the great luminary.

To us, quality has always been more important than quantity. We see today quite empirically how smaller is stronger. A little drone can accomplish what a big fighter jet may not be able to do. A smartphone is small enough to fit in your pocket, but it's got an entire office inside.

Here in South Africa, there is an Afrikaans expression, goedkoop is duurkoop, "cheap is expensive." If you buy something cheaply and it doesn't last, you are not getting value for money. In the long run, you will be spending more as you keep replacing the inexpensive item of poor quality and workmanship. But it doesn't only apply to buying a home, or furniture, etc. It is a philosophy of life. Quality counts.

We Jews have never been into numbers. For us, quality is much more valuable than quantity. We represent no more than 1% of the world's population, but when it comes to Nobel Prize winners, we can claim over 22% as our own. Israel is a tiny country but has become a global leader in medical and technological advances, shining brightly in the darkness.

So don't worry about numbers. We're not into numbers. Never feel depressed about being outnumbered. Moshe Dayan didn't look at the speedometer and neither should we (metaphorically, that is). We have never taken the speedometer of life too seriously. Statistically, we shouldn't even exist at all.

We will continue to march to our own beat as we have since the days of Abraham. May we continue to shine in the heavens and on earth. Please G d, we will stand out and sparkle materially, spiritually, academically, morally, ethically, and Jewishly, an eternal source of pride to G d and to ourselves.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Genesis 15:5

2. *Ibid* verse 12.

* Founding director of the first Chabad in South Africa and President of the South African Rabbinical Association.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5678511/jewish/Are-We-as-Numerous-as-the-Stars.htm

Lech Lecha: The Pulse of Life by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

"Abram continued on his way, moving steadily toward the south." Genesis 12:9

The words for "moving steadily" in Hebrew literally mean "going and traveling." Allegorically, this refers to the spiritual process of "running and returning," the two interdependent yet opposing thrusts that must occur constantly and

alternately in order for life to continue and for physical and spiritual growth to take place.

For example, in its yearning to return to its Divine source, the soul aspires to leave the body, but as soon as it starts to do so and achieves the Divine consciousness it was seeking, it is reminded of its Divine mission and humbly returns to the body to continue with its task. This constant spiritual oscillation is reflected in the physical pulsation of the heart and lungs.

Our mission to unite heaven and earth must also comprise both “running and returning,” separating ourselves periodically from the mundane world by losing ourselves in meditation, prayer, or Torah study, yet always returning to the world to fulfill our mission.

– from *Daily Wisdom* #3

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society
291 Kingston Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11213

* A Chasidic insight that Rabbi Wisnefsky selected for the parsha.

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on the 12th of Cheshvan

Volume 29, Issue 3

Shabbat Parashat Lech Lecha

5783 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

A Palace in Flames - Why Abraham? That is the question that haunts us when we read the opening of this week's parsha. Here is the key figure in the story of our faith, the father of our nation, the hero of monotheism, held holy not only by Jews but by Christians and Muslims also. Yet there seems to be nothing in the Torah's description of his early life to give us a hint as to why he was singled out to be the person to whom God said, "I will make you into a great nation ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

This is surpassingly strange. The Torah leaves us in no doubt as to why God chose Noah: "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generations; Noah walked with God." It also gives us a clear indication as to why God chose Moses. We see him as a young man, both in Egypt and Midian, intervening whenever he saw injustice, whoever perpetrated it and whoever it was perpetrated against. God told the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart; I have appointed you as a Prophet to the nations." These were obviously extraordinary people. There is no such intimation in the case of Abraham. So the Sages, commentators, and philosophers through the ages were forced to speculate, to fill in the glaring gap in the narrative, offering their own suggestions as to what made Abraham different.

There are three primary explanations. The first is Abraham the Iconoclast, the breaker of idols. This is based on a speech by Moses' successor, Joshua, towards the end of the book that bears his name. It is a passage given prominence in the Haggadah on Seder night: "Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshipped other gods" (Josh. 24:2). Abraham's father Terah was an idol worshipper. According to the Midrash, he made and sold idols. One day Abraham smashed all the idols and left, leaving the stick with which he did so in the hand of the biggest idol. When his father returned and queried who had broken his gods, Abraham blamed the biggest idol. "Are you making fun of me?" demanded his father. "Idols cannot do anything." "In that case," asked the young Abraham, "why do you worship them?"

On this view, Abraham was the first person to challenge the idols of the age. There is something profound about this insight. Jews, believers or otherwise, have often been iconoclasts. Some of the most revolutionary thinkers – certainly in the modern age – have been Jews. They had the courage to challenge the received wisdom, think new thoughts and see the world in unprecedented ways, from Einstein in physics to Freud in psychoanalysis to Schoenberg in music, to Marx in economics, and Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman in behavioural economics. It is as if, deep in our cultural intellectual DNA, we had internalised what the Sages said about Abraham ha-Ivri, "the Hebrew," that it meant he was on one side and all the rest of the world on the other.[1]

The second view is set out by Maimonides in the Mishnah Torah: Abraham the Philosopher. In an age when people had lapsed from humanity's original faith in one God into idolatry, one person stood against the trend, the young Abraham, still a child: "As soon as this mighty man was weaned he began to busy his mind ... He wondered: How is it possible that this planet should continuously be in motion and have no mover? ... He had no teacher, no one to instruct him ... until he attained the way of truth ... and knew that there is One God ... When Abraham was forty years old he recognised his Creator." [2] According to this, Abraham was the first Aristotelian, the first metaphysician, the first person to think his way through to God as the force that moves the sun and all the stars.

This is strange, given the fact that there is very little philosophy in Tanach, with the exception of wisdom books like Proverbs, Kohelet and Job. Maimonides' Abraham can sometimes look more like Maimonides than Abraham. Yet of all people, Friedrich Nietzsche, who did not like Judaism very much, wrote the following:

Europe owes the Jews no small thanks for making people think more logically and for establishing cleaner intellectual habits... Wherever Jews have won influence they have taught men to make finer distinctions, more rigorous inferences, and to write in a more luminous and cleanly fashion; their task was ever to bring a people "to listen to reason." [3]

The explanation he gave is fascinating. He said that only in the arena of reason did Jews face a level playing-field. Everywhere else, they encountered race and class prejudice. "Nothing," he wrote, "is more democratic than logic." So Jews became logicians, and according to Maimonides, it began with Abraham.

However there is a third view, set out in the Midrash on the opening verse of our parsha: "The Lord said to Abram: Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house" To what may this be compared? To a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames. 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?" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, "I am the ruler, the Sovereign of the universe."

This is an enigmatic Midrash. It is far from obvious what it means. In my book *A Letter in the Scroll* (published in Britain as *Radical Then, Radical Now*) I argued that Abraham was struck by the contradiction between the order of the universe – the palace – and the disorder of humanity – the flames. How, in a world created by a good God, could there be so much evil? If someone takes the trouble to build a palace, do they leave it to the flames? If someone takes the trouble to create a universe, does He leave it to be disfigured by His own creations? On this reading, what moved Abraham was not philosophical harmony but moral discord. For Abraham, faith began in cognitive dissonance. There is only one way of resolving this dissonance: by protesting evil and fighting it.

That is the poignant meaning of the Midrash when it says that the owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the owner of the palace." It is as if God were saying to Abraham: I need you to help Me to put out the flames.

How could that possibly be so? God is all-powerful. Human beings are all too powerless. How could God be saying to Abraham, I need you to help Me put out the flames?

The answer is that evil exists because God gave humans the gift of freedom. Without freedom, we would not disobey God's laws. But at the same time, we would be no more than robots, programmed to do whatever our Creator designed us to do. Freedom and its misuse are the theme of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the generation of the Flood.

By Sari, Russell, Avi, Atara and Arella Mayer
on the occasion of the 20th yahrzeit of Sari's
mother, Mrs. Rita Walker, z"l
(Rivka bat Reuven) - 13 Marcheshvan

In commemoration of the ninth yahrzeit
of Cynthia Abrams, z"l,
14 MarCheshvan, by David Abrams

Why did God not intervene? Why did He not stop the first humans eating the forbidden fruit, or prevent Cain from killing Abel? Why did the owner of the palace not put out the flames?

Because, by giving us freedom, He bound Himself from intervening in the human situation. If He stopped us every time we were about to do wrong, we would have no freedom. We would never mature, never learn from our errors, never become God's image. We exist as free agents only because of God's tzimtzum, His self-limitation. That is why, within the terms with which He created humankind, He cannot put out the flames of human evil.

He needs our help. That is why He chose Abraham. Abraham was the first person in recorded history to protest the injustice of the world in the name of God, rather than accept it in the name of God. Abraham was the man who said: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?" Where Noah accepted, Abraham did not. Abraham is the man of whom God said, "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." Abraham was the father of a nation, a faith, a civilisation, marked throughout the ages by what Albert Einstein called "an almost fanatical love of justice."

I believe that Abraham is the father of faith, not as acceptance but as protest – protest at the flames that threaten the palace, the evil that threatens God's gracious world. We fight those flames by acts of justice and compassion that deny evil its victory and bring the world that is a little closer to the world that ought to be.

[1] Bereishit Rabbah (Vilna), 42:8.

[2] Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, chapter 1.

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated with commentary by Walter Kaufmann, New York, Vintage, 1974, 291.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"And Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all of his possessions, and Lot went next to him to the Negev." (Genesis 13:1)

The portion of Lech Lecha is a kaleidoscope of intriguing and exciting sequences—from the attempted rape of Sarah in Egypt to inter-family conflict to a major war to God's mysterious covenant with Abraham. Are these disparate stories held together only by a timeline, or is there a conceptual scheme placing them in a higher context? I believe that an examination of the portion's seven subdivisions, or aliyot, will provide the uniting theme as well as Israel's most important – though often overlooked – role among the nations (see Elhanan Samet's *Biblical Commentary*).

The portion opens with God's command to Abram to move to the Land of Israel: "I shall make you a great nation, I shall bless you, and I shall make your name great; you shall be a blessing. I shall bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I shall curse; all the

families of the earth shall be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3).

God is here promising Abram two things: national development and a spiritual greatness that will encompass the world. Abram is presented as a world leader who will influence all the families of the earth. After all, he is already teaching his future generations "compassionate righteousness and moral justice" (Genesis 18:18-19).

The Vilna Gaon suggests that the phrase usually translated "I shall curse" (Hebrew a'or) might actually mean "I will show the light" (or is light in Hebrew). Israel is to be a light unto the nations, a kingdom of priests/teachers who bring the message of ethical monotheism to the world.

Abram desperately requires progeny for both of these mandates. And so, the barren Abram and Sarai place their hope for the future in Lot, Abram's deceased brother's son. Hence the Bible records – in the verse following the blessing and the charge – "And Abram went in accordance with the way the Lord spoke to him, and Lot went with him... And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot the son [of his brother] and all the wealth they had acquired..." (Genesis 12:4-5).

But then came the famine and the sojourn in Egypt. Our text (second aliya) highlights Egyptian exile as being fraught with both physical danger (Sarai is seized) and spiritual danger (the materialistic blandishments of Egypt). The Hebrew family survives the near-rape intact, but Egypt seems to have had a corrosive effect on Lot: "And Abram came up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that were his, and Lot next to him..." (Genesis 13:1).

This is very different from when the family first set out for Israel: then, Lot was mentioned right after Abram and Sarai (that is, before their possessions), and went with Abram physically and spiritually (ito) and not merely in physical proximity (imo), as here. At this juncture, however, the change in Lot is merely hinted at. The next aliya, which begins "And also Lot, going with Abram, had sheep, cattle and tents... And the land was not sufficient to carry both of them" (Genesis 13:5-6), leaves no room for doubt. Israel has become too small for the two of them – Abram's mission isn't materialistic enough for Lot, who has no desire to perfect the world; he wants to own it! So he leaves Abram's land and Lot in favor of the lush, Egypt-like Sodom to pursue materialism rather than spirituality, momentary vice rather than monumental vision.

The great message of Abraham's new name (earned in Genesis 17:5) is his universal mission ("Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made thee"). Hence, the second aliya

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concludes with And Abram called out [to humanity] there with the name of the Lord" (Genesis 13:4), and the third aliya concludes with, "And Abram built there an altar to the Lord" (Genesis 13:18).

The fourth aliya deals with Melchizedek (identified by the Midrash as Shem, son of Noah), the king of Jerusalem, who recognizes the universal God of peace. And the rest of the portion deals with God's covenant with Abraham – His promise of an heir who will make Abraham's progeny light the world like the stars of heaven. The structure and content of our Torah portion teach us why and how Lot cannot be considered a suitable heir for Abraham's mission.

We must wait many generations for Lot's return to the fold, in the person of his descendant Ruth (offspring of Moab, the son born to Lot and his daughter).

Apparently, God has cosmic patience, and so must we, if we are to be His emissaries.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

Down the Up Staircase*

For over a thousand years, the weekly Torah portions have been known by their present names with only minor changes. According to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, these titles are "Torah names," headings to which the Torah gives special significance, for they somehow reveal the inner essence of the whole of the sidra.

This Torah portion is called *Lekh Lekha*, which means, "Get thee out," be active and move. Literally, the idiom means, "Go to yourself," return to your spiritual identity, climb up the ladder to spiritual heights, reach your own soul in your ascent. A Jew must never be static. He must be dynamic and progressive in his service of the Lord, in moving himself and history in the direction of God. This, then, is the essence of all that is related in this sidra. Thus, we read of how Abram goes to the land of Israel. He is not traveling as a sightseeing tourist with first-class accommodations. His journey is a symbolic conquest. As Nachmanides points out, Abram's journeys in Canaan prefigured the Jewish possession of the land by actual possession when he staked out the territory. All of this is part of Abram's "going," his *lekh lekha*.

However, there are several important incidents which spell not progress but decline. The foremost failure or setback is the verse: "And there was famine in the land and Abram went down to Egypt" (Genesis 12:10). This is not merely an incidental decision to change residence. Psychologically, it was a major crisis for Abram. He had left Canaan with the divine promise, "I shall make you into a great nation and I shall bless you." Some blessing! He had just come to Canaan, and instead of bringing with him prosperity, he had become

the harbinger of hunger, and he was already fleeing the land.

What a disappointment – history's first oleh had become history's first yored.

