

Potomac Torah Study Center

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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning 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) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

As Israel's primary focus turns from Hamas to the evils of Iran, Gaza, Hezbollah, and their allies, we pray that Hashem will protect us during the coming year of 5785. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world.

Hashem has infinite patience – but at some point, we humans must give back and show our appreciation to the God who makes a home for humans in His universe. The first ten generations of humanity become increasingly evil, and God decides that He has to destroy the world and start over. He keeps Noach and his family, plus a pair of every living animal to restart the world. The generation of the flood starts off in a way that displeases Hashem, so He scrambles their languages and forces them to move apart to populate different areas. The Torah uses this description to summarize the world before a human appears who is willing and able to appreciate and teach the values that God wants humans to internalize.

Rabbi David Fohrman and his scholars at alephbeta.org describe some of the qualities that make Avram attractive to Hashem. Rather than seeking to make a name for himself (the sin of the generation of the Tower of Babel), Avram adopts his deceased brother's son (Lot) and marries his brother's daughter Sarai. Avram hopes to have children with Sarai to enhance the legacy of his deceased brother Haran. Avraham continues to be close with Lot and even goes to war to save Lot when the latter is taken hostage in what one might consider the first world war in history.

As Lech Lecha opens, God appears to Avram when he is seventy-five years old and asks him to leave his home and family to go to a place that He will show him. In return, God promises to give Avram (whom he later renames Avraham) what he most wants in the world – a son and descendants. Avram and his wife Sarai have been married for many years but have not been able to conceive. Avram accepts the offer, takes Sarai, his nephew Lot, and his possessions, and starts his journey with Hashem.

After the flood, God had told the surviving people and their descendants to move around and settle the land. The people instead settle in the valley of Shinar, invent a way to turn mud into bricks as hard as rocks, and determine to build a tower to heaven to make a name for themselves. When God gives Avram wealth, he moves around, lives in tents, and builds altars to call out to Hashem. In his use of the wealth that God gives him, as well as his way of building a legacy for his brother rather than for himself, Avram is a tikkun for the sins of the generation of Shinar.

God presents Avraham with several promises through covenants. For example, Hashem promises the land of Canaan/Israel to Avraham's descendants. Since delivering the land to the Jews at the time of Yehoshua, no people other than the Jews have been able to make the land of Israel productive. For more than two thousand years since the Roman exile of the Jews from the land, the land stays basically desolate until Jews return. Mark Twain visits Israel in the late 19th Century and describes a barren land that is useless for agriculture – virtually empty for two thousand years. Even in

recent years, when Israel returns Gaza to the Arabs, complete with modern equipment that makes this desert area productive, the first thing the Arabs do is destroy the agricultural equipment and irrigation – to turn Gaza back into a desert. Only once the Jews establish Israel in 1948 has the land again become a land of milk and honey.

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky provides several examples of Hamas families praising their children for murdering Israelis. For these families, their most praised goal is to raise suicide bombers. These parents consider their children to be heroes who go straight to heaven if they die killing Jews. Rabbi Kamenetzky points to 16:11-13. An angel saves Hagar and tells her that she will have a son, whom she shall name Ishmael, and that he will be violent, a highwayman and bandit whom everyone will hate, fear, and fight. Hagar praises the angel for this vision. She is delighted that her son will attack and terrorize others. In more than 3700 years since Hagar's vision, many of Ishmael's descendants have and continue to delight in killing Jews. The history of anti-Semitism, already ongoing for more than 3700 years, shows no sign of ending.

We cannot blame the Arabs for all anti-Semitism, especially since November 9-10 will be the 86th anniversary of Kristallnacht. May the day come within our lifetimes when anti-Semitism will become rare, when our people may live in peace.

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 Shleimah for Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah, Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, 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

Hannah & Alan

Haftarat Parshat Lech Lecha: Does God Care? Finding Purpose in Difficult Times

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * © 5785 (2024)

President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, for the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

Does God really care about us? How can it be that measly, miniscule humans like us possibly grab the attention of the Almighty, the Knower and Creator of all? Why would God be interested in whether my life is righteous or sinful? These are

questions that many are struggling with today as Israel and the Jewish people are going through an extremely difficult time. Does God care about how we are dealing with our heavy and ongoing losses of family, friends and community members? About our being attacked on multiple fronts as our hostages remain in Gaza? About all the ordinary people doing extraordinary acts to keep going despite the trauma and challenges?

These questions and doubts are not new. In this week's Haftarah, Yeshayahu addresses this question as he hears his fellow Jews doubting (see Ibn Ezra's Isaiah 40:27) that God even notices their actions. Yeshayahu responds: *"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Eternal is God from of old, Creator of the earth from end to end, Who never grows faint or weary..."* (ibid:28).

Yeshayahu's view is clearly that God is deeply invested in our lives and in our actions, eager to see our success. *"I strengthen you and I help you, I uphold you with My victorious right hand"* (ibid. 41:10). God stands by us; God is committed to seeing us flourish, granting strength to the weary and inspiration to the unsettled.

However, the initial verses of the Haftarah also push back against this view, that God does not care. Yet making the emphatic statement without really explaining why. Perhaps that is the point! God does care about our actions, but the reason may be beyond our comprehension. This conundrum is what the Haftarah wishes to explore.

It must be that God participates in our personal and national development, taking pride in our advances forward and supporting us when the journey seems arduous. For it is God who, as an expression of partnership with humankind, bequeaths to us the responsibility of partnering with Him in bringing spirituality and morality into this world. It is God who becomes "greater" as the piece of God, the soul within us, shines ever more brightly as we engage in bringing light into the world.

The paradigm of this journey of growing with God, expanding and enhancing the Godliness that is present in our world, is none other than *'the one who arose from the east'* (Isaiah 41:2) – our patriarch Avraham. It is Avraham Avinu who walks before God (Cf. Bereishiet 17:1), who is charged in this week's Torah portion to go off on a journey to a place unknown and to bring Godliness to new corners of the world. Avraham is described as the 'lover' of God (Isaiah 41:8), for it is Avraham who is in an ongoing relationship with God, challenges injustice and smashes the idols of the past to bring God further and deeper into the world. And it is the Avraham of this week's parsha whom we are called on to emulate, as emphasized in the Haftarah: *"But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, seed of Abraham..."* (ibid).

As individuals and as a nation, we are called to see the hand of God in our every action, and to feel that God relies on us to illuminate Divine perfection. Through acts of justice and righteousness, we embody this partnership and expand God's presence in this world each and every day — even in the face of great challenges and tragedy. [emphasis added]

* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohr Torahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

Drasha: Parsha Lech-Lecha: Suicide Moms * by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 2001

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. [ed.: now a 30 year tradition]

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 mujahedeen. 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.

Good Shabbos

* I reprint this column every year, because the message is too important not to remember.

Lech-Lecha: "And he believed in God" – Faith in God or Faith in Miracles?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2009

We are told that Avraham was given 10 tests and withstood all of them. There is no doubt that in Lekh Lekha Avraham has many trials, but it is somewhat of a question of whether he withstood them all or not. Ramban states that when Avraham goes down to Egypt because of the famine, he did a grave sin, for he did not have enough faith in God's promise to give him the land. Similarly, when Avraham complained – "*Behold to me You have not given a son,*" it sounds like Avraham is doubting God's promise. This is too much for Ramban, who reinterprets this as Avraham's concern that his sins would cause him to lose the blessing that God had promised him. Ramban expects Avraham to have this absolute faith in God, and takes him to task or reinterprets the verse when this seems to not be the case. In a similar fashion, Ramban is bothered by the verse, "*He believed in God, and it was accounted to him as righteousness,*" stated immediately after God reaffirms the promise to Avraham that he will have a son. Why, asks Ramban, should it be a big deal that Avraham had faith in God's promise? To answer this question, Ramban reinterprets the verse to not be referring to Avraham's faith at all.

However, perhaps the issue in all these cases is not faith or lack of faith, but a question of the kind of faith that one has. Ramban wants Avraham to believe that God will sustain him in Canaan even in the midst of a severe famine. Consider, however, Malbim's approach. Avraham, says Malbim, passed the test by going down to Canaan. He continued to have faith that God would keep His promise, even when all the evidence pointed to the contrary, and at the same time he did not think or expect that God would perform miracles and change nature just for him and just to make this happen.

This approach is the key to understanding these episodes with Avraham. The touch on the nature of faith which, in some way, is connected to one's understanding of God. What was Avraham's understanding of God? Consider the debate between Rambam and Ra'avad. Rambam states)Hil. Avoda Zara 1:3(that Avraham spent decades grappling theologically and philosophically until, at the age of 40, he came to the philosophical truth about God's existence and understood that God was the First Cause of all of creation. Ra'avad comments on this and states that there are those who disagree and say that Avraham recognized God at the age of 3. For Rambam, the rationalist, Avraham's knowledge of God was a rational one reached at the age of 40. For Ra'avad, the kabalist, it was one outside of reason, and achieved at the tender age of 3.

This is not just a question about how one knows God; it is also a question of the nature of one's faith in God. For some, to have faith in God is to believe that God can and will constantly work outside of nature and will shape history and events at the macro and micro levels. For others, God is the ultimate Creator of all things, and God's promises and plans will ultimately be fulfilled, but at the same time we must know that we live in a natural world, governed by laws of nature, and we should expect the world and events to follow these rational laws.

The latter is a type of emunah that can be hard to maintain. If one truly believes in God's promises but also truly believes in the natural course of the world, then it is often unclear how the promises will be fulfilled. At times, it may even seem absurd. And yet, nevertheless, one has faith. Avraham goes down to Egypt, and still has faith – although it seems to make no sense. Avraham does not know how he will have a son. *“Behold You have not given me a son.”* He believes, but he cannot understand, so he is torn up inside, and he shares his feelings with God. And because he does believe although he does not understand, *“God considered it as righteousness.”* If he had been less rooted in the real world, it would have been easier to believe. But he was able to believe in two contradictory things – in God's promise and in the natural way of the world – and that was a major accomplishment.

If one can embrace the absurd, then such a faith can be made easy. But if one is a realist, then such a faith can cause much anguish. It is for this reason, perhaps, that when God tells Avraham that Sarah will bear him a child, he asks God – *“Were that Yishmael would live before you.”* Avraham is saying to God:

“You have already fulfilled your promise to me that I will have a son. It was hard enough to keep that faith alive when the real world was constantly contradicting this and I could see no way that this could happen within the natural order of things. Please don't now promise me that I will have a son through Sarah. How – in the real world – can a 100 year old man and 90 year old woman have a son? I will believe it, of course, but it will be a belief of struggle and anguish.”

The flip side of all this struggle, however, is that with such a rootedness in the real world coupled with a deep faith in God, one not only passively sees God working in the real world, but one also see it as his responsibility to actualize God's presence and God's promises. This is a faith that leads to action. If things must happen within the natural order of things, then we must be the agents to make them happen. When Avraham's nephew is taken captive, Avraham does not wait for a miracle. He runs after Lot's captors with his small army and is victorious. And at the same time, because of his faith, he sees this as God's hand, and gives a tenth of the captured wealth as a gift to God. This is one of the profound messages of the institution of income tithing, of ma'aser kesafim, which is traced back to this event. We must act ourselves to accomplish in the world, but when we act, we must realize that our success and our wealth is not our own accomplishment, and thus the money that we have earned belongs to God as well.

Ultimately, this is a faith that can fill someone with a deep sense of mission and purpose. If one believes in the world, and one believes that God's will and promise will be realized in the world, but also believes that the nature of the world will not change and that miracles cannot be relied on, then one will realize that it is up to him or herself to be a part of making God's will become reality. Avraham is the one figure in Torah who is most inwardly driven by a sense of mission. He is the one who goes everywhere, calling out in the name of God, trying to heighten the awareness of God throughout the world, trying to actualize God's presence in the world. This sense of mission is a product of his faith. Because he believes in God and because he believes in the world as it is, he must also believe in himself. Ayn hadavar taluy ela bi, *“The matter is dependant only on me.”* It is he who can and he who must call out in the name of God, and thus will God's promises be fulfilled.

Shabbat Shalom!

* President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

Note: copied from my archives

Remembering Kristallnacht

From *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* *

The unprecedented pogrom of November 9-10, 1938 in Germany has passed into history as Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass). Violent attacks on Jews and Judaism throughout the Reich and in the recently annexed Sudetenland began on November 8 and continued until November 11 in Hannover and the free city of Danzig, which had not then been incorporated into the Reich. There followed associated operations: arrests, detention in concentration camps, and a wave of so-called Aryanization orders, which completely eliminated Jews from German economic life.

The November pogrom, carried out with the help of the most up-to-date communications technology, was the most modern pogrom in the history of anti-Jewish persecution and an overture to the step-by-step extirpation of the Jewish people in Europe.

Jews Leaving Germany

After Hitler's seizure of power, even as Germans were being divided into "Aryans" and "non-Aryans," the number of Jews steadily decreased through emigration to neighboring countries or overseas. This movement was promoted by the Central Office for Jewish Emigration established by Reinhard Heydrich (director of the Reich Main Security Office) in 1938.

In 1925 there were 564,378 Jews in Germany; in May 1939 the number had fallen to 213,390. The flood of emigration after the November pogrom was one of the largest ever, and by the time emigration was halted in October 1941, only 164,000 Jews were left within the Third Reich, including Austria.

The illusion that the legal repression enacted in the civil service law of April 1, 1933, which excluded non-Aryans from public service, would be temporary was laid to rest in September 1935 by the Nuremberg Laws — the Reich Citizenship Law and the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor. The Reich Citizenship Law heralded the political compartmentalization of Jewish and Aryan Germans.

Desecrated Synagogues, Looted Shops, Mass Arrests

During the night of November 9-10, 1938 Jewish shops, dwellings, schools, and above all synagogues and other religious establishments symbolic of Judaism were set alight. Tens of thousands of Jews were terrorized in their homes, sometimes beaten to death, and in a few cases raped. In Cologne, a town with a rich Jewish tradition dating from the first century CE, four synagogues were desecrated and torched, shops were destroyed and looted, and male Jews were arrested and thrown into concentration camps.

Brutal events were recorded in the hitherto peaceful townships of the Upper Palatinate, Lower Franconia, Swabia, and others. In Hannover, Herschel Grynszpan's hometown, the well-known Jewish neurologist Joseph Loewenstein escaped the pogrom when he heeded an anonymous warning the previous day; his home, however, with all its valuables, was seized by the Nazis.

In Berlin, where 140,000 Jews still resided, SA men devastated nine of the 12 synagogues and set fire to them. Children from the Jewish orphanages were thrown out on the street. About 1,200 men were sent to Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen concentration camp under "protective custody." Many of the wrecked Jewish shops did not open again.

Following the Berlin pogrom the police president demanded the removal of all Jews from the northern parts of the city and declared this area "free of Jews." His order on December 5, 1938 — known as the Ghetto Decree — meant that Jews could no longer live near government buildings.

The vast November pogrom had considerable economic consequences. On November 11, 1938 Heydrich, the head of the security police, still could not estimate the material destruction. The supreme party court later established that 91 persons had been killed during the pogrom and that 36 had sustained serious injuries or committed suicide. Several instances of rape were punished by state courts as *Rassenschande* (social defilement) in accordance with the Nuremberg laws of 1935.

At least 267 synagogues were burned down or destroyed, and in many cases the ruins were blown up and cleared away. Approximately 7,500 Jewish businesses were plundered or laid waste. At least 177 apartment blocks or houses were destroyed by arson or otherwise.

It has rightly been said that with the November pogrom, radical violence had reached the point of murder and so had paved the road to Auschwitz.

* Reprinted with permission from *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* (Yale University Press).

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* Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/remembering-kristallnacht>

Blessings and Curses: Thoughts for Parashat Lekh Lekha

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

(This article appeared in the Jerusalem Post, October 31, 2024)

"And I will bless them that bless you, and anyone who curses you I will curse" (Bereishith 12:3).

God called on Abram to move from his birthplace and to set off for a new land. Abram was to lay the foundations for a righteous society that recognized the One God and that repudiated all forms of idolatry. God promised Abram that he would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Setting new standards of faith and morality, Abram would attract followers. But he would also be the target of enemies who resented his teachings. So God reassured Abram that He will bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him. God's promise is echoed in the blessing later given to the Israelites by Bilam: *"Blessed be everyone who blesses you, and cursed be everyone who curses you"* (Bemidbar 24:9).

Throughout the history of our people, surely there have been many who have been blessed by their blessing us. Many millions of people have led happier and more meaningful lives by their attachment to the Hebrew Bible. Many have blessed, and have been blessed by, the many contributions of the Jewish People to civilization.

Likewise, throughout history, there have been many who have cursed us and have committed every sort of atrocity against us. But in what ways have they themselves been cursed by God? It sometimes (often?) feels that the haters are not subjected to the wrath of God. In our own times, we see anti-Semites/anti-Zionists eagerly cursing and threatening us. Although we are blessed with a strong State of Israel and a robust diaspora community, the enemies are relentless. We wonder: in what way is God cursing those who curse us?

Perhaps God's blessings and curses are not externally imposed, but are consequences of people's own choices in life.

The Torah presents two paths for humanity. The positive essence of Judaism teaches us to choose life, love our fellow human beings, serve the Lord faithfully. All who attach themselves to these ideals are themselves blessed. They live constructive, love-filled lives. Their faith strengthens them in good times and bad.

But those who curse us and our teachings are thereby choosing a destructive way of life. Their hatred poisons their lives. By cursing us and what we represent, they actually bring a curse upon themselves.

When the State of Israel was established in 1948, the Arab world exploded in hatred of the Jewish State. In all these years, Palestinians and supporters have invested billions of dollars in weaponry, tunnels, anti-Israel boycotts etc. What is the result of all this hatred? Instead of having a peaceful and prosperous Palestinian society, the Palestinians are cursed with an ongoing legacy of hatred, violence and loss of life. They have raised generations of haters rather than generations

of those who choose life, who bless Israel as a partner in peace and prosperity.

More generally, those who curse and hate Israel thereby undermine their own lives. Instead of devoting their energies, talents and resources in constructive ways, they embrace a negative way of life.

When God assured blessings for those who bless Israel and curses for those who curse Israel, these were not idle promises. They are fulfilled every day of the week.

We surely would like the haters to re-think their destructive ways and free themselves of the curses they have brought upon themselves and others.

Those who choose blessing and life are themselves blessed. Those who choose cursing and death are themselves cursed.

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

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3287>

Lech Licha – Healthy Boundaries

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

Dedicated in Memory of Mr. David Rhine Sholomo Dovid ben Avraham Yitzchak z.l.

Our father Avraham was fond of his nephew, Lot. Lot's father, Horon, was Avraham's brother. When Horon was killed for associating with Avraham and his belief in one G-d, Avraham took Lot under his wing. When Avraham set out on his historic journey to the promised land, Lot came along. Avraham was committed to being his protector.

As time went on, both Avraham and Lot became very wealthy. The workers of each argued with each other, and a breach developed between them. Avraham told Lot that they would need to separate and dwell apart. He offered Lot to choose his location, to stake out his place, a decision which Avraham would respect. Avraham then added some critical words, *"If you go to the left, I will be right there on the right. If you go to the right, I will be right there on the left."* Rashi explains that Avraham was committing to being there for Lot in times of crisis. Although they were parting ways, Avraham remained committed to Lot's success. *"If you ever need me,"* Avraham declared, *"I will be there for you."*

The concept of distancing responsibly in a close relationship is a remarkable one. Avraham and Lot were so close they are described as brothers. Many thought that because (at the time) Avraham had no children, Lot would be considered his son and would inherit him. When Avraham realized that distancing was needed, he shared that with Lot. Avraham then implemented the distancing with the greatest respect, and with surgical precision. Even in distancing, Avraham was committed to Lot. Indeed, when Lot got captured in the world war of the time, Avraham promptly joined the fray at great personal risk due to this commitment and his perspective of their continued relationship.

Most relationships are not forever. Neighbors, business partners, coworkers, and friends may eventually need to part ways from their very close association. But how they step away from the closeness and create boundaries is critical. Avraham taught us that even when some distancing is needed, a deep-rooted commitment can remain. For a time, our lives were intertwined. When we create healthy boundaries, something of that remains forever.

The Baal HaTurim points out that the last letters of the words following the word "V'Yipordu" (They separated), are words that end with the letters of Shalom (peace). Because if the separation is carefully orchestrated like Avraham did, then such a separation will bring about Shalom.

In our time we encounter many troubled relationships that are viewed as all-or-nothing. Parents-children, siblings, and sometimes spouses, will hurl the term narcissist at the other, and decide that it is a mitzva to stay far away. I cannot provide diagnosis or counter diagnosis to anyone. But I can say that differences of opinion are common in relationships. Even insults and self-centeredness are unfortunately common. These are things that can be worked out with professional guidance. Healthy boundaries are a must in all relationships. To cut off ties in an all-or-nothing way is not typically necessary or appropriate.

One of the bonds of life which we hope will be forever is marriage. Yet, there are times when divorce does occur. The Medrash Rabbah (Behar) tells two stories illustrating that a former spouse's success is part of one's responsibility. As the Novi Yeshaya (58) teaches us, *"From [that which was] your flesh you shall not ignore."* Even after a broken marriage the boundaries are such that each should hope and assist in the other's success. How exactly this principle should be applied requires mentorship. But the principle is powerful. Even divorce is meant to create healthy boundaries.

Healthy boundaries are so powerful that if we take note of a troubled marriage early enough, it can often be restored to a pleasant place by creating healthy boundaries within the marriage.

When Avraham and Lot separated, there was great disappointment. Lot chose to associate with Sodom, which eventually led to most disturbing and embarrassing incidents with his daughters. Yet, Avraham's offer to be there for Lot created a healthy boundary, a loose familial connection which would one day be actualized. As Hashem said of Lot's descendants, *"A wonderful person will yet emerge from them,"* referring to Rus, the great grandmother of Dovid HaMelech.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos.

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Lech Lecha -- It's The Thought That Matters

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer* © 2021

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Parashat Lekh Lekha: Survivor, Anonymous

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

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

On top of that, the teacher explained, according to a Midrash, that Og was the ultimate survivor. He survived the flood by sitting on the roof of Noah's ark, and he survived the very first World War, which involved nine kings and many nationalities. He also lived long enough to rule the Bashan at the time of Moshe, only to lose his life at the war against the Israelites.

This story sounds fantastic, and indeed, following the Torah's timetable, it would make Og one of the longest living people in history. The flood happened in the year 1656 after the creation of Adam, so even if we assume that Og was but a baby back then, he would be 852 years old at the time of his last battle.

It is hard to accept all these details, which suggest that not only was Og a giant of mythical proportions and of a life-span

that the Torah does not mention, but that he was able to trick God and survive the flood by hitching a ride on the ark. But this is not what bothered my daughter. The teacher also said that Og reported to Abraham that his nephew was captured because he hoped that Abraham would die trying to save Lot, and then Og would be free to marry Sarah. Yes, this is also an idea mentioned in Midrashic literature and repeated by Rashi. It makes little sense, because Sarah was taken from Abraham by both Pharaoh and Abimelech, and Og could have done the same exact thing, especially with his powerful and intimidating stature.

Yet that was not my daughter's concern, as she was focused on more practical terms. How could Og even think of marrying Sarah, she asked the teacher, if he was a giant? The teacher, not losing a heartbeat, answered that Abraham and Sarah were also gigantic, and that was too much for my daughter. Now she was asking me to explain how people in the Book of Genesis interacted with each other, and who was or was not a giant.

