

Potomac Torah Study Center
Vol. 11 #3, October 27, 2023; 12 Cheshvan, 5784; Lech Lecha

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.

Hersh ben Perel Chana, cousin of very close friends of ours, has been confirmed as one of more than 200 hostages to Hamas in Gaza. The Wall St. Journal featured Hersh and his family in a front page article on October 16. Chabad, OU, and many synagogues recommend psalms (Tehillim) to recite daily for the safety of our people. May our people in Israel wipe out the evil of Hamas and restore peace for our people quickly and successfully, with the help of Hashem.

Omer Balva, a 2019 graduate from the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, MD, enlisted in the IDF immediately after high school. After the heinous Hamas terrorist attacks on Oct. 7, Balva purchased supplies for his fellow soldiers, boarded a plane, and rejoined the IDF. Hit by an anti-tank missile attack, Balva died while sending fellow soldiers forward to safety. Our local community joins all Jews in mourning our brave young neighbor.

As we enter the third Shabbat since Hamas terrorists entered Israel to murder as many of our people as possible and to capture hundreds of hostages, we turn from the Torah's focus of pre-Jewish civilization to Avraham and the beginning of Jewish history. Incidents and themes in this parsha return numerous times later in the Torah and in post Biblical history.

The generations after Noach do not obey Hashem's directive to move around and settle the land. As we learn from Rabbi Sacks (see his Dvar Torah from last week), the people of Shinar wipe out many of the cultures and languages of the time and impose a single language on the people. Rather than appreciating God's gifts (such as rocks for building), they substitute their own technology (making bricks), and they build towers to glorify themselves rather than coming close to Hashem. Avraham is a tikkun (antidote) for the sins of Shinar – he dedicates his life to moving around, building alters, and educating people about Hashem. Although God speaks frequently to Avraham, virtually all the discussions are in dreams or through angels.

The Canaanite and Egyptian people whom Avraham encounters are a foil of evil surrounding Avraham. Avimelech in Egypt tries to steal Sarah and threatens to kill Avraham – plans that Hashem foils. In the war of the five kings versus the four kings, the Canaanite leaders take Lot as a hostage to bring Avraham into the battle and attack him. Hagar, Sarah's servant, makes her life miserable by laughing at her infertility and may also encourage Ishmael to participate. As Dr. Michelle Friedman notes in her Dvar Torah below, Hagar comes from Egypt, the country of sin, trouble, and oppression. Chazal connect Hagar and Ishmael to idolatry and violence.

When God makes a covenant with Avraham, including a promise that Sarah will have a son with him and that his descendants will return to the land after four hundred years of exile and suffering, it is an eternal covenant that includes all his offspring. We see the same eternal covenant later, when Moshe tells the people that Hashem's Revelation and mitzvot are binding on every current and future Jew. When the Canaanite kings take Lot as a hostage, Avraham responds that Lot is his brother. Today, when Hamas and other anti-Semites attack Jews anywhere in the world, we also respond – because all Jews are our brothers. (After Hamas attacked Israel earlier this month, Jews all over the world immediately responded with enormous donations to assist our family in Israel.)

Hamas fits in well with the non-Jews in Lech Lecha. Hamas takes land that does not belong to them. They seek to kill and wipe out Jews all over the world, especially the land that God gives to Avraham's descendants. Hamas seeks to destroy everything that Jews create, as they did with the capital improvements that the Jews made in Gaza before returning the land (and all improvements intact) to the Arabs in 2006. While the UN (international society of anti-Semites) urges Israel to negotiate rather than invade and punish Hamas, no sane person could trust any promises that the Arabs could or would give to Israel.

While the non-Moslem world has largely condemned the vicious Hamas attacks on our people, there are many exceptions – especially from what one might consider the ultra-left political spectrum. Responses from many universities have especially been hateful. As Jonathan Tobin of the Jewish News Service and many others have noted, one must not equate Israel's response of chasing the Hamas murderers and hostage takers in Gaza with the attack by Hamas to enter Israel, murder as many Jews as possible, and take hundreds of hostages. The UN would not blame any other country for responding to such an attack by declaring war and seeking to wipe out those responsible. Fortunately, some academics have supported good against evil. For example, United with Israel reports today that the Florida university system has "deactivated" all Florida chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine in response to its defending the Hamas massacre.

Avraham spent his life teaching others about Hashem and urging people to work for good rather than evil. God has eternal patience. May His patience show more who follow Avraham and fewer who follow the patch of Hamas. My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, taught these lessons during his long career – the lessons of Avraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, and other Jewish leaders throughout history. We must cherish our leaders who follow this path and work to make our world a better place for all.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and 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 and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Hersh ben Perel Chana (Hersh Polin, hostage to terrorists in Gaza); Eliezer Tzvi ben Etta Givati infantry brigade; Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Arye Don ben Tzivia, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, 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; Leah bas Gussie Tovah, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,

Lech Lecha: Suicide Moms

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky * © 2001

[I have run this Dvar Torah many times for Lech Lecha. It is especially relevant this year as people all over the world wonder how Hamas became so evil. The evil of Hamas goes 3700 years, as we read in the parsha this week. Boldface emphasis added.]

For the last seven years, I have patterned this d'var Torah in a standard way. I quote a verse, ask a question and then relate a story. I then conclude by explaining my answer to the Biblical question, hoping that the story I related has some enlightening or plausible connection.

In the topsy-turvy world we live in, I'd like to do something different this week. I'd like to relate a few stories first, ask a question on the almost incomprehensible stories, and then relate a verse from the Torah, with the hope that the Torah's prescience will help us to in some way understand them.

Hussein Nasr was a failed suicide bomber. He plowed an explosive-laden truck into an Israel army post. He wanted to kill himself along with as many Israeli soldiers as possible. He was only partially successful in his mission, as the only one blown to bits by his evil scheme was he himself.

Like proud relatives filming a family simcha (happy occasion), the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) took a video of his truck plowing into the Israeli post. Until Nasr's 71-year-old father, Hassan, heard of his son's actions, he said that he **had no idea his son belonged to Hamas.** But when he heard about the attack on Israeli radio, he declared, "I am proud of him. The whole world is proud of him. Even the land is proud of him here," he said.

Here's another story, that defines a new level of chutzpah.

The proud mother of Iman Atalalla, who killed Israeli soldiers by detonating a bomb-laden car, submitted forms requesting welfare payments of \$150 a month through the Islamic Rescue Committee — **regarded in Israel as a Hamas fund-raising group.** On the welfare application, the bomber's family wrote: "Died: September 12 1993; Place: Gaza; Circumstances of incident: suicide mission in booby-trapped car."

The terrorist was single, aged 20, and came from a family of nine. The family called Atalalla "polite and moral," and said he "fasted Mondays and Thursdays, prayed and read Koran." Describing his attack that killed two Israeli soldiers, the report said: "When 'his prey' approached he switched on the ignition, approached the enemy's vehicle and set off explosives, which sent a male and female soldier to [their deaths, and] the shahid (martyr) went to Paradise."

Finally, from The New York Times this past Sunday, 10/21/2001:

"I named my son Osama, because I want to make him a mujahid. Right now there is war, but he is a child. When he is a young man, there might be war again, and I will prepare him for that war. I will sacrifice my son, and I don't care if he is my most beloved thing. For all of my six sons, I wanted them to be mujahideen. If they get killed it is nothing. This world is very short."

The question is simple. Where does such moral depravity come from? How is it possible that parents consider their progeny heroes for blowing themselves up while killing others? How is it humanly possible for a mother and a father to be proud parents of monsters?

In this week's portion, **Hagar, Avram's maidservant, is driven from his home by Avram's wife, Sara.** As Hagar wanders the desert, she is found by an angel who approaches her at a wellspring.

The angel prophesies, "Behold, you will conceive, and give birth to a son; you shall name him Ishmael, for Hashem has heard your prayer. And he shall be a wild man – his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and over all his brothers shall he dwell." (Genesis 16:11-12) Powerful words. Predictions of a fate that dooms Ishmael to a violent life, one that the commentaries interpret as "Ishmael being a highwayman and bandit, everyone will hate him, fear him, and battle him." Yet Hagar's response to this bestowing is as incomprehensibly baffling. **She lauds the angel and "she called the Name of Hashem Who spoke to her 'You are the G-d of Vision.'"** (Genesis 16:13).

Imagine. **Hagar is told that her son will be a wild man who attacks and terrorizes, yet she does not protest nor pray that his fate should be altered. Rather, she responds with praise and exaltation for a "G-d of Vision."** It sounds like she is content, even proud, and frankly I just don't get it. And though I'm clueless about Hagar's attitude, perhaps now I know why so many of her descendants don't think much differently.

It is obvious that not all of them do, of course. Everyone controls his or her own destiny. But maybe there is a national predisposition to violence. Maybe these parents are genetically infused with pride, knowing that the promise to their forebear has borne its rotten fruit. The values imparted from a nomadic matriarch have been transmitted like a deadly virus to her grandchildren, and Hagar's satisfaction is now theirs.

So this misplaced pride is not a new story. It's 3000 years old. And if you don't believe me, you can look it up. [ed. note: actually Sarah's expelling Hagar and Ishmael took place more than 3700 years ago.]

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

Hagar's Place in Destiny

by Dr. Michelle Friedman, MD *

Rosh Yeshiva and President, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2016

How might we understand the Hagar narrative? We find the first Hagar episode in Lech Lecha, where she conceives Ishmael. Parshat Vayera swings between emotional highs and lows and is rich with lessons concerning how God's children should properly parent their own offspring so that the legacy of creation is transmitted forward. The second Hagar episode is sandwiched between a series of powerful stories concerning Abraham, Sarah and their son, Isaac. The story that follows Hagar's finale is surely one of the most awesome and difficult – the Akeida, the binding of Isaac. How then do the 13 verses (Genesis 21:9-21) devoted to Hagar, her numerous offspring and their exile from the nuclear family of monotheists fit into this theme of meaningful destiny for all humankind?

Negativity infuses the Hagar narratives. Her persona feels like a mistake from the start. Hagar's basic character is suspect as she comes from Egypt, a place associated with sin, trouble and oppression throughout the Bible. Abraham and Sarah first encounter Egypt as refugees fleeing famine in Canaan. In the first "wife as sister" episode, Sarah is forced into an unwanted alliance with Pharaoh so as to protect Abraham's life. They leave Egypt laden with possessions, including a slave woman whose name, ha'ger literally means "the stranger." The barren Sarah decides to give her maid servant to Abraham as a surrogate child-bearer (Genesis 16:1-16). The alacrity with which Hagar becomes pregnant stings her mistress and is compounded by insulting behavior. Sarah in turn oppresses Hagar, who on her own flees into the wilderness. Hagar finds a spring and is herself found by an angel who admonishes her to return to the family and announces the forthcoming birth and future of her wild son, Ishmael.

Enmity flares up again between Sarah and Hagar. In Parshat Vayera, scorn is transmitted to the second generation. In a continued play on the verb "tz-ch-k," the root for "laugh" and of God's chosen name for Isaac, Hagar's son is "mitzachek" –

he taunts Sarah's son, Isaac. Again, Sarah perceives danger and retaliates but this time, as the stakes are higher, she seeks actively to banish Hagar. Abraham, worried about the fate of Ishmael, his and Hagar's son, registers distress. God reassures him that Ishmael will become a nation. Abraham provides mother and son with minimal provisions and sends (vayishalcheha) mother and son into the wilderness.

The reader might imagine Hagar's frightened state and feel sympathy for her plight. Still, Hagar's behavior seems harsh and devoid of faith. After her water runs out, she puts (vatashlach – from the same root sh-l-ch, the verb referenced above to describe Abraham's action) her son under a bush and sits some distance away saying "Let me not see the boy's death" (21:16). Despite God's prophecy of numerous offspring, she appears hopeless. Even so, should a mother not stay by her child's side providing compassionate care to the bitter end?

The reader might contrast this scene with a similar scene of maternal desperation in the Moses story. In Exodus 2:3 more tender verbs are used to describe Yocheved's preparation of the tiny ark in which she places (vatasm) her child. She then places the ark in the river, and deputizes Moses' sister Miriam to witness his fate. The negativity surrounding Hagar's character feels compounded further by her seeming obliviousness to God's promise of future generations and her abandonment of her dying son.

An alternative reading of Hagar's behavior might consider the term used to measure the length between her and her dying child – a bow shot. The text could have used many terms to designate this distance. A bow shot is an arc of connection between two points. More important, keshet, or bow, appears very few times in Torah and only once earlier, in Genesis 9:16, when God designates the rainbow for Noah as the sign of God's covenant never to destroy living creatures again on the scale of the flood.

And so, Hagar puts Ishmael down in the Be'ersheva wilderness, sits a bow shot away, raises her voice and weeps. Perhaps she cries out in blank despair. Perhaps she cries out to claim her place in the covenant of the rainbow. The close reader of text is puzzled by what follows – though the text records no sound made by Ishmael the next verse reads "God hears the boy's voice" (21:17). The rescue plan is put in motion. God's angel speaks, reminding Hagar that God has a plan for Ishmael and leads her to water.

By her own standards, Hagar is successful. She raises her son, finds him a wife from her homeland, Egypt, and is blessed with many grandchildren. The exegetical tradition, however, views her in a negative light. Rashi's interpretation of God's response to Ishmael's voice demotes Hagar's efforts by suggesting that the prayer of the sick is better than the prayers of others. Other commentators connect Hagar and Ishmael to cultures of idolatry and violence that continuously threaten Abraham's family and the emerging nation.

While there is much evidence to support these points of view, we might also look at Hagar's concluding chapter, situated between epic stories of Vayera as having multiple meanings. The Torah commands our love in only three relationships, with God, with a friend, and with the stranger "ha'ger." Hagar, a woman of limited endowment and possibility, is created in God's divine image and propelled into destiny through actions taken by Sarah and Abraham. Perhaps the Hagar narrative means to teach us that lessons of love may emerge from confused, even poorly taken steps. Only after Vayera secures Hagar and Ishmael's complicated place in destiny can Abraham approach the penultimate challenge of his Akeida.

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Great but not Perfect: Thoughts for Parashat Lekh Lekha

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

“And it will come to pass when the Egyptians see you that they will say: This is his wife; and they will kill me but keep you alive. Please say you are my sister so that it may be well with me for your sake and that my soul may live because of you” (Bereishith 12:12-13).

As Abram and Sarai flee the famine in Canaan, they reach the border with Egypt. Sarai is beautiful, and Abram fears the Egyptians will seize her and kill him. He asks her to claim that she is his sister rather than his wife, and in this way (although Sarai may be taken away) Abram's life will be spared.

If the Torah didn't record this episode, we would never have known anything about it. In portraying Abram as our spiritual forefather, why did the Torah include this story that casts Abram in a negative light?

Our commentators have been puzzled by this incident. Abram acts in a manner that places his wife in danger, that entails deceit, and that results in him reaping profit from his unsavory tactic. We would expect better of him. He and Sarai could simply have remained in Canaan and suffered through the famine along with all the others in the land. The Torah reports that Abram and Sarai came to Canaan with Lot and a retinue of others. Where were they during this episode? Why didn't Abram call upon them to accompany him to Egypt and to serve as a protective force?

The questions are much stronger than possible answers.

Perhaps the Torah records this incident for posterity (and a similar incident later in the lives of Isaac and Rebecca) to teach us that even great human beings are not perfect in every respect. They sometimes fail. They sin. They are, after all, just human. They are not plaster saints who make all the right decisions at all times.

When we read of the shortcomings of our spiritual ancestors, we are taught that we can aspire to greatness even with our own faults and shortcomings. By bringing them down to human dimensions, the Torah allows us to raise ourselves.

In an article about “Gedolim stories,” Rabbi Simcha Feuerman points to the spiritual dangers of depicting our sages as being absolutely saintly, without internal conflicts. He wrote:

“I have heard people complain about “cookie cutter” biographies of Gedolim, where one gets the sense that their inner struggles and challenges have been sanitized for fear that they will be a bad influence on others. When the struggles are left out of the story it compounds feelings of inadequacy and guilt among the readers, leading some to give up on attaining anything worthwhile in comparison to the unnaturally saintly lives depicted in these stories.”

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/are-gedolim-stories-good-chinuch>

Attempts to portray our biblical heroes or rabbinic sages as perfect saints is not only an affront to them and to truth; it actually promotes a religiously problematic worldview.

In our blessings, we thank the Almighty for having given us Torat Emet, the Torah of truth. The Torah does not flinch from negative features in the lives of our biblical heroes and ancestors. It does not engage in sugar coating or explaining away problematic behaviors.

Barukh shenatan lanu Torato Torat emet.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Please share this Angel for Shabbat column with your family and friends, and please visit our website [jewishideas.org](https://www.jewishideas.org) for many articles that foster an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3173>

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

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Please share this Angel for Shabbat column with your family and friends, and please visit our website jewishideas.org for many articles that foster an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/abraham-wasnt-electable-he-was-elected-thoughts-parashat-lekh-lekha-rabbi-marc-d-angel>

Geirus -- Jewish Conversion

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

The journey of the Jewish people began with the words, "Lech Licha," a directive by which Hashem instructed Avraham to set out from his birthplace to a promised destiny. The land he and Sara were going to was not identified. The exact number of the Mitzvos which would be in the Torah were not enumerated to them. Yet, they stepped forward with great faith, charting a direction of goodness and blessing for themselves and their children.

Years later, at Sinai, the Jewish people as a nation, would declare "*Naaseh V'Nishma*," an acceptance of Torah, an acceptance that would change the course of history. This too, was an act of great faith. The Jewish people did not ask for a comprehensive list of all the Mitzvos, and where the journey called Judaism would take them. In love and in faith, they accepted the Torah as binding on them and their children for all generations.

The Rambam, in explaining Geirus (Jewish conversion) writes: "*And so it is for generations. When a non-Jew wishes to become part of the covenant and accept the Torah, he or she will follow the protocol that the Jewish people followed when we entered the covenant as a nation. As the verse states, "Like you shall be the convert."*" (Rambam, *Isurei Biyah* 13:4; *Bamidbar* 15:15)

The converts of today are seen as a modern day *Kabbolas HaTorah*. When a man or woman who are not Jewish choose to become a righteous convert, they are following in the path of Avraham who stepped out loyally and with great faith to choose the path of Hashem. In fact, regardless of what name they choose, they will be known as, "ben" or "bas," (son or daughter) of Avraham our Father. In the moments before they immerse in a Mikva in the presence of a Beis Din, they declare their allegiance to the Torah system in a way that parallels the "*Naaseh V'Nishma*" acceptance of the Jewish people so many years ago.

As a member of a Geirus Beis Din I have had the privilege numerous times of experiencing that righteous acceptance. In fact, when the Geirus occurs near a Yom Tov such as Shavuos, the already momentous occasion seems to take on an

even greater significance. A member of the Beis Din poses questions about the candidate's acceptance of Mitzvos and the candidate responds with a resounding "Yes" indicating their acceptance.

I recall one particular candidate, a woman who was from South America. Although she knew English, her primary language was Spanish. Throughout the interviews things went smoothly in communication. Her bilingual teachers guided her admirably well. Oddly enough, as we questioned her one final time before immersion, there was one question which caused her to look at us uncomprehendingly. We asked if she was prepared to accept the reward and punishment that come from observance or non-observance, and it was clear that a language barrier was present. She was not understanding the English word punishment. We tried repeating the question in different ways, but still she stared at us blankly, not understanding. Aware that this was an essential question, we asked her teacher to come in and translate our words for her. As soon as the teacher translated punishment, and said "Castigo," the candidate lit up and exclaimed, "Yes, yes, of course I accept. That is why I am here."

The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 70) indicates that Geirim can be a significant problem to the Jewish people. Tosfos offers several possibilities as to what the problem might be. On the one hand he suggests that a convert might enter the Jewish people prematurely. They may not be meticulous in observance and therefore bring down the level of observance in their community. Alternatively, Tosfos explains, they may be very meticulous in observance (as they are highly motivated and became Jewish by personal choice) and their good behavior would reflect badly on Jews who are not as connected.

As a practical matter, we strive to be aware of both of these pitfalls both as we mentor a candidate and as we interview a candidate to make sure that they will be an asset to the Jewish people. We look to see that a candidate is educated and ready to accept Torah and Mitzvos, and that they have an "Ayin Tovah," an attitude of benevolence which will shine well upon and as part of the Jewish people.

The actual procedure of Geirus is described in *Shulchan Aruch*, Yoreh Deah 268. After an appropriate education, practice observance, and interview process, a man will undergo circumcision (typically in a hospital with some sort of anesthesia) or Hatofas Dam Bris, a pinprick for the blood of the covenant which is done in the location of circumcision. Once that is healed, the candidate is ready for the final interview, accepting of Torah and Mitzvos, and immersion.