Religiously, too, Abram's descent to Egypt was frustrating, almost abortive of his whole mission. His journey to Canaan was meant to be a kiddush Hashem, an act of sanctifying the divine Name by making the one God available and accessible to humans. The Midrash compares the situation to an open box of incense. If it stands in a corner, no one can smell it and it is of no use. But if you take it and move it about in the middle of the room, then your motion causes the odor to be wafted and to benefit all who are present. So God said to Abram: "Move yourself from place to place in Canaan, and thus will your name be made great in the world" – and through your reputation will the divine Name be sanctified and the divine message be known. The journey to Canaan was to be the launching of Abram's religious career. However, if Abram "went down" to Egypt, that canceled out his mission and vitiated his message.

Domestically, this descent to Egypt was the cause of many troubles for Abram. For in Egypt there took place the abduction of Sara – she was kidnapped and taken into the harem of Pharaoh. So our sidra relates troubles as well as triumphs.

And, spiritually and historically as well, we are faced with problems in this sidra. We know the principle that our rabbis laid down, "Ma'aseh avot siman levanim" – the deeds of the fathers are the symbol of the recurring patterns in the lives of their children. But some Jewish teachers, especially Hasidim, taught that this does not mean only that the lives of the patriarchs were symbolic of the historic patterns of their descendants, but that the patriarchs actually participated in the history that came after them, that their actions were the commencement of Jewish history. Therefore, "And Abram went down to Egypt" means not only that Abram's descent to Egypt was a historic symbol of the later Egyptian exile, but that it was in some way itself the beginning of that terrible and bitter exile.

If that is the case, and such were the blows suffered by Abram and Sara, how can we account for the name Lekh Lekha, which indicates progress, growth, and advancement?

The answer provided for us by the Lubavitcher Rebbe is, in essence, this: Sometimes descent is for the purpose of ascent; often you must go down in order to go up to an even higher level than that at which you began. Some failures are merely temporary; they are the future successes in disguise. Sometimes the setback is instrumental to later success. Often you must retreat in order to move on, in which case the retreat is preparatory and part of progress and advance.

Therefore, "Vayered Avram Mitzrayma," Abram's going down to Egypt, led to and was part of "Vaya'al Avram miMitzrayim," Abram's going up again from Egypt. His going down was part and for the purpose of his later going up.

Even Sara's abduction to the harem of Pharaoh served such a function. One of the great Hasidic teachers has taught us that Sara's chaste conduct in the court of Pharaoh was so exemplary that it became the model for Jewish conduct through the centuries of exile in foreign lands. The descendants of Sara, inspired by her model, refused to assimilate. They did not permit the purity of their faith be defiled, they protected the honor of their emuna in God.

So "vayered" is part of "vaya'al," the descent leading to the ascent is all part of lekh lekha, of general progress. Or, to use a metaphor more familiar to us from the popular literature of recent years, sometimes you go down, but it is only going "down the up staircase"; your decline is merely a part of the procedure of ultimate ascent. So it is with our national life. Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery. At the time Joseph, and later all the brothers, thought that this event was an unmitigated disaster. But, as Joseph later told them when he revealed his identity to them, "The agony of my slavery was part of the divine plan to save the entire family now." He went down – but it was on the up staircase, which led even higher.

The same is true with the State of Israel today. Often we are plunged into a gray mood when we consider our international and even internal situation. The constant attrition, the state of no-war-no-peace, the ever-impending threat of greater warfare involving the great powers, the increasing isolation of Israel from neutrals and friends – all this is not calculated to encourage great cheer on behalf of those who love Israel. Nevertheless, we must never permit ourselves to lose our sense of balance. We are only humans, and therefore our perspectives are limited. Even we, in our present situation, can begin to appreciate that quite possibly our present situation is the best of all, that the alternatives may be far worse, that what is happening at the present may be propaedeutic to something much greater, much nobler, much happier. Our present descent may well be part of an ultimate ascent. May God grant that!

And the same holds true for personal life. Life is full of crises. No human being can be spared trauma in his existence. If we lose heart and are discouraged and become crushed, then our pessimism is a self-fulfilling prophecy. We lose sight of opportunities, and we almost wish ourselves into a plunging descent. But if we look at our situation as descent for the sake of ascent, if we adopt a more sanguine attitude, then our optimism becomes self-fulfilling as it sensitizes us to the creative possibilities in descent. So let us leave the pessimistic views

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to the anti-Semites. Recall what Zeresh, wife of Haman, told him when his star began to dim: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is one of the children of the Jews, then you shall not prevail over him but you will fall completely" (Esther 6:13). There was a descent which was permanent. Jews must take a different attitude. For ourselves we must learn to endure the descent as integral to the ascent, as but a temporary setback, preparation for a greater rise.

How often has a middle-aged man, suffering a heart attack, been told by his physician: How lucky you are! This is a warning which may well save your life and prolong it. The same is true for business or professional or academic setbacks. It may be a warning, it may save us from more disastrous adventures, it may teach us something whereby we will better be able to attain our ultimate goal.

This message is not simplistic, unrealistic, or happy-go-lucky. On the contrary, I am pleading for a more sophisticated and higher realism: the confidence and rational understanding that, caught in crisis, man is often prone to depression because he takes an overly dim view, because he is limited emotionally and his vision is therefore curbed; the knowledge that life is never all up or all down, but a series of zigzags – and he never knows when he is zigging or zagging; the faith that while our own personal perspective is limited, that we can only begin to discern events and their true proportions in retrospect but never in prospect, that from the perspective of God what seems to us like descent is really for the purpose of ascent. Because we are so affected personally by our own situation, we tend to exaggerate, and we do not know that we are doing so or in what measure. In the depths, it is hard to realize that you have gone down in order to go up. But it is an act of faith – and intelligence as well.

So, Lekh Lekha, both by content and by name, leaves us with this encouraging message: If we suffer, whether it be illness, financial reverses, or any form of domestic misery or loneliness or frustration, remember "descent for the purpose of ascent." I do not mean that things will always get better, but they often do, little as we expect it. Let us then not despair. Let each of us, in his or her own situation, bear this in mind – not as a palliative or peace-of-mind preachment, but as part of emuna, part of Jewish faith.

Then it will be true of us, as it was said of Abram in this sidra: "And he (Abram) believed in the Lord, and He accounted to him as tzedaka, as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). By this is meant that God considered Abram's faith as a special act of righteousness. But the word "tzedaka" derives from the word meaning "justice." We might therefore translate the verse as: "And Abram believed in the Lord, and God accredited it to him and justified his faith."

When we will have faith that the downturn is part of an up-going, that the descent is for the ascent, and that faith will prove tzedaka, our confidence will be vindicated and justified, and indeed aloh na'aleh. The call of Lekh Lekha, of climbing ever higher, will be ours to achieve.

*[Excerpted from Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot: A Commentary for the Ages – Genesis, co-published by OU Press, Maggid Books, and YU Press; edited by Stuart W. Halpern] *October 30, 1971.*

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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!

Likutei Divrei Torah

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 cardiovascular 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 Chayei 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.

Dvar Torah: |Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Lech Lecha: Jewish History in a Nutshell
ewish 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:

“Umekallelecha 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 descendents.

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.

“Umekallelecha 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 Avraham: 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.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel

Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*

Astrology or Collateral Damage

In this week’s Torah portion of Lech Licha, Abraham questions how God can fulfill his promise of making Abraham into a great nation, when he has not children at an advanced age. God responds by taking him outside and explaining that Just as Abraham cannot count the stars, no one (individual) will be able to count his descendants (**Genesis 15:5**). Rashi on the verse explains why the Torah had to tell us that Abraham was taken “outside” and what is the significance of outside. One of his explanations is that Abraham was taken out of his astrological “future” and predictions. Contrary to what astrologers told Abraham, i.e., that he and Saria would have no children, God indeed promised offspring. But the astrologers were essential correct, continues Rashi. Sarai and Abram, their current names, would not have children. But Sarah and Abraham, with new names would give birth to Isaac and the future of the Jewish people.

This Rashi seems strange to us. Why did not God simply say the astrologers are incorrect? Or, why didn’t God say that “I am more powerful than the stars?” Rashi seems to give legitimacy to the astrologers, as they knew Abram and Sarai. Thus, we must ask: what is the normative view of astrology in traditional Jewish thought?

Do astrologers have the power of predictions? Do the stars indeed have some control over our future or at least are predictive of it? Or not? Throughout the ages, there have always been individuals who have used the movements of the stars as a guide for their behavior. Even in this age of scientific discovery, more and more prominent people admit to believing in astrology and confess to using astrological predictions when making personal decisions. Is there any legitimacy to astrology? Does Judaism reject or support belief in the validity of astrology? Can one be a believing Jew and also believe in astrology? What do the sources tell us? As is often the case, the Talmud offers much conflicting evidence regarding these questions. Many sources seem to support the validity of astrology, while other sources seem to reject its validity.

The Validity Of Astrology In The Sources

The primary source supporting the concept of astrology comes from a passage in the tractate Shabbat (**Shabbat 156a**) where it says that there is a star which causes some people to be wise, another star which causes some people to become wealthy, etc. It further states that the timing of one’s birth (which day of the week, not month or date) determines one’s personality. Rabbi Chanina adds that the hour of the day in which the birth occurred predicts the future of this infant.

Then there is a debate (on the same Talmudic page) whether there exists a *Mazal* (a planetary influence) for the Jewish people as a whole.

While most opinions say that there is no influence, they bring as a proof from our Parsha that God “changed” the astrology (the placement of the planets) so that Isaac would be born to Abraham (similar to changing their names). Thus, it seems from this passage that there is no planetary influence upon the Jewish people. However, from this story, the phrase “there is no planetary influence for the Jewish people” indicates that there was an influence, but that God changed it. From this answer, it is not clear at all from this passage whether the planetary influence exists or not.

Later, on that same Talmudic page, Rabbi Akiva, who had stated his opinion that there is no planetary influence upon the Jewish people, was told by non-Jewish astrologers (Chaldeans) that his daughter was in danger of being bitten by a snake. Rabbi Akiva was very worried, and then did something that would kill the snake. Later, it turns out that Rabbi Akiva's daughter had performed an act of charity, and Rabbi Akiva proclaims that it was the act of charity had saved her from death. This source is, once again, very enigmatic. Rabbi Akiva, who says that there is no planetary influence for Jews, heeds the advice of the astrologers as truth, and then it turns out that the astrologers' predictions did not come true after all. What is the true intention of this passage?

Based on the Talmud's use of the word *Mazal* in this source, the commonly used term “Mazal Tov” does not mean “congratulations” but, rather, “you have been blessed with a good planetary sign, indicating that normative Judaism does believe that the stars have some influence.” Thus, when all Jews use the phrase “Mazal Tov,” they seem to be indicating there are astrological influences, but yours have been blessed for good.

Other sources also indicate the power of astrological influence. Another Talmudic passage (**Moed Katan 28a**) says that the life span, the children, and food of a person are all determined by planetary forces, and not by man himself. Still another Talmudic quotation (**Rosh Hashanah 11a**) says that God changed the astrological charts (moved around the planets) so that the flood at the time of Noah could come on a day which usually does not allow a lot of rain. The Midrash (**Midrash Beraishit Rabbah 10:4**) discusses the various planetary alignments before and after Adam's sin. The Talmud (**Pesachim 2a**) records that there is a certain specific day of the week (Tuesday) when a Jew should move in and move out of his or her house. And yet, various other Talmudic sources seem to negate the validity of this entire approach.

Non-Validity of Astrology in the Sources

The Torah itself forbids consulting with mediums and wizards (**Leviticus 19:31**). A few verses earlier (**Leviticus 19:26**) the Torah commands “*Lo Te-onenu*.” In the Talmud (**Sanhedrin 65b**) there is a three-way

disagreement what this phrase actually forbids. Rabbi Akiva says this forbids predicting the future, i.e., consulting an astrologer who says that on this day you should do this particular action. But can this be the same Rabbi Akiva who acted on the advice of the astrologers (Chaldeans) who predicted about his daughter? In another passage (**Pesachim 113b**) it clearly states that a Jew may not consult an astrologer.

How can these apparent multiple contradictions be resolved to emerge with a unified Jewish approach?

Resolving the Apparent Conflicts

The beginning of a resolution of our question can be found in the Geonic period. They say (**Otzar HaGe'onim on Shabbat 156a**) that one may not view astrology as fatalistic. While it is true that astrology does give a person an inclination, each person has the ability to overcome that basic inclination. Thus, the guiding phrase for Jews is “all is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven” (**Nidah 16b**). There is determination, in that God controls all things, except for man's moral choice. Thus, although man is born with a certain proclivity, he has the ability to choose to overcome these tendencies. One of the ways in which to overcome these tendencies is through prayer (**Otzar Hamidrashim, p. 496**).

Nachmanides (**Commentary on Deuteronomy 18:13 and in his Responsa, no. 282**), who lived several hundred years after the period of the Geonim, tries to resolve the contradictions in the Talmud by saying that while one may not ask an astrologer for a forecast of the future, but a pattern for prediction does indeed exist. Based on the verse commanding man to be “complete with God” (**Deuteronomy 18:13**) and used in the Talmud quoted previously to prove one should not consult astrologers, Nachmanides stresses that the Jew must believe that everything in life comes exclusively from God, and from Him alone can we ask about future events (**Pesachim 113b**). He stresses, however, that this pattern, laid out by God for each person, can be altered through individual merit and deeds. Thus, Rabbi Akiva's contradiction is resolved. He stated that one may not ask an astrologer for information and predictions. However, when he was told information (without asking) he was indeed worried, as there is some validity in astrology. The act of charity by his daughter which changed the fate predicted for her, did indeed save her life.

Maimonides (**in his letter to the wise of Ashkenaz and in Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 11:8-9**) disagrees completely with the approaches of Nachmanides and, before him, the Geonim. Rejecting the validity of astrology altogether, Maimonides says that the planets are mere agents of God for reward and punishment for actions chosen by the free will of man, but they do not contain any unique power of their own. Anyone who believes this, says Maimonides, is an ignoramus and a fool.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Therefore, anyone who asks the advice of an astrologer is punished.