I told my daughter that the Midrash was not to be taken literally, and that the Torah deliberately kept the identity of the survivor hidden because he is only a tool and not a main character in the story. Since the ultra-orthodox school was the only option we had at the time, I dismissed the incident as part of the culture of treating Midrashic texts and Rashi's commentary as part of the revelation at Sinai, and I knew there was no point in talking to the teachers or administration about it.

I have decided to return to this matter now, because I hear daily of teachers in modern orthodox schools who use Midrashic material inappropriately or where it is not necessary. That is so pervasive, that even those who want to adhere to the biblical text and logical commentaries face difficulties. Recently, a teacher told me that her students asked her why didn't she say that the survivor was Og, the King of Bashan. She had to defend her position)to second graders!!!(by explaining that she is following the biblical text.

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

The problems with the verses on which the identification of the survivor with Og relies, as well as the questions raised before about a lifespan not mentioned in the Torah, the idea that Og tricked God and survived the flood, and the fact that the Torah does not make that statement anywhere, force us to ask a different question. What was Rabbi Yohanan's purpose or agenda? We can offer two possible answers, one specific and one general. The notion of a powerful, gigantic being, who tries to steal the wife of a defenseless Jew, was all too familiar to Jews under Greek and Roman rule, and it was an uplifting message to hear that no matter how hard Og tried and how long he survived, at the end he was defeated by Moshe. Moshe is the greatest prophet and the conduit of the Divine word to the people, and when the Midrash makes him jump and hit Og's ankle, it symbolizes the power of spirituality to cause the feet and the pillars of the mightiest to buckle and fall.

In the wider context, the identification of the survivor with Og is part of the Midrashic discipline, which does not like anonymous people or unidentified places. The Midrash also likes to merge two names into one person, thus creating more information for each. The motivation of the rabbis to engage in such practice was in large measure a reaction to

Greek culture. Greek folk tales, such as the Iliad and the Odyssey, were meticulously detailed, and Jews who were exposed to these works expected similar detail in the Torah. The rabbis responded to the demand by expanding and embellishing the biblical narrative, filling in the gaps, adding biographical and historical details, and yes, identifying the anonymous.

There are numerous instances of such practice in Midrashic literature, most of which present tremendous textual and logical problems. For now, though, see the end of this article for a brief list of such examples from Rashi's commentary on Genesis.

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

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

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

* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan)Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(. **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria:** <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets> . The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.

Jewish Scholarship

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

I love Jewish scholarship. I love the multiple perspectives 3000 years of analysis and study have brought to our Torah. For all these millennia, Jews have used the parsha as a springboard for answering philosophical conundrums, analyzing linguistic anomalies, and inspiring us in the darkest of times. To borrow a phrase from the Psalms, the knowledge of Torah covers the world like an ocean. So much has been explored, and there's still nearly a Mariana Trench sized amount to go.

But I do admit that, with all this scholarship, we can sometimes get lost and miss the incredible message in the simplest of translations. We've read the Torah so many times now that we can sometimes miss it.

One of these moments happens in our parsha. God tells 75 year old Abraham)formerly known as Abram(to leave his

family, friends and community and go on a nomadic journey until God shows him the right place to stop. In other words, wander around the world to find a brand new purpose and start a new life and mission. At the age of 75! That's the age of retirement, when most are looking back and enjoying all they've built and the community they've been part of. Adventures never stop, but starting an entire new mission away from your social structure is mostly unheard of and carries huge risk.

What an incredible amount of courage this must have taken. To restart your life at 75 and go to a place where you know absolutely no one and start a mission of cosmic proportions. We take this for granted, but it's mind-blowing to consider that Abraham took this risk at this age.

Scholarship is great, but just this regular reading should be enough inspiration for one week. Thank you to our Patriarch Abraham for taking this risk, which led to the creation of the Jewish people.

Shabbat Shalom.

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

Rav Kook Torah Lech Lecha: Be Complete!

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

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

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

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

A Higher Prophetic Level

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

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

But when Abraham heard that God was referring to the mitzvah of circumcision, his concerns were put to rest. Brit milah serves to refine the special connection between body and soul. It deals with a sphere that is beyond human comprehension — and accountability. God's command was not that Abraham needed to rectify some error or character flaw, but rather to bestow upon him a unique covenant, one which would enable him to attain a purer, higher level of prophecy.

With this gift, Abraham would be able to "*walk before God*." The word hit'halech)'walk'(is in the reflexive tense; Abraham

would be able to “walk himself” as it were, and progress on his own, before God.

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

<https://ravkooktorah.org/LECH61.htm>

Lech Lecha: How Perfect were the Matriarchs and Patriarchs? (5775, 5782)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former UK Chief Rabbi *

In an extraordinary series of observations on this week's parsha, Ramban (Nahmanides, 1194 – 1270) delivers harsh criticisms of Abraham and Sarah. The first has to do with Abraham's decision to leave the land of Canaan and go to Egypt because “*there was a famine in the land*” (Gen. 12:1). On this Ramban says:

Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that God would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for God surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine God would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children. Ramban, *Commentary to Genesis 12:10*, based on Zohar, Tazria, 52a

According to Ramban, Abraham should have stayed in Canaan and had faith in God that He would sustain him despite the famine. Not only was Abraham wrong to leave, he also put Sarah in a position of moral hazard because, as a result of going to Egypt, she was forced to tell the lie that she was Abraham's sister, not his wife, and consequently she was taken into Pharaoh's harem where she might have been forced to commit an act of adultery.

This is a very harsh judgment, made more so by Ramban's further assertion that it was because of this lack of faith that Abraham's children were sentenced to exile in Egypt centuries later.

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

Our mother [Sarah] transgressed by this affliction, as did Abraham by allowing her to do so. So God heard her [Hagar's] affliction and gave her a son who would be a wild ass of a man to afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all kinds of affliction. Ramban, *Commentary to Genesis 16:6*

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

It is not difficult to defend Abraham and Sarah in these incidents, and other commentators do so. Abraham was not to know that God would perform a miracle and save him and Sarah from famine had they stayed in Canaan. Nor was he to know that the Egyptians would endanger his life and place Sarah in a moral dilemma. Neither of them had been to Egypt before. They did not know in advance what to expect. [Ed.: Avraham might have thought that Egypt was yet another place where he should call out in Hashem's name.]

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

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

Ramban believed, as we say in our prayers, that *"because of our sins we were exiled from our land,"* but what sins had the Israelites committed in the days of Jacob that merited exile? He also believed that *"the acts of the fathers are a sign for the children"* (Commentary to Gen. 12:6), and that what happened in the lives of the patriarchs foreshadowed what would happen to their descendants. What had they done to Ishmael to earn the scorn of Muslims? A close reading of the biblical text pointed Ramban in the direction of Sarah's treatment of Hagar.

So Ramban's comments make sense within his reading of Jewish history. But this, too, is not without its difficulties. The Torah states explicitly that God may punish *"the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation"* (Ex. 34:7) but not beyond. The Rabbis further restricted this to cases where *"the children continue the sins of the parents."* (Rashi to Ex. 34:7, Jeremiah 31:28, and Ezekiel 18:2) Jeremiah and Ezekiel both said that no one would any more say, *"the parents have eaten sour grapes and their children's teeth are set on edge."* The transfer of sins across the generations is problematic, Jewishly and ethically.

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

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

For example, the words *"Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian ... mocking"* (Gen. 21:9), were understood by the Sages to mean that the thirteen-year-old Ishmael was guilty of idolatry, illicit sex or murder. This is clearly not the plain sense of the verse. It is, instead, an interpretation that would justify Sarah's insistence that Ishmael be sent away.

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

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

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

Second, not only are decisions difficult. People are also complex. No one in the Torah is portrayed as perfect. Noah, the only person in Tanach to be called righteous, ends drunk and dishevelled. Moses, Aaron and Miriam are all punished for

their sins. So is King David. Solomon, wisest of men, ends his life as a deeply compromised leader. Many of the prophets suffered dark nights of despair. “*There is none so righteous on earth,*” says Kohelet, “*as to do only good and never sin.*” No religious literature was ever further from hagiography, idealisation and hero-worship.

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

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

In India, the Jina and the Buddha, founders of two new religions in the sixth century BCE, came to be worshipped later by their followers. In China, Confucius and Lao-tze came to be deified. To the non-Christian, Jesus seems to represent a parallel case. In Greece, the heroes of the past were held to have been sired by a god or to have been born of goddesses, and the dividing line between gods and men became fluid. In Egypt, the Pharaoh was considered divine. Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 187–88.

In Israel, says Kaufmann, “*no man was ever worshipped or accorded even semi-divine status. This is one of the most extraordinary facts about the religion of the Old Testament.*”¹ There never was a cult of Moses or any other biblical figure. That is why “*no man knows Moses’ burial place to this day*” (Deut. 34:6), so that it could never become a place of pilgrimage.

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

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

FOOTNOTE:

¹[Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 188.

Around the Shabbat Table:

¹[Do you think we learn more from the Midrash’s simplification of the moral situations of our biblical ancestors, or from the subtle shades of grey in the original text?

²[What do we gain from seeing the imperfections in our matriarchs and patriarchs?

³[Do you agree with Ramban’s interpretation? What is inherently problematic about stating that the mistakes of our ancestors directly impacted their descendants?

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

Life Lessons from the Parsha: You Can Do the Impossible

By Yehoshua B. Gordon, z"l * © Chabad 5785

"Lech lecha!" – "Go forth!"

These two words from the opening verse of the Torah portion of Lech Lecha are two of the most powerful words in the whole Torah. These words were not arbitrarily chosen as the title of this portion; they embody the essence of the entire story.

"Go forth," Abraham is instructed by G d, *"from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."*¹

"Lech lecha," means *"You should go,"* but it can also mean, *"Go for you," "Go to you,"* or *"Go within yourself."*

Beyond the direct command to Abraham, G d gives this instruction to each and every one of us, too. We are charged to dig deep within ourselves to connect to G d, maximize our potential, and accomplish the impossible.

Whenever I think of the portion of Lech Lecha, I think of my father, Rabbi Sholom B. Gordon, of blessed memory.

My father came to the U.S. from a shtetl in Eastern Europe at age 13. By the time he turned 18, he had already developed a Brooklyn accent. A few years later, in 1942, the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, said to him, *"I want you to become my emissary. I'm sending you to Newark, N.J., to establish a yeshiva and, as my representative, to reach out and bring people closer to their Yiddishkeit, to their Judaism."*

At age 21 my father was told, *"Lech lecha," "Go."*

A few years later, after he married my mother, Rebbetzin Miriam Gordon, of blessed memory, they were sent by the Rebbe as a team to Springfield, Mass., to open a yeshiva there.

How did two young people pick themselves up and relocate to Springfield, Mass., and later to Newark, N.J., to begin the work of reconnecting people with their Jewish heritage in the 1940s, when everyone was running away from their Judaism?

Abraham and Sarah paved the way.

There were great Kabbalists and holy tzaddikim even before Abraham – Noah, Shem, Eber, Enoch, et al. Yet none of them managed to influence their surroundings on the scale that Abraham did. They lacked either the strength, the willpower, or the ability to accomplish that which Abraham and Sarah did, which was to get thousands of people to break away from idolatry and to embrace monotheism.

With self-sacrifice, Abraham and Sarah opened the channel of lech lecha, which allows us, their descendants, to follow suit.

Leave Your Comfort Zone

From time to time, we feel the call of lech lecha – we are called upon to go and do, to give of ourselves. Often, this goes against our nature. We may feel that we can't do it, or that it's not for us, or we may simply not be interested.

We look into the teachings of Chassidus and find something fascinating: G d said to Abraham, *"Leave your homeland,*

and your birthplace, and your father's house."

The word translated as "*your homeland*," "*artzecha*," is linked to the word "*ratzon*," meaning "*will*," referring to our desires and predilections. Our "*birthplace*" refers to our intellectual capacity, which gives birth to our emotions. And finally, our "*father's home*" represents our emotional comfort.

Abraham in Biblical times, and all of us today, are told: Leave your self-will behind and surrender your own desires; abandon the conditioning and the traits of your birthplace, and leave your comfort zone. Break away from what you have decided is good for you, and from what you want, and go where you are needed.

But do I have to go? What will I lose by going? Is the loss worth the gain?

Rashi addresses this dilemma. Usually, when a person travels, three essential aspects of his life are diminished. The first is his reputation. To build a reputation (especially without the help of social media!) you have to be established in your community, and traveling challenges that. The second is family. It is exceedingly difficult to build a family while constantly traveling. The third is financial stability. It's challenging at best, and impossible at worst, to acquire and to hold onto wealth when you're always wandering around.

Rashi explains that G d told Abraham: You think your reputation will be challenged? You think your family life will be challenged? You think your economic security will be challenged? I promise you just the opposite. You're going to develop an unparalleled reputation, a flourishing family, and financial success.

On the reputation front, how many Abrahams do we have? Who in our world is as well-known as Abraham? Who else holds the title of First Jew or Founder of the Jewish People? In terms of family, Abraham is the patriarch of every single Jew! And wealth-wise, we know that Abraham acquired massive wealth. He was the Bill Gates of his time! The Torah tells us, "*And Abraham was very heavy with livestock, silver, and gold.*"² Despite all odds, G d's promises came to fruition.

But let's back up a little. Abraham sets out on his lech lecha mission, armed with G d's blessings. Things are about to get amazing, or so he believes. But what's the first thing that happens when Abraham and Sarah settle in Israel? Famine breaks out! G d promises them that they will have unparalleled success, and instead they find trouble. Because of the famine, they become poverty-stricken. Left with no recourse, they are forced to go down to Egypt, the capital of decadence and immorality at that time.

Where do they find lodging along the way? The blessing of wealth had yet to be fulfilled, so they certainly weren't staying at the Ritz-Carlton or even the Hilton. At best, they were at the Motel 6, where Tom Bodett leaves the light on for you.

Adding insult to injury, as if the Egyptians were looking to prove their immorality, as soon as Abraham and Sarah crossed the border, Sarah was kidnapped and taken to Pharaoh's palace. Trauma! Miraculously, despite having every intent of violating Sarah, Pharaoh was stricken by a plague and did not even touch her.

All Debts Are Paid

In 1990, my parents came to celebrate the bar mitzvah of our son, Eli, with our community in Encino, California. My father spoke, sharing inspiration from Lech Lecha.

There's a fundamental lesson to be taken from this whole story, my father said. Following the miracle in Egypt when Pharaoh is struck by a plague, derailing his plan to assault Sarah, Abraham is sent away laden with gifts of cattle, gold and silver.

But then, in describing Abraham's travels back to Israel, instead of simply telling us that he traveled, the verse says, "*Vayelech lemasa'av*," "*And he went upon his journeys.*"³ Rashi explains that on his way back from Egypt, Abraham stayed in the same motels he stayed in on the way down. This is a lesson in etiquette: when you have to stay in certain

hotels during a road trip for economic reasons, patronize those same places on the way back, even if your fortune has drastically changed. It's also a great way to accumulate points with the same travel loyalty program.

Another interpretation, says Rashi, is that on the way home, Abraham paid all the debts that he incurred on the way down. Abraham and Sarah were literally penniless as they descended to Egypt and were extended credit along the way. Returning from Egypt as billionaires, Abraham immediately paid up all his debts.

Isn't the story of Abraham and Sarah the story of us all? my father asked my bar mitzvah boy. We are given promises and blessings, and we do the right thing, but then the going gets tough. We run into bumps in the road and it seems to make no sense.

In fact, people start asking, *"What happened? Why is Abraham suffering? Why is Sarah suffering? Why don't they have enough money? Why can't they stay at the upscale hotel? If they are G d's chosen emissaries, why don't they have everything they need?"*

Sometimes, it takes a little more time, explained my father. Abraham had a very tough time on his way to Egypt, but on the way back he repaid all his debts. Which debts? The debts of people talking. The debts of all the murmuring. The debts of people that said, *"This is Abraham?"*

On his return, everybody said, *"This is Abraham! Now we see the blessings. It has all come full circle."*

A Milkman in Williamsburg

At this point in his talk, my father shared a very personal story.

As a yeshiva student in the 1940s, he sported a big, bushy beard. This was before the '60s when beards were "in." Nobody had a beard. This made things very interesting when it came to meeting young ladies with the objective of matrimony. One prospective date actually told her parents, *"There's a rabbi here instead of my date!"*

When my father was dating my mother, her father — the great chassid Rabbi Eliyahu Simpson, one of the pioneers of Chabad in America — was challenged by a distant relative. Rabbi Simpson was impoverished, and this relative was economically benevolent to him. But he said to him, *"Eli you're going to let your beautiful young daughter marry this guy?! What is he going to grow up to be? At best, if you're lucky, a milkman in Williamsburg!"*

It took many years, but my father and mother built a large and wonderful family with beautiful children and grandchildren. My father became a respected rabbi and a chaplain in two hospitals, positively affecting the lives of thousands of people in the greater Newark area and in his Maplewood community. There was skepticism in the beginning, but eventually, everyone saw that if you make the right commitments and if you do the right thing, then G d grants his blessing. Sometimes it takes a while, but on the way back we can repay all the debts of all of the gossip that goes on around us.

Instant gratification is rarely the answer. Long-term investment leads to long-term blessing.]emphasis added[

And that's lech lecha. G d speaks to every one of us and tells us to go beyond ourselves, leave our self-created boundaries, and depart from our self-imposed limitations. You think you can't because you're a finite being? You are not! You're a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a descendant of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. You're an extension of G d, with the ability to achieve anything you set out to do. As a Jew and as an emissary of G d, you can accomplish the impossible. How? Lech lecha! Dig deep within yourself until you find the essence of your soul and the recognition that you can do anything you set your heart and mind to.

This is how the Previous Rebbe and the Rebbe sent thousands of young men and women all over the world to be their emissaries, to go to the middle of nowhere, to the strangest places in the world, to the most unfamiliar and challenging environments, and accomplish the impossible.

Impossible?

My son-in-law's grandfather was the esteemed chasid Reb Avraham Drizin, also known as Reb Avraham Mayorer. This legendary man survived the tumultuous Stalin years in Russia, was on Stalin's wanted list, on the *"hit list,"* and miraculously survived and came to America. When his youngest daughter was about to marry, in the late '60s, she and her soon-to-be husband, Nochum Pinson, had an audience with the Rebbe.

They asked the Rebbe what they should do once they were married, and the Rebbe said that Nochum should study in kollel. The Rebbe often encouraged newlywed men to study in kollel for a year or two in order to get a solid foundation in Torah. When Nochum asked how he should support a family while sitting and studying, the Rebbe said, *"Your father-in-law will support you."*

At the time, Reb Avraham Mayorer did not have two pennies to rub together, often relying on collected funds to cover his own expenses. He certainly didn't have money to support his son-in-law! Nochum couldn't believe it. *"My father-in-law will support me? That's impossible!"* But the Rebbe responded, *"Ever since I've known your father-in-law, he has done the impossible!"*

Lech lecha is a message from G d to you and me and each and every one of us: it's a new world; it's a world in which the Jewish people can accomplish the impossible! You don't think you can? Dig a little deeper. Lech lecha – go within yourself, find those deep, profound divine energies, and bring them out. Harness yourself to the mission of G d.

When the world says you can't do it, when people look at you and question, *"If you're doing the right thing, why are you suffering?"* hang tight. Eventually, everything will fall into place, and the world will look on in admiration as they acknowledge the clear manifestation of His blessings.

May we all merit to see these blessings in every aspect of our lives in the most abundant and revealed way.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Genesis 12:1.
2. Genesis 13:2.
3. Genesis 13:3.

* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6149050/jewish/You-Can-Do-the-Impossible.htm

Lech Lecha: When You Encounter Delays or Take A Wrong Turn

by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky *

When You Encounter Delays Or Take A Wrong Turn

Abraham continued on HIS travels, from the south toward Bethel, until the place where he originally had his tent, between Bethel and Ai.)Gen. 13:3(

The words “*his travels*” in this verse can also be understood to mean “*His travels*,” i.e., G-d’s travels, meaning the travels orchestrated by G-d. It was G-d’s plan that Abram travel to these particular places.

Similarly, G-d determines where each of us finds ourselves at any given moment; if we are unexpectedly delayed, or think that we have taken a “wrong” turn, we should remember that it is all part of G-d’s unalterable plan.

It is our free choice to decide whether to fall into the trap of being frustrated over how our plans went awry or to capitalize on the Divine providence and take the opportunity to fulfill our Divine mission in the precise time and place where G-d has led us.

— from *Daily Wisdom* 3

May G-d grant resounding victory and peace in the Holy Land.

Good Shabbos.

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

* A Chasidic insight by the Rebbe on parshat Ma'sei, selected from our *Daily Wisdom*, by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky.

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Shabbat Parashat Lech Lecha

5785 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

On Being a Jewish Parent

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

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

Yet never was a promise more richly fulfilled than the words of God to him when He changed his name from Abram to Abraham: "For I have made you father of many nations." Gen. 17:5

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

There are three famous portraits of Abraham. The first is the Midrash we learned as children. Abraham, left alone with his father's idols, breaks them with a hammer, which he leaves in the hand of the biggest of the idols. His father Terah comes in, sees the devastation, asks who has caused it, and the young Abraham replies, "Can you not see? The hammer is in the hands of the largest idol. It

must have been him." Terah replies, "But an idol is mere of wood and stone." Abraham replies, "Then, father, how can you worship them?"[1]

This is Abraham the iconoclast, the breaker of images, the man who while still young rebelled against the pagan, polytheistic world of demigods and demons, superstition and magic.

The second is more haunting and is enigmatic. Abraham, says the Midrash, is like a man travelling on a journey when he sees 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?" God looked out and said to him, "I am the Ruler, the Sovereign of the universe." Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 38:13

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

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

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

exists, there is no God beside Him. Maimonides, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:3

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

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

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

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

So these views are all true and profound. They share only one shortcoming. There is no direct evidence for them whatsoever in the Torah. Joshua speaks of Abraham's father Terah as an idolater (Josh. 24:2), but this is not mentioned in Bereishit.

The story of the palace in flames is perhaps based on Abraham's challenge to God about the proposed destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" As for Abraham-as-Aristotle, that is based on an ancient tradition that the Greek philosophers (especially

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By Sari and Russell Mayer, Avi, Atara and Arella,
on the occasion of
the 22nd yahrzeit (13 Marcheshvan)
of Sari's mother, Mrs. Rita M. Walker, z"l,
(Rivka bas Reuven)

Pythagoras) derived their wisdom from the Jews, but this too is nowhere hinted in the Torah.

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

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

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

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

Abraham, the hero of faith, is simply a father. Stephen Hawking famously wrote at the end of *A Brief History of Time* that if we had a Unified Field Theory, a scientific “theory of everything”, we would “know the mind of God.” We believe otherwise. To know the mind of God we do not need theoretical physics. We simply need to know what it is to be a parent. The miracle of childbirth is as close as we come to understanding the love-that-brings-new-life-into-the-world that is God's creativity.

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

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

Judaism takes what is natural and sanctifies it; what is physical and invests it with spirituality;

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

[1] Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 38:13

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Abraham – Path Breaker or Path Follower

“Now the Lord said unto Abram, get out of your country, and from your kindred place, and from your fathers house, unto the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.”
(Genesis 12:1–2)

In these words we have the first of Abraham's ten tests – the difficult divine demand that the first Jew leave hearth and home and follow God into a strange and unknown land. In return, there is the divine promise of ultimate national greatness and international leadership. But why does God single out Abraham?