The final interview is done while the candidate is already in the Mikva in the presence of the Beis Din. For a woman candidate a Mikva lady assists, and a partition is created. The Beis Din will review the basic topics including acceptance of *Mitzvos Diorayso* (Biblical), *Drabanan* (Rabbinic), and *Minhag* (Jewish customs). They will confirm that the candidate has a sponsoring Rabbi to whom the Ger/ Giyores will ask questions, and a community into which they will integrate. The Beis Din will confirm that the candidate accepts all of the *Ani Maamins* (13 articles of Jewish faith) and is aware of antisemitism.

At that point the candidate may immerse. Once the candidate is totally immersed in the Mikva the Beis Din will typically call out "Kosher! Mazal Tov!"

For a woman, the Beis Din will exit promptly, and the Mikva lady will assist her with the Bracha.

For a man, the Beis Din will remain and assist with covering up (including a head-covering) and with reciting his first Bracha as a Jew.

Afterwards, a name is given, with heartfelt blessings of Bracha and Mazal Tov.

In our time there has been an influx of candidates requesting to be Jewish. Some of this is undoubtedly a heavenly guide to those elevated souls to join the Jewish people before Moshiach comes. I do believe that there is also a practical dimension that causes more people to apply than ever before. The promises of the many isms of the past two generations have proven empty. The promises that freedom, tolerance, and wealth would bring happiness have been proven false. These are great values, but they are not gods. They are values that must operate as part of a heaven-sent system. Thus, do countless people yearn to be counted among the righteous converts of the Jewish people. It rests upon the Beis Din to

not only facilitate Geirus, but also to serve as gatekeepers to ensure that candidates applying are indeed motivated for the right reasons and will serve as assets to the Jewish community.

In many places the Torah directs us to love the righteous convert. Such a person was not born into Judaism. He or she chose to follow in the footsteps of Avraham and Sora as they heard the voice of Hashem calling upon them so many years ago.

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 -- The Key to Living Inspired

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2022

This parsha begins to focus on Avrohom's life, opening with Hashem's command for Avrohom to travel away from his land. Hashem does not clearly tell Avrohom why he must leave, nor where he is to go. There is a Medrash in Bereishis Rabbah 39:2, which quotes Rabbi Berachya explaining Hashem's command for Avrohom to leave based on a verse in Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs.

The verse states, *“For the scent of your oils is good, poured oil is your name, therefore the young maidens have loved you.”* (Shir Hashirim 1:3) Rabbi Berachya explains that Avrohom was like a sealed flask of oil sitting in a corner where no one noticed its beautiful scent. However, once someone moves the flask and pours it into another bottle, the fragrance begins to waft. Avrohom's righteous and pious conduct were like that flask of oil that went unnoticed. Hashem, therefore told Avrohom to travel around so that people would notice him and the “fragrant scent” of his good deeds would spread.

The Mirdash on the verse in Shir Hashirim elaborates further on this idea in the name of Rabbi Yochanan. Avrohom himself was complete in his “fragrance”; he had many good deeds and many mitzvos. Yet, they were unnoticed. Hashem therefore told Avrohom to move around and his name would become great in G-d's world. This is the meaning of the end of the verse, *“therefore, the young maidens have loved you.”* Once Avrohom's oil was poured, once Avrohom began traveling, people took note of his good deeds and sought to join him and follow in his ways. Rabbi Yochanan adds that this is the meaning of the promise, *“and I will make you into a great nation.”* It was not referring to the future generations of the Jewish people, but rather to the many who would come now to listen to his teachings and follow in his ways.

When we continue the parsha, though, this Medrash becomes very difficult to understand. The Torah tells us that when Avrohom began travelling, he went with his family and household and with *“the souls that they made in Charan.”* (Bereishis 12:5) This same Medrash in Shir Hashirim explains this verse to refer to all of the people that Avrohom and Sarah converted while they were in Charan. It would appear then that Avrohom was quite active in Charan and was not simply sitting alone in a corner, like that flask of oil. Why wasn't his fragrance noted, and how would traveling help?

The Eitz Yosef on the Medrash in Shir Hashirim explains when Avrohom traveled his fragrance would be new to people. When we see a noble or pious act for the first time, it strikes us and catches our attention. We think about it, reflect on it and share the story with others. The difference was that it was different people who hadn't seen Avrohom before. The people of Charan didn't notice Avrohom anymore because they had gotten used to his greatness. Had Avrohom come to Charan now, they also would have been inspired.

If we consider this concept further, the difference between those who knew Avrohom and those who didn't was not whether or not they saw Avrohom's greatness. They both saw it equally. The difference was whether or not they gave it a second's thought. Those who had gotten used to Avrohom, saw his greatness and said to themselves, "Yep, that's Avrohom" and went on with their lives unchanged. Had they stopped and considered what they were seeing and studied his greatness, they too would have been inspired.

As we head into the long winter months and leave behind the inspiration of the holidays, it is important to find ways to maintain our inspiration and continue to grow and strive. We are blessed to live in a world and in communities where we are surrounded by many wonderful people, with many attributes and actions that we admire. If we simply open our eyes and take a moment to focus on this people, who they are and what they do, to see them as if seeing them for the first time, we can find endless inspiration in every day of our lives.

* Savannah Kollel; Congregation B'nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer will become Rosh Kollel next year.

Lech Lecha

By Rabbi Herzl Heftner *

[Note: Rabbi Heftner was unable to send me a Dvar Torah this week. As with all Israelis, Rabbi Heftner's first priority is the safety of his family and students in Israel. Please think of the Har-el Beit Midrash for donations during this time of war against our people.]

* Founder and dean of the Har'el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. Rabbi Heftner is a graduate of Yeshiva University and was ordained at Yeshivat Har Etzion. For more of his writings, see www.har-el.org. To support the Beit Midrash, as we do, send donations to America Friends of Beit Midrash Har'el, 66 Cherry Lane, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

Messages from and About Israel

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

To be a Jew **

By Talia Laniado [invited guest author] ***

For much of my life, my Jewish identity has felt... complicated. A family heirloom I appreciate, sometimes cherishing, sometimes burdened by, the value and responsibility it holds. Sacred and heavy, like the parchment and its intricate case that rest in the ark before me.

This week, for the first time since my earliest childhood memories, being Jewish feels very straightforward. Inextricably intertwined from my belonging in this world. The most important fact of my existence and the precursor to all that follows.

In the last ten days, the world has witnessed firsthand, physically or virtually — either way all too vividly — pure brutality, bloodshed, and evil. The monochrome grainy photos of just under a century ago — human beings stripped of their dignity, security, status, and right to live, solely because Jewish blood pulsed through their veins — jump to life, visceral, in a sickening flashback to the past that was hoped to be long buried alongside the millions of our brothers and sisters torn from our history pages.

To be Jewish is to be hunted, haunted, a wanted prisoner, even by one's own neighbor, or cousin, or perfect stranger. To write and recite psalms in a cave, under cover of night. To keep our commandments in secret or in plain sight: dunking in holy water, braiding loaves of bread, basking in candlelight.

To be Jewish is to be scapegoated, framed, maimed. Criticized, minimized, ostracized, dehumanized. To be a largely unprotected underdog, despite standing up for other minorities' rights. To work as hard and as dedicated as others, become successful, and somehow still get the short end of the stick, envied or distrusted.

To be Jewish is to pack a bag and bolt at a moment's notice, to kiss memories and relatives goodbye, to flee one's homeland and run to our Homeland, while still feeling that nowhere is truly safe. Not the fields, not one's bed. Not in a cage or dumpster or car, above or underground.

To be Jewish is to be a moving target.

And yet.

And yet, we are an ancient people, remarkably still alive despite those who rise to destroy us in every generation, each time with revolutionized weapons and refashioned propaganda. They plot to kill us, and they succeed, and they fail, and we fast, and we feast, forever rotating between mourning and festive clothes.

** Reprinted from The Times of Israel)Oct. 18, 2023(. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/to-be-a-jew/>

*** Talia Laniado, a daughter of Rabbi Haim Ovadia, is a creative and a storyteller. As the graphic designer for Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun and an avid reader, poet, and wordsmith, she spends much of her day thinking about life's "big questions." Talia is a mom, enthusiastic cook of all things Mediterranean, and a proud Sephardic Jew.

* Torah VeAhava. 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 article includes Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

Stepping Out in Faith in Hashem

By Rabbi Dr. Eli Yoggev *

Does Judaism require a leap of faith? It depends on whom you ask! For the Rambam, the answer is no. In his *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:50(, faith is presented as a form of knowledge: *"Bear in mind that by 'faith' we do not understand merely that which is uttered with the lips. ... For belief ... is conceived in the mind."* For us to have faith in Hashem, or any other tenet of the Jewish faith, we must intellectually prove our religious truths to ourselves. The more we prove, the more cognizant we are of the truth, the more "faith" we have. If we understand a leap of faith as a "leap" beyond what is known and proven through our intellect, the Rambam would not promote this endeavor.

The Rambam expands on his definition of "faith" through our parasha's protagonist, Avraham Avinu. The Torah says Avraham had faith in Hashem: *"he]Avraham[put his faith – emunah in Hashem, who reckoned it to his merit"*)Breishit 15:6(. How did Avraham attain this faith? The Rambam explains:

"]Avraham[began to explore and think ... wondering: 'How is it possible for the constellations to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling them? Who is causing them to revolve? Surely, they do not cause themselves to revolve.' ... Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that

there was one God who controlled the constellations, that He created everything")Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah 1:3.

In other words, Avraham was a philosopher who proved to himself, through the argument from a first cause (also known as the teleological argument), that God exists.

For the 12th century Rabbi Yehuda Halevi the opposite state of being — living in simple faith — is the ideal. Intellectual investigations only enter the equation when simple faith is wanting (see Kuzari, end of 2:26; 5:1). The ideal is to leave behind our investigations and embrace a more direct connection, through faith. Like the Rambam, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi portrays Avraham as the exemplar of his faith model: *"[Hashem] commanded him [Avraham] to leave off his speculative research into the stars and other matters, and to follow faithfully the object of his inclination, as it is written: 'Taste and see that the Lord is good'" (Tehillim 34:9) Kuzari 4:17.*

When taken to the extreme, this view implies what some might call a "leap of faith" — with one caveat. The term "leap of faith," as it's commonly used, often entails a step outside of the certain to a place of doubt and uncertainty. For Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, faith is on a higher level of certainty than the intellect. Speculations can only get us so far. This is why we are urged to leave our speculative research aside, and directly experience, "taste and see," Hashem's goodness.

Over the years I have found both faith models to speak to my religious experience. The Rambam's intellectual investigations enrich and solidify my connection to Hashem and Judaism. However, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's critique of pure reason, along with his emphasis on direct faith emerging from the inner soul, are deeply resonant as well. Therefore, in discussions on the matter, I often like to shift the conversation from a leap of faith to taking a step of faith.

This mode of faith is also directly connected to Avraham Avinu. The opening words of our parasha, lech lecha, commanded to Avraham, literally mean "take steps." Avraham therefore can be viewed not only as a philosopher and a simple man of faith, but also as a journeyman — whose faith was built through both investigation and steps of faith.

In fact, each stage of Avraham's journey, each one of his ten tests (Pirkey Avot 5:3), can be viewed as a composite of these two components. Prior to Hashem's original lech lecha command, Avraham researched and learned about Hashem's existence, as per the Rambam's depiction above. Avraham then took a step of faith in Hashem, a lech lecha, based on this knowledge, and left his homeland. From this experience he intellectually learned about how Hashem took care of him in exile. He was then ready to take a new step of faith. This is how it proceeded until Avraham's final test: the Akeidah (Binding of Isaac). The Akeidah was a huge test, but based on our explanation it didn't entail a leap of faith. It was a step of faith, based on Avraham's intellectual standing, informed by the nine previous teachings.

In the end, faith-emunah is a very personal experience, as the prophet Havakuk 2:4(proclaimed: *"And the righteous will live in [their own] faith."* Each of us must find our own path toward emunah in Hashem and Yiddishkeit. What works for others may not work for us. What's most important, however, is that we put in the work, like Avraham, to cultivate faith. This will not only be "reckoned to our merit," it will propel us forward, leaps and bounds, in our avodat Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Associate Rabbi of Beth Tfiloh Congregation (Baltimore). A YCT alumnus, Rabbi Yogev also received his Ph.D. in Jewish mysticism and Chasidism at Bar-Ilan University. [Note: because of software issues, I had to delete some Hebrew but left in the author's English translations]

<https://library.yctorah.org/2023/10/breishit5784/>

Shavuon Lech Lecha

by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

Our Father in Heaven, Rock and Redeemer of Israel.

We come before You in prayer and supplication, stunned and heartbroken by the merciless atrocities carried out against our beloved State of Israel and its People, turning the Festival of our Rejoicing into a day of our suffering.

We mourn the loss of many hundreds of women, men and children brutally murdered in these attacks and pray for their souls.

We pray for the speedy recovery of the thousands who are injured. And may the Holy One, blessed be He, have compassion on those who are being held hostage and enable them to emerge from the darkness of the shadow of death to their freedom; may He break their bonds, deliver them from distress, and bring them swiftly home to their families' embrace.

Almighty God, protect the families of Israel from the threat of terror and give strength to the soldiers of the Israel Defence Forces, whose lives are in danger as they confront our enemies.

Put into the hearts and minds of Israel's political and military leaders the wisdom to make the right decisions to bring this conflict to a swift and successful conclusion, so that innocent civilians can resume their lives without the fear and threat of attack. Spread over the inhabitants of Your land the tabernacle of Your peace, as it is written:

"I will grant peace in the Land; you will lie down and none shall make you afraid. And the sword will not pass through your land."

May You, Almighty God, bless us all with security and tranquillity and grant a true, just and lasting peace in our Holy Land and across the entire world.

"May He who makes peace in high places, bring peace for us and for all the people of Israel."

This very special prayer will continue to be said, with heart, by our members every Shabbat morning. Come to shule and pray with us.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Rube

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel)Birmingham, AL(.

Rav Kook Torah

Lech Lecha: Abraham Goes to War to Rescue Captives

"When Abram heard that his brother had been taken captive, he mustered his retainers, born into his household, numbering three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.")Gen. 14:14(

We are familiar with Abraham as a holy tzaddik and a master of kindness, the spiritual giant who taught the belief in one God in a world of paganism and idolatry. But when news reached Abraham that his nephew Lot had been taken captive, he sprang into action. In that moment, Abraham assumed the role of military leader.

Abraham was the epitome of kindness and chesed, welcoming strangers into his home and providing for the poor. But Abraham was no pacifist. When the time came to fight evil and rescue innocent captives, he took up the sword and led the battle. There is no contradiction, Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook taught, between these two facets of Abraham's personality.

Abraham emptied out the Beit Midrash, drafting all of his students whom he instructed "*so they should keep the way of the Lord and uphold righteousness and justice*")Gen. 18:19(. Abraham, educator par excellence, understood that his disciples needed to learn this lesson of mutual responsibility and act upon it.

Operation 'Rescue Lot'

Why was Lot abducted? The Midrash explains that Lot was specifically targeted because of his relationship to Abraham. The invading kings "*expected Abraham would pay a heavy ransom for the release of his nephew*")Sforo(.

Abraham could have chosen to negotiate for Lot's release, but he believed that Lot could be rescued in a military operation, without negotiations and without ransom. And that was the better option.

Abraham split his men into two forces)Gen. 14:15(. One force was charged with attacking and defeating the enemy, while the second force was tasked with rescuing Lot and the other captives)Prof. Asa Kasher(. With a surprise attack at night, he was able to overcome the four kings without them realizing that it was only a small force attacking them)Seforno(.

And who was Lot? Lot had separated from Abraham, preferring to live with the wicked people of Sodom rather than with his righteous uncle. As the Sages commented, Lot "*distanced himself from the Ancient One of the world, saying, 'I care neither for Abram nor for his God.'*"

Yet when Abraham heard that Lot had been taken captive, he immediately set out to rescue him. As the text emphasizes, it was "his brother" who had been taken captive. Abraham knew it was his responsibility to do everything in his power to bring Lot back alive.

Through this action, Abraham demonstrated his profound love for his fellow man, even for those who were distant from his beliefs and teachings. This deep-rooted love and sense of responsibility meant a willingness to risk his life in battle — true mesirut-nefesh — to rescue his estranged nephew.

)Adapted from Sichot HaRav Zvi Yehudah Kook on Breishit(

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/LECH-LECHA-84.htm>

A Palace in Flames (5780)

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

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 raison."]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.

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.

FOOTNOTES:

]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.

Around the Shabbat Table:

]1[What are the three different approaches given to answer the question, "Why Avraham?" Which of the three do you find most inspiring?

]2[What do the palace and the fire represent in the Midrash quoted? Are they a contradiction to each other?

]3[Who has to put out the fire in today's palace? How?

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/lech-lecha/a-palace-in-flames/>

Seeing Is Not Believing

By Aharon Loschak* © Chabad 2023

At a wayside inn, a dozen chassidic merchants were warming themselves at the fire. The group included men from towns and villages across Russia and Poland, all traveling to the great annual fair at Leipzig. The conversation soon turned to the greatness of their rebbes, as each extolled the virtues of his master.

One by one, the chassidim told stories about the miraculous powers of their rebbes. One told how for 15 years he and his wife had yearned for a child, until they received a blessing from their rebbe: within a year, they were cradling their newborn son in their arms. A second told of how his rebbe had neutralized the Jew-hating, pogrom-inciting priest in their village, while a third related how his rebbe's blessing and special instructions had brought home his wayward son. And so they passed the hours, recounting the wonders performed by their holy mentors.

Finally, they all turned to the one chassid who had listened in silence to their stories. "Nu, whose chassid are you?" they asked. "Let's hear something about your rebbe."

The chassid said: "I am a Chabad chassid, a disciple of Rabbi Sholom Dov Ber of Lubavitch. I deal in lumber, and several years ago I was offered a forest for sale. The price was high, but the opportunities were even greater — there was talk of a railroad to be constructed, raising the demand for and profitability of the local lumber. As I do with all major decisions in my life, I consulted with the Rebbe. He advised me to buy the forest.

"The purchase ruined me. The railroad project fell through, and I was left with a basically worthless forest. I lost my entire fortune and was cast heavily into debt."

After a lengthy pause, one of the listeners asked, "And then? What happened?"

"Nothing," said the chassid. "I am still struggling to feed my family and repay my debts."

"So what's the miracle?" they all asked.

"That my relationship with the Rebbe has nothing to do with his wonder-working powers. That I continue to follow his directives in every area of my life. The miracle is that I am his chassid."¹

The Miracle of the Clay Pits

One of the stories recounted in the portion of Lech Lecha is the battle of the four kings vs. the five kings which eventually involved Abraham, our protagonist. The four kings were far mightier than the group of five, but they made the mistake of capturing Abraham's nephew, Lot, dragging the man of G d into war on the side of the weaker five. With G d's help, Abraham's intervention decided the war's outcome: Lot was freed and the five kings spared.

The Torah describes the retreating army as they fled in defeat:

Now the valley of Siddim was]composed of[many clay pits, and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled and they fell there, and the survivors fled to a mountain.²

Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains that a miracle occurred for the kings in these pits. Though they were filled with clay and would normally trap all who fell in, these kings were miraculously pulled from the clay pits as they sank into them. This miracle evokes the miracle that occurred to Abraham when he was thrown into the fiery furnace and emerged alive. The Midrash indeed links the two, commenting that the people didn't fully believe that it was G d who saved Abraham until they saw this miracle years later. The repeat performance finally convinced all the skeptics that it was G d who had wrought a similar miracle for Abraham so long ago.

The obvious question is that really, the opposite should be true: if you witness a one-time miracle that completely defies the laws of nature, it's easier to assume it is the hand of G d. But when it occurs more than once, you can be lulled into thinking that it's just "natural." Why would a repeat occurrence be more convincing proof?

Color Me Skeptical

When an earth-shattering miracle occurs, it indeed is easy to believe. After all, if you see the sea split, or water turn to blood, how can you not believe in G d? Even when it's not an outright supernatural occurrence, when G d's hand is clear, it's clear — and it's easy to believe in the moment. When a loved one is deathly ill, all the doctors have given up hope, and then suddenly they make a miraculous turnaround, all the "color me skeptical" people come running back saying, "You were right! I believe now!"

But the reality is that such "belief" isn't really belief at all. It's simple fact, observable truth. "Seeing is believing" is one of those clichés that sound good, but isn't true. If you see it, you don't need to believe it. It just is.

Do you need to believe that the sun rises in the morning? Do you believe you're alive? Do you believe ice cream tastes good?

Of course not. You know these things are cold, hard, delicious truths.

Belief begins when skepticism is a viable option. When you witness a medical miracle once, you're blown away and run to shul and pray like Moses. But when you start working in the hospital and witness such miracles over and over again)thank G d!(, it's no longer as convincing. It's just "science" and "statistics" or whatever other banal explanation people so readily come up with.