Tur (**Yoreh Deah 179**), who compiled the great commentaries of the Middle Ages while organizing Jewish law in four major areas (a system later used to codify Jewish law by the Shulchan Aruch), quotes both Nachmanides and Maimonides. Then he concludes that if a Jew hears an evil prediction, he or she should pray that it be annulled. However, he also mentions that a Jew may not seek out such a prediction. This basically follows the path of Nachmanides, giving some validity to astrology.

Shulchan Aruch (**Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 179:1**), the Code of Jewish Law, codifies the final ruling regarding astrology. He simply says that one may not consult astrologers, which is a point of agreement between both the approach of Nachmanides and Maimonides. However, in the very next Halacha (**Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 179:2**), Shulchan Aruch says that it is customary not to begin work on a Monday or Wednesday, and that one should marry only when there is a full moon. Rema adds that the period of Torah study should begin on Rosh Chodesh (the beginning of the Jewish month), which is actually followed in practice today is most post-high school Yeshivot. These statements indicate that Shulchan Aruch rejected the notion of Maimonides, i.e., that there is no validity at all to astrology, and supports that of Nachmanides who says that while one may not consult astrologers, there is some validity in astrology and, therefore, one may adopt certain practices based on planetary influence.

Consequently, it seems that most of the authorities believe that astrology has some sort of power, but there is a fine line between believing this, and believing in another power other than God, which is not the Jewish view. Thus, one cannot give credence to any power except God, nor use astrology on a regular basis to guide one's life.

*** This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at nachum@jewishdestiny.com**

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

A Call for Constant Motion and Perpetual Progress - Moriah Dayan

The Torah portion Lech Lecha opens with the famous call to Avraham – “Go for yourself, out of your land, away from your relatives, and your father's house, to the land that I will show you.”

At the end of Parshat Noach, we are told that Avraham and his family are already on their way to the Land of Canaan (Bereshit 11, 31). If that is the case, why is this request of Avraham necessary? What does it add?

Furthermore, in what way was Avraham exceptional, so much so that he merited such a Divine call and calling? The Torah doesn't elaborate on Avraham's deeds or character traits, nor does it divulge any other information that might explain why God chose him in particular. When God turns to Noach directly, the Torah explains that "Noah was a man righteous in his generation"; the same goes for Chanoch, of whom the Torah tells us: "And Chanoch walked with God..." However, with regard to Avraham, apart from giving a technical account of the family's history and their decision to leave Ur Kasdim for Canaan, we are told nothing of Avraham's character traits or conduct that might explain why he, of all people, was approached directly by God. The question must therefore be asked: Why did Avraham merit this Divine call?

The Sefat Emet on Bereshit 21 gives a wonderful explanation based on the Zohar: "It appears that this [call to Avraham] is praise in itself, in that Avraham heard the Divine call of Lech Lecha – Hashem's perpetual call to all people – but was the only one who acted upon it."

In other words, the call of Lech Lecha is meant for every man and every woman and was not directed at Avraham exclusively; God calls out to each and every one of us. Avraham was unique in that he not only heard the call, but decided to act upon it. This explanation answers two questions. We now understand why there was a call from God despite the fact that Avraham and his family were already on the way to the Land of Canaan; we also understand Avraham's singularity in that he was attentive to this call.

But what is the significance of this call, which, according to the Zohar, is actually meant for every person? And what does this call try to evoke? Maybe if we are better able to understand Avraham Avinu's conduct and uniqueness, we will have a deeper understanding of the nature of this call.

A perusal of the Torah verses pertaining to Avraham shows that words such as walking, running, travelling, haste, and rising early appear often. The common denominator is that all of the above reflect motion. Avraham is constantly on the go; always advancing; never ceasing to move forward.

When Avraham is commanded to take his son and offer him as a sacrifice, we once again find the words Lech Lecha (Bereshit 22, 2). In that same portion (22, 3), Avraham "rises early" (mashkim), the same way he did when Sodom was destroyed (Bereshit 19, 27). In the portion of Vayera (Bereshit 18, 2), Avraham runs to the messengers (angels) and later on (verse 8) runs to his herd. In the very same section, he also hastens to Sarah and says to her – "Make haste and knead dough for cakes" (verse 8); he then

tells his servant to hurry and prepare the meat (verse 6).

This is the quality that characterizes Avraham more than any other, and it was also the lesson he taught the world. We are told in Bereshit Rabbah 42: "The whole world was on one side, and Avraham was on the other." Avraham was not fixed to one idea or place, nor did he adhere to the conventions of his time; rather, he was on a perpetual search, always aspiring to grow and change. Our Sages in Bereshit Rabbah (39, 1) compare Avraham Avinu to a man who travels from place to place and sees a palace in flames, and wonders whether the palace has no owner who watches over it. The owner of the palace then looks out and says – 'I am the owner of the palace.' Similarly, because Avraham Avinu wondered – 'Is it possible that this world is without a leader?' – the Holy One blessed be He, looked out and said to him, 'I am the Master of the world.' The fact that Avraham is always in motion leads him to constantly search for the very essence of all things. In keeping with this, our Sages (Bereshit Rabbah 39, 2) also compare Avraham to a flask filled with fragrant herbs. As long as the flask is not moved, its fragrance cannot escape. But when it is carried from place to place, its fragrance wafts out and fills the world with a sweet scent.

The Sefat Emet on Bereshit 29 expands on this quality: "Take yourself and go out of your country – lech lecha. A human being is called a mehalech, one who goes and moves, because man has to always be moving forward, elevating himself, transcending habit and nature. And even if one is able to achieve a higher level in one's worship of God, this, too, will become habit after a time. Hence, one must always find new internal pathways through which to serve God..."

In our portion of Lech Lecha (Bereshit 12, 9), we encounter Avraham's mobility most intensively. Rashi gives the following explanation on the verse "And Avraham journeyed, going forward and travelling southward": 'Going forward and travelling – sometimes he would stop somewhere for a month or more, and then set forth again and go to a different place...' Avraham was constantly on the move, never stopping.

Later in the parsha (Bereshit 17, 1), as a backdrop to the commandment of circumcision, God says to Avraham: "I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be wholehearted." Once again, God turns to Avraham and commands him to walk, to be in motion.

The Malbim (Hebrew acronym for Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel) offers a fascinating commentary: "Walk before me – be my partner in the creation by mending and making whole what is unfinished and imperfect."

Likutei Divrei Torah

Being in motion and moving forward represents being a partner in the Creation and engaging in Tikkun Olam.

The Divine call to all mankind is the call that Avraham heard and heeded – the call to walk, to advance and to be partners with God himself in the Creation of the world.

It is not by chance that the path of life every Jew must follow is called halakha (Jewish law), which is derived from the same root as the Hebrew word for "walk/go". This path of halakha is one in which a person is always advancing and evolving, never standing in one place nor bound by social norms. This is a way of life that compels us to listen to the call heard by Avraham; to go out and seek; to be in motion and to always move forward.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

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 Babel. 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 - [מעשה אבות סימן לבנים] - meaning that events in their individual lives would harbingers 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 אירע (לאברהם) כל מה שאירע לו (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.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah: Rabbi Label Lam

One Step Better - And Hashem said to Avram, "Go (to) (for) yourself, from your land, from your birth place, from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. (Breishis 12:1)

Embedded in these first words spoken directly to our patriarch Avraham Avinu is the beginning of our mission as a people. One oddity that I continue to cogitate on year after year is that HASHEM did not give Avraham a specific address, an exact location of where it is he is to begin going to. Why not tell a person where he is going? I have been collecting

insights now for quite a while and a new one occurred to me just this morning.

I found myself galloping through Davening this morning, rushing to the end when suddenly I arrested myself with this thought, "Where are you hurrying to already?" I decided to slow down and to drink in every word as if I was sipping a hot sweet tea. Then it occurred to me that this exercise might just be another valid answer to that question. Why not tell Avraham precisely where he is going?!

If Avraham was given the name of the location he was to head to, he might just get the misimpression that the goal is just to be in that place. Now we can see that it is not only an instruction to relocate from one geographic station and to another spot on the map. This is not a horizontal journey at all.

Rather, it seems that HASHEM wanted Avraham to revel in the process, the struggle, and to discover the sweet taste of success in every step. It's not in arriving that the purpose of the journey is accomplished but in the journey itself. The train is always arriving but never arrives. Rebbe Nachman said, "Wherever I am going, I am going to Jerusalem." It may be a circuitous route but we are still going and going. That may be at the heart of these instructions.

We find at the very beginning of creation, HASHEM commanded the earth to make a PRI ETZ and FRUIT-TREE and instead the earth gave forth an ETZ OSEH PRI- A tree that gives forth fruit.

What is the difference between the two? They represent two ways of living and experiencing this life. With the tree that produces a fruit, the fruit is a goal and the tree is merely a means. A person lives and strives daily to eventually get to a goal that has been placed far ahead. A person labors his whole life to finally retire with a dream in mind that then life begins but it is often not the case.

They look back and wonder, "Was that lifetime of struggle all worth it for this?" Peggy Lee sang - crooned so many years ago, "Is that all there is? If that's all there is then let's break out the booze." Even when the goal is worthy and worth it the means is tasteless and tough like the bark of a dark tree.

The TREE-FRUIT that HASHEM wanted has the rare quality where the fruit and the tree have the same taste. The means is as delicious and exciting as the final product.

A person who is learning through the Talmud is not only feeling the joy of learning when a Tractate is finished or the entire project is concluded. No! He is reveling and delighting even in the great struggle involved in decoding words of Torah. The process is as delicious as the product.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter from Kelm, had a beautiful and relevant insight into the verse, "Yismach Lev M'Vakshe' HASHEM" -Happy is the heart of those who seek HASHEM" He said that usually when a person is looking for something, he is not happy until he finds it.

You name the search! Looking for a house, a job, a couch, or any other object of desire, the frustration of the search is not relieved until what one is seeking is finally found.

However, when someone is looking for HASHEM, then the experience is very different. Even the seeking itself gladdens the seeker's heart because with every effort one is always one step closer and one step better.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Continuing Avraham's Journey Rav Doron Perz

The story of Avraham and his brothers, Nachor and Haran, is the story of the Jewish people - one-third survived and lived out Jewish destiny, one-third assimilated and one-third were persecuted.

Avraham followed the call of "Lech Lecha", following G-d's odyssey to the Holy Land, out of which came the great Abrahamic message, eventually resulting in the Jewish people and our spiritual mission. Haran was persecuted - Rashi brings a Midrash about the place called "Ur Kasdim", the fiery furnace, where the leader Nimrod persecuted Avraham and his family for their belief and Haran was murdered when he sided with Avraham.

The third brother Nachor stayed in Charan (the place where Yaakov would later go to find a wife) where he assimilated into the local cultures.

In the last century, one-third of our people were persecuted and murdered in the ovens and furnaces of Europe in the Shoah (Holocaust); we face so much assimilation and people spiritually being lost to the Jewish journey; and also the incredible privilege of the rebuilding of the Torah world, especially in Eretz Yisrael, and the return of the Abrahamic odyssey. That is our challenge today, with the privilege of having the State of Israel, the rebirth of Torah in Israel and around the world, is to continue this odyssey. Twice Avraham is told "Lech Lecha", the first regarding his journey to the Land of Israel, and the second in the Akeida telling him to go up to Yerushalayim. Being deeply connected to the Land of Israel, to Yerushalayim, to Hashem and to our spiritual destiny - this is the journey we need to continue on, which began 4,000 years ago and continues today in the State of Israel and the incredible communities connected to it around the world.

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AVRAHAM: THE EARLY YEARS

by Yitzchak Etshalom

I

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II THE MIDRASH

A: PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

And Haran died in front of Terach his father.

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

Terach was an idolater.

One day he went out somewhere,

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

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

"How old are you"?

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

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

And desires to worship something one day old."

[The customer] would be ashamed and leave.

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

C: THE OVERALL QUESTION

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

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

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

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

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

D: THE THESIS

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

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

III RECONSTRUCTING THE MIDRASH

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

A: Terach the idolater

B: Terach the salesman

C: Avraham's style of argumentation

D: Avraham's meeting with Nimrod

E: Avraham in the fire

F: Haran and “Pascal's Wager”

A: Terach the Idolater

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

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

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

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

mation found in Yehoshua's farewell address.

B: Terach the Salesman

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

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

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

C: Avraham's style of argumentation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

D: Avraham's meeting with Nimrod

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

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

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

Avraham is also considered royalty:

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

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

E: Avraham in the fire

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

F: Haran and “Pascal’s Wager”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parshat Lech Lecha: Trust in Training

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

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

AVOID DISAPPOINTMENT: LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS!

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

A FEW GOOD MEN:

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

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

AVRAHAM: THE FIRST TO PASS:

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

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

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

BEREISHIT 15:1-18 --

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

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

The word of Hashem came to him, saying, "He shall not inherit you; instead, he who comes from your body, he shall inherit you." He

brought him outside and said, "Look at the sky and count the stars, if you can count them!" He told him: "So [many] shall be your children." He believed Hashem, and thought it just ["tzedaka"].

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

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

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

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

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

NOW FOR SOME ANSWERS:

- 1) On the issue of what Avraham is afraid of, several interpretations are offered by the mefarshim (commentators) :
 - a) Avraham is afraid he has used up his stored-up merit, that he has been rewarded for all of his good deeds with the success Hashem has granted him in the war he and his men have just won. He fears that he has consumed what should have been stored up for him as his portion in the afterlife. (The weakness of this alternative is that there is no evidence for it at all in the text.)
 - b) He is afraid that during the war he killed a righteous person. (Again, no evidence for this in the text.)
 - c) He is afraid that the supporters of the kings he has beaten will hunt him down. (Support for this possibility: Hashem's reassurance comes immediately after Avraham's victory in the war.)

In any event, what is clear here is that Hashem is doing is reassuring him.

- 2) What is the reward is for? Again, suggestions from the mefarshim:
 - a) The reward is his place in the world to come, a reward for all the good deeds of his life: he is being told that he did not use up all of his merit. (Again, no textual support at all.)
 - b) The reward is for saving Lot, his nephew, which is what he has just done in the previous section and for which he has just refused the reward offered by the king of Sedom. Hashem is reassuring him that despite his refusal of the king of Sedom's reward (Avraham did not want to be enriched by an evil person), he will be rewarded.
- 3) Why does Hashem connect the seemingly unrelated issues of Avraham's fear and the reward he will get?