At this fateful moment, the Torah seemingly takes Abraham's faith and religious quest for granted without providing a clue as to how, where and why this particular nomad is worthy of divine trust and blessing. In the closing verses of Noach, we read about his genealogy, the names of his father, brother, nephew and spouse. We are provided with dry facts, travelogue locations on a map, ages at time of death. But there is nothing substantive telling us how the initiator and prophet of ethical monotheism arrived at the point where he even had a relationship with God. Is this the first time God speaks to him? And if it is, what makes the Divine believe that Abraham would heed His call?

What seems to be absent from the text is made up for in a charming and famous midrash which identifies Abraham's father, Terah, not only as an idolator, but also as a wealthy businessman who actually trafficked in idols. His son Abram discovered the God of the universe by his own faculties of reason at a very young age.[1] When Terah had to go on a business trip, he left his young son Abram in charge of the idols store. The proprietor returned to find all of his idols but one smashed to smithereens. Abram explained that a woman had brought food for her favorite idol, whereupon all of the other idols fought over the sumptuous dish. The strongest one was the victor, having vanquished all the others. When Terah expressed skepticism, Abram mocked his father's belief by proving to him that even he was aware of the limitations of the works of his hands.

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Terah's shop was not some fly-by-night affair rented in temporary quarters near the busiest section in town to get the crowd before the holidays. It was rather a thriving center for the idol arts – more like the luminescent chambers in any large museum with spotlights and acres of space to dramatize the repose of the idols and to explain the philosophy of idolatry. Abraham's action was not a mere childish prank. It was a revolutionary stroke which changed the way humanity perceived its own reality and the reality of the universe for all subsequent generations. In this midrash, Terah is seen as a primitive representative of an outmoded religion, whose iconoclast, revolutionary son broke with his father to create a new faith commitment which would ultimately redeem the world. ‘Get out of your father's house,’ says God to the ‘born again’ Abraham.

But what if there is another way of looking at Terah more in accord with the biblical text itself? What if Terah had discovered God first – and so Abram was not so much a path breaker as he was a path follower? Perhaps Abraham was not so much a rebellious son as he was a respectful son, who continued and built upon the road laid out for him by his father?

After all, there is every reason to believe that when God tells Abraham to go forth from his country, his birthplace, to a land that God will reveal, God is communicating to a man who was already in an advanced state of God consciousness, a mind-set that was most probably based on a religious awareness first glimpsed at home. Terah himself may at one time have been a believer in idol power but may slowly have turned to the One God while Abraham was yet a very young lad, or even before Abraham was born. I suspect that a subtle clue testifying to the correctness of this position is to be found in an otherwise completely superfluous verse, especially when we remember that the Torah is not in the practice of providing insignificant travelogues.

“Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran.”
(Genesis 14:18–20)

Why is it that Terah sets out for Canaan, the very place where Abraham himself ends up at the relatively advanced age of seventy-five at the behest of a call from God? Could Abraham have been completing the journey his father had begun decades earlier? And what was special about Canaan? Why would Terah have wished to journey there and why does the

Torah believe the journey significant enough to be recorded even though Terah never made it to Canaan?

Further on in this parasha, Abram wages a successful war against four despotic kings in order to save his nephew Lot, who had been taken captive by them. The text then cites three enigmatic verses, which record that Malkizedek, the King of Shalem, a priest of God on High, greets Abram with bread and wine, and blesses him:

“Blessed be Abram to God on High, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be God on High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.” (Genesis 14:19–20)

Abram then gives Malkizedek a tribute of one tenth of his spoils. Now the city of Shalem, JeruSalem, was the capital city of Canaan – and this is the first time it is mentioned in the Bible. Malkizedek literally means the King of Righteousness, and Jerusalem is biblically known as the City of Righteousness [Isaiah 1:26]. From whence did this Malkizedek, apparently older than Abram, hear of God on High (Kel Elyon)? Nahmanides maintains that from the very beginning of the world, the monotheistic traditions of Adam and Noah were preserved in one place in the world – Jeru-Salem, Canaan. Indeed, the flood never damaged Canaan. Their king, Shem son of Noah, also known as Malkizedek, was a priest to God-on-High, teaches Nahmanides. If this is the case, it seems logical to suggest that Terah was someone who had come to believe in this One God even in the spiritual wilds of Ur of the Chaldeans – and therefore set out for Canaan, the land of monotheism, where he wished to raise his family. He may even have had personal contact with Malkizedek, who greets the son of his friend with religious words of encouragement to the victor of a religious battle in which right triumphed over might, a victory of the God of ethical monotheism. Like so many contemporary Jews who set out for Israel, Terah had to stop half way and didn't quite make it. But all along God was waiting for Terah's son to embrace the opportunity to continue where his father had left off.

The common view of Terah has Abraham defy his father's way of life as he creates his own way, becoming in effect a model for many modern day penitents who radically break away from non-believing parents, rejecting everything from their past. In the alternate view that I propose, Abraham follows in his father's footsteps, builds on his father's foundation, redefines his father's way of life and for the first time in history paves the way for himself as well as others to move up the spiritual ladder by not only continuing but also advancing. Abraham is the model for those

spiritual idealists who – upon embarking on a journey of religious hope – look at their pasts with an eye for reinvesting what is salvageable, attempting to improve rather than reject. Whose path survives, thrives and becomes a link to the next generation? The revolutionaries, the evolutionaries, or a combination of both? It depends probably on who and what your parents happened to have been.

[1] See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, 1, 1*

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

Starting Over from Bereshit

There are moments in life when we must start all over, when we have no choice but to begin again.

Such moments seem to typically follow tragic events. Sudden loss, especially the loss of those closest to us, forces us to begin again. Our only other options are lifelong despair and depression.

There are times when even good fortune demands that we begin again. Acceptance into a new professional career, or a move to a new community, or marriage, all require a new response, and often an entirely new way of life.

I write these words little more than a week after one of the most horrible catastrophes in recent Jewish history, Hamas' invasion into Israel's homeland and its consequent massacre, torture, and kidnapping of well over a thousand civilians and soldiers.

I leave it to those who have the expertise to describe and record details of the terror. I am not sufficiently astute to even speculate upon the military decisions that lie ahead, nor am I remotely qualified to suggest political responses to this complex predicament.

What I can do and will do is to ask that you consider, if not immediately then as the way forward becomes clearer, that we now have a responsibility to begin again. As individuals, as communities, and as a Jewish nation, we must start over. We must reconsider old habits, past strategies, former relationships, and long held ideologies and beliefs.

In short, borrowing from an old Yiddish adage which Naomi Shemer used as the title of one of her poems, we are all now challenged to “begin anew from Bereshit.”

Ironically, the day that Hamas struck, the Shabbat that shall live in infamy, was Simchat Torah in Israel. The core ritual of this sacred day is to read the final passages of the Chumash from one Torah scroll, and then open

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another Torah scroll to “begin again from Bereshit.”

How apt it is that this column is dedicated to Parshat Lech Lecha (Genesis 12:1-17:27). This parsha begins with the Lord's instruction to Abram to begin again, to start all over. We know almost nothing about Abram's life until this point. We know his father's name, his brothers' names, and his nephew's name. We know that his father took some of his family on the journey from the land of Canaan, but never quite made it there until the father died. All that was recorded in last week's parsha.

This week's parsha begins: “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your native land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you...’ Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him...”

Abram began anew. He started over. He readied himself to face the various challenges, nisyonot, that lay ahead. Beginning again was just the first of these challenges.

We, the Jewish people, are all descendants of Abraham. Even converts to the Jewish faith typically adopt the name Abraham for themselves or refer to themselves as ben Avraham, a son of Abraham. Like our forefather, we all are called upon, at critical moments in our long history, to begin again, to start anew.

I am not sufficiently arrogant, however, to offer direction to an entire nation or even to any one specific community. I will instead confine myself in this column to guidance for those interested in, resorting to a psychological terminology that I picked up in graduate school, the “developmental task” of lifelong Torah study. This is a task incumbent upon us all.

In the future, however, I will endeavor to bring to your attention themes from future parshiot which detail ways in which the Jewish nation as a whole must “begin anew.”

For now, let me introduce you to a wise old rabbi whom I was privileged to learn from in his later years. His name was Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, of blessed memory. He was born and educated in pre-Holocaust Lithuania and spent the last decades of his life as the head of the Torah Vodaath yeshiva in Brooklyn, New York. Toward the end of his life, he lived with family in Baltimore, where I then resided. From time to time, I was invited to keep him company, and I used that opportunity to interview him on subjects of interest to me, especially Torah education.

Once he initiated our conversation by exclaiming in Yiddish, "Menn darf vaksen in lernen Torah," "One must grow in one's Torah study." He went on to portray just how comic it would be for a 30-year-old to cling to the Torah lessons he was taught in kindergarten.

"As a five-year-old," he would explain, "he was excited to learn what the world calls 'bible stories.' As he matures, so must his understanding of Torah so that those stories become the basis of profound lessons of theology, Jewish history, ethics, and morality."

He continued with a delightful tale about his childhood friend, Asher, with whom he grew up in the old shtetl in Lithuania. Their paths diverged when Asher, then no more than eight years old, emigrated with his family to the United States.

Seventy years later, their paths again crossed. It was the day before Yom Kippur and, as is the custom, Rabbi Kamenetsky went to the mikvah, the ritual bath house, to "cleanse" himself before the Day of Awe.

How surprised he was to encounter Asher there! They joyously reunited, trying to catch up with all that had transpired in their long lives. Then, in the dressing room, Rabbi Kamenetsky donned his arba kanfot, his under garment with ritual fringes, or tzitzit. His garment extended from his neck down to his knees, in accordance with Jewish custom.

He was stunned to observe that Asher too had donned a similar garment. But his merely extended from his neck to his chest. As the Rabbi explained to me, "it was like a baby's bib!"

When the Rabbi asked Asher to explain why he wore such an inadequate garment, Asher responded: "You must remember my old Zaidi, my grandfather. He did not accompany us to the United States. He felt that our religious observance would be compromised there. But he did call me over to him and pointing to my arba kanfot—I was then only eight years old—instructed me to always wear this garment. And so, although I am now 6 feet tall, I continue to wear the same size garment that I wore then."

Rabbi Kamenetsky then drove home his point to me. Just as a grown man cannot wear a child's clothing, so must a grown person's understanding of Torah grow as he matures.

The Rabbi's pedagogical lesson was cogent and forceful and remains so. A ten-year-old must be taught Torah at his or her level. So must the twenty-year-old and thirty-year-old and fifty-year-old and eighty-year-old

approach Torah anew as he or she advances through life's stages.

Each year of our lives requires us to return to the beginning. To return to Bereshit again. To readjust our understanding to conform with the lessons we have learned earlier in our lives.

At this tragic juncture in the history of our people, we must be prepared to begin anew to ascertain where we have gone wrong in all aspects of our behavior, in our faith, in our prayers, in our understanding of what the Almighty expects of us, and especially in our relationships with others.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yisrocher Frand

So Too Will Your Offspring Act

The pasuk says, "And Avram said, 'My L-rd, Hashem Elokim: What can You give me being that I go childless and the steward of my house is the Damascene Eliezer?'" (Bereshis 15:2). Avraham frets to the Ribono shel Olam: What is going to be of me? I have no heirs! He fears that his servant Eliezer will inherit his entire household. Hashem responds: "...That one will not inherit you; only the one who shall come forth from within you shall inherit you." (Bereshis 15:4). The Ribono shel Olam then took Avraham outside, directed his attention to the sky, and asked him if he could count the stars. Obviously, this was impossible. The Almighty told Avraham "Thus will be your seed." (Bereshis 15:5). This is what your nation is eventually going to be like.

I saw a beautiful insight from Rav Meir Shapiro. The following is what I believe he means to say:

There is a problem in this pasuk. The pasuk says that Hashem took Avraham outside and told him to count the stars. Then the pasuk says, "And He said to him (Vayomer lo...) so will be your seed." Inasmuch as Hashem has already been the one speaking in this pasuk, the repetition of the words "Vayomer lo" are superfluous. We already know who is talking!

Rav Meir Shapiro explains that the words "Vayomer lo" need to be inserted into this pasuk because something happened between Hashem's earlier statement to Avraham and His subsequent statement to him. Hashem told Avraham "Go outside and count the stars." So Avraham indeed went out from his tent, looked heavenward and began counting: "One, two, three, four...". He started counting the stars even though this was an obvious impossibility. Hashem told him, "Avraham, you are trying to do the impossible." Avraham responded, "But you told me to count the stars so I tried to count them." Hashem responded, "Oy! This is what the Jewish people will be like!" They will look at something that seems like an impossible dream, and they will attempt to

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make it happen! "So too will your descendants act." That ability to look at a situation and not be turned off or discouraged by what seems to be impossible does not stop the Jewish people from trying to make the effort.

If we study examples throughout Jewish history, we are in awe of what the Jewish people experienced and how they were able to pick up and start again. You know many such events. We do not need to go back to ancient times. We need only look back 75 or 80 years. Consider a few examples:

Rav Aharon Kotler came to America in 1941 from Kletzk, where he had Gedolei Yisrael as talmidim. When he started a yeshiva in Lakewood, New Jersey, where were his students holding?

Rav Muttel Katz, who lost his entire family in Telshe and came to the United States in the 1940's, took boys from public schools and made them into Torah scholars, building in the process a major Yeshiva in Cleveland, Ohio.

The Rosh Yeshiva zt"l (of Ner Yisroel), was walking with Rav Schwab in Baltimore. They walked by a building on Garrison Blvd and Liberty Heights Avenue. (Don't go there today.) He told Rav Schwab, "Ah, this will be the dormitory for the Yeshiva." There were eight bochrim in the Yeshiva at the time, and the building he was eyeing had capacity for 50 bochrim.

When Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman walked along the sand dunes of Bnei Brak and envisioned the Ponevezh Yeshiva that he planned to reestablish there after its European destruction, he was told "You are dreaming." He responded, "I may be dreaming, but I am not sleeping!"

This ability to pursue a goal even if it seems impossible began with Avraham. Avraham started counting the stars, expecting to learn their number even though it was a Mission Impossible! So too is the practice of his offspring.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

War and Our National Values and Mission

According to the Ba'alei Tosafos (Da'as Zekeinim 12:4, Berachos 7b), Avraham Avinu made a pilot trip to Eretz Yisroel before making aliya, notwithstanding the fact that his aliya was planned step by step by the Rebbono Shel Olam Himself. The Tosafos are brought to this explanation in order to reconcile their calculations that on the one hand, Avraham was seventy years old at the bris bein ha'besarim, while on the other hand, the opening of our parsha that brings Avraham to Israel at the age of seventy-five. Avraham's first trip, at the age of seventy, is recorded in our parsha and culminates in the vision of the multitude of stars that resemble our people in

the future. That trip did not result in a lasting aliya and Avraham finds himself back in his land of origin shortly thereafter. (Rashi and Ramban both take issue with dating the bris bein ha'besarim to have taken place when Avraham was seventy, which requires rearranging our parsha from a simple chronological narrative to one with significant "flashbacks", and the Netziv (15:7) vigorously defends their view in his commentary on Chumash.)

Avraham's aliya at age seventy, as described by the Ba'alei Tosafos, was presumably to get away from his pagan Babylonian environment. That aliya climaxed with the covenant, but only to see Avraham then return to chutz la'aretz. Our parsha opens with Avraham being commanded to make aliya again, but this time as a person who has a treaty with G-d and who is returning to his Divinely promised homeland. The Chareidim (a 15th century commentary) explains that the pattern of the two aliyot will match the causes of immigration by Avraham's offspring. At times we will come to Israel running for refuge, trying to escape the precariousness of the exile, and sometimes we will simply return home proudly bearing a divine treaty.

Nevertheless, one question still remains: why did Hashem record the bris bein ha'besarim as a flashback, after a battle, and not in chronological order at the beginning of Lech Lecha?

It seems to me that by placing it after the battle, the promise and zechuyos of the seventy-year-old Avraham are boldly apparent, and Hashem's choosing Avraham as a covenantal partner is well understood without any commentary or conversation. The covenant happened when he was seventy because Hashem saw in him a person who would risk everything to bring back his estranged nephew from captivity, a person who would understand well the promise and the responsibilities of being a covenantal partner with the Creator.

This insight breathes life into one of the many impressive wartime thoughts of the saintly giant HaRav Avraham Yitzchak Kook zt"l. In an essay on war that he penned during World War One, published in Orot, he explains why Chazal refer to Hashem as ba'al milchamot - the Master of war. With great trepidation of finding any positivity in something that creates unending pain and suffering, Rav Kook points out that nations define themselves during war. Sadly, wars determine a nation's highest values and defining missions.

We see from the recent war in Eretz Yisroel that our nation defines itself around finding safe-haven for our people and protecting our

G-d-given land while simultaneously protecting all life. Avraham, in similar fashion, defined himself to be responsible for his nephew while simultaneously confident in Hashem's vision.

Finally, the Jewish people have had battles in the times of Yehoshua and in our own times that miraculously showed the bond between Hashem and His children. Let us all try to do the teshuva incumbent upon us so that we will once again merit to see miracles.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

When He Eventually Arrives

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 land that I will show you ... (Breishis 12:1)

For many years I have been learning (and teaching) about those words that launched Avraham Avinu and began the mission of the Jewish People in a particular way. It would seem he is being told, "go to yourself, discover your real power, beyond the outer boundaries and limitations of "your land" and "your birthplace", and "your father's house". What would you accomplish and who would you be if you didn't know what the world was telling you to become?!

Otherwise, how do we understand the word, "LECHA – to or for yourself"?! Why are his marching orders in the reverse order of land and then birthplace and then father's house?! It would seem that the journey is inward and not just a mandate to get from point A on the map to point B. He is not even told where he is to go with any specificity, "to the land that I will show you". Why not tell a person where he is to go? No doubt this was not just a horizontal trip he was to set out on, but rather an inward excursion.

Why then was it necessary for him to travel outwards as well? It could be that the outer struggle of a person is a reflection of the inner struggle. Rebbe Nachman says that all throughout Tehillim when Dovid is speaking about affliction from various enemies he is really speaking of his own inner battles.

In Sefer Shemos, the Torah tells us about a defining moment in Moshe Rabbeinu's life, "And it happened in those days that Moshe grew up and he went out to his brothers and saw their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, of his brothers. He turned this way and that way and saw that there was no man, so he struck down the Egyptian man and hid him in the sand. (Shemos 2:11-12)

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The Shomer Emunim has a fascinating approach on this brief narrative. It was not just that Moshe saw the suffering, and identifying with his Jewish brothers decided to risk everything and smite the Egyptian. Whatever was happening on the outside was also happening on the inside. Moshe grew up on the holy lap of his mother Yocheved and was loaded up with 10 Jewish names and yet he was raised in the capital of Egyptian culture and was being groomed for leadership as an exemplar of Egyptian society.

He not only witnessed an Egyptian hitting a Jewish brother but he felt the Egyptian culture beating him up from within and overwhelming his Jewish identity. He looked this way and that and saw no man. He saw that if he is to be a little bit Egyptian and a little Jewish too, he will not become the Ish – the man he is meant to become, the Ish Moshe, Ish Elochim. So, what did he do? He smote the Mitzri from within and buried him where, in the Chol, as we say at the end of Shabbos, "HaMavdil Bein Kodesh L'Chol. He designated his Egyptian trappings, his upbringing, to Chol, secular/profane. It is no longer the essence of his identity.

Whatever was happening outwardly was a manifestation of what was going on inwardly and although it is apparent in this account it opens a window into everything we experience. Avraham Avinu endured 10 tests and not only did he pass them but he was changed by each challenging experience. They each exposed another facet of the diamond of his personality.

It's not enough to retreat and go inward and it's equally insufficient to only travel outward. Both are necessary and valuable. The story of anyone's life is a narrative of events and encounters but there is a whole other internal record of what we are feeling in relation to ourselves and HASHEM and how we are struggling and learning and growing in ways that no one can see. That is what Sefer Tehillim is about. Shmuel Alef and Bais may inform us of the critical events in Dovid's life, but Tehillim tells us what he was experiencing inwardly. Which is most valuable?

This may help explain why Avram was not told exactly where to go. It was not a geographical location alone. By traveling in both directions simultaneously he would know for sure where – when he eventually arrives.

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

Avraham the "Ivri"

Sicha of Harav Lichtenstein, z"l

"And I shall make you into a great nation" (Bereishit 12:2) - this is the source for the words "God of Avraham" in the opening berakha (blessing) of the Amida prayer. "And

I shall bless you" - this is the source for the words "God of Yitzchak." "And I shall make your name great" - this is the source for "God of Yaakov." Should we not, then, in closing the berakha, mention them all again? The answer lies in the final clause of the promise to Avraham: "And you shall be a blessing" - they will conclude [their blessing] with your name, not with theirs [those of Yitzchak and Yaakov]. (Rashi, Bereishit 12:2)

Both early and later commentaries have pointed out the peculiarity of Avraham's appearance on the stage of history without any prior introduction. The Torah tells us nothing of the early years of his life, his righteousness, his activities or his personality. It is as if he springs up suddenly out of nowhere, and God immediately promises him, "I shall make you into a great nation."

It seems that this sudden appearance on the part of Avraham Avinu is characteristic of his essence. He is a character created "ex-nihilo." His origins, the home in which he grew up and the environment which surrounded him leave us surprised, astonished, amazed. His entire society - including his father's household - are deeply immersed in the world of pagan gods, idols and icons. How could a person from such a background achieve such closeness to God and reach such an elevated spiritual status?

Whether we accept the midrash according to which "Avraham recognized his Creator at the age of three" or the opinion that he was forty at the time, this phenomenon is clearly an outstanding one, and represents the appearance of something entirely new.

The modern study of the social sciences is based on the principle of causality. Every phenomenon has its cause. In every event we tend to see the mover and that which is moved. Avraham Avinu proves that a different reality is possible.

Avraham represents a great challenge for all of us. The Rambam writes that a person must always strive upward, saying, "When will my actions equal those of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?" Even if a person is incapable of reaching the spiritual levels attained by the forefathers, he must still strive and try - at the very least - to create his own path to serving God. Avraham embodies the proof that it is possible to free oneself from the pressures of society and family and to swim against the current - with great strength. That small grain which for a tiny moment out of eternity broke through the barriers of his family and his society, became the father of a whole nation.

This is Avraham's essence. They go their way - and he goes his. The whole world stands on

one side, and he on the other. Therefore, according to the midrash, he is called "Avraham ha-Ivri" (Avraham the Hebrew). [The source of the word 'ivri' is 'ever,' meaning 'over' or 'on the other side,' therefore we can interpret his name as "Avraham who stands opposite" - "the whole world stood on one side and he stood on the other."] The father of the nation teaches us that it is within a person's power, if he but wills it, to beat his own path, to clear himself a way, to create his own current. This character represents an enormous challenge, and presents a great demand of us.

At the same time, it also serves as a source of comfort. When a person is overcome with despair at the rushing, tumultuous streams facing him, he can take comfort in the knowledge that he can prevail - if only he wishes to act against them. Perhaps he will not give rise to a new nation - "they will conclude with your name" - but he will find the strength needed for his struggle.