When you choose to believe despite the viable, easy, and rational justifications, then you're a true believer. When you choose to look under the hood of familiarity and see the incognito hand of G d, then you really believe.

So when G d performed a miracle for the kings and those who witnessed it chose to believe that what occurred to Abraham was also a miracle from G d, it made them true believers — more so than in the past when it was more clearly an act of G d.

Choose Belief

It's easy to believe when things are miraculous. When life is swell and you've scored some major wins, it's easy to profess your profound piety and relationship with G d.

When you miss your flight and get frustrated only to discover that the plane you missed just crashed)G d forbid!(, it's easy to "believe." Of course you do.

But what about when you miss your flight, then the reroute is delayed, your luggage never arrives. . . and the plane you missed arrives safely and you're still stuck without a change of clothes in Singapore? How do you feel then? Do you still believe?

Are you like the chassid who needs his rebbe to perform a miracle for him to believe, or are you like the chassid who believes despite the lack of any miracles?

Be like the third chassid. Don't sit around waiting for crazy miracles to hit you over the head before you start believing. Like so many other things in life, belief is a choice. And that's great news, for belief is an empowering and edifying feeling that can carry you through so much. That it can be yours whenever you want is nothing short of a gift.

So why not unwrap that gift right now?3

FOOTNOTES:

1. As told by Yanki Tauber in "Miracle Chassid."
2. Genesis 14:10.
3. This essay is based on Chiddushei Harim, Genesis 14:10.

* Writer, editor, and rabbi; editor of JLI's popular Torah Studies program,

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5673628/jewish/Noah-the-Pessimist.htm

Lech Lecha: We Must Assert our Inheritance by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

Asserting our Inheritance

G d said to Abraham, "*I have given this land to your descendants.*")Genesis 15:18(

The survivors of the Flood overlooked the Flood's lesson that we should look to G d as the source of our well-being.

When G d promised the Land of Israel to Abraham's descendants, the land in its entirety became – and remains to this day – the inheritance of every Jew, not subject to negotiation or trade.

It is solely G d's promise to Abraham that constitutes our connection to our land.

When we articulate this confidently and unapologetically, the community of nations will acknowledge its truth. In contrast, basing our claims to the Promised Land on treaties, military victories, or diplomatic machinations will undermine other nations' respect for our inheritance.

By asserting our inviolable connection to the Land of Israel, we hasten the Messianic Redemption, when G d will grant us its full possession peacefully.

— from *Daily Wisdom*

May G-d grant a swift, miraculous and complete victory over our enemies.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

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Volume 30, Issue 3

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z'l

Journey of the Generations

Mark Twain said it most pithily: When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.

Whether Freud was right or wrong about the Oedipus complex, there is surely this much truth to it, that the power and pain of adolescence is that we seek to define ourselves as different, individuated, someone other than our parents. When we were young they were the sustaining presence in our lives, our security, our stability, the source that grounds us in this world.

The first and deepest terror we have as very young children is separation anxiety: the absence of parents, especially of the mother. Young children will play happily so long as their mother or care-giver is within sight. Absent that, and there is panic. We are too young to venture into the world on our own. It is precisely the stable, predictable presence of parents in our early years that gives us a basic sense of trust in life.

But then comes the time, as we approach adulthood, when we have to learn to make our own way in the world. Those are the years of searching and in some cases, rebellion. They are what make adolescence so fraught. The Hebrew word for youth – the root is n-a-r – has these connotations of 'awakening' and 'shaking'. We begin to define ourselves by reference to our friends, our peer-group, rather than our family. Often there is tension between the generations.

The literary theorist Harold Bloom wrote two fascinating books, *The Anxiety of Influence* and *Maps of Misreading*,^[1] in which, in Freudian style, he argued that strong poets make space for themselves by deliberately misinterpreting or misunderstanding their predecessors. Otherwise – if you were really in awe of the great poets that came before you – you would be stymied by a sense that

By Fred and Adina Friedman and Family in honor of the yahrzeit of their father and grandfather, Abraham Friedman, a"h (Avraham Eliyahu ben R'Nachum Shlomo) on the 12th of Marcheshvan

Shabbat Parashat LechLecha

everything that could be said has been said, and better than you could possibly do. Creating the space we need to be ourselves often involves an adversarial relationship to those who came before us, and that includes our parents.

One of the great discoveries that tends to come with age is that, having spent what seems like a lifetime of running away from our parents, we have become very much like them – and the further away we ran, the closer we became. Hence the truth in Mark Twain's insight. It needs time and distance to see their wisdom, to see how much we owe our parents, and to acknowledge how much of them lives on in us.

The way the Torah does this in relation to Abraham (or Abram as he was then called) is remarkable in its subtlety. *Lech Lecha*, and indeed Jewish history, begins with the words, "God said to Abraham, 'Go from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house to a land I will show you'" (Gen. 12:1). This is the boldest beginning of any account of a life in the Hebrew Bible. It seems to come from nowhere. The Torah gives us no portrait of Abraham's childhood, his youth, his relationship with the other members of his family, how he came to marry Sarah, or the qualities of character that made God single him out to become the initiator of what ultimately turned out to be the greatest revolution in the religious history of humankind, what is called nowadays Abrahamic monotheism.

It was this biblical silence that led to the midrashic tradition almost all of us learned as children, that Abraham broke the idols in his father's house. This is Abraham the Revolutionary, the iconoclast, the man of new beginnings who overturned everything his father stood for. This is, if you like, Freud's Abraham.

Perhaps it is only as we grow older that we are able to go back and read the story again, and realise the significance of the passage at the end of the previous parsha. It says this: Terach took his son Avram, and his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Avram's wife, and together they set out from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan. But when they arrived at Harran, they settled there. Gen. 11:31

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It turns out, in other words, that Abraham left his father's house long after he had left his land and his birthplace. His birthplace was in Ur, in what is today southern Iraq, but he only separated from his father in Harran, in what is now northern Syria. Terach, Abraham's father, accompanied him for the first half of his journey. He went with his son, at least part of the way.

What actually happened? There are two possibilities. The first is that Abraham received his call in Ur. His father Terach then agreed to go with him, intending to accompany him to the land of Canaan, though he did not complete the journey, perhaps because of age. The second is that the call came to Abraham in Harran, in which case his father had already begun the journey on his own initiative by leaving Ur. Either way, the break between Abraham and his father was far less dramatic than we first thought.

I have argued elsewhere^[2] that biblical narrative is far more subtle than we usually take it to be. It is deliberately written to be understood at different levels at different stages in our moral growth. There is a surface narrative. But there is also, often, a deeper story that we only come to notice and understand when we have reached a certain level of maturity (I call this the concealed counter-narrative). Genesis 11-12 is a classic example.

When we are young we hear the enchanting – indeed empowering – story of Abraham breaking his father's idols, with its message that a child can sometimes be right and a parent wrong, especially when it comes to spirituality and faith. Only much later in life do we hear the far deeper truth – hidden in the guise of a simple genealogy at the end of the previous parsha – that Abraham was actually

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completing a journey his father began.

There is a line in the book of Joshua – we read it as part of the Haggadah on Seder night – that says: In the past your ancestors lived beyond the Euphrates River, including Terach the father of Avraham and Nahor. They worshiped other gods. Joshua 24:2

So there was idolatry in Abraham's family background. But Genesis 11 says that it was Terach who took Abraham from Ur – not Abraham who took Terach – to go to the land of Canaan. There was no immediate and radical break between father and son.

Indeed it is hard to imagine how it could have been otherwise. Avram – Abraham's original name – means "mighty father". Abraham himself was chosen "so that he may direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just..." (Gen. 18:19) – that is, he was chosen to be a model parent. How could a child who rejected the way of his father become a father of children who would not reject his way in turn?^[3] It makes more sense to say that Terach already had doubts about idolatry and it was he who inspired Abraham to go further, spiritually and physically. Abraham continued a journey his father had begun, thereby helping Isaac and Jacob, his son and grandson, to chart their own ways of serving God – the same God but encountered in different ways.

Which brings us back to Mark Twain. Often we begin by thinking how different we are from our parents. It takes time for us to appreciate how much they helped us become the people we are. Even when we thought we were running away, we were in fact continuing their journey. Much of what we are is because of what they were.

[1] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[2] Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2017).

[3] Rashi (to Gen. 11:31) says it was to conceal the break between son and father that the Torah records the death of Terach before God's call to Abraham. However, see Ramban ad loc.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Nationalism vs. Universalism: The Struggle Within Abraham

"...and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:3) Our biblical tradition seems to live in a paradox between the universal and the particular; our obligations to the world at large and our obligations to our own nation and family.

This tension is evident from the opening sentence of the Torah: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' While it seems these words are a clear proclamation of universality, Rashi's opening comment turns the verse on its head. He argues that the fact that the Torah begins with Creation has nothing to do with a grand universal vision, but rather everything to do with establishing Jewish rights to the land of Israel. He cites a midrash that says since God created the world, He can parcel out specific areas to 'whomever is righteous in His eyes.' This tension between the particular and the universal also permeates the High Holy Day festival period. The universal dominates Rosh Hashanah when we crown God as the King of the entire universe, and Yom Kippur when we declare: "...for My house (the Holy Temple) shall be called a house of prayer for all people. (Is. 56:7)

Further, the seventy sacrifices offered over the course of the festival of Sukkot symbolize our commitment to the welfare of all seventy nations. But in stark contrast, Shemini Atzeret signifies a more intimate and particularistic rendezvous between God and Israel, when the Almighty sends all the other nations home, wishing to enjoy a celebration with Israel alone. Simhat Torah, the added celebration of our having completed the yearly reading of the Pentateuch during this festival, merely emphasizes the unique and separatist significance of this holiday.

The tension is apparent in God's dealings with Abraham. At first God instructs Abraham: Go out of your land, and from your kindred birthplace and your father's house, unto the land that I will show you. (Gen. 12:1)

There are no introductions or apologies. It's straight to the point: Abraham is to found a new family-nation in the specific location of the land of Israel. However, in the next verse, this ethnocentric fervor of going up to one's own land is somewhat muted by the more universalistic message of God's next mandate: "...And through you shall all families of the earth be blessed."

From this moment onwards, both of these elements – a covenantal nation with a unique relationship to God and the universal vision of world peace and redemption – will vie for center stage in the soul of Abraham's descendants.

In the case of Abraham himself, it is the universalistic aspect of his spirit which seems the most dominant. He quickly emerges in the historic arena as a war hero who rescues the five regional nations – including Sodom – from the stranglehold of four terrorizing kings.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Even after Abraham's nephew and adopted son, Lot, rejects Abraham's teachings, he still wants to continue his relationship with Lot, and even bargains with God to save the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. According to the Midrash, the ten righteous people for whom Abraham wishes to save these evil cities are none other than Lot and his family – even though Lot rejected Abraham (and presumably the Abrahamic way of life) for the greener and more permissive pastures of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham also initially opposed the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael – Hagar his Egyptian mistress whom Sarah gave her husband for the sake of enabling him to bear a child and who treated Sarah with derision, and Ishmael, who was the perennially mocking hedonist, interested only in immediate gratification (the metzahek) – apparently because this universalistic patriarch would have preferred a place for everyone under the Abrahamic umbrella.

The Midrash magnificently captures Abraham's concern with the world and world opinion in a trenchant elucidation of the opening verse in the portion of Vayera, where the Torah records the moment of God's appearance to Abraham after the patriarch's circumcision in the fields of the oak trees of Mamre. Why stress this particular location, including the owner of the parcel of trees, Mamre? The Midrash explains that when God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, he went to seek the advice of his three allies – Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre.

Now Aner said to him, 'You mean to say that you are one hundred years old and you want to maim yourself in such a way?' Eshkol said to him, 'How can you do this? You will be making yourself unique and identifiable, different from the other nations of the world.' Mamre, however, said to Abraham, 'How can you refuse to do what God asks you? After all, God saved all of your two hundred and forty-eight limbs when you were in the fiery furnace of Nimrod. If God asks you to sacrifice a small portion of only one of your limbs, how can you refuse?' Because Mamre was the only person who gave him positive advice, God chose to appear to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. (Gen. Raba 42:14)

What I believe is truly remarkable about this midrash is that it pictures Abraham as 'checking out' the advisability of circumcision with his three gentile friends and allies, in order to discover just how upset they would be

By Sari, Russell, Avi, Atara and Arella Mayer on the occasion of the 21st yahrzeit of Sari's mother, Mrs. Rita Walker, z"l (Rivka bat Reuven) - 13 Marcheshvan

by the introduction of this unique and nationalistic sign upon his flesh. The tension between the universal and the particular poses a serious threat to Abraham's relationship with his wife, Sarah. It would seem that theirs is a union of love and genuine cooperation. After all, the very first time that the Bible mentions a husband choosing a wife is in the case of Abraham: And Abram and Nahor took for themselves wives; the name of the wife of Abram was Sarai...(Gen. 11:29)

Until that time, the women are generally anonymous, with all the 'begetting' seeming to take place because of the men alone [Gen. 5]! Hence when the Bible records: And Abram took his wife Sarai...and all their substance that they had gathered and the souls that they had gathered in Haran.... (Gen. 12:5)

Rashi hastens to explain based on the Midrash, that to 'gather souls' meant that 'Abraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women.' At least our Sages believed that they truly worked together as consecrated partners to accomplish the work of the Lord.

Indeed, Abraham is deeply committed to Sarah, and also seems to be aware of her higher gift of prophecy. When she, tragically barren after many years of marriage, suggests to her husband that he father a child with her maid-servant Hagar, the text records 'And Abraham hearkened to the voice of Sarah' [Gen. 15:2] – suggesting that Abraham's role in this matter was entirely subject to the will of Sarah. And if Sarah's suggestion seems rather jarring and out-of-wifely-character to the modern ear, it is important to note that this was precisely the method of adoption practiced by the ancient Near Eastern world. The secondary wife would literally give birth 'on the knees' of the primary wife, causing the baby to be adopted by the primary wife 'as if she had borne him.'

Moreover, Abraham assumes a purely passive role in the second marriage: 'And Sarai the wife of Abram took Hagar her Egyptian maid-servant and she gave her to Abram her husband for a wife' [Gen. 16:3]. This description belies the usual biblical formula for marriage: 'When a man takes a woman.... 'Yet despite Abraham's total devotion to Sarah – all we have to do is consider the effort and expense he invests in the purchase of her permanent burial place in Hebron – they differ strongly in one area. Hagar may have been brought into the picture by Sarah, but when Sarah realizes that the behavior of Hagar's son Ishmael constitutes a serious threat to her family, she is not willing to compromise: Hagar and her son must be banished.

Since Abraham's vision wants to embrace all of humanity, how do we understand his willingness to cast his own flesh and blood to the desert? The Tosefta on Masekhet Sotah, commenting on the verse spoken by Sarah in Lekh Lekha: '...I was derided in her [Hagar's] eyes. Let God judge between me and you,' expands this theme and demonstrates how Abraham and Sarah held two very different world-views. The Sages in the Tosefta fill in the following dialogue between Sarah and Abraham:

'I see Ishmael building an altar, capturing grasshoppers, and sacrificing them to idols. If he teaches this idolatry to my son Isaac, the name of heaven will be desecrated,' says Sarah to Abraham. 'After I gave her [Hagar] such advantages, how can I demote her? Now that we have made her a mistress [of our house], how can we send her away? What will the other people say about us?,' replies Abraham. (Tosefta Sotah 5:12)

Sarah's position is crystal clear. She is more than willing to work together with Abraham to save the world – but not at the expense of her own son and family. She teaches us that our identity as a unique people must be forged and secure before we can engage in dialogue and redemption of the nations. God teaches Abraham that Sarah is right: Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for through Isaac shall your seed be called. (Gen. 21:12)

Indeed, one of the tragedies of life is that we often fail to appreciate what we have until we lose it – or almost lose it. It may well be argued that the subsequent trial of the binding of Isaac comes in no small measure to teach Abraham to properly appreciate – and be truly committed to – his only son and heir Isaac, who, in the final analysis, will carry on his traditions and life's mission. And at the end of the day, nothing remained for Israel from 'all of those souls whom they [Abraham and Sarah] made in Haran. The legacy of Abraham was carried on by one individual and he was Isaac!'

The Person in the Parsha Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

The Book of the Upright

Regular readers of this column are familiar with my dear grandfathers, both of whom passed away more than fifty years ago, may their memories be a blessing. Although they were quite a different from each other, they both taught me lessons that have lasted throughout the years.

Reb Chaim Yitzchak, my father's father, taught me about the great figures of Jewish history. He encouraged me to read their biographies and even supplied me with specific books.

Likutei Divrei Torah

That way, he introduced me to a wide range of historical personalities, ranging from rabbinic sages such as Rashi and Maharshal, and especially to the Maharsham, Rabbi of Berzhan, under whom he studied before leaving Poland for America in the early twentieth century. He had no problem with my reading biographies of distinctly secular individuals such as Franz Kafka and Dr. Janusz Korczak.

I vividly recall the day he gifted me with a three-volume set entitled Makor Baruch. This was the first time that he presented me with a book written in Hebrew. Up until that time, he understood my Hebrew reading skills were limited, and he found English language books for me to peruse.

Although I was initially intimidated by three thick volumes of Hebrew text, I quickly came to realize that the author, Rabbi Baruch Epstein, had written a masterwork with which I was familiar, Torah Temimah, and had a very clear and simple Hebrew style. Rabbi Epstein was a nephew of the great Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the dean of the famed Yeshiva of Volozhin in late nineteenth-century Lithuania. Rabbi Epstein devoted several sections of his three-volume work to his famous uncle. This was my introduction to this unique rabbinic scholar and prolific writer, and Rabbi Berlin, known as Netziv, has remained one of my favorite heroes to this day.

I am occasionally asked to identify a passage from Netziv's vast oeuvre which typifies his religious ideology. I have no difficulty in doing so. Netziv wrote a comprehensive commentary on the entire Pentateuch or Chumash. There, we find his brilliant and particularly relevant introduction to the book of Bereshit, Genesis, which we are now reading in the synagogue every Shabbat. That introduction is the gem which displays his central teaching.

The Bible, in at least two places, refers to a mysterious work known Sefer HaYashar, the "Book of the Upright." The Talmud, Avodah Zara 25a, suggests that this work is the Book of Genesis, Bereshit. There Rabbi Yochanan explains that Bereshit be known as the "Book of the Upright" because its major characters, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, were upright individuals par excellence.

Netziv accepts this explanation but wonders why the term "upright," yashar, is used rather than terms such as tzaddik, righteous, or chassid, pious. Netziv explains that there were periods in Jewish history where there were individuals who were righteous and pious, but not quite upright. They were not upright in their relationships with others, often to the extent that they were guilty of sinat chinam, of

vain hatred of their fellows. He goes so far as to say that by not being upright, they were even capable of murder.

He writes: "The Holy One, Blessed Is He is yashar, upright. He cannot tolerate those who are merely "righteous" in their religious practices but cannot get along with others, and commit deeds done for the "sake of heaven" which lead to the ruin of creation and the destruction of society." The Patriarchs, particularly Abraham, were yescharim, upright souls, who "conducted themselves well even with decadent pagans, and live with them with love and concern for their well-being."

As we read the weekly Torah portions at this time of year, we can study just how resoundingly Netziv's words ring true.

One wonders about the origins of upright behavior. How did Abraham, for example, learn to be yashar? How can we, his descendants, instill yashrut, uprightness, in ourselves and in our children?

I propose that the answer lies in a verse in the Book of Ecclesiastes, Kohelet. The verse appears at the very end of chapter 7. It reads, "The Almighty made men yashar, upright, but they sought out many schemes."

The Book of Kohelet is often read as a pessimistic work. But this verse implies an alternative to pessimism. Humans are not stained by original sin. They are not evil from birth and therefore incorrigible. Quite the contrary. We are all created yashar. The word "yashar" literally means "straight." We are all born straight, insists Kohelet. But somehow, we seek out crooked schemes which distort our straightness.

I cannot conclude this column without quoting from the wise Rabbi Shimon Schwab, of blessed memory. He diagnosed our Jewish society as placing our emphasis on kashrut but neglecting yashrut. We tend to be careful about kosher but need to do better with yosher.

Perhaps reflecting upon the narrative of the current weekly portions, the words of Netziv, and the verse in Kohelet will inspire us to be straight, upright, and yashar. We will thus conform to the Almighty's intentions when He created us, and the world will be a better place.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

Altruism As A Necessity

In modern times we have come to realize that self-interest, or plain egotism and selfishness, constitutes one of the most powerful forces in the universe. Thoughtful people conclude, therefore, that we ought to harness this

immense reservoir of energy for constructive purposes.