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

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

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

a) Most mefarshim suggest that Avraham is not doubting Hashem's promise, but he is afraid that the promise has been revoked because he did something wrong. There is no textual evidence for this approach; the commentators are motivated to suggest this alternative primarily because the other alternative is to say that Avraham did indeed doubt Hashem's promise.

b) A plain reading of the text indicates exactly that: Avraham's faith in the promise is weakening. He has grown old, yet he remains childless. He believed the promise before, but he is beginning to worry, and he wants reassurance.

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

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

This is really not an interruption in the middle of the conversation. It's the Torah's way of telling us that these are two totally separate conversations! Hashem introduces Himself again because He is indeed introducing Himself at the beginning of a separate conversation which took place at a different time. The reason why the Torah places the two conversations side by side is part of the answer to our next question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:

We are used to thinking of Avraham as appearing on the scene of the Humash with his faith in Hashem already perfect; we are used to thinking of him as having *already* been selected by Hashem. I am suggesting that he has not yet passed all the tests (a thought confirmed resoundingly by Hazal). At this point, Hashem is both training him and reassuring him, on the one hand, as well as testing him, on the other hand. The command to leave his homeland is one of the tests, which, as we know, he passes. This earns him the right to the promises recorded earlier in the parasha -- the promises of children and land. In the section we looked at above, Hashem relates to

Avraham not as a tester, challenging Avraham's faith, but as a trainer and reassurer of Avraham's faith. Avraham is afraid, so Hashem tells him not to be afraid, that He will protect him; Avraham is worried about the promise of children, so Hashem provokes him into revealing his doubt and then reassures him; Avraham is worried about the promise of the land, so Hashem provokes him into revealing his doubt and then reassures him by making a covenant with him.

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

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

THE CIRCUMCISION COVENANT:

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

BEREISHIT 17:1-14 --

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The physical symbol of this covenant also indicates that the covenant does not focus on Avraham, the individual, and instead focuses on all of the future individuals of the nation he will produce. That symbol is the mila, circumcision. Avraham is the first person to enter this covenant, the first to perform the act of cutting which is traditionally part of a covenant (as in the case of the Covenant Between the "Cut Pieces" which we discussed above). But unlike the previous covenant, which was sealed by Avraham and his action, this covenant, the

covenant of circumcision, must be repeated in every generation, by every male individual who wishes to be a part of it. Unlike the Covenant Between the Cut Pieces, where Avraham played a central role, here he is only the first in a line of millions of Jews who will enter the same covenant with Hashem. By keeping the covenant, each generation affirms its relationship with Hashem and with Eretz Yisrael. Of course, one cannot help pondering this everlasting covenant's implications in light of recent developments in Israel: finding the correct balance between our responsibility to our and future generations' connection to Eretz Yisrael, and our responsibility to our and future generations' safety and security and peace, can only be a wrenching process. May Hashem guide us and our leaders.

Shabbat Shalom

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Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT LECH L'CHA

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

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

Did Avraham Avinu simply win a 'Divine lottery'?

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

THE SIN OF "DOR HA'PLAGAH"

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

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

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

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

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

So what did they do that angered God?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BET-EL & SHEM HASHEM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A 'STRATEGIC' LOCATION

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

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

A BIBLICAL THEME

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

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

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

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

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

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

IN MESSIANIC TIMES

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

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

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

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

The following table reviews this contrasting parallel:

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

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

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

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

REWARD OR PURPOSE

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom,
menachem

=====

FOR FURTHER IYUN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PARSHAT LECH L'CHA -Part Two

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

THE FIRST HITGALUT - BECOMING GOD'S NATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FIRST 'SPLIT'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let's explore that possibility.

LIKE NEPHEW LIKE SON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LEAVING AVRAHAM OR LEAVING GOD?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BRIT BEIN HA'BSTARIM - THE FIRST COVENANT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is the meaning of this question?

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

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

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

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

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

NOT IN YOUR LIFETIME!

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

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

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

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

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

A PROOF FROM VA'EYRA

To prove that this is God's answer to Avraham's question, we simply need to read the famous psukim in Parshat Va'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'b'tarim"], 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'b'tarim.

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'b'tarim 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'b'tarim, explaining HOW Bnei Yisrael will become a nation, is quite significant for it highlights the special nature of our relationship with the land.

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

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

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

THE BIRTH OF YISHMAEL

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

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

BRIT MILAH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

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

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

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

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly, there is a broadening of the information provided:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To further strengthen the parallel between Terach and No'ach, note the ages when the patriarchs of the second "begats" list (linking No'ach to Avraham) first had children. Shem was 100; 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 (*haNimtza'ot*)..." (19:16)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Where does Mo'av come from?

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

"And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Avraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot lived. And Lot went up out of Tzo'ar, and lived in the mountain, and his two daughters with him; for he feared to live in Tzo'ar; and he lived in a cave, he and his two daughters. And the firstborn said to the younger, Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth; Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father. And they made their father drink wine that night; and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; and he perceived not when she lay down, nor when she arose. And it came to pass on the next day, that the firstborn said to the younger, Behold, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine this night also; and you go in, and lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father. And they made their father drink wine that night also; and the younger arose, and lay with him; and he perceived not when she lay down, nor when she arose. Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father. And the firstborn bore a son, and called his name Mo'av; the same is the father of the Mo'avites to this day. And the younger, she also bore a son, and called his name Benammi; the same is the father of the Ammonites to this day." (19:29-38)

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

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

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

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

III. CHAPTERS 1-11: A BRIEF RECAP

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

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

Ark in Chapter 9 and those given to Adam in Chapter 1).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

V. OLAM HESED YIBANEH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VI. AND THEY SEPARATED...

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

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

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

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

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

In the meantime, we find that the uncompromising characteristic of Emet was "diluted" in the generations following Avraham. Although we will address this topic at length in a few weeks, I'd like to briefly point out that there are a number 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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Keep Your Enemies Close – Parshas Lech Lecha

By Raphael Grunfeld - 10 Heshvan 5783 – November 3, 2022

These highlights from the Parsha Shiur of **Haga'on Harav Dovid Fienstein, zt"l**,

are brought to you by Raphael Grunfeld, a partner in the Wall Street law firm of Carter Ledyard & Milburn LLP, who received semicha in Yoreh Yoreh from Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem of America and in Yadin Yadin from Harav, Haga'on Dovid Feinstein, zt"l, and who attended his weekly parshah shiur for twenty years.

“Va'avarcha m'varachecha... v'nivrechu vecha kol mishpechos ha'adama – I will bless those who bless you... and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you” (12:3). The words v'nivrechu vecha not only mean that the families of the earth will be blessed through you, but also that they will be grafted onto the Jewish people. When other nations see that by simply blessing Avram, they too will be blessed, they will want to convert to Judaism. Jews by birth who may be practicing Judaism out of habit will be strengthened in their commitment to Torah by the fresh enthusiasm and conviction of such converts.

G-d tells Avram to go to the land “that I will show you” without naming the land. So, Avram wanders through the land of Canaan, likely passing many places, but the Torah only mentions two specific locations: Shechem and Alon Moreh. In Shechem he experiences a troubling prophecy, a vision of the sons of Ya'akov fighting there. He does not yet know whether the children of Ya'akov fighting in Shechem are his own descendants, or if the land of Canaan is his own land, because G-d has not told this to him yet. Perhaps the children of Ya'akov are not his biological children but are merely his students, in the spirit of “whoever teaches Torah to his friend's son is regarded as if he had fathered him” (Sanhedrin 19b).”

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In Alon Moreh, which is close to Shechem, he experiences a joyful prophecy. He has a vision of the descendants of Ya'akov pledging collective responsibility to the Torah at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival. Avram understands that what appears to be negative infighting in Shechem can turn out to be positive unity at Alon Moreh. If there has been sinas chinam, selfish hatred, there might also be ahavas chinam, selfless love. But if you have not experienced the former, you will not fully appreciate the latter. It is only after Avram demonstrates his own ahavas chinam, by praying for the welfare of others and celebrating the joy of others in a land of others, that G-d tells him in pasuk 7 that these are his biological children, and this is indeed his own land.

No sooner has G-d told Avram that the land of Israel belongs to him and his descendants, there is a famine in the land and Avram finds himself on the road to Egypt. This is one of the tests of faith he undergoes to see whether he will question G-d. Fearing that Pharaoh will kill him and take Sarai as his wife, Avram asks Sarai to tell Pharaoh that she is his sister, “Lmaan yitav li va'avureich, v'chaysa nafshi big'lalech – so that it will be good for me because of you, and I will live thanks to you” (12:13). Rashi interprets these words to mean that the Egyptians will give Avram gifts. But that begs the question. Why does Avraham add the words v'chaysa nafshi big'lalech. Obviously, Avram cannot enjoy gifts if he is not alive. And why use the word “nafshi”?

G-d did not directly instruct Avraham to go down to Egypt. The Gemara informs us that there was no mass exodus from Canaan to Egypt. People were able to survive the famine in Canaan, even if only with difficulty. But Avram felt compelled to go down to Egypt of his own accord, even if he did not yet know why. And in so doing, he set the stage for the ultimate survival of the Jews in Egypt.

Like Nachum Ish Gamzu, Avram understood that the famine was for the best. Lmaan yitav li va'avureich means gam zu l'tovah (this too is for the best). In asking Sarai to pretend she was his sister, a ruse which led to Pharaoh being stricken with a skin disease that made intimacy with her impossible, Avram and Sarai guaranteed the future purity of the nefesh of the Jewish people. Even though the Egyptians were later given the power to enslave the Jews, they did not dare touch the Jewish women, out of fear that what happened to Pharaoh years earlier, would happen to them.

As a result, the Torah can vouch that the pedigree of all the twelve tribes was unadulterated. It does so by adding two letters of G-d's name, the letters yud and hei, to the names of the tribes, as in mishpachas haChanochi (Rashi to Bamidbar 26:5 and Tehillim 122:4.). In addition, by acting in this way, Avram and Sarai guaranteed that the twelve tribes would not assimilate with the Egyptians but would live apart in the land of Goshen. Chazal tell us that the land of Goshen was given to Sarai by Pharaoh, in compensation for the stress he caused her and that it was later bequeathed to Joseph's brothers when they arrived in Egypt (Bereishit 47:6, Pirkei DeRabi Eliezer 26:7). By creating these two precedents in Egyptian history, which resulted in the Egyptians desisting from having relations with Jewish women and earmarking the land of Goshen for the Jews, Avram and Sarai saved the Jewish soul from corruption and assimilation. That is the meaning of v'chaysa nafshi big'lalech.

As a result of the gifts Pharaoh lavished on them, both Avram and Lot became extremely wealthy. But they related to their wealth very differently, “V'Avram kaveid me'od bamikneh bakesef u'vazavah – Avram was exceedingly wealthy, in livestock, silver and gold” (13:2). The word kaveid means that Avram considered his wealth a burden and the word me'od means he suffered from this burden, (Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis 9:8). Avram did not need all that wealth to live, and he understood that G-d had deposited it in his bank account in trust for other less fortunate people. He was now burdened with the responsibility of finding those people and making sure he fulfilled his function as paying agent. Shlomo Hemelech's warning that “osher shamur livalav l'ra'aso – riches hoarded by their owner to his misfortune” (Kohelet 5:12) did not apply to Avram.

With Lot it was different. Although we are told “V’gam l’Lot...haya tzon u’vakar v’ohalim,” (13:5) we do not find the words kaveid me’od. For Lot, whatever he had was nice, but it was not enough. He was the perfect example of Natan Habavli’s adage that whoever has 100 desires 200. And so, in addition to the abundance he already had, he sent his animals to graze in the fields of others. This caused strife between Avram and Lot.

Let us not quarrel says, Avram, for we are “anashim achim” (13:8). Avram and Lot were not brothers; they were uncle and nephew, relatives. But what Avram meant is that even though we have to part ways to end the strife, I will always be there for you in times of crisis when you say “ach” and groan in pain (Rashi, Bereishis 7:23). Avram would always be there for Lot, to step into the breach, “la’achos es hakera,” as he did when he waged war with the five kings and rescued Lot from captivity.

G-d promises Avram (Bereishis 13:15) that He will give him the land forever (“ad olam”). What happened to that promise? True, we are no longer in Eretz Yisrael, because “mipnei chata’einu galinu mei’artzeinu,” as we say in the Yom Tov davening, but it is still and always will be artzeinu, our land. Nobody can take that ownership right away from us, even as they squat in our land. A yerusha can be taken away, but not a nachalah. Unlike the land of Moav, which changed ownership when conquered by Sichon, the ownership of Eretz Yisrael belongs to us, irrespective of who has possession of it.

That the land belongs to us even as we live in the Diaspora is confirmed by the very next pasuk in which G-d says, “I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth.” When the Jews live in Israel, they are not compared to the dust of the earth. They are compared to the stars of the heavens. It is only when they are living in the Diaspora that they are compared to the dust of the earth, because everybody treads on them. The juxtaposition of these two verses, one guaranteeing that Eretz Yisrael will be our land forever and the other telling us that we will be like the dust of the earth, proves that the land belongs to us forever, irrespective of where we live.

“Vayehi bimei Amrafel” (14:1). We know that the word “vayehi” always spells trouble. What was the trouble with the war that Avram won against the five kings?

There are three reasons given to explain why the Jews were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years (Nedarim 32a). The first is because Avram mobilized his Torah students to fight in the battle instead of hiring mercenaries (14:14). The second is because Avram asked G-d for a guarantee that his descendants would inherit the land (“ba’ma eidah ki irashena”) when he should have trusted G-d without guarantees (15:8). The third is that he allowed the King of Sedom to keep the war prisoners of Sedom instead of taking possession of them and converting them to Judaism (14:21).

It was Avram asking Hashem for a guarantee that that was the root cause of the other two incidents. No concrete action was involved in asking for the guarantee. It was merely words. But it showed a lack of trust in G-d that led to the two concrete actions in the war of the five kings. It was lack of trust in the ability to put together an army in short order that led Avram to mobilize the Torah students on hand, instead of allowing them to continue to study. And it was lack of trust that G-d would help him convert the wayward prisoners of Sedom that led him to give them up and abandon them in the custody of the King of Sedom.

The academic question ba’ma eidah ki irashena would in itself have not led to the punishment of Mitzraim, but it was the practical application of this question in the war of the five Kings, that triggered it. That was the vayehi.