(Originally delivered on Leil Shabbat Parashat Lekh Lekha 5732. Summarized by Rav Elyahu Blumenzweig. Translated by Kaeren Fish.)

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

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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: *להעיל לאחרני, 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 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

אם מחוט ועד שרוך : was a legitimate compensation for Abraham. Yet Abraham refused to accept it I will not take anything from a thread to a "נעל ואם אקה מכל אשר לך ולא שחaelace...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 *לך*: we have described. When the Lord first revealed Himself to Abraham, and commanded him leave your country and birthplace and family, Abraham was *לך* 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 *לך*--"get thee"--i.e., for your own sake, or, as the Rabbis put it: *להנאתך ולטובתך*,

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 מחוט ועד שרוך 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 החוצה**: 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 **בוא ברוך**--does he say to Eliezer: **ה' למה תעמד בחוץ**, 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 **שעל חטא שחטאנו לפניך ביצר** 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 **יצר הרע** confession for the Evil Urge? Are not all sins committed because of the fact that we are victimized by the **יצר 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 **יצר 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 שמים**, 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 לשמה**, 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 **לשמה** 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 to **לשמה** and **לשמה** two different verses in the Psalms. One verse reads: **כי גדול עד שמים חסדך**, that God's love (i.e., His Torah and our study of it) is high unto Heaven. The second verse reads **כי גדול מעל** 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, **לשמה**; whereas the second verse refers to **תורה לשמה**, 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 **לשמה**, 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

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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 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! A spark of Abraham's teaching - **אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל**!

Certainly we who are the descendents 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 **חשאי**, 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**, 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 שמים.

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 והערב example of Abraham! No wonder that every morning we pray ונהיה אנחנו, Make sweet, O Lord, the words of Your Torah in our mouths בפיו ובפי so that we and our children may- וצאצאינו וצאצאי עמך בית ישראל כולנו יודעי שמך - 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' המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל. Blessed is the Lord who teaches such a Torah to his people Israel.

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Rabbi Yissocher Frand Parshas Lech Lecha

Chumras and Hidurim Were Luxuries That Avram Could Not Afford in Mitzrayim

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1310 – Giving Gifts to Non-Jews. Good Shabbos!

The pasuk says that on his way down to Mitzrayim, Avram realized that Sora was a beautiful woman. He was afraid that she would be desirable as a wife in Mitzrayim, and that he would be killed in order that Sora could be taken as someone else's wife. As we know, Avram said, "...Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me for your sake, and that I may live on account of you..." (Bereshis 12:13).

Rashi says on the words "so that it will be good for me" – this means that I will be given presents. Why Avram Avinu would be so interested in presents is itself a question, but a more pressing question is why Avram indeed accepted these presents from the Egyptians and, in fact, became a wealthy man because of them. Yet, shortly thereafter in the parsha, when Avram Avinu saved Lot, and the King of Sodom offered him the spoils of war, Avram refused to take them. "...I have raised my hand to Hashem, G-d, the Most High, Maker of heaven and earth, if so much as a thread or a shoelace, or if I shall take from anything that is yours! So you shall not say 'It is I who made Avram rich'" (Bereshis 14: 22-23). If Avram was worried about people saying that the King of Sodom made him rich, why wasn't he worried about people saying that the King of Mitzrayim made him rich? If Avram took into account the teaching of Shlomo Hamelech "...and the one who despises presents will live" (Mishlei 15:27) regarding Melech Sodom, why did Avram have such a sudden change of heart from his earlier ready acceptance of gifts?

There is an interesting Medrash that explains this contradiction and teaches a very important lesson. On the pasuk, "And he proceeded on his journeys..." (Bereshis 13:3), the Medrash Tanchuma notes that when Avram returned from Mitzrayim back to Eretz Canaan, he went to all the places that he visited on the way down to Mitzrayim, in order to pay his bills. Apparently, on the way down to Mitzrayim, Avram did not have money and he needed to borrow money to pay for his lodging and expenses. It was only on the way back from Mitzrayim that Avram had money to repay the debts that he had accumulated on the trip to Mitzrayim.

We derive two important lessons from this Medrash:

1. When people lend you money, pay them back. This may seem like an obvious statement, but unfortunately, this is not always done.
2. Do not be a tzadik on someone else's account. This means that it is fine to be righteous and have personal chumras (stringencies) and hidurim (ritual beautifications) if these chumras and hidurim only effect you. But if someone wants to practice exceptionally righteous religious behavior (for example, refusing to accept gifts because Shlomo Hamelech taught "the one who hates presents will live,") then he had better be certain that his personal piety is not causing the people to whom he is in debt to go unpaid. A person's fiscal responsibilities come first. Chumras and hidurim can only be built upon that baseline of integrity.

Avram in Mitzrayim had to tell Sarah "...in order that it will be good for me for your sake...". He was in debt at the time and he did not have the luxury of being concerned that people would be able to claim "It is because of me that Avram became rich." Later on in the parsha, Avram had prospered. By then he was "heavy with cattle, with silver and with gold." (Bereshis 13:2). By the time Avram went out to do battle for the King of Sodom, he was a wealthy man. Aha! A wealthy man has the ability and the luxury to be able to say "One who hates presents, he will live."

I can give a couple of examples of this principle of "Don't be a tzadik on someone else's cheshbon":

Rav Dovid Kronglas, zt"l, (1908-1972), the Mashgiach of Yeshivas Ner Israel, had a "chumrah" in shechitah, such that he did not eat beef. He thus had chicken for supper virtually every night. (There are fewer halachic issues with the ritual slaughter of birds than with animals). However, this is not a stringency that he imposed on his wife and children. His family ate meat. He was not going to restrict the members of his family from meatballs, hamburgers, roast, or steak because he accepted certain halachic stringencies upon himself.

Another example of not imposing personal chumras on others is evident in a story told over by the Tolner Rebbe. A young Kollel student came to Rav Schach, zt"l, and complained to him that his Rosh Kollel told him that he should not learn so late at night. Rav Schach told the young student to have his Rosh Kollel come see him. The Rosh Kollel came to visit Rav Schach, who asked him about the instructions he gave to his young Kollel student.

The Rosh Kollel said, "This young man has recently been looking unhappy – worried and perturbed about something. I asked him what was wrong. He explained that his wife got a new job, for which she needs to leave the house very early. She needs to get up even earlier to make the children's lunches and get them off to school. She is not getting enough sleep because she needs to get up so early. She is therefore not in a very good mood, and it is affecting their shalom bayis (marital harmony).

The Rosh Kollel asked his student, "So why don't you get up early and help make the lunches and get the children off to school?" The student gave as an excuse the fact that he stayed up learning late at night. The Rosh Kollel advised him: Don't learn so late at night, go to sleep earlier, and get up earlier so you can help your wife make the lunches and get the children off to school. That was "the story behind the story."

Rav Schach then called the young man back in and told him "Your Rosh Kollel is 100% correct. If you want to learn late at night, that is all fine and good. But if that negatively affects your wife, you cannot do that. You are a baal chov (in debt) to her. When you gave your wife her kesuvah, you pledged to support her in the custom of all Jewish men. She is supporting you! For that, she gets a great blessing. But you owe her. You can't be a tzadik on her cheshbon. If you are learning so late that it prevents you from getting up early to help your wife, then don't stay up so late! You have a primary obligation, and that primary obligation is to help your wife.

Hashem Said to His World "Enough"

The Beis HaLevi (Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, (1820-1892)) notes that when Avraham Avinu received the mitzvah of milah in this week's parsha, it is the first mention of the name Sha-k-ai (Shin, Daled, Yud) of the Almighty in the Torah. HaKadosh Baruch Hu told Avraham, "I am Kel Sha-k-ai, walk before Me and be perfect." (Bereshis 17:1).

What is the specific connection between the Name Sha-k-ai and the mitzvah of milah? The Beis Halevi says that the connotation of the name Shin-Daled-Yud is that "I am the One who said to the world 'Dai' (Enough)". This name indicates that the Ribono shel Olam put the brakes, so to speak, on the act of creation.

The Medrash elaborates: Ma'aseh Bereshis (the Story of Creation) was an ongoing process. Had it not been for the fact that at a certain point, Hashem said to the world "Enough" (Dai – Daled, Yud), the process of creation would have continued. As a result, instead of going out into the field to harvest bushels of wheat, a person would go out into the field and harvest loaves of bread. The seed would not only produce the wheat, but creation would continue and the wheat would independently go on to produce bread and other edible products. Likewise, creation would not stop with just flax and linen, but rather suits and ready-made garments of all sizes would be "manufactured".

The Ribono shel Olam said, "No. That is not the way I want My world to work. I am the One who said to My world 'Dai – Enough!' because I want to leave something for man to do." This, says the Beis Halevi, is why the mitzvah of milah appears with the Divine Name of Sha-k-ai. As the Medrash relates, the wicked Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, "If

Hashem wanted man to be circumcised, why was he born with foreskin – why weren't we all born already circumcised?" The answer to that question is that Hashem wants us to perfect ourselves. We are not born perfect. No one comes into this world as a finished product. Man's charge in this world is to perfect himself. This is the underlying message of the mitzvah of milah.

When I was once in England, Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu (Av Beis Din of the London Beis Din (1932-2022)) told me a beautiful thought from his predecessor on the London Beis Din, Dayan Morris Swift (1907-1983): We put a mezuzah on our door containing the Torah chapters: Shema Yisrael and V'haya Im Shamoah. However, we do not see those chapters. The parchment is rolled up so it is impossible to see what is written inside. The only part of the mezuzah that we see is the outside of the mezuzah's parchment where the name Shin Daled Yud is written. Dayan Swift said that the message is "I am the one who said to My world 'Enough!'" Just as at the time of the original creation, Hashem said, "I am going to create the world but I am going to leave something 'left over' for man to complete", so too, each man's creation is 'incomplete,' leaving over the removal of the foreskin as a covenantal task for man to thereby improve himself.

And in the spirit of havei domeh lo (man 'imitating' G-d's Actions), man too, in his own "Home Improvement" projects, does not need to complete every last detail, by building the greatest palace in the world. The message of Shin-Daled-Yud is He who said to His world 'Enough' – so too, we need to say to our interior decorator "My 'world' is also 'enough'".

I told my handyman "We need a new shower rod" (because our old shower rod keeps falling down). He sent me the links to Home Depot shower rods. It is incredible how many different types and prices of shower rods there are. I am not even talking about the shower curtains. I am merely speaking of the shower rods! Chrome, brush nickel, this and that. Enough! There is a boundary.

That is why the part of the mezuzah that is visible is Shin-Daled-Yud: I am the One who said to My world 'Enough'.

Chief Rabbi Mirvis Lech Lecha

Noach When people curse those who bless them...
Sometimes people curse those who bless them. This is a message that emerges from the beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha.

Hashem conveys to Avraham the significance of his future generations, saying, "Va'avarechah mevarecheicha" – I will bless those who bless you, "umekallelcha a'or" – I will curse those who curse you, and "venivrechu vecha kol mishpechot ha'adamah" – and all families on earth will be blessed through you. This prompts a crucial question: if every family on earth is blessed through the existence of the Jewish people, why do some still choose to curse us? In Sefer Mayana Shel Torah, it is noted that sometimes people are in denial regarding those who bring them blessings.

Or, sometimes they recognise it, but out of the hatred that's burning in their hearts, they only seek our downfall, even though they benefit from us daily. That is what Hashem is saying to Avraham. The Jewish people will be a blessing for all civilization, but that won't stop anti-Jewish sentiment from existing. This phenomenon is not limited to the Jewish people; it also applies to the State of Israel. Israel has given the world remarkable innovations, from advancements in technology to improvements in healthcare. Israel is a blessing to all of humankind.

Yet, even with these contributions, many do not recognise them and some still harbour an anti-Israel bias. Hashem's message to Avraham is clear: regardless of how our actions are perceived, we must continue to shed the proper light in this world. Sunshine produces light but can also create shade. In the midst of darkness, the sun continues to shine.

This is Hashem's enduring message to the Jewish people: regardless of the way that people view you, nonetheless, always be true to the mission that I give you to shed light within our fragile world. Shabbat Shalom

Drasha By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Lech Lecha
Suicide Moms

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 mujahedeen. 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.

This week’s e-mail Drasha is dedicated in memory of Rav Michael Ben Eliezer Fuld Z”L, who passed away on 7 MarCheshvan 5755, who brought his sons closer to Torah by being an excellent example and treating them to a wonderful education at the Yeshiva of South Shore.

The Power of Example

Lech Lecha

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

So familiar are we with the story of Abraham that we do not always stop to think about what a strange turn it is in the biblical narrative. If we fail to understand this, though, we may fail to understand the very nature of Jewish identity itself.

Here is the problem: Until now the Torah has been concerned with humanity as a whole. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel are human archetypes. The former represent the tensions between husband and wife, the latter the rivalry between siblings. Both are stories about individuals and both end tragically, the first with paradise lost, the second with bloodshed, fratricide and death.

Then comes another pair of stories – the Flood and the building of Babel – this time about society as a whole. Each is about the tension between freedom and order. The Flood is about a world where freedom (violence, lawlessness, “everyone doing what was right in their own eyes”) destroys order. Babel is about a world where order (the imperialist imposition of a single language on conquered peoples) destroys freedom.

All four narratives are about the human condition as such. Their message is universal and eternal, as befits a book about God who is universal and eternal. God as He appears in the first eleven chapters of Genesis is the God who created the universe, made all humanity in His image, blessed the first humans, and who – after the Flood – made a covenant with all humankind. The God of the universe is the universal God.

Why then does the entire story shift in Genesis 12? From here onward it is no longer about humanity as a whole but about one man (Abraham), one woman (Sarah), and their children, who – by the time of the book of

Exodus – have become a large and significant people, but still no more than one nation among many.

What is happening here? Does God lose interest in everyone else? That surely cannot be the case. At the end of Genesis, Joseph says to his brothers:

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

Gen 50:20

It may be that the phrase “many lives” means no more than the lives of his own family (so Targum Yonatan understands it). But the plain sense of the phrase *am rav*, “a great people,” suggests Egypt. Not until Exodus are the Israelites called *am*, a people. Joseph is saying that God sent him not merely to save his family from famine, but also the Egyptian people.

That too is the point of the book of Jonah. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, the Assyrian city, to persuade the people to repent and thus avoid their own destruction. In its closing words God says to the prophet:

“Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left?”

Jonah 4:11 (and see Malbim *ad loc.*)

God is concerned not only with Israel but with the Assyrians, despite the fact that they would become Israel’s enemies, eventually conquering the northern kingdom of Israel itself.

Amos famously says that God not only brought the Israelites from Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir (Amos 9:7). Isaiah even prophesies a time when the Egyptians will worship God, and He will rescue them from oppression as he once rescued Israel (Isaiah 19:20-21). So it is not that God loses interest in humanity as a whole. He feeds the world. He sustains all life. He is involved in the history of all nations. He is the God of all people. Why then the narrowing of focus from the universal human condition to the story of one family?

The philosopher Avishai Margalit, in his book *The Ethics of Memory*, talks about two ways of thinking: “i.e.” and “e.g.” The former speaks of general principles, the latter of compelling examples. It’s one thing to talk about general principles of leadership, for instance – think ahead, motivate, set clear goals and so on. It’s another thing altogether to tell the story of actual leaders, the ones who succeeded, the role-models. It is their lives, their careers, their examples, that illustrate the general principles and how they work in practice.

Principles are important. They set the parameters. They define the subject. But without vivid examples, principles are often too vague to instruct and inspire. Try explaining the general principles of Impressionism to someone who knows nothing about art, without showing them an Impressionist painting. They may understand the words you use, but these will mean nothing until you show them an example.

That, it seems, is what the Torah is doing when it shifts focus from humanity as a whole to Abraham in particular. The story of humanity from Adam to Noah tells us that people do not naturally live as God would wish them to live. They eat forbidden fruit and kill one another. So after the Flood, God becomes not only a Creator but also a teacher. He instructs humanity, and does so in two ways: i.e. and e.g. He sets out general rules – the covenant with Noah – and then He chooses an example, Abraham and his family. They are to become role-models, compelling examples, of what it means to live closely and faithfully in the presence of God, not for their sake alone but for the sake of humanity as a whole.

That is why five times in Genesis the patriarchs are told:

“Through you all the families, or all the nations, of the earth will be blessed.”

Gen. 12:2, Gen. 18:18, Gen. 22:18, Gen. 26:4, Gen. 28:14

And people recognise this. In Genesis, Malkizedek says about Abraham, “Praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand” (Gen. 14:20). Avimelech, king of Gerar, says about him, “God is with you in everything you do” (Gen. 21:22). The Hittites say to him, “You are a prince of God in our midst” (Gen. 23:6). Abraham is recognised as a man of God by his contemporaries, even though they are not a part of his specific covenant.

The same is true of Joseph, the only member of Abraham’s family in Genesis whose life among the gentiles is described in detail. He is constantly reminding those with whom he interacts about God.

When Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him he says:

“How could I do such a great wrong? It would be a sin before God!”

Gen. 39:9

To the butler and baker, whose dreams he is about to explain, Joseph says:

“Interpretations belong to God.”

Gen. 40:8

When he is brought before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, he says:

“God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”

Gen. 41:16

Pharaoh himself says of Joseph:

“Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?”

Gen. 41:38

Jews are not called on to be Jews for the sake of Jews alone. They are called on to be a living, vivid, persuasive example of what it is to live by the will of God, so that others too come to recognise God and serve Him, each in their own way, within the parameters of the general principles of the covenant with Noah. The laws of Noah are the “i.e.”. The history of the Jews is the “e.g.”.

Jews are not called on to convert the world to Judaism. There are other ways of serving God. Malkizedek, Abraham’s contemporary, is called, “a Priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18).

Malachi says a day will come when God’s name “will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets” (Mal. 1:11). The prophets foresee a day when “God will be King over all the earth” (Zechariah 14:9) without everyone converting to Judaism.

We are not called on to convert humanity but we are called on to inspire humanity by being compelling role-models of what it is to live, humbly, modestly but unshakably in the presence of God, as His servants, His witnesses, His ambassadors – and this, not for our sake but for the sake of humanity as a whole.

It sometimes seems to me that we are in danger of forgetting this. To many Jews, we are merely one ethnic group among many, Israel is one nation-state among many, and God is something we talk about only among ourselves if at all. There was recently a television documentary about one British Jewish community. A non-Jewish journalist, reviewing the programme, remarked on what seemed to her a strange fact that the Jews she encountered never seemed to talk about their relationship with God.

Instead they talked about their relationship with other Jews. That too is a way of forgetting who we are and why.

To be a Jew is to be one of God’s ambassadors to the world, for the sake of being a blessing to the world, and that necessarily means engaging with the world, acting in such a way as to inspire others as Abraham and Joseph inspired their contemporaries. That is the challenge to which Abraham was summoned at the beginning of this week’s Parsha. It remains our challenge today.

Natural Faith and the Cause of Disbelief Revivim

Humans naturally believe * If one explains faith incorrectly, questions will arise * As faith becomes freed from the limited explanations that sufficed for previous generations, faith will return to pulse in people’s consciousness * The trait of humility is essential for absorbing faith * Since Jewish faith manifests in all areas of life, it is a commandment to establish it in three circles that encompass human life: in consciousness, in emotion, and in life as a whole

The Foundation of Faith

Faith in God is a foundational assumption in Jewish tradition, and therefore the Prophets and Sages did not try to prove it, but only to explain its meaning and concepts. This is because as faith is explained and revealed in all areas of life, the consciousness of faith becomes stronger in intellect, emotion, and life as a whole. One can say that humans naturally believe, but if they explain faith incorrectly, such as describing God in physical and limited terms, questions will arise, such as: How is it possible that God who is perfect has deficiencies, and how is it possible that God who is good, does evil? As such questions strengthen in one’s consciousness, more doubts about faith will arise that may even cause them to deny what they defined as faith. And when these intensify further, they may sometimes even cause them to lose faith in the existence of correct faith. This is like a person who has been deceived numerous times by many people and may lose faith in all people and think they are all deceivers; but after time passes, people naturally return to believing, except for those who were so disappointed in faith that they decided to stubbornly deny it, even when their nature is drawn to it.

The Crisis of Faith in Recent Generations

In recent generations, through the development of natural sciences, human and social sciences, human consciousness has developed and expanded greatly. Many areas that were mysteriously unexplained, became understood and explicable. The expansion of science improved human living conditions beyond recognition, cures were found for diseases that were previously incurable, and life expectancy increased significantly. Through technological development, the production of food, furniture, clothing, and housing improved beyond recognition, and today, an average person can live in conditions that in the past only the greatest kings could afford. Through social sciences, more efficient methods for organizing society and economy were developed, and additional methods were developed for treating mental illnesses.

In this context, some of the explanations about faith that were accepted in the past are no longer sufficient today. For example, some explanations relied on diminishing human capability, based on the fact that humans cannot understand their world, and only God can save them through miracles. Therefore, when science continues to develop and succeeds in finding solutions to many hardships, these explanations appear refuted. Thus, beliefs that were previously universal became undermined, and became objects of criticism and mockery.

The Revival of Faith

As faith becomes freed from the limited explanations that sufficed for previous generations, faith will return to pulse in people’s consciousness,

and correct explanations will be found that will illuminate the path of humanity toward a meaningful, good life.

Moreover, as Jewish faith becomes more clearly explained, it will increasingly illuminate the world with a great vision, and drive Israel to call in God's name, and work toward Tikkun Olam (world repair) through the guidance of Torah, its commandments, and values. For this purpose, one must engage in Torah study with awareness of the general vision of Tikkun Olam within the Torah, and contemplate the inner, faithful ideas in all its details. Through this, all the achievements of natural and spiritual sciences will not only not interfere with the revelation of faith, or become an obstacle to it, but will enhance and elevate the revelation of faith. Both in that humans created in God's image discovered them and understood them as divine wisdom, called 'the work of creation,' and in that faith gives them ethical, moral, and divine meaning.

Rational 'Proofs'

There were great Jewish scholars in the Gaonic and Rishonim periods, from about thirteen hundred years ago until about five hundred years ago, who strengthened faith through rational proofs. Their arguments can be divided into three main points. We'll mention them briefly:

Causality, the Cosmological Argument: If we accept the principle of creation, regardless of which theory, including the 'Big Bang' theory and evolution, we must assume there is a reason why the creation process began, and a reason for that reason, until we must reach the conclusion that there is an ain-sofit (infinite) first cause. Even if we accept the view that the world is eternal and was not created, there must be a reason for its existence, since it cannot rely on itself, as it is itself limited, and therefore, we must conclude that it relies on an ain-sofit cause, which is God.

The Principle of Purpose, the Teleological Argument: Since we see such a complex and ordered world, we must assume there is someone who arranged it for a certain purpose. That is, the previous argument referred to existence itself needing a cause, while this argument refers to the nature of existence being ordered with wisdom for some purpose.

Human Consciousness, the Ontological Argument: This argument proves God's existence from the fact that God is present in human consciousness, for no person can think about something that does not exist and cannot exist, but only about something that exists in reality. And if the concept of God exists in human consciousness, then God exists in reality.

The Emergence of Philosophical Proofs

Until the Gaonic period, Jewish scholars did not engage in philosophical proofs for faith (except for Philo). Even during the Gaonic and Rishonim periods, most Jewish scholars did not engage in philosophical proofs for faith, and it is worth understanding why, at the end of the Gaonic period and during the Rishonim period, many Jewish scholars such as Saadia Gaon, Rabbeinu Bachya, and Maimonides engaged in philosophical proofs for faith.