Certainly, skyscrapers are built, and schools founded, and hospitals established, books are written, and elections won, and business increased, not primarily because the people who do these things are concerned with the general weal or social health or science or esthetics or national economic growth. They are done because people want to make more money, or build a reputation, or simply have the satisfaction of doing things bigger and better than anyone else.

Cynical though that sounds, all of us recognize the truth in it. It is a fact. The nail in your shoe hurts more than the fatal accident on the next street. And one flattering remark, one little compliment, buoys your spirit more than the news that ten people were saved from disaster.

Religion nowadays also tends to capitalize on that insight. Thus such phenomena as Christian Science to something called "Jewish Science," and the Power of Positive Thinking to the promises given by leaders of every religion that what they have to offer will bring more happiness and psychological well-being.

Popular morality, too, exploits this idea. We are told to practice honesty, not because it is right, but because "honesty is the best policy." We are discouraged from committing a crime, not because crime is wrong, but because "crime doesn't pay."

Perhaps there is something to all this. Perhaps to some kinds of mentality, or even to all kinds of mentality, this appeal to self-interest yields results and makes the world a better place to live in. But if this is all there is to it; if we work on the premise that man is only a self-seeking, egotistical animal, out only for himself--then we are in a sorry mess, and religions which accept such a view without protest are unworthy of the name. To be religious only because you have an angle, to be decent only because there is a kick-back to it, is to worship yourself, not the Almighty.

"Selfishness," writes Israel Zangwill, in his Children of the Ghetto, "is the only real atheism; aspiration, unselfishness - the only real religion." Or, to quote a far greater authority on religion, R. Hayyim of Volozhin used to say: *להעל אחרני כי זה תכלית כל האדם* -- "The whole purpose of man is to help others, to be of service to other human beings." Self-respect and self-worth thrive only in the presence of self-disregard and self-forgetfulness.

This teaching is implicit in today's Sidra. Abraham, the man of righteousness and peace and gentleness, observed the war of the five

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Kings and the four Kings. He noticed the cruel oppression and the suffering, and so he decided to abandon his ways of peace, and in an act of great courage he proceeded to liberate the victims of this cruelty. When he succeeded, the King of Sodom, who had been emancipated by Abraham, offered him the spoils of war. Certainly this was a legitimate compensation for Abraham. Yet Abraham refused to accept it, "I will not take anything from a thread to a shoelace...and you shall not say that you made Abraham rich." Abraham even takes an oath to affirm his refusal to accept any reward. He wants his noble act to remain unspoiled and untainted by selfish interest!

It is important to recognize that this is a high level in the development of character. You cannot attain such altruism of selflessness at once. Thus, when we first meet Abraham in today's Sidra, we find a figure who, despite his refreshing dedication to righteousness, is not quite as selfless as *ך*: we have described. When the Lord first revealed Himself to Abraham, and commanded him leave your country and birthplace and family, Abraham was apparently reluctant to follow the divine command until God assured him that he would derive some personal benefit from his obedience. Thus the extra word *ך* -- "get thee" -- i.e., for your own sake, or, as the Rabbis put it: *הנתך ולטובך*, for your own benefit and your own good. Abraham is willing to go to all costs to perform a good deed, but he still wants his actions to benefit him in some way. It is only later that Abraham's character blossoms in its full sublimity, and Abraham achieves the height of altruism, when he replies to the King of Sodom: *אם מהות ועד שרך נעל...* I cannot accept nothing from you for having performed a courageous act of decency.

It is interesting to compare the development of the character of Abraham to the degeneration of the character of Laban, the man who was the brother of the young lady who was to become Abraham's daughter-in-law. When Laban hears that a stranger has come into town--Eliezer, the messenger of Abraham who was looking for a wife for Isaac--we read that Laban apparently reacted nobly: *וירץ לבן אל האיש החוץ*, Laban ran to greet him. Certainly, we have here revealed a bright aspect of the personality of Laban. But then something happens he noticed that Eliezer is laden with all kinds of jewelry and gems, and then--only then--does he say to Eliezer: come into my home, why do you stay outside? Laban's sudden exuberance, his expansive hospitality, is occasioned not by a disinterested goodness, but by an opportunity he detected for self-aggrandizement. Laban confounded business with hospitality. He had a nose for profit, he smelled a deal--and that corrupted what might have been a heartfelt act of pure generosity.

The well known Hasidic teacher, the Radomsker Rabbi, once commented about the confessions we recite on Yom Kippur: one of the list of sins to which we confess is for the sin which we committed by means of the Evil Urge. Why, asks the rabbi, a special confession for *צער הרע*, the Evil Urge? Are not all sins committed because of the fact that we are victimized by the *צער הרע*? Why, then, set aside a special confession for this lack of resistance to the Evil Urge? The answer is, that this particular confession refers not to the sins that we have committed, but, on the contrary, to the good deeds and mitzvot which we have performed--but without purity and selflessness! We confess to the noble deeds which we performed only because we were impelled by the *צער הרע*, by the opportunity for self-interest and self-advancement. We confess to having performed acts of decency only because we were motivated by selfish interest.

Do we not recognize it? Is it not a universal failing? This is a confession which includes those who give charity--only because they want to build a reputation. It includes those who pray with apparent fervor, not because one ought to pray fervently, but--because they want to impress others. It includes people who become active in religious and philanthropic organizations, not because they want to strengthen them, but--because they need them politically.

Allow me to make myself clear: I do not mean that one must always be selfless and altruistic. I do not mean that we are to become angels all of a sudden. I wish to be thoroughly realistic. But I do believe that at least something in life must be sealed off from our ubiquitous egotism. I believe that one deed during the day, one mitzvah, one little area of life, ought to be reserved for that which is unselfish and *לשם שמי*, for the sake of Heaven.

You may say that that is unnatural and superhuman. Granted--but it still is a necessity! To be natural is not always a virtue; the cow munching on the pasture, the elephant drinking from a brook, and the monkey stealing bananas, are all being natural. And insofar as humanity is concerned, I am convinced that in order to be human most of the time, we must be superhuman some of the time.

(The Talmud indicates this in a most interesting way. The study of Torah is one of the greatest commandments known to Judaism. Torah study is desirable no matter what the motive: whether we study Torah for its own sake, *תורה לשלמה*, without any selfish motives; or whether we study it not for its own sake, but because we have a personal benefit such as the prestige we , *לשלמה* desire, or we want to become teachers or Rabbis. What is the

difference between studying Torah with or without a selfish interest? The Talmud assigns these two motives, *תורה לשלמה* and *לשלמה לשלמה*, to two different verses in the Psalms. One verse reads: *כי גדול עד שמי חסוך*, that God's love (i.e., His Torah and our study of it) is high unto Heaven. The second verse reads *כי גדול מעל שמי חסוך*, that God's love is great beyond or above the Heavens. How do you reconcile these two apparently contradictory verses? The Talmud answers: the first verse refers to Torah study for a selfish reason, *תורה לשלמה*; whereas the second verse refers to *תורה לשלמה*, Torah study for unselfish reasons. (What the Talmud means is that as long as we study Torah, even if there is a personal element involved, we reach the highest limits of human conduct and aspirations. Then our love for God and our study of Torah lead us to be great unto the Heavens. But if we study *תורה לשלמה*, Torah for its one sake, selflessly, then our love and our relationship to God magnifies our personality even beyond the Heavens; for then, indeed, we humans become superhuman.)

A charming and most relevant story is told about some of the giants of Jewish history who lived in Safed in the 16th century. Rabbi Moshe Elshikh, the great mystic and Talmudist, was also known as a great teacher of Torah and preacher. Once, as he was about to begin a *derashah* or sermon, the audience was thrilled to notice that there appeared, in order to listen to him, the renowned Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as the Ari ha-Kadosh, one of the greatest mystics of Kabbalists in Jewish history, accompanied by numerous disciples. In the middle of the sermon, however, the Ari and his disciples picked themselves up and left the synagogue! Later, when they were asked for the explanation for their strange behavior, the Ari explained: "Initially we came because in my mystic visitations, when my soul soared into the Heavens, I noticed that all the angels were preparing to come to listen to the sermon of Rabbi Moshe Elshikh. But then, in the middle of his talk, the Rabbi evidently began to feel self-satisfied and smug; he noticed the wonderful impression he was making on the congregation, and there arose in his mind a thought of conceit. At that moment he intended not so much to teach Torah as to impress others with his own competence and importance. Therefore, since his teaching of Torah no longer was pure, the angels departed. And when I saw that the angels had left, then I too left with my students..." Whether it is teaching of Torah or doing of good deeds or simply being a decent human being--the finer are our characters, the more are we expected to be selfless!

I can think of many acts of kindness and generosity, undiminished by any selfish interest, acts done with dignity and sensitivity, by people here this morning; even by some

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who never have realized and appreciated the nobility of what they are doing! We meet it all around us, though perhaps not as often as we should. Only recently we all became aware of a dramatic example, when earlier this week Rev. Martin Luther King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which he so richly deserved--and he immediately announced that he would give the entire amount to the Civil Rights Movement! ! נעל נעל אמר מהות ועד שרך נעל אמר Abraham's teaching.

Certainly we who are the descendants of Abraham ought to re-learn this lesson. Charity is usually given in full view of the public. Very often that is as it should be--because when we give with publicity, that inspires others to do the same, and it is more important that charity be given than that our motives be pure. Nevertheless, at least sometimes we ought to try to introduce into our lives the principle taught to us by what the Talmud tells of the days of the Temple, that there was in the Temple the *לשכה חשאן*, the "Chamber of Silence," where people would leave their donations and poor men would take them without ever meeting each other--acts of pure selflessness.

That is why the *Hevra Kadisha* is so significant--because the people who devote themselves and dedicate their energies to this difficult and demanding work, perform a *חסד של אמת*, an act of goodness which has truth in it, i.e. they never expect compensation from the people who are their beneficiaries.

Or, to take another example: people who work for a *Yeshiva* or Day School which their children attend are without question and without doubt performing wonderful work. But when such people continue their labors and efforts on behalf of the school in an undiminished manner even after their children have left that school--they are proving themselves utterly altruistic and selfless in the finest traditions of our Father Abraham!

Abraham's example therefore inspires us not to give up any and all or even the major part of our self-interest and our striving for self-advancement. It does inspire us just occasionally, and with some regularity, to do something in our lives that is utterly unselfish, completely *לשם שמי*.

And whereas this selflessness demands, by its very nature, that we expect no reward or compensation, nevertheless it is a fact: that life is so much sweeter when we emulate this example of Abraham! No wonder that every morning we pray

והערב נא 'אלקינו את דברי תורה
בפינו ובפיה עמך בית ישראל
וניה אנחנו וצאצינו וצאצאי עמך בית ישראל כלנו
וודע שך ולומדי תורה לשלמה

Make sweet, O Lord, the words of Your Torah in our mouths so that we and our children may--learn Torah for its own sake, without any selfish interest. Only that way, by studying Torah and putting it into practice in all our lives lishmah, without any selfish angle, can life become as sweet as possible. Such is the teaching of our Torah. **ברוך אתה ה' מלך העולם לעמו ישואך**. Blessed is the Lord who teaches such a Torah to his people Israel.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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

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 HaOrah 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

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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."

Dvar Torah

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

What gave Avraham a great name?

At the commencement of Parshat Lech Lecha, Hashem commands Avraham and Sara to make aliyah, a pilgrimage, to the land that He would show them, the land of Canaan. Hashem promises (Bereishit 12:2),

"V'eescha legoy gadol," – "I will make you into a great nation,"

"Va'avarechecha," – "and I will bless you,"

"Ve'agadela shemecha," – "and I will make your name great."

The Gemara in Masechet Pesachim, 117B, brought down by Rashi, explains that the commencement of our Amida, our central prayer when we stand before God three times a day, is based on this text.

The Torah tells us that Hashem said to Avraham, "Ve'eshcha legoy gadol," – "I will make you into a great nation." That's why we proclaim, "Elokei Avraham," – God is the God of Abraham.

Hashem continued, "Ve'avarechecha," – "and I will bless you." That's why we say, "Elokei Yitzchak," – the God of Isaac.

Finally came the third statement, "Ve'agadela shemecha," – "and I will make your name great." That's why we say "Elokei Yaakov," – the God of Jacob.

Now Rav Soloveitchik asks a great question. We can understand the connection between the second statement, 'I will bless you,' and 'Elokei Yitzchak.' Avraham was blessed through Yitzchak, because Hashem blessed Avraham miraculously with a child (Yitzchak) when he was old. However, what is the connection between the third statement and 'Elokei Yaakov' – that is, in what way did Avraham's 'name become great' through Yaakov?

Rav Soloveikchik explains beautifully. He says that when it comes to parenting, it's a marvellous achievement to see one's child walking in one's footsteps. But it's an even greater achievement to witness one's grandchildren emulating one's ways. That is exactly what Avraham achieved through Yaakov having internalised the values of his grandfather and who in his own right became a great person. Therefore we see that Avraham's name became great through his grandchild.

A very important lesson emerges for us from this. Famous and renowned people can make national and global impacts but ultimately the most significant impact that anybody can make is within their own families.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

"Avraham the Hebrew" – Particularity, Universality and What is Between Them

Rabbi Dr. Tomer Corinaldi

"Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house." The first Divine call to Avram was to depart from his birthplace and leave his surroundings. Immediately following this we see the consequence of this departure: "And in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

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Ostensibly, the Torah seems to be describing two contradictory movements: separation from one's surroundings vs. connection and reproduction.

If we read on in the parsha we will notice that both these notions continue to co-exist. Avram arrives in the Land of Israel as instructed by God and receives a very particular national blessing: "To your seed I shall give this land."

And immediately following this, we read: "...and he built there an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord" – this verse denotes a general calling upon the Lord.

The famine compels Avram to go down to Egypt, where the story of Pharaoh and Sarai takes place. Driven by fear and detachment, Avram introduces Sarai as his own sister, an action which leads to separation once again: "And they sent him away and his wife and all that he had."

Avram returns to the Land of Israel, to the very spot where he had initially built his altar, and once again calls out to the entire world:

"And Avram called there upon the name of the Lord."

The pendulum never ceases to move between two extremities, swinging constantly between segregation, on the one hand, and a connection to the world, expressed by calling upon the name of the Lord, on the other.

The story continues and we are told of the dispute that broke out between the shepherds of Avram and the shepherds of Lot. Avram then asks of Lot: "Separate yourself, I pray thee, from me."

And once again Avram receives the blessing of the Lord for his descendants: "For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever."

In the section that follows, Avram goes out to war against the Four Kings in order to save Lot, and following his victory he receives the blessing of Malkitzedek, king of Shalem: "Blessed be Avram of God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth."

This verse clearly expresses the acknowledgement of an outsider, one who is defined as a "Priest of God Most High" and even receives from Avram a tenth of all the revenue (as explained by Rashi).

God then promises Avram as follows: "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs..."

This promise is immediately followed by the story of an Egyptian maidservant – Hagar. Sarai deals harshly with Hagar until the latter “flees from her”.

Once again, we are witness to this dual motion – connection vs. detachment from the surrounding nations/the local environment.

At the end of the parsha we see something quite extraordinary, even paradoxical.

God changes Avram's name to one bearing universal significance: “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be the father of a multitude of nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Avram, but thy name shall be Avraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made thee.”

However, in this very same covenant, God also says: “And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land of thy dwellings, all the Land of Canaan...”.

Furthermore, the covenant between Avraham's seed and God is manifest in a way which is extraordinarily unique: “This is My covenant, which ye shall keep, between Me and you and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised.”

One cannot but wonder how is it that in the very covenant in which God changes Avram's name to Avraham – a name denoting that Avraham will be the father of many nations, a name signifying universality – God also commands him to perform an extraordinary act that has become a sign and symbol of the Jewish people throughout history, marking their individuality, segregating them from all others; an act that was even looked upon negatively by the gentiles of the world, so much so that it led to the forceful conversion and awful persecution of Jews!

A fascinating explanation of this paradox is offered by R 'Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev in his beautiful book Kdushat Levi: ‘As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be the father of a multitude of nations (Bereshit 17:4). The idea that is conveyed here is that the main task of the tzaddik is to elevate the lower spheres and bring them closer to God Almighty. As is written in the Zohar ‘–We wish to stand before the King’. However, the tzaddik is in great peril when he descends for the purpose of uplifting, because the tzaddik must constantly be close to the infinity of God. For this reason, God promised Avraham “–My covenant is with thee”. The covenant is the connection with the Almighty. In other words, what God wished to say was that He would be with Avraham even at such

times when Avraham is ‘the father of a multitude of nations’. And this requires more careful reading.” (Kdushat Levi, Parshat Lech Lecha on the words “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be the father of a multitude of nations”.)

Put more simply, owing to the universal mission with which Avraham was tasked by God – to elevate the lower spheres of reality – there was a need for a special covenant that connected him to God in an extraordinary and particular manner.

It seems to me that the ostensibly contradicting trends that are given expression in our portion can be explained in the above manner as well. In order to operate and have universal impact, one must separate oneself, segregate from all others, subject oneself to a covenant that is unique to us only, one which connects us to God.

This explanation is complemented by yet another fascinating explanation of the Kdushat Levi in Parshat Toldot, where he refers to the matter of Avram's name being changed to Avraham:

“And the reason Avraham and Sarah's names were changed, and not that of Yitzhak, is that the trait of chessed [“charity and kindness”] signifies the spreading and extension of the infinite Divine light (behirut) of God Almighty. When this infinite Divine light descends into this world, it must converge into itself and diminish itself. Anything that descends from the world above to the world below must, by definition, lessen itself so that this world may contain it. Similarly, Avram's name had to change to Avraham. He was Avram before he descended and diffused into this world, when his light was still very bright. But after he descended and spread out into this world, his infinite light had to diminish itself, and that is why he was given a different name – Avraham...”

R 'Levi Yitzhak goes on to add: “Before he diffused into this world, he was called Avram. For Avram is a name of the world above, which is called ram [“lofty and high”], but after he had spread out, and his behirut consequently diminished – he was called Avraham, av hamon goyim, father of a multitude of nations, for he had now descended into the world of the multitudes. Hence, before he had spread out into the lower world, he could not father offspring. Only after he had extended himself and spread out into the world below and his name was changed to Avraham, could he bring forth progeny.” (ibid.)

The name Avram – av ram [“a mighty/lofty father”] denotes a higher level than the name

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Avraham – av hamon goyim [“the father of a multitude of nations”]. Avram, a dweller of the lofty world, had to diminish himself into an Avraham in order to descend into the world of the multitudes. Only then could he realize his potential and bear children of his own.

The notion that a person must depart from his place in order to act and do for the Jewish People even at the risk of “undermining” his own “spirituality” is a well-known one.

However, R 'Levi Yitzhak teaches us a novel idea: Even for the sake of engaging in positive activity among the nations of the world, one is obliged to diminish and lessen oneself and descend spiritually. For only in this manner was it possible for Avraham to fulfill the mission for which he was chosen.

“Ma'ase avot siman lebanim,” is a well-known quote “ –the actions of the fathers are a sign unto the children.” In my opinion, it is possible for us to achieve both of the ideas presented above. On the one hand, we must always remember that we are unique, connected to God. Not only has He stamped the seal of the covenant between ourselves and Him into our very flesh, we are also bound to Him with our souls and the Torah we study. As is written:

“Lo, it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.” (Bamidbar 23:9)

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg

True to His Mission

After Pharaoh sends Avraham and Sarah away from Mitzrayim, Avraham returns home on the same path that he had traveled on his way to Mitzrayim. The posuk says, “He proceeded on his journeys, from the south till Beis-El, until the place where his tent had stood at first, between Beis-El and Ai, to the place of the altar which he had erected there at first, and there Avraham called out in the name of Hashem” (Lech Lecha, 13:3-4). Rashi comments that the phrase “He proceeded on his journeys” implies that Avraham traveled on the same route and stayed in the same lodgings in which he had stayed overnight on his way down to Mitzrayim. This teaches proper conduct that a person should not choose different lodgings when traveling on the same route.

Why is this behavior so significant? The Ksav Sofer explains that what made Avraham's behavior noteworthy is the fact that he was now much wealthier than before. After Pharaoh was forced to return Sarah, he showered Avraham with gifts. And as a result, “Avraham was very heavy with livestock, with silver and gold” (13:2). Generally, when a person

becomes wealthy, he changes his lodgings. He upgrades his home; he vacations in greater style. He raises his standard of living.

The posuk is teaching that Avraham Avinu was different. He was not drawn to luxuries. Rather, he was focused on avodas Hashem, on spreading Hashem's name to all those who came in contact with him. He felt no need to change his accommodations or his home. He stayed in the same lodgings and he returned to the same tent in Beis-El, because his ultimate goal was to return to the same altar, the same mission he had begun, to call out in the name of Hashem. Despite the wealth that he had amassed, he remained focused on his life's mission - to draw people closer to Hashem. The true eved Hashem remains focused on serving Hakadosh Boruch Hu despite whatever else is happening in his personal life.