When Sarai understood that she could not bear a child, she consented to Avraham having relations with her maidservant Hagar. Somehow, Sarai understood that her having a child was dependent on Hagar having a child, “ulai ibaneh mimenah” (16:2). Sarai could only build her family on the back of Hagar’s family. We know that Yaakov could not exist without Eisav. He needed Eisav to keep him keep in line. Yaakov would only rule over Eisav if he remained loyal to the Torah. The moment Yaakov strayed from adherence to the Torah, Eisav would rule over him (Bereishis 27:40 and Bereishis Rabbah 67:7).

The same was true for Yitzchak. He needed his archenemy Yishmael nearby to keep him in line. If Avram would never have married Hagar, Yishmael would never have been born and, in turn, Yitzchak could never have been born. The intervention of Hagar in the story of Avram and Sarai was essential for Yitzchak. This existential link between Yitzchak and Hagar can be seen from the gematria of Hagar which is 208, the same as the gematria of Yitzchak.

From: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** <ryfrand@torah.org> to:

ravfrand@torah.org date: Nov 3, 2022, 5:51 PM subject: Rav Frand - Kiruv Success "On the Road, " But Not at Home

Parshas Lech Lecha

Kiruv Success "On the Road," But Not at Home

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1135 – “Schar Pe’sios” – Should You Walk Or Drive To Shul (on weekdays). Good Shabbos!

In enumerating those who accompanied Avram on his journey from Charan, the Torah mentions that he took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, the property that they acquired, and “the souls they made in Charan” (Bereshis 12:5). Chazal say that “the souls made in Charan” were individuals that Avram “brought under the Wings of the Shechinah.” In other words, these were people whom he introduced to monotheism, and whom he influenced to reject Avodah Zarah.

In the beginning of the Rambam’s Hilchos Avodah Zarah, he describes the development of the theology of Avodah Zarah in the world, and how Avraham Avinu was the first iconoclast. Avram influenced the inhabitants of Charan and had many followers who accompanied him when he left on his journey to Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Shlomo Glasner, a grandson of the Chasam Sofer, notes that Avram was not originally from Charan. Avram originally grew up in Ur Kasdim. The Medrash describes how Avram began his lifelong battle against Avodah Zarah in Ur Kasdim. He was challenged by Nimrod, the ruling power, who worshipped the god of fire. Nimrod threw Avram into a fiery pit to “see if your G-d can save you from the power of my god.” The Medrash says that Avram was miraculously saved from the fiery furnace. Some Rishonim count this challenge as the first of the ten challenges that Avraham Avinu endured (per Avos 5:3).

The question must be asked, why was Avram apparently only successful in bringing people “under the Wings of the Shechina” in Charan? What happened in Ur Kasdim? Why was he not successful in drawing people to the concept of monotheism in his home town of Ur Kasdim? We would imagine that after having witnessed Avram miraculously escape from Nimrod’s attempt to kill him, the people in Ur Kasdim would have certainly been ready to listen to Avram’s message of One G-d and follow him! And yet, it appears that Avram only succeeded in his ‘kiruv’ efforts in Charan. Why was that?

Rav Shlomo Glasner gives an interesting answer. Imagine the scene: All the town people were gathered. Nimrod challenged Avram. The people are sitting in the bleachers watching. Avram jumps into the fiery furnace and emerges unscathed. One fellow says to the person next to him, “Look at that! That is amazing. This person must have a real G-d!” The person next to him says “Wait a minute. Not so quick. If this Avram fellow is for real, then why is his father still in the Avodah Zarah business?” If Avram had a true religion, wouldn’t he first have an effect on his own family members? And yet, his father rejected it. People murmured, “There must be something fishy here.” Avram must have worn a fire-retardant suit or something. Therefore, Avram did not have the same effect “at home” in Ur Kasdim that he later had in Charan, because there were sceptics in Ur Kasdim who tried to debunk the miracle, based on the fact that Avram’s immediate family appeared unimpressed.

A Kri U’Kesiv Teaches Avram’s Sensitivity to His Wife’s Privacy

“From there he relocated to the mountain east of Beth-el and pitched his tent (va’yet ahalo)...” (Bereshis 12:8). The word ‘ahalo’ in the expression “He pitched his tent (ahalo)” is spelled aleph hay lamed hay. Thus, the kesiv (the way it is written) is actually “her tent” rather than the k’ri (the way it is read) which is “his tent.” Rashi comments on this, saying that Avram first pitched his wife’s tent, and only afterwards pitched his own tent.

Why did he do that? The Levush Ha’Orah, one of Rashi’s super-commentaries, explains that Avram did this to protect the tznius of Sora. She should have a tent to move into immediately, and not need to wait out in the open while he first pitched his tent. One of the outstanding character traits of Sora was her modesty. Chazal say that Avram didn’t even know what she looked like until they arrived in Mitzrayim. Her privacy and comfort drove Avram to prioritize the setting up of her living quarters above setting up his own tent.

How long does it take to pitch a tent? We are not talking about hours or days! And yet, the Levush Ha’Orah explains that this is what Rashi is saying. The sensitivity of Avram for his wife’s privacy was such that by employing this kri u’ksiv, the pasuk is alluding to the fact that he pitched her tent before his tent.

Every year, we mention that Sefer Bereshis is about the maxim Ma’aseh Avos siman l’Banim (the actions of the forefathers foreshadow the actions of the children). This lesson is also Ma’aseh Avos siman l’Banim. A Jewish husband must be sensitive to the feelings and sensitivities of his wife.

This dovetails with a Gemara in Bava Metzia 59a. Rav Chelbo says that a person must always be careful about the honor of his wife because blessing resides in a person’s home only by virtue of his wife. He brings another pasuk as a proof from this week’s parsha: “And Avram benefited because of her” (Bereshis 12:16). This means that a person’s honoring his wife is a segulah for parnassah. That is what the Gemara says!

This is ironic because everybody under the sun wants a “segulah for parnassah”. The Gemara gives an explicit segulah for parnassah—a person should honor his wife! Come and see how particular Avram was for the honor of Sora—he pitched her tent first so she did not need to stand there for an extra ten minutes out in the open.

I saw an interesting observation in the sefer Darash Mordechai from Rav Mordechai Druk: Why is a person’s honoring his wife a segulah for parnassah? How does that work? He explains that when Chava ate from the Etz HaDaas (Tree of Knowledge) and then gave it to Adam, they were both cursed. Her curse was that “...your desire shall be to your husband and he shall rule over you” (Bereshis 3:16). Her honor was thus impacted because her husband would now dominate her. So, if a person honors his wife and tries to lighten that curse then, measure for measure, his own curse will be lessened. What is the curse that Adam received? “By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread...” (Bereshis 3:19) In other words, you need to shvitz for parnassah. If a man honors his wife and makes her curse lighter, his own curse will be lightened, and his livelihood will come easier.

Better To Be “Too Wicked” Than To Be “Too Righteous”

The pasuk states, “There was a quarrel between the shepherds of the flocks of Avram and the shepherds of the flocks of Lot, and the Canani and the Perizi then dwelt in the land.” (Bereshis 13:7). A fight broke out between the respective herdsmen of Avram and Lot. Lot’s shepherds let their livestock graze on property that was not theirs, basically stealing from the owners of those properties. Avram instructed his shepherds to muzzle the cattle when they are on land that belonged to other people so they would not graze where they were not allowed to graze.

Avram tells Lot, “Lot, I love you like a nephew, but it is time for us to part ways. You go whichever way you want to go, but we cannot live together anymore.” That is what happens. Lot journeys on to Sodom.

The question must be asked: Avram had influence over thousands of people. Why can’t he sit down with his own flesh and blood and reason with him? Why can’t he influence Lot to instruct his shepherds not to steal other people’s crops?

The answer is that Lot felt that he had a legal right to graze his cattle wherever he wanted! The pasuk emphasizes, “The Canani and the Perizi then dwelt in the land.” Lot reasoned that Avram was destined to inherit all the Land of Canaan. Based on G-d’s Promise, it really belonged to Avram. Avram was an elderly man who did not have children. Who would inherit the land from him? It would be his next of kin, namely, Lot himself. By this convoluted logic, Lot felt that he was merely taking what was soon going to be his anyhow. That is why he felt that there was no theft involved, and he could not be convinced otherwise.

It is possible to have influence over people when they know they are wrong. But if people believe they are right, talking to them from today until tomorrow is not going to help! Rav Ruderman, zt”l, used to say: It says in Koheles “Don’t be too much of a Tzadik... Don’t be too much of a Rasha.” (Koheles 7:16-17). Rav Ruderman used to ask, “Which is worse?” He would answer, it is better to be too much of a Rasha than too much of a Tzadik. When a person is wicked, he knows that he is wicked, and he knows that he needs to change. But a person who views himself as a Tzadik never considers the possibility that he might be wrong and that he, too, might need to change. It is impossible to talk to such people. A classic example was Lot. He felt that “al pi din” (by legal right) he was permitted to graze his cattle on other people’s land. So there was no way he could be talked out of it.

Avram realized this. Therefore, he bid his nephew farewell and said, “Lot you go your way and I will go my way.”

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subject Starting Avraham's Journey

Lech Lecha 5783

Was Avraham an Influencer?

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Avraham was selected by Hashem to transform a dark pagan world by educating them about a “one G-d”. For thousands of years, Hashem’s presence was obscured from a lost world lost which had fallen into moral disarray. Finally, one man discovered Hashem and he was determined to inspire his fellow human beings to a life of religion and meaning.

Avraham’s first teaching opportunity arose in the aftermath of a bloody battle. For 25 years, the world was engulfed in a vicious conflict, incited by a large-scale rebellion against four oppressive tyrants. Avraham was slowly dragged onto the battlefield, in part to quell the violence, and in part, to rescue his nephew Lot who had been taken as prisoner of war. Avraham liberated his nephew and rescued the entire kingdom of Sedom from these belligerent and repressive monarchs.

As was common practice in the ancient era, Avraham, a military hero, was offered lavish financial compensations as well as human reward in the form of the citizens of Sedom who would now be reassigned to him and become members of his clan.

Avraham lifts his hands to Heaven and foreswears any reward or any “people transfer”, refusing even to accept something as meager as a shoe-string. This disavowal of reward is both noble-spirited and expected. Avraham aspires to establish a new moral standard and the best way to begin is to avoid any trace of greediness or desire for profit. Greed is a dark and powerful human instinct especially when we sense the opportunity for free profits. The thought of profiting upon the misfortunes of others is repugnant

and this move would sabotage Avraham's lofty moral agenda. To memorialize Avraham's moral courage, we wear string-laden tzitzit as a constant reminder to live within ourselves and within our resources, rather than chasing unbridled consumerist longing.

Though his frugal rejection of war loot is admirable, Avraham's refusal to naturalize the citizens of Sedom is surprising. The residents of the corrupt city of Sedom would soon be incinerated in a hail of sulphuric fire and heavenly flames. This is a perfect opportunity for Avraham to save the souls of condemned sinners and convert them to Judaism. Avraham stumbles upon a giftwrapped opportunity to save people from a looming disaster, yet, he takes a pass. His decision is so odd and is so incongruous with his mission, that the Gemara itself critiques him. What could possibly have convinced Avraham to reject these potential converts?

Education of Manipulation

After his heroic rescue mission, Avraham enjoys extraordinary popularity. He was heralded by kings and lauded by grateful soldiers whom he had protected on the battlefield. Most of all, the average common citizen was indebted to Avraham for saving their lives.

If Avraham parlayes his influence to inculcate his new religious ideas, those ideas may not be authentically incorporated. How genuine would people's acceptance of Avraham's ideology be if they were coerced to consent because Avraham was so popular and because he enjoyed a position of such authority? Given his wild popularity they may sheepishly follow his lead, but it is unlikely that they would deeply internalize his new notions about religion and morality.

Moreover, is it even fair of Avraham to take advantage of his stature and his rising popularity to indoctrinate others? Using our moral authority or our popularity to aggressively influence others can be intrusive and manipulative. It is one thing to suggest ideas or even to passionately assert our beliefs. However, when our audience has no choice but to accept our opinions, we must be exceedingly careful about how we offer our opinions and how strong we peddle our influence. It may work in the short term but rarely yields genuine education. Even when this approach is successful it raises several moral red flags. Avraham pauses before he exerts his popularity and influence upon the impressionable people of Sedom and perhaps, as the gemara implies, he made an incorrect decision. However, his moral quandary was vital for preserving his moral integrity.

These are very delicate questions about the manner in which we convince people of our ideas. When we are deeply committed to values, we share our opinions with others hoping to persuade them to our view. However, we must also check ourselves against manipulating or deceiving others. Do we spread our influence in a respectful and dignified manner which doesn't insult the intelligence of our listeners? Do we abuse our positions of authority to unduly influence other people, thereby robbing them of their autonomy and personal discretion?

There are no easy answers to this dilemma, but these are important questions worth pondering-especially for educators and Rabbis.

Information or Influence

Avraham's dilemma also sheds light upon our current cultural moment. The internet, and in particular, social media have empowered us to spread our influence to larger audiences than ever before. At best, the internet makes us better informed people, as it allows information to flow more freely and more efficiently. The internet is a portal which grants us access to wisdom, knowledge, and expertise which we don't personally possess.

However social media doesn't just better inform us it also powerfully influences us. Social media has manufactured a new public figure called an influencer, who aims to shape our opinions and behavior. Generally, "influencers" do not possess particular talent or unique expertise, but manage to get our attention as they continuously garner followers and "likes". Social media empowers them to impact our purchase decisions, our thought, our opinions, and our social and political behavior.

We thoughtlessly submit ourselves to the influence of people who possess nothing more than celebrity or notoriety. Often influencers pontificate about

topics which they are completely ignorant of preaching about politics, culture or religion.

Additionally, by submitting ourselves to the influence of others we abdicate our freedom of decision, often falling prey to group think and to herd mentality. Ironically the internet, which was meant to democratize information, and empower personal autonomy, often shrinks our freedom of thought and of opinion.

Addicted to Influence

Sadly, our culture celebrates the phenomenon of influencing others. We start to define ourselves and our worth based upon our capacity to influence others, rather than upon our principles, character or achievements. As we thirst for more and more influence, we become more dependent upon public approval for our self-esteem. We act provocatively just to draw attention to ourselves and "feed the monster" and satiate our desire for public attention.