It seems there were two reasons for this: First, the engagement with philosophical proofs appeared following the rise of philosophical discussion among scholars of other nations, and since faith needs to appear in all forms of consciousness, there arose a need to express it in philosophical tools as well.

Second, following the low state of Jews in exile, doubts arose about Jewish faith, which seemed to have failed. In this context, severe attacks against it arose from people of different religions, and there was a need to defend it with philosophical tools as well.

However, it must be noted that according to many of our Sages, despite the great value of philosophy in clarifying concepts, philosophical proofs about faith are not binding. This is because faith precedes intellect, just as life precedes intellect. Therefore, intellect can explain the appearance of life and the appearance of faith, but cannot prove, or negate it.

Summary of the Relationship to Rational Proofs

Ultimately, it is appropriate for every Torah student to briefly know these proofs as well, but most Jewish scholars did not rely in their faith on philosophical proofs, but rather used rational discussion to cleanse faith from any trace of physicalization. However, their faith itself relied on the trait of faith that exists in humans, that just as they know they are alive, so they believe. And the content of faith itself relies on the precise and faithful tradition from generation to generation, whose foundation is in the divine revelation where God was revealed to the patriarchs, to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, to Moshe Rabbeinu, and to all the prophets after him.

The Trait of Humility and Jewish Faith

The trait of anava (humility) is essential for absorbing faith, because we cannot think or speak about God's essence, as God is beyond all comprehension. In contrast, we can think and speak about what is revealed to us. This principle is hinted at in the Torah, which does not begin with the letter alef, (ed., the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet), meaning, it does not begin with a description of the Creator Himself, but begins with the letter bet (the second letter), in other words, with creation, as it is said: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).

Among all faiths and religions, only Israel refrains from speaking about God's essence, and this does not weaken their faith, but rather, strengthens Jewish faith. Like a person who tries to look at the sun, who will end up damaging their vision and will not be able to see anything properly, so too, one who errs and tries to think and speak about God's essence will not only fail to understand God, but will also fail to understand the purpose and goal of creation. But if one focuses on what is revealed to us, one can cleave to God with all their heart, soul and might.

Jewish Faith Manifests in All Areas of Life

Precisely because Jewish faith bounds itself with humility, and does not try to define the Creator Himself, it deals with the full divine revelation in the world and in humans, and thus, encompasses all of human life. This is its main uniqueness, because from the perspective of strong feelings of faith, members of different nations can also reach heights as high as Jews. Similarly, in philosophical clarification ability, which deals with the divine source and strives to cleanse it from all physicalization, scholars of other nations can reach achievements as high as Jews. However, only in Judaism does faith manifest in all areas of life, in the 613 commandments as guided by the Torah, and from here, comes its strength and blessing, which extends to the whole world (Rabbi Kook in the article "Da'at Elokim" pp. 135-136).

In Consciousness, Emotion, and All of Life

Since Jewish faith manifests in all areas of life, it is a commandment to establish it in three circles that encompass human life: in consciousness, in emotion, and in life as a whole.

In to'da'ah (consciousness), meaning in the study of emunah (faith) and its meaning, as written: "Know this day and take unto your heart that the Lord is God in heaven above and upon the earth below; there is none else" (Deuteronomy 4:39); and "I am the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:2). Also: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4); and "Know the God of your father and serve Him with a whole heart and with a willing soul..." (Chronicles I 28:9). As mentioned, in Judaism, the study of faith is the study of divine revelation in the world, and not an attempt to understand His essence, which is beyond our comprehension. The study of divine revelation is the study of the words of Torah and prophets who explain God's guidance in the world, as well as contemplation of creation, which is also divine revelation.

In regesh (emotion), through the commandments of loving and fearing God, as written: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5), and also: “The Lord your God shall you fear, and Him shall you serve, and by His name shall you swear” (Deuteronomy 10:20).

In all of life, through studying Torah and fulfilling all its commandments, as written: “In all your ways know Him” (Proverbs 3:6). Our Sages said: “This is a small passage, on which all the fundamentals of Torah depend” (Berachot 63a), because it includes the fundamental position of Jewish faith – that faith needs to be expressed in all areas of life. And the more commandments a person fulfills, thereby revealing faith in more areas, the stronger they become in faith and it empowers them, for one commandment leads to another.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Parshat Lech Lecha: Abraham – Path Breaker or Path Follower
Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

“Now the Lord said unto Abram, get out of your country, and from your kindred place, and from your fathers house, unto the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.” (Genesis 12:1–2)

In these words we have the first of Abraham’s ten tests – the difficult divine demand that the first Jew leave hearth and home and follow God into a strange and unknown land. In return, there is the divine promise of ultimate national greatness and international leadership. But why does God single out Abraham?

At this fateful moment, the Torah seemingly takes Abraham’s faith and religious quest for granted without providing a clue as to how, where and why this particular nomad is worthy of divine trust and blessing. In the closing verses of Noah, we read about his genealogy, the names of his father, brother, nephew and spouse. We are provided with dry facts, travelogue locations on a map, ages at time of death. But there is nothing substantive telling us how the initiator and prophet of ethical monotheism arrived at the point where he even had a relationship with God. Is this the first time God speaks to him? And if it is, what makes the Divine believe that Abraham would heed His call?

What seems to be absent from the text is made up for in a charming and famous midrash which identifies Abraham’s father, Terah, not only as an idolator, but also as a wealthy businessman who actually trafficked in idols. His son Abram discovered the God of the universe by his own faculties of reason at a very young age.[1] When Terah had to go on a business trip, he left his young son Abram in charge of the idols store. The proprietor returned to find all of his idols but one smashed to smithereens. Abram explained that a woman had brought food for her favorite idol, whereupon all of the other idols fought over the sumptuous dish. The strongest one was the victor, having vanquished all the others. When Terah expressed skepticism, Abram mocked his father’s belief by proving to him that even he was aware of the limitations of the works of his hands.

Terah’s shop was not some fly-by-night affair rented in temporary quarters near the busiest section in town to get the crowd before the holidays. It was rather a thriving center for the idol arts – more like the luminescent chambers in any large museum with spotlights and acres of space to dramatize the repose of the idols and to explain the philosophy of idolatry. Abraham’s action was not a mere childish prank. It was a revolutionary stroke which changed the way humanity perceived its own reality and the reality of the universe for all subsequent generations. In this midrash, Terah is seen as a primitive representative of an outmoded religion, whose iconoclast, revolutionary son broke with his father to create a new faith commitment which would ultimately redeem the world. ‘Get out of your father’s house,’ says God to the ‘born again’ Abraham.

But what if there is another way of looking at Terah more in accord with the biblical text itself? What if Terah had discovered God first – and so Abram was not so much a path breaker as he was a path follower? Perhaps Abraham was not so much a rebellious son as he was a respectful son, who continued and built upon the road laid out for him by his father?

After all, there is every reason to believe that when God tells Abraham to go forth from his country, his birthplace, to a land that God will reveal, God is communicating to a man who was already in an advanced state of God consciousness, a mind-set that was most probably based on a religious awareness first glimpsed at home. Terah himself may at one time have been a believer in idol power but may slowly have turned to the One God while Abraham was yet a very young lad, or even before Abraham was born. I suspect that a subtle clue testifying to the correctness of this position is to be found in an otherwise completely superfluous verse, especially when we remember that the Torah is not in the practice of providing insignificant travelogues.

“Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran.” (Genesis 14:18–20)

Why is it that Terah sets out for Canaan, the very place where Abraham himself ends up at the relatively advanced age of seventy-five at the behest of a call from God? Could Abraham have been completing the journey his father had begun decades earlier? And what was special about Canaan? Why would Terah have wished to journey there and why does the Torah believe the journey significant enough to be recorded even though Terah never made it to Canaan?

Further on in this parasha, Abram wages a successful war against four despotic kings in order to save his nephew Lot, who had been taken captive by them. The text then cites three enigmatic verses, which record that Malkizedek, the King of Shalem, a priest of God on High, greets Abram with bread and wine, and blesses him:

“Blessed be Abram to God on High, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be God on High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.” (Genesis 14:19–20)

Abram then gives Malkizedek a tribute of one tenth of his spoils. Now the city of Shalem, JeruSalem, was the capital city of Canaan – and this is the first time it is mentioned in the Bible. Malkizedek literally means the King of Righteousness, and Jerusalem is biblically known as the City of Righteousness [Isaiah 1:26]. From whence did this Malkizedek, apparently older than Abram, hear of God on High (El Elyon)? Nahmanides maintains that from the very beginning of the world, the monotheistic traditions of Adam and Noah were preserved in one place in the world – Jeru-Salem, Canaan. Indeed, the flood never damaged Canaan. Their king, Shem son of Noah, also known as Malkizedek, was a priest to God-on-High, teaches Nahmanides. If this is the case, it seems logical to suggest that Terah was someone who had come to believe in this One God even in the spiritual wilds of Ur of the Chaldeans – and therefore set out for Canaan, the land of monotheism, where he wished to raise his family. He may even have had personal contact with Malkizedek, who greets the son of his friend with religious words of encouragement to the victor of a religious battle in which right triumphed over might, a victory of the God of ethical monotheism. Like so many contemporary Jews who set out for Israel, Terah had to stop half way and didn’t quite make it. But all along God was waiting for Terah’s son to embrace the opportunity to continue where his father had left off.

The common view of Terah has Abraham defy his father’s way of life as he creates his own way, becoming in effect a model for many modern

day penitents who radically break away from non-believing parents, rejecting everything from their past. In the alternate view that I propose, Abraham follows in his father's footsteps, builds on his father's foundation, redefines his father's way of life and for the first time in history paves the way for himself as well as others to move up the spiritual ladder by not only continuing but also advancing. Abraham is the model for those spiritual idealists who – upon embarking on a journey of religious hope – look at their pasts with an eye for reinvesting what is salvageable, attempting to improve rather than reject. Whose path survives, thrives and becomes a link to the next generation? The revolutionaries, the evolutionaries, or a combination of both? It depends probably on who and what your parents happened to have been.

[1] See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, 1, 1

Shabbat Shalom

The Hero for the Simple People Thank Goodness, Noah Was No Saint Rabbi YY Jacobson

Henry Kissinger's Suit

There is an old Jewish anecdote about the late former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (who died in Nov. 2023, aged 100), who decides to make for himself a custom-made beautiful three-piece suit of the finest material. During his next trip to Italy, he has himself measured by a world-renown designer, who subsequently gives him the material for his suit.

When he arrives in Paris and presents the material to the skilled tailor, the man measures his body and says: "Sorry, Mr. Kissinger, but a man your size needs at least another two inches of material."

Surprised, Dr. Kissinger continues his journey to London. There, the tailor says, "I am sorry, Mr. Secretary of State, but to turn this into a suit for your physique, I need another three inches of the material."

Disappointed, he arrives in Beijing. There the widely acclaimed Chinese tailor remarks, "I really don't understand what you were thinking, Mr. Kissinger. Your body is far larger than this material. We need another five inches."

An upset Dr. Kissinger arrives in Tel Aviv. He presents the material to a local Jewish tailor. The tailor measures him and says: "You actually don't need so much material, but I will cut off some of it and will turn the remainder of it into a stunning suit."

Kissinger is astonished. "Can you explain this to me," he asks the tailor. "I have traveled the world, and everybody claims that I need much more material. What is going on here?"

"Oh, it's quite simple," the Israeli tailor responds. "In Italy, you are a big man; in Paris, you are even a bigger man; in London, you are a great man, and in Beijing, you are a giant."

"But here in Israel, you are a small man."

The Debate on Noah's Persona

What is nothing but a Jewish joke becomes reality when it comes to one of the most important figures in the Torah—the man who single-handedly saved civilization: Noah. What the tailor told Kissinger is what we actually did to poor Noah. We cut him down half-his-size, which is both astounding and problematic.

The Torah states in the opening of this week's portion:

This is the history of Noah. Noah was a righteous man; he was wholesome in his generation; Noah walked with G-d.

The Talmud,[1] and Rashi, ever sensitive to nuance, take note of the fact that the words, "in his generation" are superfluous. Obviously, Noah lived and functioned in his generation. Why could the Torah not say simply "Noah was a righteous man, wholesome he was; Noah walked with G-d?"

The Talmud offers two opposing explanations. In the words of Rashi:

Among the sages, there are those who interpret this as praise of Noah: If he was righteous in his [corrupt] generation, certainly he would have been even more righteous had he lived in a generation of righteous people. Others interpret it negatively: In relation to his wicked generation he was righteous; had he been in Abraham's generation he would not have amounted to anything.[2]

Who was Noah? is the question. Was he really a man of extraordinary stature or just a cut above the rest? Did G-d save him because he was a "perfect tzaddik," or there was nobody better?

Why Denigrate a Hero?

Yet there is something disturbing about this discussion. The Torah is clearly trying to highlight Noah's virtue. "But Noah found favor in the eyes of G-d," is how the previous portion concludes.[3] Then, we have the above verse: "This is the history of Noah. Noah was a righteous man; he was wholesome in his generation; Noah walked with G-d." Later in the portion G-d says to Noah: "I have found you righteous before Me in this generation." G-d, clearly, is trying to extoll Noah. What drove some Rabbis to denigrate him and say that relative to other generations he would amount to nothing special?

Besides, when you can choose a complimentary interpretation and perspective, what drives some to choose a negative and condescending interpretation?[4] It runs against the instructions of the Torah to give people the benefit of the doubt.

What is more, Noah is the only person in the entire Tanach who is called a Tzaddik, a perfectly righteous individual. G-d tells Noah: "I have found you to be a tzaddik before me in this generation." [5] And we, the Jews, say: Yes, but not really...

There are various interpretations. One of my favorite ones was presented by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in 1964.[6] Not only were the Rabbis not trying to minimize Noah's virtues; they actually wanted to highlight his praises even more. Equally important, they were trying to teach us all a transformative lesson.

Who Can Change the World?

What did Noah accomplish? He saved all mankind. In the absence of Noah, humanity would have become extinct soon after it has begun. Single-handedly he ensured the continuity of life on earth. He is the man who builds an ark, rescues all living organisms, and ensures our world would survive.

An achievement indeed, if there was ever one.

And who is the individual who achieves this feat? A person called by the Torah "a man of the earth." [7] The only story the Torah tells us about Noah, outside of constructing the Ark and spending a year in it during the Great Flood, is that he was a farmer; he planted a vineyard, became intoxicated, and exposed himself. That's all. The last thing we hear about him is that he lay there in his tent, drunk and bare.

The Rabbis deduce from the text that “Noach, also, was of those people who were wanting in faith: he believed and he did not believe that the Flood would come, and he would not enter the Ark until the waters forced him to do so.”[8]

Noach was a fine man, who lived a decent, moral life, and tried to do what G-d wanted, but was not without his flaws, doubts, and struggles. Compared to Abraham he would not amount to much.

But look what this simple fellow achieved! In a society dripping with greed and temptation, Noach held to his morals, walked with G-d, and swam against the tide, saving the planet from destruction. Civilization survived not because of a towering, titanic figure; but because of a simple man who had the courage to live morally when everyone around him behaved despicably.

Remarkably, by degrading Noach and stating that in other generations Noach would be eclipsed, the Rabbis turned him into the most inspiring figure, someone who serves as a model for all of us ordinary men and women. Noach is my hero, the hero of the ordinary cut-of-the-mill individual who is no great thinker, warrior, leader, or man of transcendence. By explaining the biblical text the way they did, the Sages turned Noach into a symbol for us ordinary people, who appreciate a fine cup of wine and a little schnaps, how we can make a difference in people’s lives.

The message of Noach is life-changing. You don’t need to be Abraham or Moses to transform the world. Noach was just another kid on the block, but look what he did! With your own courage not to toe the line of corruption, fakeness, and falsehood, with a little gentleness, friendliness, compassion, kindness, and goodness you can save lives, ignite sparks, and create an “ark” of sanity amidst a raging flood.

Noach was not a saint? Thank goodness. I have heard enough about saints in my life; now tell me about real people, who struggle with fear, doubt, and pain. Tell me about the guy whose IQ was not 180; he was not valedictorian of his school; he did not get a full scholarship to Oxford; he was not a tycoon or bestselling author. He was not a guru or a holy man. He was not the greatest warrior, thinker, artist, or leader. He was just a guy trying to do the right thing when everyone around him descended to greed and apathy. And look what he accomplished.

In the presence of great moral giants, he might be eclipsed, the Talmud says. Standing near Abraham he would appear insignificant. And that is exactly what made him so significant! He set a standard for those of us who appear in our own eyes as insignificant.

Uniform Biographies

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, dean of Yeshiva Rabanu Chaim Berlin and author of *Pachad Yitzchak*, laments in a letter about biographies published on the lives of Jewish leaders and rabbis. They are “cookie cutter” biographies, in which every one of them was born a holy genius. At the age of six, he knew the entire Tanach by heart, and at the age of twelve he mastered the Talmud, and his mother had to force him to eat. There is almost no trace of struggle, failure, crisis, doubt, anxiety, temptation, confusion, adversity, and the winding viscidities of the path toward individual self-discovery. Besides it being a dishonest portrayal, it deprives the biographies of having educational value. How can I try to emulate a flawless and brilliant saint?

It is an educational mistake to see spiritual success in the absence of struggle and the repression of authentic emotions. Look at Noach. He was a flawed man, and he saved the world!

One day, an old man was walking along a beach that was littered with thousands of starfish that had been washed ashore by the high tide. As he walked, he came upon a young girl who was eagerly throwing the starfish back into the ocean, one by one. Puzzled, the man looked at the girl and asked what she was doing. Without looking up from his task, the girl simply replied, ‘I’m saving these starfish, Sir.’

The old man chuckled aloud, ‘Young woman, there are tens of thousands of starfish and only one of you. What difference can you make?’

The girl picked up a starfish, gently tossed it into the water, and turning to the man, said, “It made a difference to that one!”

So today, decide to emulate Noach: A simple man who was true to his soul and his G-d. In your own way, stand up to lies, greed, and promiscuity. Become a beacon of light, love, and hope. Construct an ark where others can find shelter from a flood of pain and insanity. Stop giving the excuse that you are just a regular guy, minding your own business. All of us can be Noach’s.

“I’m only one, but I am one. I can’t do everything but I can do something, and what I can do, I ought to do.”[9]

[1] Sanhedrin 108a

[2] In the Talmud *ibid.* it’s a debate between Rabbi Yochanan (derogatory) and Reish Lakish (complimentary). Rabbi Chanina continues to say: “Rabbi Yochanan’s view may be illustrated by the parable of a jar of wine stored in a cellar filled with jars of vinegar. In such a place, the fragrance of the wine is sensed, because of the vinegar’s fumes; in any other place, its fragrance might not be sensed. Rabbi Oshaiya said: Resh Lakish’s view may be illustrated by a vial of fragrant oil lying amid excrement: if its fragrance is sensed even in such surroundings, how much more so amid spices!”

Perhaps we can suggest that these two sages’ dispute is connected to their own life story. Rabbi Yochanan was raised in piety and holiness; Reish Lakish was a gangster and gladiator who later became one of the greatest Torah sages of his age (Talmud Bava Metizah 84b). Reish Lakish, remembering his past, and knowing the dark side of human nature and its great potency, teaches that if Noach could succeed in his corrupt generation to live morally, certainly he would have been righteous in a more spiritual generation. Reish Lakish understood the depth of the human struggle against darkness and the enormity of the challenge some people face, and he could only stand in awe of Noach’s moral standing in his generation. Rabbi Yochanan, on the other hand, could not fully appreciate what Noach had to contend against. Yet the questions in this essay are still unanswered.

[3] Genesis 6:8

[4] In the Ethics of our Fathers (1:6) we are enjoined to “judge every person favorably,” giving them the benefit of the doubt. It is the sages who go so far as to declare that “the Torah is loath to speak negatively even of a non-kosher animal” (Talmud Bava Basra 123a; Pesachim 3a), a lesson derived from this very portion of Noach! If the clause “in his generations” can be understood both ways, why propose a negative interpretation? In the words of the famed Polish-Italian Talmudic sage and commentator the Beer Sheva (Rabbi Yissachar Ber Eilenberg, 1550-1623):

קשה כ”א, בדורותיו נאמר לשבח או לגנאי אם הכרע לו שאין מאחר קוהה הייתי ימי כל” (א, קח דף סנהדרין שבע באר) “לגנאי לדורשו נפשו משכו למה יוחנן רבי על

“All my life I was grinding (my teeth). Since the term “in his generation,” can be explained positively or negatively, why did Reb Yochanan’s soul compel him to explain it disgracefully?”

[5] Genesis 7:1

[6] The Rebbe shared this during a public address (“farbrengen”) on Shabbos Parshas Noach 5725, October 10, 1964. Published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 5 pp. 281-283.

On another occasion, the Rebbe shared another explanation (Likkutei Sichos vol. 25 Parshas Noach). Briefly: The sages had some independent criticism of Noach for not trying to save his generation (see Zohar Bereishis 66; 107). When they observed the term “in his generation,” they understood that this was written to underscore the flaw of Noach. They felt it was important to bring out this flaw not in order to denigrate Noach (especially since in his position he may have done the best he could) but to caution others not to follow in the same direction. What is more, Noach himself would appreciate this interpretation so that his behavior (which may have been right during his time, under those unique circumstances) should not serve as a paradigm for others at other times.

[7] Genesis 9:20

[8] Rashi to Genesis 7:7, quoting Midrash Rabah Bereishis 32:6

[9] My thanks to Rabbi Moshe Kahn (Melbourne) for his assistance in developing this insight.

The First Jewish War

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

The first Jewish war, if we want to call it that, shows up in Parshas Lech Lecha. We will begin our study from the beginning of Chapter 14, but first we need a little background to understand the storyline.

Avraham has done a lot of traveling, starting in Haran and ending up Eretz Yisrael. If you look at a map of the Middle East, Avraham started his life journeys from an area near the delta where the Euphrates River joins the Tigris and they collectively empty into the Persian Gulf. He then traveled northwestward into Aram Naharayim; the term “Mesopotamia” is the same as Naharayim, both meaning “between the rivers.” All of these areas are in today’s Iraq, but they are quite a distance from each other. Avraham started near the Persian Gulf, traveled northwestward along the Euphrates River until he arrived somewhere near the point where contemporary Iraq, Syria, and Turkey border. Although Iraq is almost due east of Eretz Yisrael, one never went from Israel due east to Iraq or due west the other way, because that route crosses a large desert. People from Bavel (Babylonia, which is in contemporary Iraq) traveled up the Euphrates River, which actually starts with the snowmelt of the mountains of eastern Turkey.

One would walk up the banks of the Euphrates; then, one would travel roughly westward through what is called today Syria, and then go either down the Mediterranean coast or through the Lebanese mountains and forests. Since you can’t have a forest without sufficient rainfall, there would be consistent water and food in that area. You would come southward through Lebanon and enter Eretz Yisrael from the north. So, even though one would be coming from Bavel which is east of Eretz Yisrael, one would arrive from the north.

Avraham arrives in Eretz Yisrael and there is a famine. The closest place to go for food is Egypt, so Avraham travels to Egypt accompanied by his nephew Lot, who had escorted him since his earliest journeys. When Avraham is chased out of Egypt, he has become a wealthy man. Lot is also wealthy, and they return to Eretz Yisrael. Both of them now have large flocks, and the shepherds of Lot quarrel with those of Avraham. Avraham suggests that they travel in opposite directions.