We find a similar idea later in the parsha. The Torah describes how during the battle of the five kings against the four kings, Lot and the people of Sdom are taken captive, and a fugitive comes to tell Avraham of Lot's plight. Chazal understood that it was Og who escaped from the battle and approached Avraham. The Targum Yonason elaborates on the words of the posuk and explains, "He came on erev Pesach, and he found him (Avraham) as he was making matzos." This is alluded to as well in the Midrash Rabba (42, 8): "Why was he called Og? Because he came and found Avraham involved in the mitzvah of matzos (ugos)."

Why did Chazal highlight this fact that Avraham Avinu was baking matzos when Og came to his tent? I once heard that perhaps Chazal meant to underscore Avraham's dedication to avodas Hashem. It is highly unlikely that Avraham did not know of the war raging between the kings. This was the first world war in history, and people were passing by Avraham's tent on a daily basis. Surely at least one of them would have told him about the war. And yet, what is Avraham preoccupied with? Baking matzos. Avraham fulfilled all the mitzvos of the Torah even before it was given (Kiddushin 82a). Despite whatever else was happening in the world on erev Pesach, Avraham Avinu was involved in baking matzos.

Chazal say (Shabbos 31a) that one of the questions that a person is asked in the heavenly court is "Kavata itim l'Torah - did you have set times for the study of Torah?" One is not asked whether he studied Torah, but rather whether he had set times for the study of Torah. Why is having set times so important? Rashi explains that a person must have some form of livelihood because "im ein derech eretz ein Torah - if one does not have an occupation there is no Torah" (Avos 3:17). Therefore, one must have set times for Torah study so that he

will not be drawn to his occupation the entire day. Without having set times, one can easily forget to study Torah because he will be so involved in his work.

In a sense, then, the real question that a person is asked in the heavenly court is not whether he studied Torah during his lifetime, but whether he had a proper sense of priorities. Did you have set times for the study of Torah that were sacrosanct, that you would not sacrifice no matter what was going on in the office, or did you learn Torah only when it worked out with your schedule? Were you able to focus on talmud Torah despite whatever else was happening in your life or were you distracted by your other responsibilities?

Avraham Avinu is a model of a true eved Hashem. No matter what happened to him personally or what world events were transpiring during his lifetime, he always remained focused on serving Hashem to the best of his ability and bringing honor to Hashem's name in all of his endeavors. It is a model worth emulating.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

If You Keep On Going

And HASHEM said to Avram, "Go for (or to) yourself from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house to the place that I will show you!" (Breishis 12:1)

Why did HASHEM not tell Avraham where it is that he is to be going? He is told to leave and abandon everything familiar to embark on a journey into the unknown. Why not tell a man where he is going? Why keep that part wrapped in mystery.

Every year I look for a new answer to that question. The search continues to bear valuable fruit for me and that's already part of the answer.

It just started to dawn on me by not telling Avraham about where it is that he is supposed to go, there is a deep message implied. It may not be about getting geographically from point A to point B on the map. The purpose of Avraham's journeying is not just to end up in a new place. That would be too simple and superficial.

The meaning of the mandate to begin moving that was given to Avraham and which is installed in the heart of each and every one of us is, to be in the process of going. The train is always arriving. The idea is that there is a process of growth and the process itself needs to be honored.

Here are a few of my favorite quotes, "The most successful person is not the one who

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makes the fewest mistakes but the one who learns the most from his mistakes." and "It's not how hard you fall but how high you bounce that counts". King Solomon says, "The Tzadik falls seven times and gets up!" Life is filled with falling down and failing but the important thing is that "he gets up".

I once asked a very big psychologist if he noticed any difference between Jews and gentiles in his practice. He told me without hesitation that he definitely did. He said that Jews tend to be resilient. That could be one of the great secrets to our survival and endurance as a people. It's not about brilliance as much as it's about reliance, the ability to keep going.

Every once in a while, it happens that a good Hebrew and English term, brothers in pronunciation, homonyms, have incidentally harmonized and have the same meaning. In Hebrew the word "Muvan" means understood. Once something is understood, and an important lesson is learned, then it's time to "move on". It's not the time to dwell in the past, but to "Muvan" and "Move on"!

This is the essence of the message of Lech Lecha, I do believe, in a very practical and personal way. One of my daughters just came home from a glorious year in seminary in Eretz Yisrael. We welcomed her with a big sign on the door and it was wonderful to reunite. She has so many pictures, stories, and souvenirs to share. A few days later I hear weeping coming from her room, loud and heart-breaking cries of who knows what.

I knocked on her door and asked if everything was all right and if I could come in. When I entered, she was sprawled across her bed sobbing. I asked, "What's the matter?" She articulately launched into her rant, her soliloquy, "I went to elementary school for all those years. I lined up by the water fountain and wore the school uniform. I did my homework and then I went to a nice high school. I studied and behaved and I got into a good seminary. Now, I am back home from seminary, (bursting into tears) where's my job and where's my husband?"

I understood immediately she is coming to grips with the idea that life isn't always a scripted formula. As a father, what was I to say?! An idea jumped into my mind. I wrote it down on a piece of paper and gave it to her. As she read it, I could see that it began to heal her broken heart. She was thinking! Later I typed

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it up and added a picture and put it in a frame which I hung by her bed. The picture was of a little toddler taking first steps and the mother's arms can be seen reaching and coaxing the next step. The words I inscribed there were, "It doesn't matter where you begin, if you keep on going, you will end up where you need to be!" And the key-operative words are, "if you keep on going".

Mizrachi Dvar Torah**Rav Doron Perz****Being a Blessing**

What is the mission of the Jewish People? G-d tells the first Jew, Avraham, that He will bless him, and that "he will be a blessing".

What does it mean "he will be a blessing"? We understand he will be blessed, but why will he also "be a blessing"?

We learn that Avraham and his progeny will also be a source of blessing to others.

But Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch points out that this seems counterintuitive – since people and nations tend to look after themselves, not look after others. Rav Hirsch explains that this is exactly the mission of the Jewish people – to not only look after our own communities, but to also look out for all others.

This is certainly true both for our Jewish communities around the world, as well as the State of Israel.



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Parshas Lech Lecha

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand The Landlord Is Still Home

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 830, Standing for a Chosen. Good Shabbos!

Avraham Avinu returns victorious from the battle with the Four Kings and is greeted by the rescued King of Sodom who tells him "Give me the souls and you take the spoils of war." Avraham takes an oath that he will take not even a shoelace from the King of Sodom so that the King would not later be able to say "I made Avraham wealthy." [Bereishis 14:22-23] This booty rightfully belonged to Avraham but he did not want to take it.

The Medrash in Bereishis Rabbah comments on this refusal to take even a shoelace: "For this noble act, Avraham merited that his children receive a mitzvah." What was this mitzvah? The Medrash actually lists several mitzvos that Avraham's children merited because of this act, among them the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel — coming up to Jerusalem for the Festivals. This is alluded to by the pasuk: "Mah Yafu p'amayich bas nadiv" [Shir HaShirim 7:2]. This pasuk extols the virtues of the footsteps of Klal Yisrael.

The question we need to analyze in light of this Medrash is what is the connection between Avraham Avinu and the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel? More specifically, how does the proclamation of Avraham to the King of Sodom regarding his refusal to take the spoils of war lead to his children meriting the privilege of having the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel?

In order to answer these questions, we need to spend a few moments analyzing the mitzvah. The pasuk says, "Three times during the year, each male from amongst you should be seen before the L-rd your G-d." [Shemos 23:17] The three times a year that Jews have to leave their homes and travel to Jerusalem are the holidays of Pessach, Shavuos, and Succos. When one

thinks about it, this obligation could not come at a worse time for the average Jewish household. It is equivalent to saying "in March and April, all accountants have to go up to Jerusalem." [Yearly income tax is due April 15 in the United States.] It is the middle of tax season, you do not know how you are going to finish all your work, but you have to drop everything and travel up to Jerusalem at the worst possible time.

That is the way it was for the farmer in the agrarian society. We celebrate Pessach during the planting season, in the month of Nissan, I need to leave the farm and travel to Jerusalem. Shavuos occurs during the harvest season. Again, the worst time in the world for a farmer to have to take a forced trip and leave his farm — together with all the hired help — right in the middle of the crop harvest! Finally, the real test comes on Succos — the time of the in-gathering of the crop — I need to bring the crop into the barns and silos before the winter rains begin. Again I need to drop everything and run to Yerushalayim.

It is no coincidence that at these times it is necessary to go up to the Beis HaMikdash. On these occasions — especially when a person is busy with the harvest — it is very easy for a person to fall into the trap of "My strength and the power of my hand made me all this wealth" [Devorim 8:17] — Boy am I a good farmer! Look at this crop! I am going to make a fortune! Therefore, at this very time, the Almighty tells us, "Go to Jerusalem and go to the Beis HaMikdash and get your priorities straight. Realize that 'my strength and the power of my hand made me all this wealth', is not correct, but rather, 'He who gives you the strength to prosper' [Devorim 8:18]". This is one of the lessons we need to learn when we go up to Jerusalem at the time of the Festivals.

However, there is something even more acute than that. The Torah uses the expression — Adon [Master] — by Aliyah L'Regel. "Three times during the year, all your males should be seen before the Master, Hashem." [Shemos 23:17] Hashem is rarely referred to as "Adon" in the Torah. "Adon" is simply not one of the more common names used to refer to Hashem in the Torah. Again, by Aliyah K'Regel in Parshas Ki Sisa, the pasuk says "before the Master, the G-d of Israel." [Shemos 34:23] So by Aliyah L'Regel it is emphasized twice. This teaches a second lesson that we must learn from the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel. The mitzvah reminds us "Who is the Master?" "Who is the 'Baal-Habayis' of the world? "Who owns everything?" The 'Baal-Habayis' is the Hashem. The nuance of the word 'Adon' means He is the Master, He is the 'Baal-Habayis'.

To wit, the Yalkut Shimoni writes that anytime the Torah uses the expression 'Adon' the connotation is "He can take out the existing tenants and he can put in new tenants". He is the "Baal Ha-bayis". In English, we would say "He is the landlord!" That is why the Torah uses this expression concerning the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel.

Every Jew who owned the smallest piece of land, leaves everything and goes up to Yerushalayim. Is this not a security risk? Is this not an invitation for disaster? Who will be watching the sheep, the cattle, the farm, the house? Everyone left town! The Jewish people rarely if ever lived in entirely tranquil times. What would stop the enemy from coming in and taking over? Imagine what would happen today if everyone left their homes to travel to Jerusalem. It would be an open invitation to our enemies to invade and take over the country, Heaven forbid.

How can we do that? We can do it because the Ribono Shel Olam says, "the 'Baal haBayis' is still home". The Landlord remains on guard! "I promise you," the Landlord says, that "no man shall covet your land when you go up to see the Presence of the L-rd your G-d three times a year" [Shemos 34:24]. I promise you that no ill will befall you when you perform this mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel. This is the message that is reinforced by this three times a year commandment: Do not ever forget who is in charge.

The Medrash in Shir HaShirim tells the story of two wealthy brothers in Ashkelon who had wicked Gentile neighbors. The neighbors plotted to loot the property of the brothers when they traveled up to Jerusalem. The brothers

left on their Aliyah L'Regel journey, and the neighbors scouted out the property — expecting it to be unoccupied — but they saw two people still there, going in and out, in and out. They continued checking throughout the holiday and to their amazement, each day the brothers still appeared to be on their land. Lo and behold after the Yom Tov was over, the brothers returned from Jerusalem and they brought their neighbors back souvenirs from the Holy City.

The neighbors questioned the brothers: Where were you? They said, "We were in Jerusalem." The neighbors were incredulous. "What do you mean, we saw you each day. You were here the whole time!" The brothers assured them that they just gotten back from a two week journey to Jerusalem. The Medrash concludes that the Gentile neighbors recognized the miracle and responded, "Blessed be the G-d of Israel who does not abandon them and does not leave them orphaned." It was a miracle. The Almighty made two angels appear who looked like the two brothers. Nothing happened to their house because "No man will covet your land". G-d says, "I am the Landlord and the Landlord is sill home."

The Medrash relates a similar incident. The brothers left the door unlocked, a snake came and wrapped himself around the padlock so that the Gentiles could not enter. There are several such incidents in the Medrash. The points are all the same: There is a Ribono shel Olam who is in charge and who is the landlord. He brings tenants in and he kicks tenants out. He is the One who provides sustenance. He can protect us. He will protect us. This is the lesson of Aliyah L'Regel.

When Avraham Avinu came back from battle, the King of Sodom told him: "Give me the souls; you take the booty." What does Avraham Avinu say? "I lift my hand to the G-d on High, who owns Heaven and Earth (koneh shamayim v'aretz)..." This expression "koneh shamayim v'aretz" is an expression we say daily in the Shmoneh Esrei in reference to Hashem. It connotes that he is the Landlord — he owns everything! Avraham will not accept a shoelace from the King of Sodom because he knows that it is the Lord who owns Heaven and Earth who has promised to give him wealth.

Avraham is confident that it will be He who will give him wealth and does not want to give the King of Sodom the opportunity to say "I made Avraham wealthy."

This was Avraham's signature message to the world: There is One G-d, a personal G-d, an interested G-d, a G-d who runs the show and who is the Baal HaBirah (the Master of the Metropolis). This is the same Avraham Avinu in whose merit his children received the mitzvah of Aliyah L'Regel, which for all future generations would teach Avraham's offspring this very same message.

It is no coincidence that the Gemara says, [Brochos 7b] "Rav Yochanan stated in the name of Rav Shimon bar Yochai: "From the day the Holy One Blessed be He created the world, there was no person who called Him 'Adon' until Avraham came and did so." Others recognized the Holy One Blessed be He. Adam recognized Him, Noach recognized Him, Shem recognized Him. But Avraham was the first one to recognize him as the 'Adon', the Landlord, owner of everything that exists and all that happens in the world. Therefore, it was he who merited for his children the commandment of Aliyah L'Regel.

Once before, I mentioned that a person wrote a commentary on the Siddur, the Jewish prayer book, and brought it to the Gaon of Vilna for an approbation. The Vilna Gaon opened it to the first page and saw the first insight of the author — on the Adon Olam prayer. The author asked, "Why does the morning service begin with the Adon Olam prayer?" The answer is because Avraham Avinu was the first person to call the Almighty by the name Adon and the morning service was enacted corresponding to Avraham's practice to recite the morning prayer. The Gaon commented that for this insight alone, the rest of the commentary was worth buying.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion.

from: **Rabbi Efrem Goldberg** <reg@brsonline.org> date: Oct 26, 2023, 1:29 PM

subject: Chizuk in These Dark Times, Parsha Resources, and More... OCTOBER 26, 2023 א' חשוון תשפ"ד

ISRAEL HAS CHANGED FOREVER, HAVE YOU?
BY RABBI EFREM GOLDBERG

While the primary horrors and atrocities in Israel occurred on October 7, the fallout and aftershocks are continuing every single day. Despite Hamas literally videoing, promoting, and memorialize their brutal and heinous attack using all kinds of media, there are still people questioning the scale and depravity of the massacre. In response, Israel held a stunning session for the international press sharing gruesome images of the atrocity so that journalists could document in an undeniable way what happened. Eylon Levy, an Israeli government spokesman, in a video announcing the session, said, "As we work to defeat the terror organization that brutalized our people, we are witnessing a Holocaust denial-like phenomenon evolving in real time as people are casting doubt on the magnitude of the atrocities that Hamas committed against our people, and in fact recorded in order to glorify that violence."

The infiltration, casualties, number of hostages, relentless barrage of rockets, continuous attacks from Gaza and from Lebanon are indeed great reasons for concern, prayers, effort, and support. The world is coming to learn what Israel has known for a long time: she is surrounded by enemies who seek her utter destruction and annihilation. The infamous Hamas charter, written in 1988, doesn't speak of disputed territory, it reads like the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and calls for a genocide against Jews. Hezbollah, Iran and other terror organizations and individuals in the West Bank and elsewhere speak of "from the river to the sea," a non-subtle euphemism for the destruction of all of Israel.

The last two weeks have seen countless headlines and analyses of the risks of a ground invasion, potential implications for the North in the event of a full-scale war and the possibilities of other nations like Iran or Syria getting involved. Indeed, there is so much to worry about, work on, daven for, and care about.

But, here is the thing. While I daven, advocate, and lose sleep over the safety and security our brothers and sisters right now, I am not worried about the long-term future of Israel. Israel is incredibly resilient, capable, powerful, tenacious, fierce, smart, cunning and strong. Israel will persevere, the IDF will triumph, the people, though deeply wounded, will bounce back. These horrific atrocities have brought the people of Israel together, fostered a united country and people. (I had the privilege to represent our shul and our community this week by bringing supplies, goods, toys, hugs, and love to IDF soldiers and displaced citizens this week. I saw with my own eyes resolve, achdus, and energy the likes of which cannot be believed. I look forward to sharing more with you about this trip in the coming days.)

The people of Israel have revealed that underneath the important, often vociferous debate, is a nation of profound faith, unity and conviction. Israel will emerge stronger than ever.

This week's Parsha is filled with pesukim and stories that feel so relevant today: Avraham first settling in Israel, Hashem promising the land to Avraham and his descendants, the birth of Yishmael and the fateful promise about his future. One of the central highlights is the Bris Bein Habesarim, the "Covenant of Parts," in which Hashem tells Avraham about the destiny of his descendants: the slavery and suffering they would endure, and the subsequent redemption and settlement in Israel. The Torah describes how Avraham cut up a calf, a ram, and a goat, but וְאַת חֶצְפֵּר לֹא בָתַר — he did not

cut the turtledove that was part of the covenant. Rashi explains that Psukim in Tanach compare other nations to calves, to rams, and to goats, and the Jewish people are compared to doves. The animals representing the other nations were cut up, representing their eventual demise. Why wasn't the bird cut? **רְמֹא שִׁיחַוּ יְשָׁאֵל קָמְמִין לְעַלְמָם** – To symbolize the promise of the Jewish nation's everlasting future.

A video clip was circulating this week of an address given by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l, whose third yahrtzeit is next week. So many have expressed how much we miss Rabbi Sacks at times like these, and it brought such comfort hearing his voice at an AIPAC policy conference ten years ago, delivering chizzuk with remarks that sound like they could have been given this week:

I have to tell you that what we grew up with, "never again," is beginning to sound like "ever again." And at the heart of it is hostility to Israel. Of course, not all criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic. But make no mistake what has happened.

In the Middle Ages Jews were hated because of their religion. In the 19th century and the 20th, they were hated because of their race. Today, when it's no longer done to hate people for their religion or their race, today they are hated because of their State. The reason changes, but the hate stays the same. Anti-Zionism is the new anti-Semitism. ...

Today what is at stake in Israel's survival is the future of freedom itself. Because make no mistake, this will be the defining battle of the 21st century, which will prevail: the will to power with its violence, terror, missiles, and bombs; or the will to life with its hospitals, schools, freedoms, and rights. ... Every time I visit Israel I find among Israelis, secular or religious, an absolute unwavering dedication to Moshe Rabbeinu's great command Uvacharta Bachayim, "Choose life." Israel is the sustained defiance of hatred and power in the name of life because we are the people who sanctify life. ... Judaism is the defeat of probability by the power of possibility. And nowhere will you see the power of possibility more than in the State of Israel today.

Israel has taken a barren land and made it bloom again. Israel has taken an ancient language, the language of the Bible, and make it speak again. Israel has taken the West's oldest faith and made it young again. Israel has taken a shattered nation and make it live again. Friends, let us not rest until Israel's light shines throughout the world, the world's great symbol of life and hope. While we must not stop davening, donating, supporting and visiting, Israel will ultimately be ok. The real question is what will happen next for those Jews living outside of Israel? While even before October 7, everyone knew about the enemies surrounding Israel, few of us truly knew how many enemies were living in our midst and how, given the opportunity, they would boldly and brazenly rear their ugly heads and ideas.

Surely, we thought, taking sides on an issue so clear and obvious like supporting innocent civilians, elderly, children and women who were victims of a series of pogroms and systematic murders versus associating with and sympathizing with, or full-on endorsing wicked and evil terrorists, the choice would be clear. Even if one was regularly critical of Israel and supportive of Palestinian statehood, surely it would be simple to condemn objective atrocities and express sympathy for butchered civilians and kidnapped hostages.