In a tragic irony, the "influencer" becomes the "influenced". Influencing others becomes so addictive that our personal behavior is, itself, influenced by our overwhelming desire to influence others. Are "influencers" the ultimate "influencees"?

Religion is about Inherent Value

Religious people look for inherent value and not "social value" or value based upon public opinion. We construct lifestyles of which should be internally self-sufficient and should not require external social validation.

The validity and integrity of a religious life should never be a product of how much that lifestyle influences other people. Believing deeply in the nobility and meaning of a religious life, we certainly desire others to be similarly inspired, but our own evaluation and appreciation of religion must come from within and not from the impact our religious values have upon others. Too much influence peddling can distract us from the that inner validation which lies at the core of religious meaning. Influence can often degrade meaning. Influence comes and goes, meaning is built to last

<https://www.jpost.com/jewish-world/judaism/parshat-vayera-sacrificing-the-future>

Parshat Vayera: Sacrificing the future

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"And it happened after these things, and the Lord tested [or proved, or held aloft as a banner or example] Abraham, and said unto him, 'Abraham,' and he said, 'Here I am.'" (Genesis 22:1). Even after the recent conflict in Lebanon again tested the cracks in Israeli society and brought the country to a new period of self-examination, one of the fundamental issues still plaguing the state is how to respond to the Palestinians. Is our position not to give up "even one inch" - that the borders of Israel are clearly delineated in the Bible and we are forbidden to relinquish any portion of it? Or are we duty-bound to seek peace even if that means giving up territory, and even if past events prove the folly of leaving settlements? Fascinatingly, both positions can be found within our biblical commentaries - specifically in the manner in which they interpret the difficult commandment given to Abraham: to sacrifice his son Isaac. This week's reading of Vayera concludes with one of the most agonizing incidents of the entire Bible, in which God orders Abraham to "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and get yourself to the Land of Moriah, and lift him up there as a whole burnt offering on one of the mountains" (Genesis 22:1, 2). The narrative seems to link this most problematic Divine order to a prior incident by introducing the story with: "And it happened after these things" What things, and how do these things - whatever they are - affect God's command? The Rashbam (Rabbenu Shmuel ben Meir, grandson of the famous Rashi), after confirming that it is indeed the biblical style to employ cause-and-effect, sin-and-punishment connections between incidents that follow each other, suggests that "here too, after the cutting of a covenant between Abraham and Abimelech allowing the Philistine's children and grandchildren to continue living in Gerar [Gaza], the Holy one Blessed be He became angry; after all, this 'land of the Philistines' is within the boundaries of Israel. [Abraham is giving up part of the heritage that God had given to his descendants], so God reproved

Abraham. It is as though He said, 'You are so proud of the son that I gave you that you agreed to a covenant between you and their [Abimelech's] descendants! Now go and bring him [your son] up as a whole burnt offering, and see what benefit this covenant [with Abimelech] will bring you!' (Rashbam ad loc). In effect, the Rashbam is castigating Abraham for signing away some of the patrimony that God gave his descendants. Abraham has no right to cede property that doesn't belong to him alone but rather to succeeding generations. This is what Yitzhak Tabenkin explained to David Ben-Gurion when he advised the prime minister to refuse an early partition plan that would have granted us a paltry state. "I took counsel with two individuals, and they convinced me that you must reject the offer. I asked my grandfather and I asked my grandson; my grandfather who has been dead for 10 years, and my grandson who has not yet been born." At the same time, however, there is another commentary reported in the name of the Midrash Enelow: "'And it happened after these things' - after Abraham sent away Hagar and Ishmael just one chapter before. Then, as now, 'Abraham rose up early in the morning.' Then after hearing Sarah's wish to banish Hagar the handmaiden and his first-born son Ishmael confirmed by God - whereupon he sends them with bread and a jug of water - but without gold or silver, and without even sufficient provisions for a desert journey. ('And he [Abraham] sent her [Hagar] away, and she went and wandered in the desert.')" And now, just as Ishmael was forced to wander through the desert, Abraham will be forced to go and wander among the mountains with his son Isaac. "And she went and sat opposite, the distance of the fling of an arrow, saying I do not wish to see the death of the child;" Abraham caused Hagar to see her son die, and he will be forced to see - and even bring about - Isaac's death. "And an angel of God called out to Hagar from the heavens, informing her that Ishmael shall live and become a great nation, just as an angel of God will stop Abraham's hand, and promise that a great and numerous nation will emerge from Isaac." Was the Akeda a punishment for Abraham's insensitivity toward Ishmael? Yes, because although he was obligated to banish the handmaiden and her son, that didn't necessarily include issuing a death warrant by virtue of sending them out to the desert as penniless paupers lacking provisions. Even the Ramban, the most passionate lover of Israel, takes Abraham to task. When Sarah afflicts Hagar for treating her mistress [Sarah] "lightly" and causes her to flee, Ramban comments: "Our matriarch sinned by this affliction, and so did Abraham by allowing her to act in such a manner. And so God heard her [Hagar's] pain and gave her a son who would become a wild ass of a man, and will afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all types of affliction" (Ramban, on Genesis 16:6). It is quite possible that eventually we - the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael - shall eventually share this land, the apex of the world. Perhaps God only wished that the two boys not grow up together; perhaps the problem lay with Sarah, who would not allow a shared inheritance, who would not stand for "the son of this hand-maiden inheriting together with Isaac" (Gen. 21:10). After all, it is the angel of heaven who prophesies that "he [Ishmael] shall dwell in the face of all of his brothers" (Gen. 16:12), and it is the Bible that informs us that Ishmael eventually repents (Gen. 25:9, Rashi ad loc). If the eternal words of the Bible are great enough and inclusive enough to allow for such diverse and conflicting explanations, can we not understand how contemporary Israel is likewise fractured with such diverse and conflicting viewpoints? And if we clearly uphold one side of the argument, ought we not at least respect - and not delegitimize - those who uphold the other? The writer is the founder and chancellor of Ohr Torah Stone Colleges and Graduate programs, and chief rabbi of Efrat.

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Cheshvan 8, 5783 · November 2, 2022 Lech Lecha

Adapted by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks; From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

There appears to be a contradiction between the name of this Sidra and its content. For "Lech Lecha," as the Sicha will explain, means "Go to

yourself"—Abraham's movement towards the fulfillment of his task. But the Sidra describes a series of events which happened to Abraham, seeming to deflect him from his mission. The Rebbe resolves the contradiction by going in depth into the meaning of fulfillment, or "ascent," for the Jew.

1. What's in a Name?

Names are not accidents in Torah. We find in many places that the name of a person or a thing tells us about its nature. And the same is true of the Sidrot. The names they bear are a cue to their content, even though on the face of it they are simply taken from the first words of the Sidra and are there, as it were, by chance. For there is no such thing as pure chance in events, since everything happens by Divine Providence; certainly in matters of Torah.

We might think that the names of the Sidrot are a relatively late convention, since we are not certain that they are mentioned in the Talmud,¹ while the names of the books of the Torah² and of the divisions of the Mishnah³ are all detailed there. But there is a law relating to legal documents, that a name mentioned in one becomes a name recognized by Torah law if it has stood unchallenged for 30 days.⁴ A fortiori, since the names of the Sidrot have stood unchallenged for more than 1,000 years, and are mentioned by the Sages (Rashi,⁵ for example), they are recognized as such by Torah.

So we can sum up the inner content of the whole of this week's Sidra by understanding the implications of its name: Lech Lecha.

2. Lech Lecha: Go To Yourself

This is usually translated as "Get thee out (from your country and your birthplace and your father's house....)" But it literally means, "Go to yourself." "Going" has the connotation in Torah of moving towards one's ultimate purpose—of service towards one's Creator. And this is strongly hinted at by the phrase, "Go to yourself"—meaning, towards your soul's essence⁶ and your ultimate purpose, that for which you were created.

This was the command given to Abraham, and the first part of the narrative bears this out. For he was told to leave his heathen background and go to Israel. And within Israel he was "going and journeying to the South," that is, towards Jerusalem. He was moving progressively towards an ever increasing degree of holiness. But then we suddenly find: "And there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt." Why this sudden reversal of his spiritual journey, especially as the whole Sidra (as testified by its name) is supposed to contain an account of Abraham's continual progress towards his fulfillment?

3. Ascent or Descent?

That it was a reversal seems clear. To go to Egypt was itself a spiritual descent—as the verse explicitly says, "And Abram went down to Egypt." And the cause of his journey—"and there was a famine in the land"—also seems like the deliberate concealment of G-d's blessing. The more so as G-d promised Abraham, "And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great." Is it not strange that when he reached the land that G-d had shown him, a famine forced him to leave?

A possible answer is that this was one of the trials which Abraham had to face to prove himself worthy of his mission (and the Midrash⁷ tells us when faced with this inexplicable hardship Abraham "was not angry and did not complain").

But this will not suffice. For Abraham's mission was not simply a personal one—it was his task to spread G-d's name and gather adherents to His faith. The Midrash⁸ compares his many journeyings to the way a spice box must be shaken about, to spread its aroma to all corners of a room. So an explanation of his descent in terms of a personal pilgrimage will not do justice to the difficulty. Especially since its immediate effect was to endanger Abraham's mission. It could not help the work of spreading G-d's name for the arrival of a man of G-d to be followed by a bad omen of a national famine.

Worse is to follow, for when Abraham entered Egypt, Sarah, his wife, was taken by Pharaoh by force. And even though he did not so much as touch her,⁹ it was an evident descent from the spiritual course that seemed to be outlined for them.

And even before this, when they first approached Egypt, Abraham said to Sarah, “Now I know you are a woman of beautiful appearance.” Thereby he had already begun to see (though only relative to his own exalted standard) with “Egyptian” eyes; for previously he had not noticed this¹⁰ because of the spirituality of their modest relationship.

So how, in the face of so many contrary indications, can it be that the whole story of Lech Lecha is—as its name would seem to imply—one of Abraham’s continual ascent towards his destiny?

4. History Foreshadowed

We can work towards a resolution of these difficulties by understanding the inner meaning of the famous dictum, “The works of the Fathers are a sign for the children.” This does not mean simply that the fate of the Fathers is mirrored in the fate of their children. But more strongly, that what they do brings about what happens to their children.¹¹ Their merit gives their children the strength to follow their example. And in Abraham’s wanderings, the subsequent history of the children of Israel was rehearsed and made possible.

Abraham’s journey down to Egypt foreshadows the future Egyptian Exile. “And Abram went up out of Egypt” presages the Israelites’ redemption. And just as Abraham left, “weighed down with cattle, silver and gold,” so too did the Israelites leave Egypt “with great wealth.”

Even that merit for which the Israelites were saved they owed to Sarah; for just as their women kept themselves from sinning with the Egyptians,¹² so had Sarah protected herself from Pharaoh’s advances.

5. The End is Implicit in the Beginning

Understood in this light, we can see the end of Abraham’s journey to Egypt foreshadowed in its beginning. For its purpose was his eventual departure “weighed down with cattle, silver and gold,” expressing the way in which he was to transform the most secular and heathen things and press them into the service of G-d. This was indeed the purpose of the Israelites’ exile into Egypt, that G-d’s presence should be felt in this most intransigent of places. The final ascent was implicit in the descent.

There is, in Jewish learning, an image which captures this oblique directedness. The Babylonian Talmud, unlike the Jerusalem Talmud, never reaches its decisions directly but arrives at them through digressions and dialectics which shed, in their apparent meandering, more light than a direct path could. Indeed, when the two books are in disagreement, the Babylonian verdict is always followed.¹³

So too do the seeming digressions of Jewish history represent not a wandering from the path of destiny but a way of shedding the light of G-d on untouched corners of the world, as preparation for, and part of, their subsequent redemption.

Abraham’s removal to Egypt was not an interruption but an integral part of the command of “Lech Lecha”—to journey towards that self-fulfillment which is the service of G-d.

And as Abraham’s destiny was the later destiny of the children of Israel, so it is ours. Our exile, like his, is a preparation for (and therefore part of) redemption. And the redemption which follows brings us to a higher state than that which we could have reached without exile. “Greater will be the glory of this latter house (i.e., the Temple of the Messianic Age) than that of the former (the first Temple).”¹⁴

Exile, then, is an integral part of spiritual progress; it allows us to sanctify the whole world by our actions, and not simply a small corner of it.

Perhaps one will say: Where is this progress apparent? The world does not appear to be growing more holy: Precisely the opposite seems to be the case.

But this is a superficial judgment. The world does not move of its own accord. It is fashioned by Divine Providence.

What appears on the surface to be a decline is, however hidden, part of the continuous process of transformation which we work on the world whenever we dedicate our actions to Torah and G-d’s will. In other words, the world constantly becomes more elevated and refined. Nothing could illustrate this more clearly than the story of Abraham’s journeyings, seen first on the surface, and then in their true perspective.

Whatever a Jew’s situation, when he turns towards his true self-fulfillment in the injunction of Lech Lecha, he places his life and his actions in the perspective of Torah, and takes his proper place in the bringing of the future redemption.

(Source: Likkutei Sichot, Vol. V pp. 57-67)

FOOTNOTES 1. Cf. Megillah, 29b; 31a, Sotah, 40b. 2. Baba Batra, 14b. 3. In many places. 4. Baba Batra, 167b; Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, 49:3; Remo in Shulchan Aruch, Even Hoezer, 120:3. 5. Bereishit 47:2; Shemot 19:11; 25:7, etc. 6. Alshich, beginning of our Sidra. 7. Bereishit Rabbah, 40:2. 8. Ibid., 39:2. 9. Cf. Tanchuma, 5 (on our Sidra). 10. But he had seen her previously (cf. Kiddushin, 41a). 11. Cf. Ramban, 12:6. Bereishit Rabbah, 40. 12. Shir Hashirim Rabbah, 4:12. 13. Cf. Yad Malachi, beginning of Part 2. 14. Haggai 2:9, as interpreted in Zohar, Part I, 28a..

from: <office@yutorah.org> date: Nov 3, 2022,

subject: Lech Lecha 5783

Kehunas Avraham

Rabbi Elchanan Adler

In the middle of Parshas Lech Lecha after Avraham’s battle with the four kings, the Torah describes two interactions immediately following his victory. The Torah tells us about the well-known offer that the king of Sedom makes to Avraham. He tells Avraham to take all of the spoils of war, and in return all he wants is his people who had been taken captive. Before delving into Avraham’s response, it is worth noting the following quirk in the pesukim setting this scene. It is in pasuk yud zayin that the Torah tells us that the king of Sedom went out to greet Avraham after his victory.