If Lot were concerned for his spirituality, he would tell Avraham that he, Lot, will keep his shepherds in line, and he would stay with Avraham. The shepherds are either his employees or his slaves, and he can insist that they do his bidding.

Lot does not take that approach. Instead, he relocates to Sodom, an affluent neighborhood, which allows him to advance his business prospects and also to live the easy life -- hedonism. Sodom is easy to identify today; it is where the Dead Sea is. Before the raining of sulfur and salt that landed on Sodom and its sister cities, this was a very

productive region. So Lot decides to graze his flock in this area, and Avraham sets off in the other direction.

That is the story line up until the point where we are beginning, with the start of Chapter 14:

“And it was in the days of the following kings: Amrafel, king of Shinar....” Shinar is Sumer, one of the cradles of civilization, which is located in the northern part of the Tigris River valley. Then we have Aryoch, king of Elasar. It is not exactly clear where Elasar is. In his book, The Living Torah, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan assumes that Elasar is Larsa, a city about 100 miles south of Babylon, in the lower Euphrates River valley. Eilam, the next kingdom mentioned, was a major power at this point, and is further to the east, in the mountainous areas of what is today western Iran. The fourth power is called Goyim, which is not the name of a place, but means that its king ruled over an area where many different nations had gathered.

Notice that these nations were very distant from one another; many hundreds of miles separated them. Also note that the order and prioritization of the four powers varies from pasuk to pasuk. In the first pasuk, the list is: Shinar, Elasar, Eilam, and Goyim. The second time they are mentioned, Eilam is alluded to first. The next time, the order is Eilam, Goyim, Shinar and Elasar. If the order is based on significance, this implies that which kingdom was most powerful changed in the course of events.

Ancient empire building

At this point, I need to digress to explain how ancient civilizations built empires. An empire was created by first amassing a strong army. When the king or emperor wanted to acquire significant money, he would march his army to a city and demand tribute of gold, silver, precious jewels and the like, as well as people, whom they needed for their army and as slaves. The king of the city, who amassed all its power and wealth, was the state and ultimate authority, and he would negotiate with the invading army. If they reached an agreement, he would provide whatever had been agreed as tribute and his city would be free from this threat for some period of time. Then the imperial army would march on the next city-state.

If the local king refused the tribute, his city would prepare for an extensive siege. If it did not succeed in repelling the attack, the imperials would sack the city. Whoever they did not kill would be sold as slaves, and they would haul away all the wealth of the city, some for the imperial treasury and some to reward the members of the imperial army for their valiant courage. This is how empires were built.

Now, these four nations came to attack Sodom. Why four of them? This was unusual for the time. Usually, you had one strong nation going to collect tribute, or perhaps two, such as Persia and Media. Having four was extremely unusual. It seems that the four kings felt that they could develop an empire together.

They went to war against Sodom. Here’s where the interesting question is. Sodom is over a thousand miles away, and bear in mind that the airport connections were not very good in those days. There were no trains. The highways were not meant for busses or tanks. They had to march their troops all the way there — up the Euphrates, cut across Syria, and down to Sodom. Aside from the time this took, you also had to feed your troops this entire time and that required a great deal of bread. The prize must have been worth the investment!

Now, obviously the reason they came to Sodom was the same reason that motivated Lot to relocate there and also why Willie Sutton robbed banks. Because that’s where the money is!

They came to Sodom because Sodom was a wealthy city and they could get a lot of tribute from it. They passed many cities on the way, yet they appear to have ignored most of them. They came to threaten Sodom, Amora, Adma, Tzevo’im, and Tzo’ar, all of them in the same general area, Sodom and its sister cities.

Continues the pasuk: “They all gathered at the Valley of the Field.” Today, this is the Yam Hamelach, the Dead Sea. We see in parshas Vayeira how it became the Dead Sea, but in parshas Lech Lecha it was not yet the Dead Sea.

“Twelve years they served Kedarla’omer.” What does “they served him” mean? It means that they paid him tribute. Kedarla’omer was the king of Eilam. He and his three cohorts launched an invasion of Sodom and its sister cities and demanded tribute on a regular basis. We don’t know if the tribute included manpower for their armies or slaves, but they certainly were demanding much tribute, enough that the pasuk describes it as service.

“Ushelosh esrai shana maradu.” Rashi understands this to mean that, for thirteen years, they did not pay tribute, i.e., they stopped paying tribute and managed to avoid it for thirteen complete years. This pasuk can also be read that in the thirteenth year they stopped paying tribute, meaning that they paid tribute for twelve consecutive years and then stopped in the thirteenth year. This was considered an act of rebellion.

Now, if Sodom was in such an economic downturn because of the tribute, Lot should have left. If he was afraid that Kedorla’omer would attack, he should have left. He should have read the handwriting on the wall and seen that all of the options, paying the tribute and being poorer, or fighting a war against Kedorla’omer, were all bad options and he should have moved onward to greener pastures.

“In the fourteenth year...” According to Rashi, this is the fourteenth year of them not having paid tribute. According to the other approach, this is year fourteen since the entire saga began. Now, what does Lot do while all this is brewing? He stays in Sodom! This is idiotic! Why not get out while the going is good?

But, of course, Lot has been moving up the totem pole in prominence in Sodom, so this may have blinded him to the seemingly obvious option. He identified as a Sodomite.

“In the fourteenth year, comes Kedorla’omer, the king of Eilam, Vehamelachim asher ito.” Note that the other three kings have now been reduced to being his cohorts. Vayaku es Refa’im be’Ashteros Karnayim - on their way, the four empires wipe out six other towns (see below). Presumably they asked for tribute and were denied, and simply erased these cities from the map: this gives a demonstration of the power of these kings.

“They smote the Refa’im in Ashteros Karnayim, the Zuzim in Hom, the Eimim in Shavei Kiryasayim, and the Chori in the mountains of Sei’ir.” After wiping out these four cities, instead of going straight to Sodom, they attacked the fields of Amalek. Now, Amalek was in the south, in what is today considered the Negev. If you look at the map, you will see that they traveled past Sodom on the way.

Who else did they attack? Amori, which was a strong power.

Having done all this, what would you imagine the kings of Sodom and its neighboring cities would do?

Either they would pay tribute or, alternatively, they could stock up for a long siege within their towns and strengthen their fortifications enough to protect their towns and withstand a siege.

Remember, warfare in those times was very barbaric. If the attackers had no means with which to destroy the walls, they would place ladders against the walls, while the people within the city would pour boiling oil down on the attackers, all while arrows and other projectiles were flying from both sides. Civilians? Collective punishment? These were never concerns.

From the inside, however, if the walls and defenses had been strengthened enough, you could even defeat Napoleon. Napoleon lost the battle of Akko because the fortress built two sets of walls. When Napoleon finally succeeded to breach the first set of walls, he discovered the inner wall. By then, he had lost so many soldiers that he simply turned around and left. This is how Akko was saved in Napoleon’s Ottoman campaign.

What did the kings of Sodom do instead? The five kings decided to fight an open battle against Kedorla’omer in the Valley of the Fields.

Open warfare in the fields. They are going up against very successful, experienced soldiers who had just won at least six military campaigns to the north and south of them -- and they chose to fight in the open fields? That is suicidal. It is completely asinine and stupid.

If Lot didn’t have a good enough reason to leave Sodom before then, he should have left at this point.

The five kings go and wage war against the four kings, and we know what happens.

The pasuk tells us that the kings of Sodom and Amora were the first to flee, and they fell there. Presumably, they fell in battle, as we use the term today -- and the “king of Sodom,” to whom we will soon be introduced, is a successor. (You could also understand it that the kings of Sodom and Amora were captured and did not die in battle.)

The survivors flee and hide in the mountains. The mountains are full of hiding places, particularly if the enemy isn’t interested in pursuing, which they aren’t. All the imperial armies want is to loot the city, take all the valuables, and seize whoever is there, either as their own slaves or to sell as slaves.

They seize all the valuables of Sodom and Amora, all the food that had been stored to survive an extensive siege and -- who else -- Lot, Avraham’s nephew, and all his flock. The pasuk emphasizes that “Vehu yosheiv biSedom, and he was living in Sodom.” We know Lot was in Sodom, so why is there a need to emphasize this? To tell us that he had so many chances to leave, but he did not.

Vayavo hapalit, “and the survivor came” -- someone who survived and escaped the battle came to Avraham Avinu, who was living in the valley of Mamrei.

Vayishma Avraham ki nishba achiv. “And Avraham heard that his brother was captured.” Lot was not his brother, he was his nephew. Why does the Torah call Lot “his brother?” Because that’s how Avraham looked at it. “Mishpacha zeinen mishpacha.” Family is family.

Even though Lot had literally turned away from Avraham and had made errors in many areas -- spiritually, financially, and politically -- he did not leave Sodom when he could have and should have. Nevertheless, Avraham still said: “he’s my brother.” There was no requirement for Avraham to do anything here, halachically. Hashem doesn’t tell him to do anything. He doesn’t ask anyone. There is no question for him, no issue. Family is family.

The first thing Avraham does is: Vayarek es chanichav, yelidei baiso, shemonei esrei ushelosh mei’os, “He militarizes those whom he has educated, those who were raised in his house, three hundred and eighteen.” Now, none of these people have any experience in warfare, whatsoever. He is taking roughly three hundred people, inexperienced individuals, straight out of yeshiva to wage war against a seasoned army of tens of thousands of hardened veterans who have wiped out eight civilizations in the last few weeks.

We have a word for that: suicide.

We know the famous Medrash Chazal, quoted by Rashi, that three hundred and eighteen is the gematria of Eliezer.

There are two reasons Chazal say this -- one implied by the pasuk and one conceptual.

The one implied by the pasuk is a missing word. It says “he gathered and armed the members of his household, three hundred and eighteen.” Three hundred and eighteen what? The Torah does not give us a number without saying what the number is made up of. It doesn’t say who these three hundred and eighteen were? Students? Soldiers? Light cavalry? Heavy artillery? It doesn’t say!

So what is three hundred and eighteen to Chazal? It is Eliezer.

But let us realize: Who waged war, Avraham’s contingency and the huge armies against him? Avraham and Eliezer against tens of thousands of trained combatants?

None of the above. If this was a conventional war, Avraham and his followers -- whether it was just Eliezer or three hundred and eighteen -- would be toast. It is beyond impossible odds. So Chazal are noting: It doesn’t matter whether it was three hundred and eighteen soldiers or just Eliezer accompanying Avraham. It didn’t matter, because it was not a conventional war. It was the ish milchamah, the “Man of war” waging war.

I’m not going to go through the rest of the pesukim, but if you look at Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s chumash, he has an intricate map of the battle, and you can see that it was not a simple overnight mission. Avraham chased the tens of thousands of soldiers of the four armies up and down Eretz

Yisrael until he could get back what he wanted. i.e., Lot and his property, which Avraham eventually succeeded in reclaiming.

In other words, Lot was a captive, and Avraham did not know where he was. Does this sound familiar?

Avraham was pursuing his enemy, tens of thousands of them, with his three hundred or so soldiers, until he could locate his captive nephew and rescue him.

Eventually, he finds Lot and frees him. To accomplish this, he ended up releasing the entire city of Sodom.

King of Sodom II

At the beginning of the story, the king of Sodom had been the crown prince who succeeded when his father was killed in the original battle with Kedorla'omer. He comes to Avraham and does not express his gratitude in any way. What does he say? "Give me the people, and you can take the booty." He assumes that Avraham would sell all the Sodomites into slavery and he demands them for himself. Chutzpah +.

Avraham turns to him and says, "Listen, I don't want you telling anyone that Avraham got wealthy because of you. I'm not going to take a thread or shoelace from you. I will take my expenses, the reimbursement of business expenses. And I can't speak for Aneir, Eshkol, and Mamrei, who, even though they did not join the battles, they protected my camp for me." So, let Aneir, Eshkol, and Mamrei take their share, and I will take my reimbursements, and you keep the rest -- is what Avraham says to the king of Sodom.

And after all this, where does Lot go? He goes back to Sodom. Oh, how hard it is to teach a fool!

Conclusion

This is the first Jewish war, and it should serve as a model lesson for every Jewish interaction.

Whether you have an army with tens of thousands of hardened veterans with the most modern armaments, you have an army of three hundred and eighteen, or all you have is two old men. If G-d is fighting for you, it doesn't matter.

MOTHER OF ALL YESHIVOS: UNCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN LEGACY OF MRS. JENNIE MILLER FAGGEN **By Dovi Safier**

Uncovering the forgotten legacy of Mrs. Jennie Miller Faggen, the most prolific Torah philanthropist of the interwar era

With additional Research by Gavriel Schuster and Chaya Sarah Herman
Special thanks to Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky and family for their guidance, assistance, and encouragement

This article has been excerpted from Dovi Safier's upcoming book on Jennie Miller Faggen (2024)

One serene summer morning, a stranger entered the prestigious Ponevezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. He walked through the building determinedly until he found a wall of dedication plaques. Then he stopped, and began to scrutinize each one. The students looked at him curiously before returning to their learning.

Finally the man turned around. "Where can I find Rabbi Kahaneman?" he asked in an American-accented Hebrew.

A nearby student, sensing the urgency in the stranger's voice, escorted him to the office of Rav Avraham Kahaneman. As his son, Rav Eliezer Kahaneman, would later recount, this was no ordinary encounter. The man had come from Philadelphia with a question that would lead them both on a remarkable journey through time.

"Where is the plaque commemorating Jennie Miller's 1929 dedication?" he asked. Rav Avraham, puzzled, pressed the stranger for details. With a trembling hand, the man removed a frayed, yellowed contract from a worn manila envelope. The document bore the signatures of Pesha bas Reb Yisroel Miller (Jennie Miller), the Ponevezher Rav — Rav Yosef Shlomo

Kahaneman, and Rav Ephraim Eliezer HaKohein Yolles — the Philadelphia rabbi who helped draft the contract.

The truth dawned on Rav Avraham. Decades prior, before the horrors of World War II, Rav Avraham's father, the Ponevezher Rav, had traveled from Lithuania to fundraise in America. There he met Jennie Miller Faggen, a Philadelphia woman of uncommon means and generosity. Profoundly moved by his impassioned speech at a local synagogue, Jennie had pledged \$8,000 (which is approximately equivalent to \$700,000 in 2023 when measured using gold as an inflationary measure.) to construct a new building for the Ponevezh Yeshiva, to be named "The Jennie Miller Building" in her honor. The contract specified that Jennie would retain naming rights were the yeshiva ever to relocate to Israel.

Trapped in Mandatory Palestine as war erupted, the Ponevezher Rav never returned to Lithuania. The yeshiva was obliterated, and its students and faculty were ruthlessly exterminated by the Nazis. Undeterred, the Ponevezher Rav resolved to resurrect the yeshiva in Bnei Brak, where it would ultimately become an iconic institution, surpassing its predecessor in stature and influence.

Confronted with the stranger and the long-forgotten contract, Rav Avraham Kahaneman faced an ethical quandary. Although the contract mandated Jennie's naming rights, the yeshiva had not relocated to Israel; it had in fact been utterly destroyed and reborn under the same name elsewhere.

After much contemplation, Rav Kahaneman chose to honor the spirit of the contract and the memory of Jennie Miller Faggen. He commissioned a plaque commemorating her benevolence, acknowledging that her acts of charity deserved eternal recognition and celebration.

That plaque still hangs in Ponevezh today. It's a rare reminder of a great woman who dedicated her fortune to buttressing the yeshiva world when Torah learning was hardly valued in America. Other than that plaque, scarce public reminders exist to commemorate her extraordinary generosity. It would take months of tenacious research, serendipitous leads, and several privileged conversations with the venerated rosh yeshiva of Philadelphia to unveil the full story of Jennie Miller, a patroness of yeshivos and gedolim, who was largely forgotten to history.

Chapter I: The Box in the Basement

IT all began with a box in my basement.

I contracted coronavirus during the dark days following Purim of 2020, when fear over the pandemic was at its peak. Under strict quarantine in the basement, I decided to peruse some boxes that had been collecting dust in storage.

While most frum collectors tend to focus on antique seforim and chassidic artifacts, I had been quietly amassing a different kind of collection, a treasure trove of documents that I had nicknamed my "Vilna Genizah." Within its dusty confines lay a range of fascinating materials, including letters, marketing materials, and fundraising ledgers from early 20th century yeshivos. Through the contents of this collection, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the yeshiva world during a critical time in its history.

Now, as I perused the diverse files for something of interest, a small pamphlet slipped out onto the dust-covered floor. The booklet was embossed with bold English letters proclaiming, "THE WORLD FAMOUS YESHIVA COLLEGE OF TELSHE, LITHUANIA." It was dated 1929 and seemed to have been prepared by the yeshiva in advance of a fundraising visit to the US by Rav Elya Meir Bloch, the son of the rosh yeshiva Rav Yosef Leib Bloch.

The document began by outlining the more than half-century history of the yeshiva and quickly reverted to the current financial state of the yeshiva, which like most yeshivos at the time, was rather dire:

WHILE SPIRITUALLY the Yeshiva is at its height, its financial status is in fact all too lamentable. The budget of the Yeshiva — which is only \$7,000.00 monthly — has not been met for many, many months....

American Jewry must fulfill its duty to our Torah and people and must rescue the famous Yeshiva of Telshe from closing its doors to the

hundreds of applicants who are stretching forth their hands and clamoring for admission....

...Come to the support of the great Telshe Yeshiva and receive the reward of Heaven's blessings that come to those who support the Torah.

In the year 1927, when a delegation of the Yeshivah visited America, it succeeded with the cooperation of the venerable Rabbi B. L. Levinthal, of Philadelphia, to interest the benefactress of every good cause, Mrs. Jennie Miller, of said city, in the institution, in conjunction with the Yeshivah, and Mrs. Jennie Miller, in her generosity, has undertaken to cover the greater part of the budget of the said "KOLLEL RABBIS" and because of same, the "KOLLEL" hereafter shall be known as the "JENNIE MILLER KOLLEL."

I was immediately intrigued. Could it be true that the renowned Telshe Yeshiva named its kollel after an American woman? This would seem highly improbable to anyone familiar with Lithuanian yeshivos. But here it was in black and white. I was determined to uncover the truth.

Forgotten Philanthropist

A Google search netted some positive results. YIVO's digital archive contained several letters written to Jennie Miller from various gedolim and yeshivos. There was a thank-you letter from the Chofetz Chaim in Radin, a letter of acknowledgment from Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski wishing Mrs. Jennie Miller success in her endeavors, and most surprisingly, a missive from the Mir Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel, written on the stationery of a Mir Kollel titled, "The Cohlel of Ten Rabbis on the name of Mrs. Pesha Miller, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania." So there were not one, but two kollelim named for this forgotten woman. Next, I checked the comprehensive book Ketzur Chalamish: The Golden Age of the Lithuanian Yeshivas in Eastern Europe by the incomparable yeshivah historian Dr. Ben-Tsiyon Klibansky, where I found mention of regular donations that Jennie Miller sent to the Lomza Yeshiva under the leadership of Rabbi Yechiel Mordechai Gordon:

"In 1925, Rav Yechiel Mordechai Gordon secured a pledge from Pesha Miller for \$200 a month toward the new branch of Lomza in Petach Tikvah. This would be sufficient to support ten students."

More evidence of her generosity surfaced while I perused the online archives of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, which reported in 1930 that Rav Menachem Mendel Kasher had obtained a commitment from Jennie Miller Faggen to support a kollel of ten scholars to assist him with the research for his groundbreaking Torah Shelaimah project.

This bold initiative was an encyclopedic work that combined the parshiyos of the Torah with all the relevant passages from Chazal across Shas and all midrashim, even obscure midrashim from original manuscripts. The 38 volumes published during Rav Kasher's lifetime surely consumed the bulk of his time and likely could not have been produced without Mrs. Miller's assistance.

Slowly but steadily, I began to sense the unusual dimensions of her philanthropy. I had already studied the lives of other great Torah philanthropists of the time, dynamic figures such as Irving Bunim, Harry Fischel, Samuel Kaufman, and Mrs. Necha Golding in the US; and the legendary Russian microbiologist Dr. Waldemar Haffkine and Mrs. Flora Sassoon in Europe. While these individuals were all well-known philanthropic icons, none seemed to have reached Jennie Miller's level of giving towards yeshivos. Why was so little known about her?

I continued my research, and the basic contours of the story began to take shape: Jennie Miller was a remarkable woman who was born in America and had been widowed twice. For the bulk of her life, she resided in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood of Philadelphia, and during the golden age of European yeshivos in the interwar period, she became likely the world's most prolific supporter of Torah. For many years, dozens of yeshivos received donations from her each month, and her 18-room mansion at 1837 North 33rd Street hosted some of the greatest gedolim of the era.

These gedolim described her in glowing terms. In a 1934 letter from Kletzk, Rav Aharon Kotler referred to her as "Esteemed Mother of Torah." At the end of that same year, a letter of gratitude from Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin paid tribute to her generous support of Torah scholars:

"Chanukah greetings to you, a modern Chashmonaite, who is most zealously and wholeheartedly aiding in the preservation of Judaism in our generation!"

Why, then, was her name so unfamiliar? How had her legacy of generosity fallen so utterly into oblivion? Surely there was an annual pilgrimage to her gravesite, I reasoned. Perhaps there were plaques paying tribute to her at the Mir Yeshiva in Yerushalayim, Lomza Yeshiva in Petach Tikvah, or the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland. Why had not even one of my six Bais Yaakov-educated sisters ever performed a song or play dedicated to her? Someone must have written a book or even an extensive article about her. Perhaps it was out of print or published in a hard-to-read academic Yiddish?

To find out more about Jennie Miller — and to understand why she'd virtually disappeared from the public consciousness — I realized that I needed to find something more than a newspaper blurb or sefer dedication (of which there were many). I would need to find someone who knew Jennie Miller personally.

After discovering that she'd lived into her nineties and passed away in 1968, I began to hope that there would still be someone around who remembered the good deeds and magnanimity of the woman popularly known in Strawberry Mansion as "Aunt Jen."

The eBay Clues

I began sounding out fellow students and teachers of history. My email to noted Jewish historian Professor Shnayer Leiman was a good start. He responded:

Yedidi David,

I am, of course, familiar with the name Jennie Miller-Faggen. I have many of the envelopes she received from the various East-European institutions she supported. See attachment for a sample. But I know little about her.

He went on to suggest several others to contact for possible leads, but none had any further knowledge. I continued by trying some of my usual contacts. An email to Professor Shaul Stampfer netted me no results. The always-helpful Yeshiva University archivist Shulamith Z. Berger and her trusted teacher, Rabbi Dr. Aharon Rakeffet Rothkoff, were equally flummoxed. (Later on, Shulamith Berger was able to track down several letters in the YU Archive).

Arthur Kiron, the curator of Judaica Collections at the University of Pennsylvania, politely apologized that he could not offer any further information — but did send me several further local contacts. Then I tried Rabbi Moshe Kolodny, the long-time archivist at the America Orthodox Jewish Archives in lower Manhattan, and my close friend and colleague at Mishpacha Magazine, Yehuda Geberer.

Dr. Gil Perl, then Headmaster of Kohelet High School in Philadelphia and the author of a prolific book on the Netziv of Volozhin, couldn't help me. My dear friend Dr. Zev Eleff was surprisingly lacking information. Someone suggested that I try the noted historian Gershon Bacon, who was born and raised in the area. (I even went so far as to reach out to Professor Noam Chomsky, whose father was involved in Jewish education in Philadelphia during Jennie Miller's lifetime.) Klum. Gornisht.Nada. Nothing.