Instead, the last two weeks have been an enormous wakeup call to Jews of the Diaspora. Ivy League universities, once considered bastions of intellectualism, centers of sophistication, capitals of progress and advancement have abandoned their Jewish students, failing to protect them from Hamas-sympathizing fellow students and professors. Long considered spiritually dangerous for Torah Jews, college campuses and others are now literally dangerous physically for those who proudly identify as Jews or supporters of Israel. Every day seems to bring new stories that should shake us all. An Israeli at Columbia got beaten with a stick. Jewish students at Cooper Union were locked in a library while a horde of threatening students, some encouraged by professors, banged on the doors and windows. Jews on

campuses across the country are being threatened, harassed, and physically intimidated, while the academics at these institutions issue statements about "escalations of violence" at best or simply casting Hamas's atrocities as "resistance" and blaming Israel for everything that happened on October 7 at worst. One professor at a prestigious college gave a horrifying speech, captured on video, in which he described feeling "exhilarated" watching the events of October 7 unfold.

The images and videos of pro Hamas rallies in cities across the US, Europe and around the world is shocking, jarring, and downright scary. They have included swastikas and actual calls to "gas the Jews." We learned that for some, while Black Lives Matter and some other forms of prejudice are so serious and have zero tolerance, Jewish lives don't matter and antisemitism is open for debate, as organizations purportedly devoted to civil rights and justice were unashamed to celebrate terrorists who paraglided into a rave killing 260 innocent people. We experienced a legacy media that abandoned journalistic principles and practices, all too eager to swallow and regurgitate Hamas propaganda without verification or substantiation.

We witnessed elected Congresspeople stand with the perpetrators over the victims and spread a blood libel falsely accusing Israel of striking a hospital, actions with real consequences.

Of course, we have also witnessed extraordinary expressions and demonstrations of support, from the majority of Congress who passionately and compassionately stand with Israel, to President Biden who has demonstrated enormous support by traveling into a war, asking for significant funding for Israel and steadfastly supporting Israel's right to defend herself, to zealous advocacy for Israel from many elected officials, including those who stand to alienate themselves in their parties and caucuses, including Congressman Ritchie Torres. We have seen billionaires withdraw their funding and their longstanding ties with universities and institutions that are underserving of them. We have experienced media who were moved to tears over what happened in Israel.

Yes, there are reasons to be hopeful and optimistic but with all the enemies that Israel faces, the safety, security and rights of the Jews in the diaspora feel the most vulnerable and fragile of any point in my lifetime.

Of course, the simple answer to the now-revealed condition of Jews around the world is to move to Israel. Certainly, Israel is our homeland, it is our destiny, and now more than ever we should recognize it should be part of each of our final destinations. Even if we don't live in Israel now, Aliyah must be a question not of if, but of when, for all of us.

However, realistically, just as throughout our history there were multiple centers of Jewish life and Torah, the likelihood is that the millions of Jews living in the Diaspora are not picking up and moving tomorrow. So what will be? How should we confront the new reality we have seen? While spiritually and now physically unsafe, are there consequences of having universities and college campuses that have no Jewish students, nobody to advocate for Israel, no representatives of our people? Is there more we can do to ensure terrorist sympathizers aren't elected to any office in this country? Is cancelling subscriptions to legacy media that has a clear bias enough or can more be done to hold journalists accountable? And perhaps most importantly, have the rallies and people despicably tearing down posters of kidnapped Jews changed our security considerations at our Shuls, schools and Jewish communities? Do we continue to trust our outstanding local law enforcement and intelligence who protect us or does our sobering new reality demand elevated security measures for ourselves?

I don't have answers to these questions, but they need to be consistently spoken about and considered. Israel has changed forever, but so has the world of those who don't yet live there.

[From last week]

A Light from Within

Rabbi Moshe Shulman

Young Israel of Saint Louis, Noach, 5784

In most years it is hard to relate to Parshat Noach, to the notion of an entire civilization degenerating into evil, violence, and chaos. ותִשְׁחַת אָרֶץ לְפָנֶיךָ Is humanity really capable of becoming so blind, corrupt, and evil that its only hope is a reboot? Today we know the answer! We just need to look at the images around us and across the globe, and see how ‘rational voices’ can be swayed by a lie, how academic institutions could tolerate public support for terrorism, how a world could accept a lie so pernicious that it threatens to engulf the entire planet in flames... We know many midrashic sources that are critical of Noach for not trying to ‘save’ his generation. (Rashi compares Noach to Avraham. The Midrash (בר”ר לו:ז) similarly contrasts Noach and Moshe.) Today we know a profound and sad truth that perhaps in a different era and a different generation they didn’t appreciate. Sometimes a society can indeed degenerate so much, and become so depraved that it is simply beyond ‘saving’. Sometimes evil just needs to be called ‘evil’, and we have to apply a different paradigm: בברית הרע מפרקן!... אָנֹכִי הָאֵלֶּה אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר-בָּנָי מִעַל פְּנֵי הַאֲדָמָה... Much like Gd’s proclamation regarding the entire ummah that Zevul Unmilik made on the eve of the flood – כי מזה אממה את זכר עמליך מתחת השמים – and precisely because their behavior was exactly the same as that of the generation of the flood – ויזבב בר כל הנחשיים אהורייך. An evil unleashed upon the most vulnerable in a society is an evil so ingrained and so inhumane that it cannot be ‘saved’. So perhaps we know that Noach had no choice! The only option was to build an “ark” to save that part of civilization – however small – that still understood the difference between truth and lies, between good and evil. ... ונה מצא חן בעניינו ה... את האלים החולר נח

But there is an additional message in the story of Noach that I think resonates today. Amongst all the many details and materials described in the making of the Ark, the Torah includes a seemingly odd detail: **זֶה מִשְׁעָנָה לְכֹבֶד** (טו:ג) **zeh mishe'anah lecovod**

What is a צהָר?

(ראב"ע) מקום שיכנס ממנו האור, והוא מגזרת צהרים Ibn Ezra says it comes from the same root as צהרים or light! Therefore a צהר was a mechanism that enabled light to fill the ark! That's why Rashi, in his first interpretation, says it is a window, ויהי א חלון ("ויהי א חלון") (רש"י) How much light can a single small window let in to such a multistoried and enormous structure? Perhaps that's why the Radak and others suggest that its purpose was to be used not for light but to enable those inside to know when the rain stopped.

(רד"ק שם) ...שיכנס ממנה האורה לאחר כלות הגוף

But Rashi quotes another option,

רְשִׁיָּה שֶׁם) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים טוֹבָה הַמְּאִירָה לְהָבִם A stone which gave off light... A light source has two purposes. A window is designed primarily to illuminate from the outside in. It lets light outside shine upon the darkness inside. It offers a dark world a glimpse of a brighter one outside its borders. Hence the ק"ר says it was reserved for later, for when the rain stopped, for rebuilding, to know when it was safe to emerge into the world once again. But there is another kind of light, necessary for times when the sky is dark and gray, and kindness and goodness outside seems all but diminished. That is a light that illuminates from within - אָבִן טוֹבָה המְאִירָה. The light inside the תִּבְהָה is created by hope, by חֶסֶד and kindness, by inspiration that comes from a world that still cares for one another inside the תִּבְהָה even as the world outside it grows darker. That's a light that comes from a sense of unified purpose and clarity of vision. The world of the Flood started with the words הַשּׁוֹמֵר אָזִי אָנֹכִי defending the first act of violence and murder, and quickly degenerated into a society of violence and oppression, וְתַמְלָא כָּל הָאָרֶץ חַמֵּס. Inside that ark was a world of מִסְרָה נְפָשָׁה, שָׁנִים שָׁנִים, of חֶסֶד, of caring, of mutual responsibility, of love for one another, the world of a family that understands how indeed אהָזִי אָנֹכִי as a statement, not a question. Inside that ark was light created from the אָבִן טוֹבָה that would shine outward, when the world was ready! Today Israel

feels like it is inside an ark surrounded by a sea of darkness. At times like these where does Israel - and the Jewish people around the world - find the strength and light to shine? From INSIDE! From the **heart** of the **and** unity of the Jewish people! From the heart of the Jewish people. □ From the stories like the hundreds of thousands of Israelis displaced from their homes due to mandatory evacuations of the south and north and yet nobody is on the street. Nobody is without a bed and roof. All housed – with families, with strangers (although in Israel no such thing as a real stranger) – or hotels... within hours! One story posted was how 6000 families had been placed with families within 45 minutes. □ From the unimaginable **gavorah** of organizations like United Hatzalah – first responders – or Zak"a charged with **כבוד המותים** and I need not elaborate... □ Or the stories of heroism – not just from soldiers but from ordinary citizens – saving lives, saving entire communities... □ Or a Chassidic Jew (unidentified) who stood by the El Al counter in NY the day after Simchat Torah and paid for the tickets of every Israeli soldier trying to get home to their unit in the IDF. That person paid over \$250,000 in tickets for Israeli soldiers! And he insists on remaining anonymous. □ From the volunteer ‘cyber’ unit created from grass roots professionals who left their day jobs to volunteer their time to help comb through thousands of pieces of social media footage and use the most advanced technology to identify the names and faces of the hostages... so the world will know, and those faces can be displayed on buildings in Time Square and tables set with empty chairs from Tel Aviv to Bondi Beach! □ from the solidarity of the Jewish people, from the sense of shared destiny – that all feel – **חדרים, חילונים, דתים**, all labels erased... □ from images or achdut and unity within the country in ways once unthinkable: □ Charedim hugging soldiers, preparing food for them... □ Scenes of Chassidim in Shtreimles dancing at a wedding carrying an Israeli flag, or Viznitzer Chassidim and Kibbutznikim from the South singing together before Shabbat, singing **עמ. ישראל זו והעקר לא לפחד כלל** and **עמ. ישראל זו והעקר לא לפחד כלל**. □ Two separate stories of non-religious restaurant owners koshering their entire operation so that they can send food to soldiers in the IDF that everybody can share... □ A news clip on Israeli news outside of the IDF intake center (**השכנת הגיסים**) in Tel Aviv where Charedim are coming to volunteer service for the IDF in unprecedented large numbers, and a secular Israeli woman crying as calls out to them how much she loves and respects them for it.

□ Somebody posted this conversation: My neighbor's daughter is in the army. She told her that now that she's around all the **חילונים**, she should look out for a nice guy for herself. She answered: 'A few days ago I could have. But now, I can't tell who is dati and who isn't – everyone is wearing a kippah and tzitzit.' **אך טינה!** When the world of darkness closes in from the outside, we find the light of the **צדקה** from the miraculous heart of the Jewish people inside, **חיבת ישראל מי!** We will emerge from this **חיבת ישראל מי!** **אין ייְהוָה בְּצָבָא אֶחָד וְאֶלְךָ אֶחָד וְאֶתְּנָגֵן** (1) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (2) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (3) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (4) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (5) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (6) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (7) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (8) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (9) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (10) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא 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**לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (73) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (74) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (75) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (76) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (77) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (78) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (79) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (80) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (81) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (82) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (83) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (84) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (85) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (86) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (87) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (88) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (89) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (90) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (91) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (92) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (93) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (94) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (95) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (96) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (97) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (98) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (99) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (100) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (101) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (102) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (103) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (104) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (105) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (106) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (107) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (108) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (109) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (110) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (111) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (112) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (113) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (114) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (115) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (116) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (117) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (118) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (119) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (120) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (121) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (122) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (123) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (124) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (125) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (126) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (127) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (128) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (129) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (130) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (131) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא גָּדוֹלָה** (132) **לְפָנָס עֲנָנוֹת הַזָּמִינָה מִפְּנֵי מִקְרָא 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Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

After his victory in the battle of the four kings against the five, Avrohom is approached by the defeated king of Sodom, who tells him, "Give me the people and the possessions take for yourself." Avrohom responds that he will take nothing from the king, except for the provisions coming to his men, so that the king would not say that he made Avrohom wealthy (Bereishis, 14:21- 24). Avrohom's response needs explanation, both in regard to his failure to take the people, and his refusal to take any possessions. In fact, the Talmud (Nedarim 32a) brings an opinion that Avrohom was punished for not taking the offered people, because he could have influenced them to recognize God and accept His sovereignty over the world. Why, then, didn't he do so? After all, he was constantly teaching people about God and bringing them under the wings of the divine presence. What made this instance different?

Rav Henoch Leibowitz, in his Chiddushei HaLev, explains that Avrohom felt that by refusing to take anything from the king he would sanctify God's name in public, and that this consideration took precedence over converting the captives. However, he was wrong, and should have taken the people and converted them. Rav Leibowitz does not really spell out why Avrohom was wrong, but I believe that the answer is implicit in the question. As Rav Leibowitz pointed out, Avrohom was constantly involved in influencing people to recognize God. It was, then this very activity, of teaching people to recognize God, that constituted Avrohom's essence, the contribution that he made to the world, and therefore, he should have taken every opportunity available to continue this work. We find something similar to this idea in Megillas Esther, as well; in regard to Mordechai. The Megillah tells us that when Haman would appear in public, all the servants of the king and people around the seat of power would bow and prostrate themselves to him, but that Mordechai would not bow and prostrate himself (Esther 3:21). The form of the verb to bow and prostrate, with regard to Mordechai, are written in the future, rather than in the present, indicating that Mordechai made a point of appearing before Haman and not prostrating to him, despite the danger that it would generate. Rav Yochanan Zweig explained that this was because Mordechai came from Binyomin who was the only tribe that did not bow down to Eisav when he visited Yaakov, and thus, it was part of his essence not to bow down to him. This being so, he took every opportunity possible to bring out this point, even when it involved danger. Similarly, Avrohom, should have availed himself of the opportunity offered by the king of Sodom, and was punished for not doing so.

We also need to understand why Avrohom refused to take any possessions from the king of Sodom. After all, when Avrohom was in Egypt and Pharaoh gave him gifts, he accepted them. What was the difference between the two cases? Rav Eliyahu Meir Bloch, in his *Pnhei Da'as*, offers several answers. First, he says that when Avrohom was in Egypt, he had the status of a poor person, and, therefore, had to accept whatever he needed to stay alive. In addition, Pharaoh was the king of the land that Avrohom had chosen to live in at that time, and, therefore, out of honor for the king, he could not refuse him. The king of Sodom, on the other hand, having just been defeated in battle, was in a much weaker position, and Avrohom could therefore refuse him. Most significantly, Rav Bloch says that Avrohom did not want to negate whatever thoughts of repentance that the king of Sodom may have had. By giving the spoils of war to Avrohom, even though they were his by right, anyway, the king may have assuaged any feelings of guilt he may have had over his past actions and refrained from a possible repentance. A somewhat similar idea is offered by Rav Elimelech bar Shaul in his *Ma'archei Lev*, in discouraging the practice of vegetarianism. People, he said, have a certain amount of sympathetic feelings, and these should, first and foremost, be used in helping human beings. If they are expended on animals, humans may be neglected. This argument echoes that of the French

philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, who observed that attendance to the theater may, rather than arousing one's emotions and making one sensitive to the plight of others, have the opposite effect, and waste whatever humanitarian feelings a person may have on fictional characters depicted on stage, leaving nothing left for real people. Avrohom, then, by refusing to take the spoils of war from the king of Sodom, was trying to facilitate his repentance, and, thus, in this aspect of his response, was following the essence of his personality, by trying to bring people closer to God.

Themes in the First Pasuk of Lech Licha**Rabbi Hershel Reichman**

The opening lines of Parshas Lech Licha represent one of the ten tests of Avraham Avinu, although rishonim differ as to how it is numbered among them. What is particularly surprising is a comment in the Midrash that suggests that this test may have been even more challenging than the other one that included the words "Lech Licha", i.e. the akeidah of Yitzchak. This seems baffling; the very nature of this instruction as a test is already difficult to understand, as Rashi fills in the words "l'hanas'cha u'lovas'cha", the journey will be for Avraham's benefit. Certainly, the notion that it could be challenging on a level to rival the near-sacrifice of Avraham's beloved son is very difficult to understand.

To some commentaries, the challenge lay in the very fact of the personal benefit it contained; the test was to see if Avraham could carry out the instruction for the sake of Hashem's message, rather than any ulterior motive. Similarly, others felt that the mundane nature of this challenge raises it above the more dramatic akeidah; the true test of faith is in day-to-day challenges, more than isolated moments of extreme performance (it is, for this reason, the Maharal explains, the Torah does not include the extraordinary story of Avraham's rescue from the fiery furnace).

One approach to understanding this particular nisayon may come from a possible perspective on the akeidah itself. As some understand (see *Darash Moshe*, *Meoros Yitzchak*), the purpose of the nisyonos were not to test Avraham, as certainly Hashem needed no extra information; rather they were to elevate Avraham to new levels of faith. In the case of the Akeidah, Avraham had been promised a large nation would come from him, specifically through Yitzchak. Now, that seemed impossible, as he was destined to be sacrificed before having any children, apparently. Can Hashem's promise still possibly be true in any way?

In such a sense, the challenge of Lech Licha can be framed as well. Often, we have preconceived notions of what success looks like and what the path to happiness entails. If we are promised that we will be granted great blessings, but we are told that requires uprooting ourselves from our "land, birthplace, home of our fathers" and to pursue a vision completely different from that we had always expected, it takes great faith to believe that success actually can assume a different form. The investment we have made in the path we have taken this far is one that is very difficult to abandon, and to accept that happiness can be very found in a very different fashion requires great emunah indeed.

R. Eliezer Geldzehler (*Sichos R. Eliezer*) notes that much can be discerned from the language that gives the parshah its name. Lech – go – "Licha", to yourself; the purpose of a nisayon is make the potential actual; it is only thus that one's abilities can actually be claimed as their own (a theme often emphasized as well by R. Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht). "Licha", to yourself, because every individual has unique challenges and abilities; to be jealous of another's resources is folly, once it is realized that one's personal challenges can only be addressed with their unique toolset, and what seems like the superior assets of another may actually be inadequate to the task. "Lech", go, because it is a constant journey, as that is the purpose of life, to continuously develop one's potential. "M'Artzecha", as often doing so requires creating

the proper conducive environment, even if that requires a difficult process of relocation.

The language may have halachic significance as well; the Medrash Rabbah (39:7) notes “Licha” you, Avraham, are released from the obligation of kibud Av in this case, while others would not be. This is invoked in the ongoing debate about whether one is permitted to make Aliyah, or stay in Eretz Yisrael, when parents object (see Panim Yafos; Resp. Mabit, 1:139; Resp. Maharam Rotenberg 28 and 79; Pe’as HaShulchan 2:21; Resp. Tashbetz 3:288; Chaye Adam in Shaarei Tzedek 11:5; Resp. Yechaveh Da’as 3:69; Resp. Dvar Yehoshua 2:71.)

from: Torah Musings <newsletter@torahmusings.com> date: Oct 26, 2023, 11:02 AM subject: Torah Musings

Hagar and Avraham’s Encounter with Hashem

by **R. Gidon Rothstein**

Parshat Lech Lecha

From childhood, I have enjoyed analyses of the Torah that account for te’amim, the notes that guide how we chant the Torah.

Be’er Lachai or Lachai Ro’i?

In 16:14, HaKetav ve-Ha-Kabbalah finds an example. The verse tells us Hagar named the well where she encountered the angel who told her to return to Avraham’s household, bear Sarah’s treatment of her, and that she would have a boy. When the experience is over she calls the angel (or God Who sent the angel) E-l Ro’i, usually translated as the (Almighty) God Who sees, then names the well Be’er Lachai Ro’i, I think generally read to mean the Well of the Living God Who Sees.

R. Mecklenburg points out this version links lachai, living, to ro’i, Who sees, where the te’amim group lachai with the word be’er, well. (It’s a mercha tipcha for be’er lachai, indicating a stop within a phrase, then the etnachta, the stop for the middle of the verse, for ro’i.) Whatever the words mean, the grouping suggest lachai describes the well rather than God. It’s the lachai well of the Seeing God.

He just has to define lachai, a word he found in Ketubbot 91b, where it means good, as in “if this is satisfactory to you, lechayei, and if not, then take this.” (As I’ve written, the word there is actually lechayei, with two yuds, but R. Mecklenburg does not seem to think it makes a difference.) For a closer example, when David contacts Naval (to share some of his bountiful harvest because David’s forces had protected his flocks), I Shmuel 25:6, he tells the messengers to say lechai (here, it is leh chai, rather than le-chai, as we have it in Bereshit). For David, the word means something like “live well,” or “be successful.”

From those two examples, R. Mecklenburg claims Hagar named the well the good-fortune well of the Seeing God, different from usual translations, with his starting point how the te’amim group the words.

The Implications of an Unusual Name of God

Like his maidservant/concubine, Avraham gives God a Name we do not often see, notes R. Hirsch to 15:2. We might not spot the difference, because we read the Name Hashem Elokim, one we see many times in the Torah. However, that usually consists of the four-letter Name (written with a yud, hei, vav, and then another hei, but pronounced like the Hebrew word with the root adon, master). Here, it is actually written Ado... Then the second word, usually Elokim, is here the four-letter Name.