However, it is only three pesukim later that the Torah continues to describe the interaction between Avraham and the king of Sedom. Meanwhile, smack in the middle of this story are three pesukim describing how Malkitzedek, the king of Yerushalayim, also comes out to meet Avraham and brings with him refreshments and blessings. After feeding Avraham, Malkitzedek – who was a kohein – gives both Avraham a blessing and Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu himself a blessing. After this interlude the Torah resumes telling us about the king of Sedom’s offer to Avraham and how Avraham refuses to take from the king even a shoelace, lest he take credit for making Avraham wealthy when in fact it was a guarantee from Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu that he would be wealthy. The curious placement of this interaction with Malkitzedek begs the question, why would the Torah interrupt describing Avraham’s meeting the King of Sedom to tell us about Avraham’s meeting Malkitzedek?

Ohr Hachaim (Bereishis 14:18 DH U’Malkitzedek) suggests that the Torah was trying to draw a stark contrast between the behavior of Malkitzedek, who was righteous, and the king of Sedom, who was evil. Avraham had been returning from war. He was likely exhausted and hungry, so like the *mentsch* that he was, Malkitzedek brought Avraham “*lechem v’yayin*”, food and wine. The king of Sedom on the other hand, despite being the king that he was and despite the degree of appreciation he should have been expressing to Avraham for defeating the four mighty kings, he shows up empty handed.

There is in fact another distinction to be drawn between the behavior of Malkitzedek and the King of Sedom. Malkitzedek is identified by the Torah as being a kohein. Seemingly it was for that reason that Avraham gave *ma’aser* to Malkitzedek. Kohanim had the responsibility of bringing *korbanos* on behalf of *klal yisrael*, but they had an additional job as well. The pesukim say in parshas Eikev (Devarim 10:8) that in addition to bringing *korbanos* they also had the responsibility of giving a *beracha* to *klal yisrael*. But, they cannot just give any type of *beracha*. The *beracha* preceding *birkas kohanim* ends by saying “*le’varech es amo Yisrael be’ahava*”. Based on this word, the Magen Avraham (OC 128:18) quotes the Zohar that a kohein can only give the *beracha* if he is in good spirits. In other words, there is a certain sense of generosity and camaraderie necessary for the kohein to be fit to give this *beracha*. If he isn’t in the right state of mind then he shouldn’t give the *beracha*. As displayed by the presents that Malkitzedek gave to Avraham Avinu, he gave him a *beracha* filled with love and connection. He gave Avraham a *beracha* that was focused solely on Avraham’s betterment. This comes in stark contrast to the king of Sedom who only offered Avraham the

spoils of war for his own self interest and never thought to wish Avraham well for Avraham's sake alone.

In truth, this interaction between Malkitzedek and Avraham bears greater fruit in the pages of Chazal. Chazal (Nedarim 32b) wonder why Malkitzedek was stripped of the zechus to have his offspring become the future kohanim of klal yisroel for it to be given to Avraham. They answer that it was because when Malkitzedek gave a beracha to Avraham and HaKadosh Baruch Hu, he first gave one to Avraham and only then blessed Hakadosh Baruch Hu, when he should have first given a beracha to HaShem and only then blessed Avraham. In Chazal's words, it was because Malkitzedek was makdim birkas eved le'birkas kono [preceded the blessing of a servant to the blessing of a creator] that he was held responsible. This transgression and punishment beg an explanation. What's the connection between the injustice and the retribution? What did Avraham have that Malkitzedek was missing?

The Gemara in Rosh Hashana (28b) discusses the topic of ba'al tosf in the context of the birkas kohanim. The gemara entertains the following scenario where a kohein goes to bless the kehillah and says to himself that since Hakadosh Baruch Hu gave him the reshut to bless the people, he might as well add his own additional beracha.

In such a case the gemara says that if he does make any additions, he has transgressed ba'al tosf. Often the word "reshut" refers to authority or power. If so, there is an interesting tension that emerges from this gemara. On one hand, the kohanim are given a degree of autonomy and are in fact imbued with authority in this process of blessing klal yisroel; it finds expression in their needing to raise their hands or in their need to face the congregation when blessing. They are in fact playing an essential role and contributing towards the blessing. They aren't merely praying to G-d and letting Him do the rest. However, on the other hand, they're limited in their contribution to the beracha in that they cannot add anything to the beracha itself.

In truth the tension is not as contradictory as it seems. It's not that Kohanim are merely davening to HaShem to bless the people and it is not that the kohanim are blessing the people themselves. There is a middle ground. The Kohanim act as a medium and as a channel through which the blessing of Hakadosh Baruch Hu can flow. Ultimately it is Hashem himself giving the blessing but the kohanim are the vehicles.

Not only is this potentially the reality of how birkas kohanim works, but since the kohanim are in fact the vehicles for the beracha of Hakadosh Baruch Hu they themselves must recognize and be cognizant of the fact that they are not the source of the beracha but rather that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is the source of the beracha and that they are merely the conduits for its passage.

With this understanding we can explain a little bit better the episode with Malkitzedek and Avraham. Malkitzedek was giving a birkas kohein to Avraham. However, because he gave a beracha to Avraham before giving a beracha to HaShem Himself, it suggests that he believed that he was in fact the source of the blessing being given. He failed to recognize that really it was coming from HaShem. Had Malkitzedek recognized that, of course he would have honored HaShem by giving Him the blessing first. Malkitzedek had the giving nature and good spirit necessary to give a birkas kohein but his conduct conveyed a lack of recognition that the source for the beracha was Hashem himself. Avraham on the other hand had both prerequisites. Avraham had the good spirits, the giving nature, but never lost sight of Hakadosh Baruch Hu's role in the world. Chazal tell us how Avraham would encourage his guests before eating food to recognize who the food was coming from. In our story itself, Avraham's behavior highlights the synthesis of these character traits. When the king of Sedom offered Avraham the spoils of war, the very first thing Avraham does is acknowledge Hashem as the creator and sustainer of all things. Then he goes onto say that although those with him should take spoils for themselves, he will not take even a shoelace. It's from this that Chazal know that Avraham has an "ayin tova". This episode clearly depicts his unequivocal acknowledgement of Hakadosh Baruch Hu in addition to his keen sensitivity, care, and love for those surrounding him.

To conclude, the berachah in shmoneh esrei immediately following Birkas Kohanim is Sim Shalom. There is a unique connection in halacha between these two berachos in that we only ever recite Sim Shalom when we are also reciting Birkas Kohanim. The connection between these two berachos goes beyond just the halacha. We beseech HaKadosh Baruch Hu in Sim Shalom, "barcheinu aveinu kulanu ke'echod". We ask Hashem to bless us like "echod". Who is "echod"? The meforshim tell us that "echod" is really Avraham Avinu. We're asking HaKadosh Baruch Hu to bless us like he did Avraham. We know that Avraham was blessed with a critical role in future berachos. The pasuk (Bereishis 12:3) says "ve'nivrechu vecha kol mishpechos ha'adamah". Future generations will be blessed through him. People will bless their children by asking Hashem to help their children be like Avraham. In light of what we said until now maybe we can explain this a little better. Avraham Avinu was the original mekareiv. He was the one and only person who dedicated himself at his time to spreading the name of G-d throughout the world. It's because of his commitment to spreading the oneness of HaKadosh Baruch Hu that Avraham is referred to as "echod". Avraham embodied the meeting point between the two middos we mentioned earlier. Firstly, he was a nadiv lev, a giving person; he was a person filled with love and connection towards others. Secondly, Avraham was the model servant of G-d in his recognition that all comes from Hashem. Avraham never failed to recognize HaKadosh Baruch Hu as the source behind the happenings of the world. With these two unique and critical attributes that Avraham lived with, he was a most worthy beginning for the line of kohanim, those gifted with the merit to bestow blessing on klal yisroel.

from: **Peninim on the Torah** <peninim@hac1.org> date: Nov 1, 2022, subject: Parashas Lech Lecha

לך לא תירא אברם אנכי מגן לך Fear not, Avram, I am a shield for you. (15:1)

We are referred to as Bnei Avraham Avinu, children of the Patriarch Avraham, because we inherited from the father of our people a national character trait. The Chiddushei HaRim writes that the term Magen Avraham, shield of Avraham, is a guarantee from Hashem that the nekudah, characteristic, which defined Avraham would be bequeathed to each and every one of his descendants. The Patriarch was referred to as Avraham Halvri, because he stood his ground on one eiver, side, while the rest of the world was on the other side. This applies to Avraham's ability to withstand societal coercion, family pressure and the challenges and trials of life, both at home and in exile. The strength of character which Avraham evinced is intrinsically imbued within the psyche of each and every Jew. We are Ivrim, off to one side, who neither seek, nor require, public acclaim. We do our "thing" regardless of its acceptance by the greater society and culture in which we live. No other nation has endured our trials and tribulations, and not only survived, but thrived, holding our heads high with pride and devotion to Hashem. Yes, we are different, but so was Avraham, and we are his descendants.

Avraham Avinu used every ounce of strength to spread the word of Hashem to a world steeped in paganism. He taught them about monotheism, to worship the one G-d Who created, rules and guides the world. He was relentless in his commitment. Even when it became difficult due to the Heavenly-induced trials that he endured – and from which he emerged triumphant – he continued his work, because he was focused on spreading the d'var Hashem. Can we say the same? Is our devotion real, or is it limited by our comfort zone?

An elderly Holocaust survivor devoted himself selflessly to seeing to it that Yeshivas Ponovezh was kept clean. He did everything within his ability to maintain the pristine, positive atmosphere of the physical structure. Indeed, his "work" was his life, having lost his wife and children to the Nazi murderers. Understandably, every once in a while the memories of what had been overwhelmed him, when he realized what could have been. During such moments of sadness, he would fall into a melancholic state that overtook him. Only after he visited the saintly Bais Yisrael, zl, of Ger, who consoled him, was he able to calm down.

Simchas Torah 1958, the students of Ponovezh were dancing with great passion and fervor in honor of the festival commemorating the annual completion of the Torah. In the center of the dancing, inspiring everyone to elevate their dancing and singing to a greater level, was the venerable Ponovezher Rav, zl. The elderly Jew mused to himself, "If only my sons would be alive, they, too, would be among those who were dancing. Instead, they are buried somewhere in Europe." The more he reiterated this thought and how they had lived, that they would have been counted among the scholars of the yeshivah, the more emotional he became, and tears began to roll down

his face. He could no longer contain himself, and he cried to the Ponovezher Rav, “Rebbe, where are my sons? Why were they taken from me? They could have grown into great talmidei chachamim!”

His cry – and the bitter weeping that accompanied it – brought a halt to the dancing. The Ponovezher Rav had not been spared from tragedy. He, too, had lost everyone except for one son. The Rav began to weep, and he cried out to the elderly shamash, “For them (the martyrs), it is not necessary to cry. They are ensconced in a far better world, basking in the glow of the Shechinah, Divine Presence. For whom should we cry? For us! We have to ask ourselves where we are holding in our mission as Jews. How much more could we achieve? Every moment of life is a Divine gift for a reason – to act and accomplish for Yiddishkeit! For us, we must cry!”

The Ponovezher Rav’s response applies to all of us. Avraham Avinu taught us that nothing stands in the way of a Jew’s mission. We answer to a Higher Power. If this means being on one side against everyone else – so be it. It is part of our national DNA.

והאמין ב'ד' ויחשבה לו לצדקה And he trusted in Hashem, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (15:6) 5783

Avraham Avinu was rishon v’rosh l’maminim, first and foremost of the believers in Hashem. Discovering on his own that this world did not just happen and that every moment of its existence – and the existence of every creation – is providentially guided by Hashem, he devoted his life to spreading this concept to a world to whom this idea was foreign. His descendants, the Jewish People, have maintained his teachings with emunah in Hashem, the pre-emanate foundation of our dogma. Throughout (what presented themselves as) the worst moments in our tumultuous history, we have continued and maintained our faith in Hashem – against all odds and under all conditions. Even when the Jew was alone in an inhospitable world, surrounded by hostile people who viewed him with an eye of disdain, the Jew proudly held his head high, buttressed by his commitment to Yiddishkeit and his faith in Hashem.

Not all stories need be about a tragedy if they are to inspire the heart and impact the mind. The following story is well-known to some and probably comes as a surprise to others. It demonstrates the passion and commitment a Jew had in trying times, when he was alone, surrounded by thousands of non-Jews, who, at best, did not understand him, his laws and lifestyle! Nonetheless, he openly displayed zeal and devotion to Hashem – a commitment that was acknowledged by the most powerful man in America.

The winter of 1777 was very harsh. Bitter cold, treacherous biting wind and heavy snow was what the soldiers fighting for America’s freedom from England began to expect as daily fare. Coupled with the freezing cold, which took a toll on their bodies, was the emotional turmoil, the loneliness and separation from family and friends, that made their battle even more difficult. If this was true for the thousands of soldiers who, as far as anyone knew, were gentile by birth, one can only begin to imagine the terrible depression that should have (but did not) overwhelm the lone, observant Jew.

While many of the soldiers would secretly curse their lot and the man (George Washington) who was their commander-in-chief, the lone Jew respected him and offered daily prayers for General Washington’s triumphant emergence from the battlefield. The Jew had memories of his home, his family in Poland and the suffering to which they were subjected by the cruel anti-Semites who ruled the country. The miserable landowners took every advantage of the hapless Jews. It took place everywhere that the Jew called home. The wicked gentiles, cruel barbarians who enjoyed nothing more than exerting their power over the weak and downtrodden, victimized him. What kept these broken souls alive, committed to a higher ideal? Their emunah in Hashem that this was all part of a Divine Plan. Whether it was in Poland or Valley Forge, the Jew’s devotion to Hashem withstood all external pressures to sever his relationship with the Almighty. After all, he shared Avraham Avinu’s DNA of faith.