Even as these historians lacked further information, more clues began to appear in the form of primary sources. Letters and charitable receipts from venerable rabbinic figures and great yeshivos were regularly posted on the websites of various Jewish auction houses, book dealers, and even eBay.

Where were these letters coming from? There seemed to be dozens, possibly hundreds that had passed through these channels. Perhaps Jennie Miller had some descendant who was selling off the "family archive"?

I reached out to Chaya Sarah Herman, a preeminent Jewish genealogist who is a family friend and has helped me solve these sorts of mysteries in the past. I asked her to try and put together some sort of family tree. Perhaps once that was complete, a good old game of Jewish Geography would locate a relative who could fill in the elusive story.

Meanwhile, I endeavored to contact several rabbanim and rebbetzins whom I thought might know more. I emailed Rabbi Elazar Meir Teitz of Elizabeth, NJ, whose father Rabbi Pinchas Mordechai Teitz had been

active in Telshe fundraising circles during the 1930's and perhaps had visited Mrs. Miller. He apologized that he had nothing to share. I reached out to Rabbi Paysach Krohn, whose mother grew up in Philadelphia and had authored a charming memoir chronicling her childhood there. Surprisingly, he knew nothing about Jennie.

The great gaon Rav Moshe Brown of Far Rockaway, whose shul I grew up in, was one of Philadelphia's brilliant native sons. Perhaps he would have heard something from his father, Dr. Joseph Brown? Or perhaps his Rebbetzin Leah (née Weinberg), who also hailed from an influential frum family in Philadelphia, would be familiar with Jennie? Neither of them had heard her name before. I asked my dear friend Rabbi Osher Rosenbaum to check with his great-aunt Rebbetzin Shoshana Gifter (wife of the Telshe Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Mordechai Gifter) — but she was unaware of the story.

After months of inquiries and research, I still hadn't made the hoped-for progress. I had the bare outlines of a story, but not much else. I had established that a great philanthropic woman in Philadelphia donated tremendous sums of money to Torah causes in the early 20th century — but I hadn't managed to track down the motive or real story behind her largesse, or even the source of her funds.

I could have given up and relegated the Jennie Miller file back to my basement. But just then, with the help of Chaya Sarah Herman, my very curious friend Gavriel Schuster, and literally dozens of visits to libraries, archives, and private collectors from across the world, I began to make progress. Finally, I began to cobble together bits and pieces of Jennie Miller's life.

Chapter II: Abiding Faith in the Treifene Medineh

You might say that Jennie's story dates back to the years directly leading up to the Great Immigration (1820-1880), an era of Jewish immigration to the United States from the areas in Central Europe that would later become ratified as unified Germany. A portion of those immigrants were single women of marriageable age who were sent by their parents to the New World in search of a match that would provide them with a more secure and prosperous future.

It was just shortly following the cease of the Franco-Prussian War and the proclamation of the Second German Empire by Kaiser Wilhelm I and Otto von Bismarck, that 19-year-old Hannah Cohen (then known as Hannchen Wolff) departed Hamburg, Germany, alone in steerage class on the S.S. Germania, never to return to her home in Gembitz (district of Posen). She arrived in New York City on June 28, 1871 and likely moved in with the Kutner family, who were relatives of her mother, Tzirel Wolff (née Kutner), on the Lower East Side.

Just 15 months after she arrived in America, she married 23-year-old Israel (Yisrael) Cohen, a fellow native of the Posen region hailing from the town of Wittkovo, which was just a few miles from her hometown of Gembitz. Municipal records show that the wedding was officiated by a local rabbi named Rabbi Shlomo Beiman.

If prosperity and stability were what Hannah sought in America, she was soon disappointed. Israel Cohen eked out a meager living as an expressman, tasked with the delivery and security of a variety of commodities, such as gold and currencies.

The Lower East Side of the 1870's was quite different from the Eastern-European hub that it morphed into decades later. It was then nicknamed Kleindeutschland (Little Germany), an homage to its predominantly German population. It was there that Pesha (Jennie) Cohen was born in 1874 (There is a lot of confusion over her year of birth, but both census reports and her marriage certificate indicate it was 1874), followed shortly thereafter by a brother named Shlomo Zalman (Samuel). It wasn't until 1894 that the Chofetz Chaim issued his famous plea to American Jewry in his sefer *Nidchei Yisroel* (1894) declaring, "If a 'proper person' has made the tragic mistake of emigrating America, he must return to his home where G-d will sustain him. He must not be misled by thoughts of remaining there until he becomes wealthy." Only back in Eastern Europe, he believed, could a Jew live a proper religious lifestyle and "bring up his children in Torah and piety."

According to acclaimed historian Jeffrey Gurock, one of the earliest such statements came in 1862 from no less than Rav Yosef Shaul Nathanson of Lemberg, the acclaimed author of the responsa sefer *Sho'el u-Meshiv*, who had cautioned that "dedication to the Torah is weak" in that far-off land to where so many "patently unknowledgeable people are migrating." The Cohen family belonged to the small minority that withstood that powerful tide, remaining true to their roots and maintaining an observant life. Overall, Jewish immigrants from the Posen region, which was geographically (and religiously) closer to Poland, remained more devoted to traditional life, even in the "treifeneh medineh." An anecdote from this period shared by the historian Hasia R. Diner, which occurred around that time in nearby Washington, bolsters that assertion:

To take but one example, thirty-eight members of the Washington Hebrew Congregation, many of them recent arrivals from Posen, withdrew from the city's only synagogue when it installed an organ in 1869. They objected with equal vigor to the conversion of the service to an English-only ritual and to the elimination of the kiddush, the prayer ushering in the Sabbath, on the grounds that it blessed G-d for having chosen the Jews "among all the nations." The dissenters believed that only Hebrew should be the language of worship and that texts like the kiddush could not — and should not — be altered. Those who seceded formed Adas Israel, the capital's second congregation.

Faith Amid Misfortune

Jennie was one of those rare youngsters who held on to traditional values despite the odds. In a recently discovered interview with Jennie Miller (née Cohen) published in 1924 in the *Yiddishe Velt*, the writer gives us a rare glimpse into Jennie's upbringing:

She is herself an American by birth. She was born and bred in the city of New York. And yet, for all the diverse temptations that must have assailed her, Mrs. Miller has zealously guarded in spirit and indeed the principles of Orthodoxy which formed the foundation of her own home life. The power that sustained her in her moments of despair was a hope derived from the religious training received as a young girl and fostered throughout her life.

On February 3, 1893, tragedy struck the Cohen home when Israel Cohen suffered a heart attack and perished. After extensive searching, we discovered his grave at one of New York's oldest Jewish burial spots, in the Gniezno Landsmannschaft section of the Bayside Cemetery. He left behind a grieving widow and two orphans whose inheritance included little but their faith in the One Above. As the *Yiddishe Velt* put it:

....She (Jennie) had hope. A hope, a belief that had been instilled in her from her very childhood, that had grown with the years. An abiding faith in the ultimate good even within evil and misfortune. It was that which buoyed her up, forced her to walk erect, with head up and eyes forward, to take up the thread of life once more even though her nearest and dearest had been taken from her. And then, while everything still loomed empty before her, she conceived a splendid idea of creating happiness out of misfortune.... As she said, "I don't know what would have become of me if I had not this belief and this hope to bolster me...."

As I was soon to learn, Jennie lived a life that was marred by one tragedy after another, but buoyed by her faith and commitment, she drew a positive picture and lived with joy and optimism.

Two years later, records show that Jennie Cohen married an entrepreneurial 27-year-old immigrant from the Yanishkel region of Lithuania named Harry Miller. Much of Harry's background remains shrouded in mystery, but we do know that he was likewise orphaned at a young age. Shortly thereafter, the new couple settled in Philadelphia, which was then home to the third-largest Jewish population in America (after New York and Chicago).

Philadelphia had also recently become home to a very determined rabbinic transplant named Rabbi Dov Aryeh (Bernard) Levinthal; his arrival in 1891 is in fact viewed as a turning point in the city's Jewish history.

Born in a suburb of Kovno in 1865 and descended from 11 generations of rabbis, Rabbi Levinthal received his training and ordination from Rav

Yitzchak Elchonon Spector and Rav Shmuel Mohilever. At the age of 19, he married Mina Kleinberg.

Rabbi Levinthal's son, famed jurist and community leader Louis Levinthal, recalled that even after his father accepted the offer of a rabbinic pulpit in Philadelphia, those around him pleaded with him not to go, saying, "The land is treif, the people are treif, even the stones in America are treif!"

Their fears were not unfounded. "I found virgin territory here," reminisced Levinthal in a 1934 interview quoted in Alex Goldman's *Giants of Faith*. "Plain and simple, and undone. Even the ground, as it were, was not prepared, not ready for sowing. I had to begin from scratch. The road was strewn with mountains to hurdle. I was not to be deterred." Rabbi Levinthal's 60-year tenure at the helm of the Philadelphia rabbinate was in its infancy when the Millers moved to Philadelphia. Their first home was on North Sixth Street in the Society Hill neighborhood, which was then the hub of Jewish life for the city's Russian immigrants. The city was dotted with landsmannschaft shuls that focused on social issues rather than worship and prayer, so much so that Rabbi Levinthal once described the primary function of these shuls as a place where one went to recite the gomer blessing after arriving in America.

Interestingly, it was not at Ahavas Chesed Anshe Shavel, the Ponevezher Lodge, Shomrei Emuno Anshe Kelm, or Tiferes Israel Anshe Lita that the Millers chose to daven, but at one of the more prominent local congregations, a Galician congregation called Bnei Halberstam.

Back in 1884, seven immigrants from Galicia established one of the first chassidische shtetlachin America (and the first in Philadelphia), which they named Bnei Halberstam, evoking the name of Rav Chaim Halberstam, the Divrei Chaim of Sanz. Two years later they celebrated a gala hachnassas sefer Torah after receiving a specially ordered sefer Torah from a prestigious sofer back in Sanz, dedicating it in memory of the Divrei Chaim, who had passed away several years prior. This unique event was celebrated across the city, piquing the interest of even the most secular of Jews.

Records preserved by the Philadelphia Jewish Archives, (now housed at Temple University), along with local newspaper reports suggest that Harry likely met his future business partner, Abraham Pleet, at Bnei Halberstam.

Pleet had immigrated to America as a teenager from the Lithuanian city of Shadova. Upon his partnership with Harry Miller, who had risen from a simple peddler to proprietor of a respectable business where he bought and sold cloth materials, the firm of Miller & Pleet was established.

During the turn of the century, Philadelphia was home to a flourishing textile industry that employed over 40 percent of the city's workforce, including a significant portion of its immigrant population. Jewish immigrants skilled in tailoring and dressmaking were drawn to this city of abundant work opportunities.

Archival issues of *Textile World* magazine from the early 1900s, housed at the New York Public Library, showed that Miller & Pleet quickly expanded their business and prospered in the worsted fabrics trade (used for high-end suits and coats). This success prompted them to explore the possibility of cutting out the textile middlemen by purchasing their own mill.

In 1905, they signed a lease with the Delaware County Trust Company for a 20-acre mill property in the small town of Lenni, situated along Chester Creek, near the Delaware state line. The agreement included water rights and 25 "dwelling houses" for employee accommodation. Three years later, they opted to purchase the mill and renamed it Yorkshire Worsted Mills, which, after renovations, became one of the largest and most active in the region.

Harry also ventured into the real estate business and held significant investments in public securities and government bonds. When he and other prominent Jewish businessmen experienced discrimination at the hands of the exclusively gentile loan committees at local banks, they boldly opened their own bank, named People's Trust. By 1910, 42-year-old Harry Miller had become one of Philadelphia's wealthiest Jews. But his similarities with other affluent Jews in the city ended there.

Harry and Jennie observed with concern as their fellow Jewish Philadelphians drifted away from traditional Judaism, embracing the emerging Conservative and Reform movements instead. Feeling the need to respond, they sought to collaborate with someone who shared their convictions. Rabbi Levinthal, who had swiftly risen to prominence as one of America's foremost rabbinic figures during his first decade of service in Philadelphia, seemed the perfect ally.

At the time, cities across the country were courting Rabbi Levinthal with major offers. When Rabbi Levinthal began to seriously consider an offer to lead Chicago's Russian congregations, Harry stepped in to ensure that their beloved leader would stay put. In order to do so, he gathered a group of the city's most important leaders and began to organize a kehillah system, which would afford Rabbi Levinthal control over consequential and potentially contentious issues — from kashrus and gittin to a unified Talmud Torah system. After spending a few days pondering the offer, Rabbi Levinthal agreed to Harry Miller's proposal and vowed to stay in Philadelphia — where he would serve as the city's leading rabbinic figure (across all denominations) until his passing in 1952.

Memories of a White Limousine

Now that I had established the source of Jennie's wealth and the fact that her husband had served as the first president of the Philadelphia Kehillah and forged a close relationship with Rabbi Levinthal, I felt I was getting a bit closer to the source. Rabbi Levinthal, after all, was connected to leading rabbanim and roshei yeshivah from across the world. My next move was to place an ad in Philadelphia's *Jewish Exponent*, which after 135 years was somehow still around:

Surprisingly, the ad netted me results, only they weren't exactly the type I'd been hoping for. My phone began to ring with calls from older residents of Philadelphia (all still under strict quarantine orders) hoping I'd be interested in talking to a former resident of the city — even if he/she happened to know nothing whatsoever about the subject at hand.

Almost none of these friendly, elderly Philadelphia Jews were familiar with Jennie. Most were lonely older women who just wanted to schmooze. About anything. "Who is this Jennie Miller and why are you so interested in her?" they asked, in a way that only a doting Jewish grandmother could. One of my first respondents, Sylvia, was born in Philadelphia in 1927 and left as a three-year-old. Our first call got slightly awkward when the charming nonagenarian with the heaviest Philadelphia accent I'd ever heard asked if I was single — she had a local niece whom she was hoping could meet a nice Jewish man.

Then Albert K. called from a local senior home, and I had the sense I was getting closer. He had grown up in Jennie's neighborhood and vividly described playing ball on a stoop of the Lichtenstein home, next door to Jennie's mansion. He recalled her chauffeur washing the white limousine that transported Jennie and her guests around town.

Some more basic information came via other callers, but not much of substance. Perhaps the window had closed and it was just too late to find someone who could actually recall Jennie and add some substantive information to my search. But I wasn't ready to abandon it just yet.

Chapter III: Finding Jennie

ASI was soon to discover, it wasn't just "someone" who recalled Jennie Miller; it was no less than the zaken hador, one of the great gedolim of our times. And he didn't just know of her; he and his family in fact shared a close relationship with her. But it took me some time, and more effort, to establish that link.

I reached out to Rabbi Yehuda Shemtov, whose father Rabbi Avraham Shemtov is the longtime shaliach of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Philadelphia and is widely connected across the city. He recommended that I speak with long-time Philadelphia resident Dr. Joseph Mandelbaum, who serves as the president of Chevra Bnei Moshe, the chevra kaddisha of Philadelphia.

I spoke to Dr. Mandelbaum for more than an hour. He knew the story of Jennie Miller, and while was too young to have been acquainted with her personally, he filled in several important blanks. Dr. Mandelbaum told me that Harry Miller passed away after a short illness in 1923, leaving Jennie

an extraordinarily wealthy widow. During Harry's lifetime, the Millers invested incredible sums to improve the city's local Jewish educational infrastructure, including the Central Talmud Torah network of Rabbi Levinthal.

It didn't take long for me to find evidence of these activities in various newspapers of the time. In fact, there was hardly an institution in the city that did not benefit from the Millers' largesse. In 1909, they donated four and a half acres of land to build the Hebrew Sheltering Home, which cared for homeless and neglected children. Shortly thereafter they endowed the adjacent infant shelter with an accompanying daycare center. Abandoned babies were cared for in the "Harry Miller Ward," a dedication likely spurred by Harry and Jennie's mutual experience as orphaned children.

As with all of the institutions they established, the Exponent noted that they wrote up a contract with the trustees of both the orphanage and school stipulating that their kitchens remain exclusively kosher for perpetuity, a rarity at the time.

Among all the Millers' projects, though, there was one that struck me in particular.

Neither Gold nor Yiddishkeit

In 1903, the Ridbaz, Rav Yaakov Dovid Willowski, the Rav of Slutsk, was invited to Philadelphia by Rabbi Levinthal to address the second convention of the Agudath Harabonim, which Rabbi Levinthal had cofounded the previous year.

In his speech, the Ridbaz assailed American Jewry for abandoning the chinuch of their children, relying instead on a public school system where "too much time was spent in athletic sports and pastimes and useless amusements." He explained that with the establishment of Jewish schools, children could still get a proper education while spending the time they were currently wasting on extracurriculars. learning Torah.

(On his previous visit to America in 1900, the Ridbaz was heartbroken by the low religious standards he witnessed and exclaimed that, "Whoever comes to America is a poshea Yisrael, for here, Yiddishkeit and the Torah shebe'al peh are trodden underfoot.... It was not only their homes that the Jews left behind in Europe; it was their Torah, their Talmud, their yeshivos and their talmidei chachamim." He closed the speech with a knockout punch: "In Europe, they say that Yiddishkeit in America is nothing, but gold is found in the gutter. The fact is, neither gold nor Yiddishkeit is to be found here.")

In the aftermath of the 1903 convention and the Ridbaz's impassioned call for standardized Torah education, Rabbi Levinthal vowed to revamp the city's lackluster Central Talmud Torah, which he had founded together with Dr. Cyrus Adler and Judge Mayer Sulzberger soon after his arrival in the city a decade prior. With the words of the Ridbaz, who had bemoaned the fact that "there were 13- and 14-year-olds who could not read from the siddur or even repeat daily blessings" surely echoing in his mind, he made his first major move.

In September he announced the opening of an afternoon yeshiva for high school students, where Gemara would be taught by proper rebbeim (for a time he taught the highest class). At first, enrollment was weak, but the following year, more than 60 students enrolled.

The Millers became the most significant donors to this new high school, which was named Mishkan Israel, presumably in memory of Jennie's father Yisroel Cohen.

As the Millers' philanthropy brought the community a plethora of new Jewish schools as well as other modern facilities dedicated to the young, their close friends could not ignore the elephant in the room. The beloved patrons of their community, who were now married for over a decade, had not yet merited children of their own.

It was clear, however, that Jennie was a remarkable woman with a unique perspective on life. Bnai Jeshurun's Rabbi Shlomo Barzel, who lived next door to her, shared a story about Jennie's response when faced with expressions of pity over her childlessness. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, she would point out the incredible opportunity she'd been given to support Torah, and with a wink, she'd cite the Gemara (Sanhedrin 19b) that says, "Whoever teaches someone's son Torah, it is as if he sired him."

The Miller Community Center was host to thousands of Jewish schoolchildren from several Talmud Torahs and eventually Beth Jacob, which was Philadelphia's first Jewish Day School, founded by Rabbi Chaim Uri Lipschitz

MY conversation with Dr. Mandelbaum quickly morphed into a more personal one, as he told me about his own life in Philadelphia, where he was one of the first students at Beth Jacob, the first full-time Jewish day school in Philadelphia, located in the Strawberry Mansion where Harry and Jennie had moved in 1910. The school was housed in an annex of the Bnai Jeshurun Synagogue, which carried the Miller family name, having been dedicated by Jennie in memory of her husband in 1924.

That dedication was the very event for which Jennie sat down for the aforementioned interview with the Yiddishe Velt and delineated her worldview, which centered upon the importance of Jewish education.

She is an unassuming person, rather flustered by this business of being interviewed. The fuss one has made about her \$50,000 donation, by the press, quite naturally is pleasing to her, and yet very plainly she is very much surprised.

The principles she enunciates, her statement that every Jewish child must have a real Jewish education in the history of his people and the tenets of his religion, springs from a simple and sincere faith.

Religion has proved her mainstay in her darkest hour.... That which gave her strength must be nurtured in every Jewish youth.

"They call us [women] the builders of the home," she continued. "A vocation of which any woman might be proud. That which any woman could devote all her energies, all her talents, and consider it a task worthwhile. Molding human beings — could anything be more stupendous, more inspiring, more worth concentrating upon?"

"Many have tried. And how many have failed! Why has it been so difficult to see that Jewish home, without which Judaism is robbed of its flavor and its meaning? To run a Jewish home in which the Jewish children are ignorant of things Jewish is meaningless. How can one expect a young child to grow up if it has not something on which to pin its faith — something intangible and unarticulated, perhaps, and yet something that will inspire his imagination and hold his loyalty. Religion! That is what the Jewish home lacks — religion and knowledge....

..."What a joy there is in giving!" she exclaimed after a pause. "If only they [the rest of the wealthy Jews in Philadelphia] would know how happy it makes one to help others, they would give generously. What greater joy than to help a child? Think of these innocent little children. They look to us for help, to show them where to go, and what path to take. And the joy of directing them right!

"Money?" she scoffed. "What good does money do if you can't spend it for something that will give you pleasure?"

"We can't take our fortunes with us to the grave. Why should one wait until one is dead to plan good deeds? Far better to do them when one is alive and able to enjoy them. I have never been happier," she said, "than I am now, since this thought of endowing a community center came to me, since I have thrown myself into the practical work that followed."

Chapter IV: A Home and a Haven

ASI reached the end of my conversation with Mr. Mandelbaum, he mentioned something that would become a turning point in my exhaustive research: "Did you know that Jennie Miller was honored by the (Philadelphia) Yeshiva in 1956?"

Flabbergasted, I realized that I'd totally overlooked the Philadelphia Yeshiva angle. After I completed the call, I quickly emailed Rabbi Dovid Kamenetsky, a son of Rav Shmuel and a world-class Torah scholar, author, and researcher in his own right, asking if he had ever heard of Jennie Miller-Faggen. He immediately replied:

Indeed! She was a close friend of our family. We knew her well and when I was a kid we used to visit her in an old-age home in Atlantic City. We have many presents from her and a beautiful chair adorns my parents' home on which all the gedolim who came to the US between the wars sat

on when they visited her. She was one of a kind, a descendent of Rabbi Akiva Eiger who paid \$150,000 to a Russian brother-in-law to come to the US and perform chalitzah during the 20s.

The chair, how had I forgotten the chair! It was all becoming quite clear to me now. This was the famous chair that has adorned Rav Shmuel's living room for the past nearly 70 years. Rabbi Moshe Bamberger, Mashgiach Ruchani of Beis Medrash L'Talmud/ Lander College for Men, featured it in his book, *Great Jewish Treasures* (ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications), describing Jennie Miller as follows:

Among those who visited her stately home in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood of Philadelphia were such Torah leaders as the Lubliner Rav, Rabbi Meir Shapiro; the Kovna Rav, Rabbi Avraham Dov Ber Kahana Shapiro; the Baranovitch Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman; the Kamenitz Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Boruch Ber Leibowitz; the Grodno Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Shimon Shkop; and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson.

Upon their arrival, these august guests would be ushered into the dining room. At the head of the table stood a large regal chair, upon which their hostess insisted that they sit, as it was there exclusively for them. In this way, she demonstrated her genuine kavod HaTorah — a calling to which she dedicated her life. Mrs. Miller Faggen enjoyed a very close relationship with yblch"t the Philadelphia Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky and his family. As she aged and could no longer maintain her large home, she relocated to an apartment on the New Jersey shore. On the Purim prior to her move, she sent the Kamenetsky family — along with her shalach manos — a cherished gift, the legendary chair of the gedolim.