R. Hirsch tells us it appears only three more times in the Torah, once six verses from now, said again by Avraham, and twice by Moshe. The first word displays Avraham’s sense of God as sole Master. Had it meant one master among many, Avraham should have said adoni, says R. Hirsch; the way we have it signals God is the sole One.

The second Name here, the four letter one (often considered an indication of the middat ha-rachamim, God’s Attribute of mercy, or giving another chance), is pronounced as if it were the Name Elokim (the Attribute of Justice) to highlight the underlying rachamim in God’s Justice. Justice and

judgment are tools to reach God’s kindness, he says. Even when God punishes us fully, to the extent we deserve, it lays the groundwork for a future with bounty and blessing.

In the current vision, Hashem informs Avraham of a difficult period in his descendants’ future (four hundred years of exile), followed by great goodness. Avraham is declaring God his sole master, along with his awareness of the interplay between justice and kindness, his trust God is doing what is right and best, with good outcomes, even if he himself does not understand them.

A different Hashem Elokim than we are used to, this one—according to R. Hirsch—to declare one’s submission to God’s Justice, an announcement of one’s confidence in the Master, Whose strictness always leads to a better world.

Avraham’s Sense of Family

During the war of the four kings against the five, Lot is taken captive, with all his possessions and those of the people of Sodom and the other four cities. The verse that tells us Avraham heard of the situation, 14:14, speaks only of Lot’s captivity, telling Malbim Avraham cared only about his relative, not the money.

His connection to Lot stands out because Lot had chosen to leave Avraham’s company, yet Avraham still felt the need to save him. Malbim reminds us of Rambam’s claim in the Guide that a low level of prophecy comes when the spirit of Hashem pushes someone to extraordinary acts, such as when Yehonatan the son of Shaul invaded the Philistine camp with just him and his attendant. Avraham, too, attacks the four kings, and does not ask his allies to join him, only his students and the members of his household. It worked, because despite their small numbers they chased the kings all the way north, to where Dan would eventually settle.

Avraham Was Supposed to Separate From Lot

Although R. David Zvi Hoffman agrees with Malbim about Avraham’s sense of familial connection, in the introduction to the parsha he gives the sense Avraham was supposed to separate from Lot more quickly than he did. He says the chapter shows how Divine Providence brought about the fulfillment of Hashem’s command to Avraham to leave his land and his father’s house. Lot wanted to join, and Avraham did not have the heart to turn him down. However, Lot wasn’t a proper companion, as we see from his later choice to live in Sodom. (An important point: Lot’s ability to live comfortably in Sodom itself reveals a flaw in his character.) So Hashem brought about circumstances where Lot would choose to leave, to achieve the goal, Avraham separating completely from his family of origin.

R. Hoffman sees support for the point in Hashem’s appearing to Avraham immediately after Lot left, then reiterated the Divine promise that Avraham’s descendants would inherit the Land, now adding the words “ad olam, forever,” the promise firmed up once he has established a family free of those negative original influences.

The story also shows some of Avraham’s qualities, says R. Hoffman, such as letting Lot choose where to live despite his being the senior member of the family, to avoid further fighting.

Two comments on God, Hagar’s sense of the well as a place of good fortune from God and Avraham’s appealing to the rachamim underlying God’s Justice, and two on Avraham and his sense of family, leading him to come to Lot’s aid, after having been required by Hashem to remove himself from that family.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/perceptions-5784-lech-lecha/>

Perceptions

Parshas Lech Lecha

By Rabbi Pinchas Winston

October 24, 2023 (5784)

Friday Night

I COULD NOT have planned it better. This is Issue #2018, and #70 of Ain Od Milvado, two very important numbers in this week's parsha. Talk about Hashgochah Pratis.

More on that later, b"ch. In the meantime, I was allowed to share the following personal note, which I feel is relevant to this week's parsha. This is what it says.

Dear God: I am writing this letter to You, and to me as well. Anyhow, you already know what I am about to write, even if I don't. You're probably even telling me what to write.

First of all, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for allowing me to live in Your land, Eretz Yisroel. There is not a day that goes by that I don't appreciate it and feel eternally grateful to You for the merit. I don't know what I did to deserve it, or if I even do, but I'm so very glad that I am here.

Now with the latest war I want to add something. Everyone dies at some point, some sooner than later. We have already lost so many in the last two weeks alone, and so horribly. We don't get to choose when we go, or how and where. But if I die in Eretz Yisroel, even just "accidentally," I thank you again. Admittedly it would be nice to go out in a more meaningful way, but at least it was still in Eretz Yisroel, making death so much more meaningful. I do ask one personal thing, though. If I am meant to go soon, which would be considered early by most standards, help my family survive it. They're going to be shocked and sad, so please help them cope. I want them to be strong and happy in life so they can serve You with a complete heart. Please don't let my death break them in any way.

Having said that, here is my request regarding the rest of my brothers and sisters, even the ones who say that they do not feel the same way about me. Although, I have to say, You have certainly brought a lot of people together who, just weeks ago, were headed in opposite directions. It is wonderful that has happened. It is so painful that it cost so much.

So please save us from any more division and destruction. Nineveh was saved because it didn't know its right from its left. We were almost destroyed because we knew the difference only too well. Dor HaFlagah, the Generation of the Dispersion, wasn't destroyed because they worked together. We were destroying ourselves by working against each other. So, I beg You God, let this air of achdus become increasingly stronger, so that we will never go back to our warring ways again. The only one our infighting strengthens is the Sitra Achra, and those he works through.

I'm asking this of You specifically because I have learned that creating achdus in the Jewish people is beyond our capability. No one is smart enough to talk to so many people with so many different opinions and make them all get along. It would take a huge miracle, and last I checked, that was Your department.

Shabbos Day

WHY HAVE I put a request for achdus before a victory over our enemies? Because I know that the latter depends upon the former. That's the reason, isn't it, why division in this country is usually followed by some kind of unifying war?

During the Yom Kippur War in 1973, I was told, many thought it was the end of the Jewish State, God forbid. But when some asked Rav Abramsky, zt"l, one of the Gedolim of that generation, why he wasn't as concerned as others about the outcome he told them, "With this much achdus the Jewish people will not lose the war!" He was right, Boruch Hashem. After all, You didn't bring us back to Eretz Yisroel to divide us. We are a nation that knows exile only too well. We are the only people to have been spread to the four corners of the earth, and the only one to have been ingathered from there afterwards. To do what? To fight against each other? To build walls between groups? We are supposed to be a single people with a single God living on a single land. It's in our dovening, in Shabbos Mincha. Granted, national unity has not been our history. Moshe Rabbeinu had to fight off dissenters and breakaways in his day, and that was right under the auspices of God. After

getting to the land and building a kingdom, it later divided into two parts during Rechavam's reign, remaining that way until foreign powers eventually attacked and exiled all of us.

Even after we came back to the land, we had a difficult time being unified. The joke about "two Jews, three opinions" is no joke, just a sad reality. You would think that a nation that suffered the Holocaust would never want to fight one another ever again. We have enough enemies in the world. We don't need to become our own worst enemies as well.

But I think I know why it happens. I think I understand where the bad comes from. This was a land that once belonged to the most depraved people on earth, the Canaanites. But how can the holiest land be lived on by such evil people? Strangely enough, it was not a question I thought to ask until after I already saw the answer, in asefer, as You know, called Tuv HaAretz. It explains a lot.

Based completely on the teachings of the Arizal, it explains that Eretz Yisroel is not something that You created, but something that we, the Jewish people, have to create. It is our job to redeem the holy sparks that are the basis of the land out of the side of spiritual impurity and bring them to the side of holiness. That is what transforms Eretz Canaan into Eretz Yisroel. I guess we never did that fully. It would seem from history that as close as we have come to doing it, we were still far enough away to be affected by the Klipos, the spiritual basis of evil in the world. I also assume that it is also possible to reverse some of the redemption and send sparks back to the Klipos, just as Adam HaRishon did when he sinned. Not only did he not fix the rest of Creation, he undid a lot of what You had already rectified. That's how Gan Aiden turned into this very non-paradisal world of ours.

I suppose this is something that has to be resolved once and for all before Moshiach comes.

Seudas Shlishis

I GUESS ALSO that this might be the reason why we had to go through what we just did, and what might be coming up, may it be sweet and easy, please. We may have recovered the physical land of Eretz Yisroel back in 1948, but not all of the spiritual reality of it. Some of Eretz Canaan still lingered after all this time.

We have been told that Eretz Yisroel today is built upon the ashes of the Holocaust. Six million sparks were released from this world and somehow gave us the right to get and keep our homeland in preparation of the final redemption, may it come very soon and peacefully. Might it be then that the death and suffering over the last couple of weeks, reminiscent of the atrocities and cruelties of the Holocaust, be part of the final payments, part of the final extraction of the remaining sparks from the side of impurity in preparation for Moshiach's arrival.

I don't just hope so.

I believe so.

As You told us, Your ways are not our ways, which is why we have a difficult time comprehending Your calculations. Sacrifices have been imposed upon us that we ourselves would not have made, given the choice. We don't have the big picture view You do to know why they need to be made in the first place. That kind of understanding, we have been told, won't come until later.

In the meantime, it seems, it is Lech Lecha for all of us. We're going to have to follow You blindly and trust You implicitly. We'll have to have faith that You will direct us down the best path possible, despite what the world and history seem to show us. Avraham did, and we have to learn from him how. Isn't that what Bris Ben HaBesarim was all about? What a prophecy!

Strangers in a land not ours for 400 years! Oppression for long periods of time! Sure, eventual redemption. But how many would still be around to enjoy it? How many of those generations were born and died in slavery, never getting a chance to realize the reality of Your promise and their hope?

Now my bubbys prayer makes so much more sense to me than ever before. It was her own personal prayer that she constantly said because she had gone through so much in her lifetime, more than many other people of faith could ever handle and remain loyal to You. "God," she would say, "test me if You will, but also give the strength to pass Your tests."

Amen. Because it seems that, as children of Avraham Avinu, having our faith and trust in God tested is part of our legacy. Help us make passing Your tests part of that legacy as well.

Ain Od Milvado, Part 70

THE BRIS BEN HaBesarim took place in 2018, the issue number of thisparsha, and it was also Avraham's 70th year, the number of this week's chapter of Ain Od Milvado. How impressive is that, since I started number these many years back, and didn't start Ain Od Milvado until last year, and had no idea that they would come out together in the oneparshathat they make a difference. The odds must be astronomical against it, especially since not everyone is familiar enough those numbers and the history behind them to realize the "coincidence" as it happens.

What does it mean? No clue. We're not talking about the Urim u'Tumim here. We don't have prophets to find out or confirm our suspicions. But one thing it does do with certainty is make you feel the Presence of God, even on the level of your learning and teaching. And the truth is, the Zohar says that's what Lech-Lecha actually meant.

What's the purpose of life? What do you want from life? These are questions that many of us consider at one point or another in our lives, but the answer tends to be something very personal, something that gives us pleasure in life. Not too many people get the real answer, God's answer.

And what is God's answer? His revelation of Himself to us. Not for His benefit, mind you, but for our benefit. That's what God gave Avraham to encourage him to make the move to Eretz Yisroel, the promise of a more intense revelation of God, available nowhere else in the world.

And that's what God told us as well when He said, "I am God, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be a God to you (Vayikra 25:38). God's just not willing to reveal Himself as intimately anywhere else but in Eretz Yisroel, making it the only land where a person can really fulfill ain od Milvado.

Besoros Tovos for Klal Yisroel

from: Times of Israel <newsletter@timesofisrael.com>

Lech Lecha: On the Question of Human Shields

Rabbi Lazer Gurkow

The question of human shields has been in the news a lot these past few weeks. As Israel responds to the heinous massacre of innocent civilians, men, women, and children, perpetrated by the sub-human Hamas terrorists, it is being accused of targeting innocent civilians.

Some of these accusers are the very people who were quick to blame Israel for Hamas's atrocities even as the atrocities were ongoing. In my mind, these people have lost all credibility. Anything they say going forward is capricious and without merit. I don't take them seriously. They are not after facts. They are propagating their own agenda.

It is rich to be lectured on the value and sanctity of human life by nations that were involved or stood idly by while six million Jews were slaughtered in the Holocaust. It is ironic to be accused of causing a holocaust in Gaza only days after Hamas murdered and tortured more Jews in one day than have been killed since the Holocaust. It is a sport for them. Hit Jews when Jews are down. When we are in pain, blame us. Never sympathize. Never consider us human. Just stick to your script and propaganda.

Is it not ironic that Jews, who taught the world about the sanctity of human life, are being lectured on this sanctity by murderers? Hamas accuses Israel of war crimes. Did you hear that? Hamas, the people who attacked innocent families, murdered them whole, abducted babies and the elderly, burned

innocent civilians alive and to a crisp to the point that they can't even be identified, accuses Israel of genocide and war crimes?

Hamas was quick to blame Israel for bombing a hospital when it turned out they had bombed it themselves, albeit inadvertently. But get this. While people around the world were quick to point out that this is a war crime of the worst magnitude, there was stunning silence when Hamas targeted the Barzilai Hospital in Israel with rockets on October 8, only several days earlier.

Hamas denies that it targeted women and children after they recorded and published these atrocities on their GoPro cameras. Now, Hamas had the audacity to deny it. What's worse is that protestors around the world accept this bald-faced lie as truth.

And you have to love it when Vladimir Putin accuses Israel of war crimes and dehumanizing attacks after he targets and carpet-bombs civilians in Ukraine. Oh, I forgot, he, too, denies his wrongdoings. Then there is the United Nations. Don't even get me started on the United Nations.

I am sure you get my point. Jews are under no obligation to respond to and to fend off such allegations. Yet, I will respond anyway because there are many Jews who read and watch these allegations and take them at face value. It is important that rabbis and Jewish leaders present the Jewish view.

Jews hate to kill, even in self-defense. We have no choice but to kill in defense of innocent lives. Jewish law is unequivocal about this. If you witness someone pursuing another with intent to kill, you must kill the pursuer to save the prospective victim. Jews have an obligation to kill every terrorist who pursues Jewish lives with the intent to kill. In other words, every terrorist.

Though we are under obligation to kill, we do it with a very heavy heart. In this week's Parshah we read that Abraham got involved in a war to liberate his nephew, who was taken captive and held hostage. Abraham was triumphant and released his nephew, but during this war, he was forced to kill many.

After the war, G-d appeared to Abraham and told him to have no fear. Our sages explain that G-d was referring to Abraham's fear that he would be punished for the killing he had done. He had no choice, yet he hated to kill. G-d told him, Abraham, have no fear. You will not be punished for this.

Golda Meir is reputed to have said that we could forgive the Arabs for killing our children, but we can never forgive them for forcing us to kill their children. This is not in the nature of Jews. Therefore, when world leaders accuse Jews of killing innocent civilians in Gaza, Jews are naturally prone to accept the blame and feel the guilt. This was Abraham's response. This is the prototypical Jewish response.

But Israel is not to blame; Hamas is. Israel would have been to blame had they targeted civilians and carpet bombed them as Putin did in Ukraine and as Hamas does every day to Israel with their rockets. Israel would have been to blame if they did to Gaza what Hamas did to Israel on October 7.

Israel targets legitimate military locations from which terror is exported to our people. Wiping out command cells, weapons factories, terror safe houses, rocket launchers, and weapons depots is an obligation. It is part of destroying the pursuer to save the pursued. The problem is that Hamas uses a diabolical, disgusting strategy that offers them a win-win.

They locate their military facilities in civilian neighborhoods. Often even in the basements or courtyards of schools, hospitals, and orphanages. They kill Jews and force Israel to respond. When Israel responds, they hide behind civilians so that Israel inadvertently kills the human shields. Then, they parade the dead bodies before the cameras and accuse Israel of genocide.

They have played the game so many times that you would think the world would awaken to their diabolical tactic. But they don't. Instead, they eat it up. Every time. This is antisemitism at its worst. But it's also anti-Palestinianism because Hamas is sending their own civilians to their deaths. But it does bring us back to the question. What is the moral responsibility of the defender when the pursued hides behind human shields?

I can't give you a definitive answer because Judaism often has more than one way to view a subject. I will share the halachic rationale that permits killing a human shield. In the book of Samuel, we read that King Saul prepared for war against the tribe of Amalek, sworn enemies of the Jewish people. Members of the Keini tribe (Descendants of Jethro) lived among the Amalekites. King Saul gave them fair warning. "Come, withdraw at once from among the Amalekites, that I may not destroy you along with them." (I Samuel 15:4)

The former chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli, pointed to this passage to demonstrate that if our killers are in our crosshairs, we must take the shot even if human shields are in their path. This is especially true if the shields choose to act as shields, and worse, when they support the cause of the terrorists. In these cases, the shields themselves assume the status of pursuer and forfeit their right to life.

Of course, it is impossible to discern who supports Hamas and who does not, who opted in, and who was forced in. However, in a state of war, these considerations fall away. In a state of war, we are required to go after the combatants even if they are embedded among civilians. That is the meaning of war.

The caveat is that one must do as King Saul did. We must warn the pursuers and give them a chance to flee. If they choose to remain in place, it is morally correct to take the shot, even if it results in the inadvertent killing of human shields.

May G-d protect our land and our people. May there be peace in Israel. And may we live in harmony and serenity. Amen.

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from: **Rabbi Kaganoff** <ymkaganoff@gmail.com> to: kaganoff-a@googlegroups.com date: Oct 25, 2023, 9:42 AM
subject: **Maaser Kesafim**

Since the first source of the obligation of maaser kesafim is in this week's parsha...

Maaser Kesafim By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

Question #1: Paying for Your Kids in Kollel "I agreed to support my married children for five years. May I use maaser money for this?" Question #2: Chomesh What is chomesh? Question #3: Tuition May I pay tuition out of maaser kesafim funds? Question #4: Testing Hashem! May I ask Hashem to pay me back for the tzedakah money that I give?

Which maaser? We should first note that the term maaser, without specifying which one, is used sometimes in the Mishnah and Gemara to refer to maaser rishon, and sometimes to refer to maaser sheini, and, in later halachic works, sometimes also to maaser kesafim. These three types of maaser have vastly different laws from one another. Usually, one can understand from context which maaser is intended. If the context alludes to maaser owned by a Levi, or to the first maaser being separated, maaser rishon is intended. If it refers to something that has sanctity, usually maaser sheini is intended. If it refers to a percentage of one's income that is donated to tzedakah, it refers to maaser kesafim. The above questions all relate to shaylos about how much someone should donate to tzedakah and how he should prioritize his giving. It is well known that Rav Moshe Feinstein used to complain that these are areas of halacha about which he was asked too infrequently. Maaser kesafim: giving ten percent of one's moneys to tzedakah. The poskim dispute whether one subtracts household expenses from one's income, before calculating maaser. The concept of maaser is primarily in the case of ayn ani bifanav, when I fulfill the mitzvah by putting aside money for tzedakah. In a case of ani bifanav I do not fulfill my mitzvah by giving him only ten percent. A person who distributes maaser kesafim to the poor is blessed with a special

guarantee of wealth (Taanis 9a). This beracha happens only when someone is meticulous to calculate exactly a tenth of one's income for tzedakah (Shu't Avkas Rocheil #3). Furthermore, this beracha is fulfilled only if one gives this maaser money to the poor, but if one gives part of it to other causes, there is no guarantee that wealth will follow (see Shu't Radbaz 3:441).

Therefore, although one may use maaser kesafim to buy an aliyah, pay for a "mi-shebeirach," purchase sefarim that will be used by the tzibur (Taz, Yoreh Deah 249:1) or similar communal needs, it is preferred to earmark maaser kesafim for the needs of the poor (Rema, Yoreh Deah 249:1).

Donations to Torah institutions are considered distributions to the poor (Ahavas Chesed 2:19:2), as are hachnasas kallah expenses (to pay wedding and related expenses for a poor groom or bride).

Chomesh: giving twenty percent of one's moneys to tzedakah. This is the optimal level of fulfilling mitzvas tzedakah, whereas setting aside ten percent is considered only "midah beinonis," an average person's conduct. Someone who gives a chomesh to tzedakah should first calculate and set aside one tenth, and then a second tenth. Before starting to give regular amounts of tzedakah on an ongoing basis, one should declare that he is following this procedure bli neder, without accepting it as a vow.

Paying for Your Kids in Kollel from Maaser Money "I agreed to support my married children for five years. May I use maaser money for this?"

The Chasam Sofer authored a responsum (Shu't Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah #231) on this subject, which is fascinating for the many different halachic issues that he clarifies. Someone had arranged the marriage of his scholarly son to the daughter of a talmid chacham, with the following understanding: The father of the son accepted that he would pay every week a certain amount to his mechutan, the bride's father, who would sustain the young growing family in his home, thus enabling the son-in-law to continue his studies under his father-in-law's direction. The father of the chosson realized that it will be difficult for him to meet this commitment, and wants to know if he can use the maaser money from his business endeavors to provide the support for which he is responsible.