The soldiers in Valley Forge had no sense of the reason for their battle against the English. They had no inkling why they were in Valley Forge in middle of a fierce winter, fighting against whom they were told was the enemy. In their midst was a lone Jewish soldier fighting for his life, the lives of his compatriots in arms, and the future of (what was to become the) United States. He rarely called attention to himself, but tonight was different. It was the first night of Chanukah, and he was prepared to light the Menorah.

When all the soldiers had drifted off to sleep, the young man took out his Menorah and lit one candle. He sat there mesmerized, watching the small flame dance merrily as it cast its shadow on the wall. Watching the flame brought back memories of better times, his parents, siblings, the small shul they attended, and the scholarly Rav, who was more father to the community than mentor. He was everyone’s friend, in whom they confided. These memories opened up the reservoir of tears that he had controlled. After all, soldiers did not cry. As he wept, a tall distinguished man came over, looked

at him, and gently asked, “Why are you weeping? Are you cold, my friend?” The Jewish soldier immediately jumped to his feet and saluted.

Then the Jewish soldier said, “I am weeping to my Father in Heaven, in whose hands lie the fate of all mankind. I was praying for your success, General Washington. I believe in your mission. I came to America to flee the tyranny and persecution that oppressed my family, my town’s people, and my nation. The despots will fall! You, sir, will emerge victorious!”

“Thank you soldier,” General Washington responded. “What do you have here? What are you lighting?” “This is a Menorah, a candelabra. Jews throughout the world are lighting their candelabra in honor of the festival of Chanukah, when my people recall the miracles that were wrought on behalf of our ancestors. They were only a handful of dedicated men committed to the ideal of belief in G-d. Thanks to this faith, they miraculously triumphed over the massive armies that sought to obliterate them. We maintained our faith in G-d and, as a result, we were the beneficiaries of Heavenly miracles.”

The bright flame of the Chanukah candle ignited a flame of hope in the fatigued general’s eyes. He declared joyfully, “You are a Jew? Then you are a descendant of the people of the Prophets. If you say that we will win this war – then I am certain we will win.” General Washington shook his hand and left to rejoin the troops, armed with renewed vigor and hope. He asked the soldier for his name and address and went out into the night.

One year later, on the first night of Chanukah, the Jewish veteran, having returned home, sat in his home on Broome Street (Lower East Side of New York). He had already lit the first Chanukah light. Suddenly, he heard a knock on the door. His wife rose to open the door. How shocked she was to come face-to-face with the new first commander-in-chief of the United States, President George Washington.

“I see that incredible light – the light of hope. That flame kindles a light in my heart. It, together with your words of encouragement and hope, inspired me that cold, bitter night. It spurred me on to renewed hope and faith that we will overcome our enemies. “As a result, you will soon be awarded the Medal of Honor for your bravery in Valley Forge. Tonight, however, you will receive a personal gift from me in gratitude for your support and inspiration.” With these words, he placed on the table a gold medal upon which was engraved a Chanukah Menorah with one light burning. Upon this medal was inscribed: “As a sign of thanks for the light of your candle. George Washington.”

When one’s faith is sincere, it garners the respect of others.

<https://www.jewishpress.com/judaism/parsha/with-perfect-faith/2022/11/03/>

Pearls of Wisdom

By Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser

With Perfect Faith

- 9 Heshvan 5783

Parshas Lech Lecha opens with Hashem’s command to Avraham Avinu, “Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives ...” and His promise “I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great ...” Our sages tell us that this command is one of the ten nisyonos (challenges) with which Avraham Avinu was tested by Hashem.

The Ramban questions this, noting that Avraham was guaranteed by Hashem that he would be rewarded with honor, acclaim, and greatness. If so, what was the difficulty of fulfilling this command?

The Ohr HaChaim poses the same query and adds that, in fact, even a simple person would do whatever was necessary to achieve such renown and blessing.

Furthermore, the Medrash Bereishis Rabbah equates the two nisyonos – Avraham leaving his birthplace and Akeidas Yitzchak – as they are both presented with the words “lech lecha – go for yourself.” How could you compare the two?

The baalei mussar (teachers of Jewish ethics) point out that the Torah characterizes Avraham’s response as (Bereishis 12:4), “Avraham went as Hashem had spoken to him.” He did exactly as he was commanded, without any deviation.

At this point in time, the Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noach had already been given to mankind. These laws – such as prohibitions against murder and theft, the establishment of courts – set up a moral code in the world. However, the essence of mitzvos is different in that we fulfill them in order to carry out the will of Hashem, whether or not we understand their rationale or reason.

HarRav Dovid Braverman observes that there was no good reason for Avraham Avinu to leave his birthplace and his homeland. He was successfully bringing people closer to Hashem right where he was. Yet when Hashem told him to leave, he accepted the Divine decree. That was the significance of the nisayon. From birth, man inherently desires to be independent, and he is loath to willingly follow orders without an explanation or reason. Thus, being subservient to the command of Hashem, without asking any questions or understanding the rationale is most difficult. Indeed, our sages tell us (Kiddushin 31a), “Greater is one who is commanded to do a mitzvah and performs it, than one who is not commanded to do a mitzvah and performs it.”

The Zohar tells us that the 248 positive Torah commandments correspond to the 248 limbs of a person. The numerical equivalent of Avraham’s name is 248, to tell us that Avraham Avinu achieved that level of subservience where all his limbs were dedicated to fulfilling the will of Hashem. Although Hashem did not disclose to Avraham his destination, Avraham readied his household and departed from his home. Avraham’s emunah was steadfast and constant, whether he was leaving his homeland or sacrificing his son. One nisayon was not more difficult than the other because his faith in Hashem was complete (emunah shleimah), as we say in the modim prayer, “to do Your will and to serve You wholeheartedly.”

Shimon, a poverty-stricken kollel fellow in Bnei Brak lived a life fraught with nisyonos. Yet he remained steadfast in his emunah, fulfilling every mitzvah with the greatest passion and intensity. He never questioned the difficulty of his circumstances, or the challenges he encountered, nor did he waver in his faith in Hashem.

When Shimon put up his succah this year, he realized that he had enough space for two people to sleep on cots. Since his children were still toddlers, he felt it only proper to invite a guest who might need a place to sleep in a succah.

Shimon invited his older uncle from Yerushalayim, who was overjoyed. The first night of Succos, as the kollel fellow prepared for bed, he happened to look up and noticed, through the schach, that the people who had built their succah on the porch above him had placed a covering over their succah for the night that extended to over half the width of his own succah, in effect technically disqualifying half of his own succah. Without giving any thought to this unfortunate turn of events, he contemplated his options, as he didn’t want to disappoint the uncle who was looking forward to being able to sleep in the succah.

Shimon excused himself from the succah and explained to the uncle that since most people were exhausted from their yom tov preparations, they went to sleep after the seudah. His family had, therefore, established a custom to stay up and learn on the first night of Succos to ensure that Torah was being learned throughout the first night. The uncle was duly impressed and accepted Shimon’s departure from the succah with no reserves.

Shimon walked through the streets of Bnei Brak looking for an open succah and found the succah that belonged to a Chassidic rebbe. He sat down and was soon deeply immersed in his learning. At approximately 2:30 in the morning, a well-dressed individual, who appeared to be a foreigner, entered the succah. Curiously, the man asked Shimon why he was learning so late at night in this succah. Not especially eager to engage in conversation, Shimon was slightly evasive. However, the stranger persisted until Shimon explained what had happened. The man was very moved by his story, and asked, “Where do you live?” Once again, Shimon was vague, just telling him the neighborhood he lived in. But the man pressed him for his exact address and Shimon realized that he would be better off just answering the questions the first time.

After the first days of Succos, there was a knock on the door and when Shimon answered, the stranger entered.

“I want you to know how moved I was by our encounter the other night,” the man told Shimon. “I’m an extremely wealthy person with real estate holdings in Canada. During the year I am privileged to support the rebbe in whose succah I found you. Whenever I am in Eretz Yisrael I join the rebbe

as a personal guest in his private succah, and after the seudah that night I stopped in to see the communal succah that I had donated this year. I was shocked to find you learning there at such a late hour, and I saw your pain when I interrupted your learning, pressing you for information. I realized how sincere and dedicated you are to your Torah studies. Truthfully, I have been searching for a while to establish a Yissochor-Zevulun agreement with a very special young man who has great yiras Shamayim and emunah. Baruch Hashem, I have found him. I would like to draw up an official contract, in which you will be supported with 5,000 Euros a month and a free five-room apartment in a very nice area.”

Shimon’s life was completely transformed, all because he wanted to follow Hashem’s command and fulfill His will to the highest degree.

from: **Rabbi Chanan Morrison** <chanan@ravkooktorah.org> date: Nov 3, 2022, 3:56 AM subject:

Rav Kook on Lech Lecha: Malki-Tzedek and Abraham

Lech Lecha: Malki-Tzedek and Abraham After Abraham defeated Chedarla’omer and his allied kings, he was greeted by Malki-Tzedek, the priest-king of Jerusalem: “Malki-Tzedek, king of Salem, brought forth bread and wine. He was a priest to God, the Most High.” (Gen. 14:18) Who was Malki-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 [Malki-Tzedek] was a priest, but his descendants were not.” (Nedarim 32b) This transfer of the priesthood has deep significance, as it contrasts the different approaches of these two great individuals, Shem and Abraham.

Shem was called Malki-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 the attribute of God’s 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) in the Torah? The kohen is 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). These commands 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 (מצוה) comes from the root צוה meaning ‘together’ or ‘team.’ The mitzvot focused Abraham’s spiritual labors toward the future community of his descendants, and through them, 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 mission: reaching out to others in God’s Name.

Shem/Malki-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 letter ה, Shem was only a priest for himself, without a connection to others. Instead, the letter ה was added to Abraham’s name, indicating the universal nature of his mission. From Avram he became Avraham - אַבְרָהָם, 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 Malki-Tzedek.” (Psalms 110:4) (Adapted from Shemu’ot HaRe’iyah 8: Lech Lecha 5690/1929. Image: Workshop of the Sarachi family - Plaque with Abraham and Melchizedek (Wikimedia Commons))

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The Value of Future Potential

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given at Gruss Kollel on Oct 29, 2020)

There is an interesting contrast between the beginnings of last week’s Parsha and this week’s Parsha. In the case of Noach, Torah says: Eileh toldos Noach. Noach ish tzadik, tamim haya be-dorosav—he was righteous; he was perfect; he was a tzadik ha-dor. And therefore, Va-yomer Hashem la-Noach: Make a teiva and I will save you because you are special. But by Avraham Avinu we find that the Torah says: Va-yomer Hashem el Avraham. Lech lecha me-artzecha u-me-moladtecha, u-mibeis avicha el ha-aretz asher areka. Ve-e’escha le-goy gadol, etc. What do we know about Avraham? We know who his father was and who his brothers were, etc. We know his family migrated. But we don’t know anything special about him. The Torah doesn’t say that Avraham was a tzadik tamim or anything else about him that was unique. Why is it that Hashem chose Noach because he was so righteous, while He chose Avraham seemingly out of the blue?! We know the Midrashim about all the wonderful things Avraham did until that day. But why are they not written in the Chumash?

I want to suggest a possible angle via another comparison between Avraham and Noach. What does the Torah say about Noach? Noach Ish tzadik, tamim haya be-dorosav. Es ha-Elokim his’halech Noach. Noach was Tamim,

and he walked with Hashem. At the very end of this week’s Parsha, after many of Avraham’s trials and tribulations, Hashem makes a bris with Avraham—Bris Milah—and says: his’haleich lefanai ve-veyhei tamim. Noach was described as Tamim from the beginning. Yet Hashem commands Avraham: hishaleich lefanai vehyei tamim. That seems very strange. After a full-parsha worth of growth, Avraham seems to be in a place where Hashem tells him to start working on what Noach had already accomplished! That can’t be. Rather, the Torah is trying to make a very sharp point here. Hashem chose Noach because of the madreiga that he had reached—Noach was special because of what he did. Why did Hashem choose Avraham? It was not because of what he did. Maybe he did a lot of things, and maybe he didn’t. Midrashim tell us about the incident of the Kivshon ha-Aish and all kinds of stories from Avram’s early life. But the Torah doesn’t mention them. Hashem chose Avraham because of what he was going to do, not because he already was tamim. The pasuk emphasizes the future tense: his’haleich lefanai, vehyei tamim. The bechira of Avraham was not a reward for what he already did. Rather, it was a mission for what he was going to do in the future. Ki yedativ—as it says in next week’s Parsha—le-ma’an asher yitzaveh es banav ve-es beiso acharav, i.e., what he is going to accomplish. On the other hand, why did Hashem pick Noach? What was Noach’s mission? He just had to do one thing—to survive. And what did Noach do right after the Mabul? Whatever he did was not terribly impressive. Let’s not

repeat it now. But what did Hashem tell Noach to do in the future? Not die... Yasher Koach! Noach may have done a lot. But Hashem didn’t think that the future of the world came from him. Hashem did not give him a mission. He just didn’t die. By Avraham, though, the Torah doesn’t even tell us what Avraham did or did not do before he was chosen. That is not important. What is important is what he will do, what his tafkid is, and what mission Hashem gives him. He will be tamim. He will walk before Hashem. He is going to metzaveh others acharav. Ultimately, we are called Bnei Avraham. We are not Bnei Noach.

How do you judge someone? It’s so natural for us, at first glance, to judge someone for what they have done already. Who am I? I am what I already accomplished. How great am I? Well, let’s see, what have I accomplished until now? And that could lead to two equally problematic psychological results. I am great because I have done a lot. And then I am like Noach—I am amazing; I am great! But then perhaps I will end up like Noach. Or. . . You could say: I haven’t done everything I should have done. I haven’t done everything I wanted to do. I haven’t done as much as the next guy has done, etc. And that’s why I don’t believe in myself. The Torah is telling us here: No. What is important is not what you have done until now. It’s a good start. But what’s really important is what you are going to do from now on. This is what they say in the outside world: Today is the first day of the rest of your life. You are not what you have failed or succeeded in until now. If you have succeeded until now, don’t rest on your laurels. And if you failed until now, don’t beat yourself up. You are what you will do tomorrow, the day after, and the day after that. If you put yourself on the path of growth, of heyey tamim, his’haleich lefanai, then you are following Avraham Avinu and therefore you are part of this amazing mesorah. Don’t look at the rearview mirror of your past. Rather look to the future like Avraham Avinu. Shabbat Shalom.