The Chasam Sofer opens his discussion by quoting two opinions that seem to dispute whether it is acceptable to use maaser money for such an expenditure. The Rema, quoting the Maharil, contends that it is not permitted to use maaser money to pay for a mitzvah, such as donating lamps and candles to the shul, whereas the Shach states, in the name of the Maharam, that it is permitted to use maaser money for mitzvos. Thus, whether one may pay for mitzvos, other than supporting the poor, from maaser money appears to be a dispute among early authorities. The Chasam Sofer then quotes the Be'er Hagolah, who explains that the two above-quoted opinions are not in dispute. All authorities prohibit using maaser money to fulfill a mitzvah that someone is already obligated to observe. The Maharam, who permitted using maaser money for these purposes, was discussing a case in which the donor intended to use maaser money for this mitzvah from the outset, whereas the Maharil is discussing a situation in which he has been using his maaser money to support the poor, in which case he cannot now divert it for other mitzvos that do not qualify as tzedakah for the poor. Thus, according to the Be'er Hagolah, whether the father can begin meeting his obligations to his son and mechutan with his maaser money will depend on whether he has already accepted the obligation on himself to pay this from other funds, in which case he cannot use maaser money for it, or if it is an obligation that he is now accepting upon himself, in which case he can specify that he wants to use maaser money to fulfill it.

The Chasam Sofer does not consider the approach of the Be'er Hagolah to be fully correct. He (the Chasam Sofer) notes that the Maharil wrote that maaser moneys are meant to support the poor and not for the acquisition of mitzvos. Therefore, use of maaser money for any type of personal mitzvah is inappropriate, whether he is already obligated to fulfill the mitzvah or not. The Chasam Sofer concludes that when someone begins donating maaser money, he may stipulate that, sometimes, the money will be used for a

mitzvah donation, such as the lighting in shul. However, once he has begun donating his maaser money regularly to the poor, he must continue using it for tzedakah.

Family first

Having determined that there are definitely situations in which maaser money must be given to the poor, the Chasam Sofer then discusses when and whether money designated for the poor can be used to support an individual's extended family. There is a general rule that one is obligated to the poor to whom one is closest – close family first, more distant family next, neighbors third, members of one's city next and the out-of-town poor next.

Greater needs

Notwithstanding that family should be supported first, the Chasam Sofer quotes from his rabbi, the author of the Haflaah, that the rules of "closest first" or "family first" are only when the funds are necessary for the same level of need, for example, all have enough to eat, but not enough for clothing. However, if some are short of food, and others have enough to eat but are short on clothing or other needs, the responsibility to make sure that someone has enough to eat comes first, even for someone out of town, regardless of whether there are neighbors or locals who are needy, as long as they have sufficient food. Yet, concludes the Chasam Sofer, this prioritization is not absolute. All needs of someone's family are considered his responsibility before the basic needs of others. In other words, the priorities should be as follows: (1) Family needs. (2) Most basic needs – food – regardless of location of needy. (3) People of one's city. (4) The out-of-town poor. Chasam Sofer's conclusion If the father had stipulated, at the time of obligating himself to support his son, that he would use maaser money for this obligation, he would be able to use it. Even then, the Chasam Sofer recommends that he use only up to half of his available maaser money to support his son. His reasoning is based on a Mishnah (Peah 8:6) which says that someone is permitted to save his maaser ani (the tithe one gives to the poor in the third and sixth year of the shemittah cycle) to support those that he chooses to, but he should not set aside more than half of his maaser ani for this purpose; the rest should be given to the local poor. However, this is only when he had originally planned to use maaser money for this purpose. Otherwise, once he created an obligation upon himself to support his son, it is similar to any other obligation that he has, and he may not use his maaser money for this purpose. Tuition Rav Moshe Feinstein ruled that one should not pay tuition for sons and daughters in elementary school and high school from maaser funds, because this level of education is obligatory. However, someone eligible

8 for a tuition reduction who elects to pay full tuition may pay the extra from maaser (Shu't Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 2:113; also see Ahavas Chesed 2:19:2). If paying the expected amount of tuition without resorting to maaser funds creates hardship, one should ask a shaylah. Yeshiva gedolah tuition and expenses may be paid from maaser, because a parent is not obligated to support a child at this age. Testing Hashem! At this point, let us discuss the last of our opening questions: "May I ask Hashem to pay me back for the tzedakah money that I give?" It is generally prohibited to "test" Hashem, as the Torah states, "Lo senasu es Hashem," "Do not test Hashem," (Devarim 6:16). One may not say, "I am performing this mitzvah so that Hashem will reward me by providing me with such-and-such (Sefer Yerei'im #361; Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah 395, 424; Shu't Radbaz #882). However, there is one exception to this rule – one may give maaser kesafim, expecting to be blessed with wealth as a reward (Taanis 9a, as explained by Shu't Avkas Rocheil #3; Sefer Hassidim #144; Rema, Yoreh Deah 247:4; Ahavas Chesed 2:18. Cf. Shel'a and She'eilas Ya'avetz #3, quoted in Pishei Teshuvah 247:2). The Gemara (Taanis 9a) relates that, after Reish Lakeish's passing, Rabbi Yochanan encountered his nephew (who was Reish Lakeish's son). Rabbi Yochanan asked his nephew what he had learned in cheder that day. The nephew replied, "Te'aser kedei shetis'asher," "Give maaser so that you get rich." "How do you know?" asked Rabbi Yochanan. "Go test it,"

answered the nephew, who then asked, "But is one permitted to test Hashem?" Rabbi Yochanan replied, "I heard from my rebbe, Rabbi Hoshiyah, that this is an exception --because of the pasuk in Malachi (3:10), where Hashem begs us to test Him when giving maaser and see for yourself that He opens the windows of Heaven and grants blessings until our lips weary of saying 'Enough!'" We see from this that it is permitted to declare that I am giving the correct amount of tzedakah and expect that Hashem will reward me with wealth. I know several people who personally attest that this beracha was fulfilled!

from: Shabbat Shalom <shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org> date: Oct 26, 2023, 8:32 PM

Alone But Not Lonely

By Rabbi Moshe Hauer

Jews should be feeling quite lonely these days. Antisemitism, an increasingly visible and unsettling feature of American Jewish life since the Tree of Life attack exactly five years ago, has spiked since the brutal Hamas massacre of October 7th. On the Israeli side, we have shifted from focusing on what seemed to be the growing circle of peace and friendship surrounding the Jewish state to consider instead its enemies poised to attack from all fronts. We fume at the callous and vicious hostility of the United Nations and watch with astonishment as the progressive champions of human rights leading, teaching, and studying in our universities salute and excuse monstrous butchers. And we celebrate any expression of support from American and other political leaders even as we anxiously parse their every phrase to identify possible cracks in that support.

We should feel desperately lonely, but we are not. A Jew is always alone but never lonely. Earlier this week, on a visit to Israel, I began to understand why.

In the wake of the recent horrors, I had the privilege to meet a wide variety of Israelis who had experienced or observed unspeakable tragedy and were bearing it with dignity and grace. It is always both humbling and inspiring to see from up close the kind of emunah, deep-rooted faith, that seems to grow bountifully in Israel and is rarely seen elsewhere. It is there in the eyes of people who project a crystal-clear sense of purpose and the faith-based conviction that they are part of the great march forward of the magnificent story of the Jewish people. It derives both from the mystical feeling of God's guiding hand and from the mindset of the faithful who choose their path in life consistent with God and his Torah.

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for You are with me." "Were my father and mother abandon me, God would take me in." King David was surrounded by frightening enemies and forsaken by erstwhile friends. It did not matter. His faith in God ensured that he was never alone. His Emunah was neither a slogan nor an abstraction. And it is similarly tangible to these understated Jews who viewed their life-changing experiences as a journey God was leading them on and they were choosing to take. Instead of feeling lost and abandoned, they have a clear sense of connection and direction.

These humbling Jews are not alone because God is with them. But they are also not alone because people are with them.

So much has been said – and enough can never be said – about the incredible outpouring of kindness and caring that is sweeping through the land. We may be attacked by our enemies and abandoned by friends, but the Jewish family is hanging together across oceans and communities. Those who have suffered loss are being embraced by Klal Yisrael.

But the real healing of that loneliness is experienced by giving. A friend told me how his daughter went to a neighborhood market on Erev Shabbos and encountered a woman collecting foodstuffs for the neighborhood poor. She had never seen her doing this before, and it seemed especially odd as people were raising funds and goods for the current causes of the displaced, the bereaved, and the soldiers. She later learned that this woman's son had been

taken captive by Hamas. She was in so much pain that her pain was all she could focus on, leaving her completely wrapped up in herself and very lonely so she chose to go out to the corner market to do something for others who needed it. She was not alone because she cared, she gave, she saw others and she made them less lonely.

The original Jew, Avraham, was known as an Ivri, completely isolated, “the entire world on one side and he on the other.” This was not just an individual characteristic of Avraham; it originated what would become the collective fate of his descendants, “the nation that dwells alone.” It began the moment God chose Avraham, when he instructed him to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father’s house, to disconnect from every part of his human support system and follow God into the unknown.

Avraham was alone. But was he lonely? How could he be lonely when the Creator Himself would accompany him and show him his pathway forward? One who walks with God is never lonely. And he could not be lonely because everywhere he went he noticed others and addressed their needs. We are a nation that dwells alone but does not feel alone. Carried by emunah and committed to chessed, we will live and move on with God before us and with our hearts and hands extended to each other.

Rabbi Shmuel Reichman

@ReichmanShmuel

This is true bravery!

When everyone else at Drexel University was supporting evil, one student still showed up for Israel!

This lone ranger, Jay, left class clutching his Israeli flag and waved it in the air walking towards Students for Justice in Palestine, where students were chanting “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” as well as other anti-Israel and anti-Semitic chants.

Jay’s proud sister videoed him marching into the belly of the beast, where he proudly waved his Israeli flag

Jay staged a one-man counter-protest, and when the hostage-deniers asked him for proof of the hostages and the massacre, he pulled out his phone and showed them footage, silencing the crowd.

The timing of this event could not be more fitting!

In this week’s parsha (Torah portion), Avraham embarks on his Lech Lecha journey into the unknown.

Avraham was called the “ish ivri” because all the masses walked on one side of the river, and he walked on the other. (Ivri comes from the Hebrew word “ever” (the other side), as in “the other side of the river.” Ideologically, Avraham walked on “the other side.”)

He walked alone, choosing to live a life of truth rather than a life of social acceptance.

A true leader must always be willing to commit to the right path, even if he or she is the only one doing so.

The lonely path can also be the very means of self-discovery and self-transformation.

Sometimes one can see most clearly once they have distanced themselves from their current surroundings, as this gives them the ability to rethink, redirect, and then return with newfound purpose and meaning.

Avraham completely removed himself from his idolatrous culture.

Moshe spent many decades alone in the desert and on the run from Pharaoh, building his clarity and understanding of life before returning to lead the Jewish People.

David HaMelech grew up as an outcast before being appointed as king by Shmuel.

This is not always necessary, but often, a step back leads to a giant step forward. This is why teenagers who leave their homes in chutz la’aretz (outside Israel) and spend time learning Torah in Israel often find it immensely transformative for their spiritual development.

These are definitely lonely times; but with that comes incredible opportunity.

May we all be inspired to embark on our own Lech Lecha journey; as individuals, there is always a certain existential loneliness in seeking the ultimate truth; but at the heart of our individual Lech Lecha journey is the realization that we’re part of something infinitely greater than ourselves; and it’s in that realization that we find a deep sense of connection, togetherness, and purpose!

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Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Lech Lecha

Outsiders

And Hashem took Abraham outside and said, gaze toward the heavens and count the stars if you are able! And He said to him, so shall your offspring be!”(Genesis:15:5) With those words, the Torah tells us G-d’s promise, “Jews will be like the stars.” Something is troubling. Why was it necessary for Hashem to take a field trip with Abraham in order to impress upon him the vastness of the universe? At the time Abraham was 100 years old. Surely he knew that one cannot count the stars! Rashi, therefore, explains the verse on a deeper level.

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

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

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

The entire family was stupefied. They knew their father had an astute grasp of almost every situation, yet in this instance he could not face reality. The doctors predicted that Hirschel was not going to survive. Yet his father was not even fazed. Reb Yoseph Chaim looked at all the shocked faces in the crowded ICU. “You doctors think you know the future? I know that Hirschel will be just fine. Let me explain. Many years ago the Chofetz Chaim wanted to make sure that his writings were understandable for the layman. He asked me to read the galley and point out any difficult nuances. He was very appreciative of my efforts, and before I left for America he promised me, “Yoseph Chaim, if you remain a faithful Jew and Shomer Shabbos, I promise that you will have a long life filled with nachas. You will not lose any one of your children or grandchildren in your lifetime.” Now gentlemen,” Reb

Yoseph continued, “who should I believe?” Needless to say, within weeks Hirschel was out of the hospital. (Reb Yoseph lived to the ripe age of 96 and all his children and grandchildren did outlive him!) The Jewish people are not controlled by the soothsayers of conventional wisdom. Predictions of defeat were abound when Israel’s army is outnumbered 10 to 1 and — yet we survived. The dire predictions of mass assimilation amidst despair after World War II faded into a rebirth of a Jewish community and renewed Torah education on unparalleled levels. Conventional wisdom had lost hope for our Russian brothers and sisters, yet new embers of Torah Judaism are beginning to glow out of the former bastion of atheism. We are not ruled by conventional wisdom. Like our forefather Abraham, we Jews are just outsiders.

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com
<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Author.aspx/1199> Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

A special message for the Jewish community from the **Chief Rabbi Mirvis**
I have just listened to one of the most inspirational radio interviews I have ever heard.

Rav Doron Perez, head of world Mizrachi was being interviewed. And when the interviewer commenced, he said, “I don’t know how to say this, but I want to say Mazal Tov, and to also extend our commiserations at the same time.” Why was that the case? Well, you see, last night Rav Doron and his wife, Shelley celebrated the wedding of their son Yonatan to Galya.

On Shemini Atzeret, Yonatan was in the south of Israel, together with his fellow soldiers. They were fighting with every bit of strength and courage they had, against dozens of terrorists. Yonatan was saving the lives of his fellow Jews. But, after good while he himself was injured, and doctors say it was a miracle that he was able to survive.

And yesterday was Yonatan’s wedding, a wonderful Simcha, but – and this is a big but – Yonatan’s brother Daniel is missing. Like Yonatan, he is also a soldier in the south of Israel. His tank was attacked. One of his fellow soldiers was found dead in the tank, the other three are missing. The Perez family do not know where he is right now.

So, can you imagine, a wedding of one son and the worry about another? And in this interview Rav Doron gave a most incredible new Perush, a new commentary, to a passage in Ecclesiastes Kohelet chapter three, where King Solomon famously says, ‘Lakkol zeman ve’et lechol-chefetz’ – ‘There is a time and a season for everything’. ‘Et livkot ve’et lischok’ – ‘there is a time to weep and a time to rejoice’. Rav Doron said, sometimes the two times coincide with each other. At one and the same moment, you are weeping, and you are rejoicing. And that’s what the Perez family experienced yesterday. But then Rav Doron went on to explain, how with his deep rooted emunah, his faith in Hashem, he and his family know that Am Yisrael will prevail, and this war will end with a great success.

In parshat Noach, which we read this week, we have the very first Baruch Hashem on record. It was Noach who explained, Baruch Hashem ‘Elokei shem’, ‘blessed is the Lord’. And you know, there is so much about which we can say Baruch Hashem right now. At a time of existential threat, Baruch Hashem, we have Medinat Yisrael. Baruch Hashem, we have a strong army. Baruch Hashem, we have notable global leaders and their governments supporting us. Baruch Hashem, we are blessed with the unity of the Jewish people at this time. But, at the same time, we are weeping, we are crying, we are concerned. Let us take a lead from the Perez family, who so inspirationally are telling us yes, we’re grieving, we’re crying, we’re concerned. But, at the same time, let’s also focus on the positive, because the Jewish people will prevail. Am Yisrael Chai. The Jewish people will continue to live on, and the reason for this is ‘Od Avinu Chai’ ‘Our Father in heaven is looking after us and will protect us.’

Please Daven for Daniel Shimon Ben Sharon, together with all the others who are missing, all those who have been taken hostage, all those who have

been injured. May peace come speedily to the people of Israel. Oseh shalom bimromav, Hu ya’aseh shalom aleinu v’al kol Yisrael v’imru Amen.

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

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly, there is a broadening of the information provided:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Where does Mo'av come from?

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

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

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

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

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

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

III. CHAPTERS 1-11: A BRIEF RECAP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

V. OLAM HESED YIBANEH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VI. AND THEY SEPARATED...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Curiously, each of these losses resulted in the birth of two boys: As a result of Lot's separation, he ended up in that cave with his two "found" daughters - and that's where Ammon and Mo'av came into the world.

Yehudah's deception in the Tamar episode (Ch. 38) is clearly linked to the earlier episodes of deceit (more on that in a later shiur) documented in B'resheet. As a result of this interaction, Peretz and Zerach are born to Yehudah.

VII. BACK TO MEGILLAT RUTH...

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

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

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

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

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

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

VIII. ...AND BACK TO LOT

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

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

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

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Parshat Lech Lecha: Trust in Training

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PARASHAT LEKH LEKA

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

AVOID DISAPPOINTMENT: LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS!

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

A FEW GOOD MEN:

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

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

AVRAHAM: THE FIRST TO PASS:

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

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

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

BEREISHIT 15:1-18 --

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOW FOR SOME ANSWERS:

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

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

- 2) What is the reward 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 Sodom. Hashem is reassuring him that despite his refusal of the king of Sodom's reward (Avraham did not want to be enriched by an evil person), he will be rewarded.
- 3) Why does Hashem connect the seemingly unrelated issues of Avraham's fear and the reward he will get?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

b) Avraham is getting old, and the land is still quite occupied by Cana'anite 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 Cana'an 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 Cana'anite 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 goyyim"]. I shall make you very, very fruitful -- into NATIONS -- and kings shall come from you. I will uphold My covenant between Me and you, and with YOUR CHILDREN AFTER YOU, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be your God and YOUR CHILDREN'S AFTER YOU. I will give to you and YOUR CHILDREN AFTER YOU the land in which you live, all of the Land of Cana'an, as a permanent possession, and I will be their God."

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

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

- 1) "Many nations": there is a particular emphasis on Avraham's development into "nations" or "many nations."
- 2) "Your children after you": the most significant phrase we find here is "your children after you," which appears 5 times within 4 pesukim (verses) -- twice in verse 7, and once each in 8, 9, and 10.

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

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

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

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

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

covenant of circumcision, must be repeated in every generation, by every male individual who wishes to be a part of it. Unlike the Covenant Between the Cut Pieces, where Avraham played a central 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

PARSHAT LECH L'CHA

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

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

Did Avraham Avinu simply win a 'Divine lottery'?

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

THE SIN OF "DOR HA'PLAGAH"

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

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

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

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

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

So what did they do that angered God?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The aftermath of the Tower of Bavel incident provides the thematic setting for God's startling challenge to Avraham Avinu:

"And I will make you a GREAT NATION.... and through you ALL the families of the earth will be blessed." (12:1-3)

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

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

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

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

BET-EL & SHEM HASHEM

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

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

After he arrives in Canaan and builds a MIZBAYACH in Shchem, Avraham continues to Bet-El, the climax of his "aliyah":

"From there he moved up the mountain range to BET-EL... and he built a MIZBAYACH there and called out b'SHEM HaSHEM - in God's NAME! (12:8).

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

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

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

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

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

A 'STRATEGIC' LOCATION

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

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

A BIBLICAL THEME

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

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

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

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

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

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

IN MESSIANIC TIMES

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

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

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

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

The following table reviews this contrasting parallel:

MIGDAL BAVEL	BET HA'MIKDASH
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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

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PARSHAT LECH L'CHA -Part Two

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

THE FIRST HITGALUT - BECOMING GOD'S NATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

Avraham's family will need to multiply -
hence the blessing of "ZERA";
A territory is necessary to establish this nation -
hence the promise of "ARETZ".

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

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

THE FIRST 'SPLIT'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let's explore that possibility.

LIKE NEPHEW LIKE SON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LEAVING AVRAHAM OR LEAVING GOD?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BRIT BEIN HA'BTRIM - THE FIRST COVENANT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is the meaning of this question?

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

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

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

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

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

NOT IN YOUR LIFETIME!

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

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

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

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

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

A PROOF FROM VA'EYRA

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

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

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

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

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

LAND - FOR A PURPOSE

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

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

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

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

THE BIRTH OF YISHMAEL

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

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

BRIT MILAH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

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

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