Two days later, I got in the car with Gavriel Schuster and drove two hours to Philadelphia to see Rav Shmuel and his rebbetzin. Along the way, we decided to make a quick stop at 1837 North 33rd Street, the Strawberry Mansion home where Jennie Miller-Faggen had resided for more than 40 years.

Despite the downward trend the neighborhood had taken, it didn't take too much imagination to see why 33rd Street was once home to Philadelphia's wealthy and powerful during the interwar period. The Miller home was located on a wide promenade, directly facing picturesque Fairmount Park. Standing four stories high, it was among the only houses on the block that remained in good condition as the area had fallen into disrepair.

As luck had it, the current owners were standing outside, tending to their garden. I introduced myself and awkwardly attempted to explain the significance of the home that they resided in. Surprised but gracious, they invited us to come inside and tour their immaculately restored mansion. I'm not usually one for adventure, but this seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Upon entering the home, it struck me that this was no simple abode. I began to tally a list of the rabbinic greats who had been inside this home nearly 100 years earlier. It was clear that I was standing on hallowed ground. I bounced up and down the steps in a trance, hardly listening to my host's words as I transported myself back to another era and recalled just one of the historic events that had occurred there.

"Upon entering the home (of Jennie Miller), it struck me that this was no simple abode"

A Dear Lady with a Jewish Heart

In August of 1926, Rav Meir Shapiro traveled to America, for what was to have been a three-month fundraising trip on behalf of his monumental undertaking to build Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin. After a large welcome ceremony from leading members of the Agudath Harabonim in New York, the excitement over his visit died down and the great Rav Meir Shapiro was faced with the stark realization that raising the necessary funds to complete the yeshivah was not going to be an easy task.

The following month, the great Torah leader hired himself out to a Brooklyn congregation as a chazzan for the Yamim Noraim, hoping to earn a few dollars and spare himself the embarrassment of having to borrow money for an eventual return trip to Europe.

But in December, help arrived in the form of an old acquaintance from Europe, Rav Ephraim Eliezer Yolles, the rav of Congregation Kerem Israel in Philadelphia, who resided just a few blocks away from Jennie Miller in Strawberry Mansion.

Rabbi Yolles invited Rav Meir to spend some time at his home in Philadelphia, where he promised to help him raise funds. That home, known fondly as the "Beis HaRav," had a vast Torah library, where the Pietrikower Rav (as Rav Meir Shapiro was then known) felt extremely comfortable.

Rabbi Yolles set out to ensure that Rav Meir would receive maximum exposure and arranged for him to deliver a shiur at Mishkan Israel, the local Talmud Torah for high school age boys, which had been founded by Rabbi Levinthal with the financial support of the Millers.

A few days after that historic shiur, Rav Meir saw his lot change, when Rabbi Yolles accompanied him on a visit to Jennie Miller. The story of this monumental meeting was shared by Rav Meir's close student and first biographer, Rabbi Yehoshua Baumol, in "A Blaze in the Darkening Gloom" (Feldheim Publications):

Having been advised that the woman (Jennie Miller) was able and willing to help generously, Rav Meir went to visit her; and no sooner was he there, seated in the parlor, than she offered to make a major dedication worth \$2,500 for the new building. The Rav, however, gave a slight frown. Sensing a certain displeasure in him, she asked for the reason. Was the amount not enough, perhaps?

In reply, Rav Meir told her of a small incident that happened with him back home, in Piotrków: A certain beggar made his rounds in the city every week, to gather the money he needed to sustain him. Once he knocked on Rav Meir's door, too, and he walked in to hold out his hand. Without much thought the Rav took out a coin of 50 kopecks and gave it to him — an amount that the beggar could collect ordinarily from perhaps 20 other people.

Well, said Rav Meir to the woman, that indigent beggar didn't take it, but began to argue and bargain instead. He insisted that 50 kopecks was too little.

Continued Rav Meir: "So I asked him: 'In the city, you get from one person a twentieth of what I'm giving you, and you take it well enough; you're satisfied. And here you go and tell me that this is too little?' He upped and answered me: 'Honored Rabbi, when I bargain and argue with you, it's worth my while: because I may get another fine, large coin like this. In town, if I go and argue for more, what will I get? Another kopeck or two? I save my breath and stroll on to the next person. I might as well get my next kopeck from him. It's easier and quicker than trying to extract it from the first man.'

"You see, then," Rav Meir explained, "I learned the lesson from that shrewd old beggar: Where I get a small, modest donation, I take it and make no effort to bargain for more. Here, however, I find a dear lady with a Jewish heart that understood my project well enough to give such a large sum directly, as soon as I came in. So it pays for me to try to argue and bargain for more."

Her response was to pledge yet another \$2,500.

Rabbi Yolles then drew up a contract between the two parties and had it countersigned (in what may have been the first major (European) yeshivah dedication negotiated in American history). The detailed contract read as follows:

B"H

Representative of the Sejm

Rabbi Meir Shapiro of Piotrków

Agreement between the representative of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin and the donor Mrs. Jennie H. Miller from Philadelphia in the presence of Rabbi Ephraim Eliezer Yolles HaKohein.

The representative of the central Torah institution in Lublin, Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, in the person of Rabbi Meir Shapiro from Piotrków, is hereby obligated to establish the highest class of the Torah Center in the name of Mrs. Miller.

The conditions are:

1. The representative is obligated to:

- a) Install a proper plaque in the class with all the Jewish and family names that Mrs. Miller will demand.
- b) The plaque will also mention the earnings that Mrs. Miller will obtain by supporting the Yeshiva and the amount of her donation.
- c) After 120 Years, Mishnayos will be studied in her memory for an entire year and each year on her Yahrzeit a commemoration will be held, which will be prefaced by the remarks of the head of the class.

2. Mrs. Miller is obligated to:

- a) To pay out her pledge of \$5,000 in ten monthly installments. Each monthly installment will consist of \$500.
- b) The installments will be paid with \$500 monthly checks on every Rosh Chodesh starting from Erev Rosh Chodesh Shvat and concluding on Erev Rosh Hashana 5688. In exceptional circumstances, the payments can be extended for another two months. In other words, [the full amount should be paid] at the very latest 12 months from today Rosh Chodesh Shvat 5687, January 4, 1927.

Signatures

Rabbi Meir Shapiro

Jennie Miller

Ultimately, in his travels across America, Rav Meir Shapiro visited more than a dozen states, spoke at hundreds of shuls and visited many wealthy prospective donors, but among the \$53,000 he raised on the visit, the largest donation was the one he obtained from Jennie Miller.

A Very Righteous Woman

The current residents of Jennie Miller's home had never heard of Rav Meir Shapiro or the other gedolim for whom it was a safe harbor in a foreign land. They surely weren't aware of the philanthropic largesse of their home's former owner — but I was about to meet someone who could attest to it firsthand.

It took just a few minutes to reach the Philadelphia Yeshivah; we arrived in time for Minchah, and when it ended, we drove the 95-year old Rosh Yeshivah the three blocks to his home.

Maybe I should have begun with typical niceties, but I was too curious at this point. "Does the Rosh Yeshivah remember a woman named Jennie Miller?" I asked.

Startled, Rav Shmuel turned and faced me. A large smile formed across his face and he exclaimed confidently, "Ah tzadekes gevehn! (She was a very righteous woman)."

I nodded along in agreement. We exited the car and headed for Reb Shmuel's porch, where we continued the conversation on this beautiful spring day. "Did you know," Rav Shmuel said, "that she sent 24 different Torah institutions \$100 checks each month on every Erev Rosh Chodesh?"

He went on to describe the family's relationship with Mrs. Miller. "We got to know her toward the end of her life. She gave us a chair that all of the great gedolim sat in when they visited her. Everyone came. Rav Elchonon [Wasserman], Rav Shimon [Shkop], Rav Boruch Ber [Leibowitz]... there is even a picture of the (sixth) Lubavitcher Rebbe sitting in the chair."

He then invited us inside his home to see the chair. We were introduced to his wife of more than 70 years, Rebbetzin Temi Kamenetsky. "They want to hear about Jennie Miller," he said with delight.

"Such a choshuve lady!" she said with a smile. "How did you come to hear about her?" Rebbetzin Kamenetsky then showed me a worn Tehillim on the table beside her, which Jennie had given her more than a half-century prior, and she continues to use daily.

I told her about the research we'd done and the visit to Jennie's former home earlier that day. Impressed, she went on to tell us more about their relationship. We also discussed a detail I'd encountered numerous times — Jennie's relationship to Rav Akiva Eiger. This was mentioned in several letters from Rav Boruch Ber as well as almost every single letter we have documented from Rav Shimon Shkop, including the blessing

offered at the end of this November 1937 dispatch from Grodno to her second husband Nathan Faggen:

She (Jennie) obligates all the wealthy people of our nation with her righteous acts. She is especially notable for the extraordinary fondness she displays in her support of many holy institutions, including our holy Yeshiva, which she supports consistently on a monthly basis. She is the woman whose pure soul emanated from the shining light of the soul of the doyen of geniuses — the great Cedar of Lebanon who encircled the sun with his height; many giants of Israel nested in his branches, and in his shade, they found solace for their weary souls by listening to his original Torah insights whereby he dismantled and resolved (questions pertaining to) the deepest Sugyos (topics in Talmud) and raised precious gems from the depths the Tamudic ocean — namely, the famous genius Rabbi Akiva Eiger, of blessed memory. May his granddaughter, Mrs. Pesha, be blessed with long life and an abundance of goodness, pleasantness, much delight and nachas always.

Shimon Yehuda HaKohein Shkop

(After consulting several genealogists over the course of the last three years, we have not been able to establish exactly how she was a descendant. Perhaps she was descended from a sibling of Rav Akiva Eiger.)

A few weeks later, I made the trip once again with Gavriel — as well as my brother-in-law Dovi Zauderer, — a close talmid of Rav Shmuel — this time to visit Jennie's kever at the Har Nebo Cemetery, as well as to hear more details about her life from Rav Shmuel and the rebbetzin. Prior to our departure, the rosh yeshivah pointed toward the bookcase.

"We have several seforim here that we received from Mrs. Miller," he said, "including a few that she received as a gift from the Chofetz Chaim's rebbetzin. Why don't you take a look?"

While Rav Shmuel was uncertain as to the exact nature of the connection between the two women, he dropped yet another bombshell: "When Jennie Miller got old and the neighborhood took a turn for the worse, she decided to relocate to a senior community near the shore in Atlantic City. Prior to her departure, she invited us to take whatever possessions remained in her Strawberry Mansion home."

Letters written by Jennie to Rebbetzin Kamenetsky during the last years of her life have been preserved by the family and offer a vivid description of her feelings:

My dear good Friends,

I received your very welcome letter, and I am happy to hear that you are all well. I am also happy to read Rabbi (Kamenetsky) is busy with the Seforim. That makes me feel very good, believe me.

The big bed on third floor maybe would be good for the Yeshiva. The Green dishes in the breakfast room closet are Fleishig. All the pots and pans in the kitchen big closet are Fleishig. All the dishes in kitchen closet are Milchig. Also in the bottom closet are the Milchig pot and pans.

Yes, it's a shame to break up such a good Jewish kosher home, but what can I do; it is G-D's wish for me to be sick and live here (in Atlantic City). For how long I don't know.

My house is not sold as yet — it will take about 60 days....

(I became melancholic as I read these heartfelt letters of a once regal woman, now ailing and isolated, her words revealing the poignant unraveling of her once vibrant life, and I found myself nodding sadly in agreement as I read the last sentence:)

...It was such a holy home.

Let me hear from you. With best wishes

Yours Always

Sincerely,

Jennie Faggen

The Lost Letters

While the Kamenetskys received some of Jennie's furniture (most notably the chair), the letters did not describe the most valuable possessions that remained in the home.

"In the basement," Rav Shmuel told us, "there were piles of letters and receipts from all the yeshivos of her time, including her personal

correspondence with the Chofetz Chaim, Rav Chaim Ozer, Rav Shimon Shkop, and close to 100 of the greatest gedolim of her time. I did not really appreciate the value of those papers at the time, but it seems that by letting others take them, my family and I lost out on a small fortune.” Rav Shmuel smiled and added that he had no regrets but figured the correspondence would be of great interest to us. “There are those who still possess these letters — which attest to the incredible respect and admiration that these gedolim had for their benefactor.”

The Rebbetzin reminded Rav Shmuel that the bulk of the letters went to Jennie Miller’s devoted neighbor, Mr. Manfred Mauskopf, a local Talmud Torah principal who had a keen interest in Jewish history. He then nobly did his best to track down the original senders of the letters, but the vast majority of these gedolim, along with their yeshivos, had perished in the Holocaust.

It seems that he donated the rest of the correspondence to various libraries and institutions and in some cases, private individuals — many of whom eventually sold them to collectors and dealers. Little did the great Philadelphia Rosh Yeshivah and his rebbetzin know, but he had just helped us solve yet another mystery.

On our way out, Rav Shmuel asked us if we had any other plans while we were in the area (in his humility, he failed to believe that anyone would travel all the way to Philadelphia just to see him). We informed Rav Shmuel that we had visited Jennie’s kever at the Har Nebo Cemetery and he smiled. “Very nice! A mitzvah! You fulfilled a tremendous mitzvah!” Then he stopped for a moment and informed us in emphatic fashion, which seemed quite unusual for the soft-spoken leader of American Torah Jewry, “A tzadeikes gevehn; she was a tzadeikes, a true tzadeikes. It’s nisht poshut, not simple.”

Before we had departed, we left Rebbetzin Kamenetsky with a small gift: a thin binder filled with various newspaper clippings and letters we’d found during the course of our research. When I called her a few days later to thank her for her time, she told me that she was particularly moved by one article in an interview Jennie had given to the Exponent when she was honored by Bnai Beshurun in 1953 at its 36th annual dinner. Clearly proud of “her” Jennie, the rebbetzin began to read to me:

She regularly contributes to the support of more than 40 Yeshivos in the United States and Israel. She supported single-handedly a Yeshivah, now situated in Cleveland, during the years when it was still in Europe. Mrs. Miller now sends out each month more than 50 checks for the support of various charitable, religious and educational groups. Closer to home, Mrs. Miller has made herself responsible for many Jewish families in her home area of Strawberry Mansion. She is a regular supporter of Akiba Academy and the Beth Jacob School.

What manner of woman is this? Perhaps the best way to show her as she is, would be to denote her attitude toward herself and others. Simplicity is the keynote of her life. Despite her outstanding position in communal affairs, she is best known as “Aunt Jen,” a name she prefers to any of the honorific titles she has earned. “Aunt Jen” is extremely religious, a devout woman who davens at home when she cannot come to the synagogue. She is a regular attendant at Friday night and Sabbath morning services. During the time of “Selichoth” (penitential prayers), Mrs. Miller regularly attends the services at five a.m. despite her advanced age.

Mrs. Miller lives alone in an 18-room house in the Strawberry Mansion section. This fact has given rise to numerous fearful questionings on the part of her friends, as to her safety and health. To one such question, Mrs. Miller replied, “I don’t live alone. I live with G-d.” To a person of such faith, many doubts and fears which assail others of us are unknown. And this faith has had other effects, as well. It has been said that, without preaching of any kind, Mrs. Miller, has, purely by her own example of Jewish living, been influential in persuading others to join her in her numerous charitable and religious activities.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Riff (1893-1976) was responsible for tens of thousands of dollars that flowed from Jennie Miller to yeshivos throughout the world. He was so beloved in Camden that local gentiles could be heard referring to him as he walked by them as “holy father”

Chapter V: Patroness of the Yeshivah World

It was clear by now that Jennie Miller was a prolific supporter of Torah learning — but what was the source of her enthusiasm for what at the time was hardly a popular cause? Was it just Rabbi Levinthal?

Yet another lead came via Rav Shmuel, who told us that Jennie had been very close to Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Riff, the beloved “chief rabbi” of Camden, New Jersey, situated across the river from Philadelphia. Rav Shmuel suggested that we reach out to his only child, Rebbetzin Rochel (Riff) Gettinger, whom he believed might know more about Jennie.

Rabbi Riff was a scion of the “Bais HaRav,” a descendant of Rav Chaim of Volozhin. During his time studying in the Volozhin Yeshiva, he resided in the home of his grandfather, the Rosh Yeshivah Rav Raphael Shapiro, son-in-law of the Netziv. After marrying his wife Basya (a descendant of Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spektor), he then took a rabbinic position in Telechin.

Upon his move to America, Rabbi Riff’s leadership impacted far beyond the Camden/Philadelphia area. He served as the vice president of the Agudath Harabonim and was instrumental in the Vaad Hatzalah. However, Rabbi Riff is best remembered for his decades of tireless work on behalf of Ezras Torah where, as successor to Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, he became the source of salvation and sustenance to thousands of bnei Torah across the globe.

The mere mention of the town of Telechin piqued my curiosity. Where had I recently come across it? A swift search through my files revealed the answer to another enigma. In 2022, I had the chance to discuss the Jennie Miller story during a Shabbos meal with Rav Binyomin Carlebach, a son-in-law of Rav Beinush Finkel and one of the current roshei yeshivah at the Mir Yeshivah in Yerushalayim. That serendipitous conversation led to an astonishing discovery.

Mr. Manfred Mauskopf, the aforementioned Talmud Torah principal who had received most of Jennie’s correspondence following her move, sent the Mir Yeshivah a package containing 150 pages of correspondence between the Mir roshei yeshiva and Jennie. The cover letter, dated January 3, 1968, read as follows:

Mirrer Yeshiva
Jerusalem, Israel

Dear Sir,

I am sending you the enclosed letters which were originally written before the war when your famous institution was still located in Europe. I believe you might be interested in them for historical and sentimental value.

Manfried Mauskopf

This correspondence began a month after Jennie’s initial meeting with Rav Leizer Yudel Finkel and Rav Avraham Kalmanowitz in 1928. The exchange started with an agreement to establish the “Jennie Miller Kollel” at a cost of \$120 per month, a sum that would support ten “rabbinic scholars” in their studies at “The Holy Yeshivah of Mir.”

What caught my attention were two letters written six years later, in 1933, which mention Jennie’s request that the Mir assist two bochurim from Telechin, Eliezer Kobrir and Zev Katarinsky, who hoped to gain acceptance to the yeshivah. I had previously wondered why Jennie was particularly interested in these students. Were they family members? Now, however, I had my answer.

Apparently Rabbi Riff had utilized Jennie’s special connection with the Mir roshei yeshivah to ensure that his former landsleit would receive special treatment. Today it’s all too common for a hopeful student to require “pull” in order to be accepted into an elite yeshivah, but this letter appears to be the first documented case of an American balabos (in this case, a balabusta!) using her influence to arrange admission to a Lithuanian yeshivah.

“She Had Very Good Taste”

Rabbi Riff’s appointment as rabbi of Camden came via the recommendation of Rabbi Bernard Levinthal, who would later write in a tribute article that he seized the opportunity to bring this “unusual

personage” to the Philadelphia area and benefitted greatly from working alongside him for more than 25 years.

(In yet another testament to Rabbi Riff’s greatness, Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky’s children recalled how during their early years in Philadelphia, their parents would take them to Camden to visit the Riff home on Erev Yom Tov to receive a brachah from Rabbi Riff.)

Many decades had passed since Rabbi Riff’s passing, but I hoped that his only child could piece together his connection to Jennie Miller. I was able to reach Rebbetzin Gettinger on the phone that afternoon at her daughter Sarah Ungar’s home in Chicago.

When told of the nature of my call, Rebbetzin Gettinger became excited. She still remembered those visits to Strawberry Mansion with her father in the 1930s, and told me that Jennie had been “a charming woman and a very generous American patriot. She lived in what — at that time — was the aristocratic section of Philadelphia, where there weren’t too many Orthodox people. She was very much influenced by my father to become a big supporter of Ezras Torah and other important (Torah) causes.

“She was the very special type,” Rebbetzin Gettinger continued. “She was the kind of woman who entertained great rabbanim at her home and then would have a chauffeured car take her and her husband to the opera. She was very hospitable. She was particularly interested in supporting talmidei chachamim and their families. She had very good taste in that sense. She was very friendly, in a stately sort of way.”

Jennie certainly appreciated Rabbi Riff as an advisor and mentor, and took his suggestions very seriously. Page through the solicitations and letters sent to Jennie from the various roshei yeshivah and you will repeatedly see Rabbi Riff’s name. Clearly, he was a key conduit between the yeshivos and their donor in Philadelphia.

In 1931, the Ponevezher Rav wrote to Jennie, “Rav Riff from Camden came to visit the Yeshiva and conveyed personal regards from you and your husband. He was shown the building that was bought for Beis Hayeshiva by Pesha bas R’ Yisrael.”

A letter from Rav Avigdor Menkovitz and Rav Mordechai Zev Dzikansky from Yeshiva Ohr Hachaim (the original yeshivah ketanah in Slabodka founded by Rav Tzvi Hirsch Levitan in 1869) dated August 3, 1933, reads: “Rabbi Riff wrote us that to our great regret and sympathy, you lately lost a lot of money. Nevertheless, knowing the great need... of the Yeshivah... your heart was moved like the heart of a true mother of Torah study. You overlooked your own losses and sent your donation for the past four months.”

Another letter sent from the Radin Yeshiva on Tu B’Shevat of 1932 and signed by the Chofetz Chaim thanked Jennie for her \$26 donation that month and asked for the yahrtzeits of her parents, “which will surely be observed when we are informed of the exact names and dates. We hope Rabbi Riff from Camden will write us about this.”

There is also a 1932 letter from Kelm written by Rav Daniel Movshovitz and Rav Gershon Miadnik that references Rabbi Riff as the person who recommended their yeshivah to Jennie, as well as a missive from the editors of a Sefer Hayovelbeing written for Rav Shimon Shkop which requests that Jennie send them Rabbi Riff’s address.

The revived Telshe Yeshiva under Rav Elya Meir Bloch and Rav Chaim Mordechai (Mottel) Katz in Cleveland continued to benefit from Jennie’s largesse

Not only did Rabbi Riff describe the yeshivos and their leaders to Jennie Miller, he would also introduce them to her in person during their visits to Philadelphia.

Rabbi Riff’s grandson, Rav Raphael Moshe Gettinger, shared with me an incredible story about Rav Boruch Ber’s visit to Philadelphia in 1929, part of an 18-month-long trip to America along his son-in-law Rav Reuven Grozovsky, during which he raised a total of \$35,000 to cover the yeshivah’s debts.

As was the tradition, Rabbis Levinthal and Riff arranged for Rav Boruch Ber to deliver a shiur to local community leaders and rabbis at the local Yeshiva Mishkan Israel, after which an appeal for the Kaminetz Yeshiva would be made by Rav Reuven.

Rabbi Riff shared with his grandson, Rav Rephhael Moshe Gettinger, vivid memories of Rav Boruch Ber dazzling the packed building with an intricate shiur on the sugya of areivus (guarantorship) in Masechas Bava Basra (this classic shiur of Rav Boruch Ber is included in his sefer Birkas Shmuel). As Rav Boruch Ber dove into an intricate examination of the different types of cosigners mentioned by the Gemara, Rabbi Riff sat there admiring Rav Boruch Ber’s genius — for this was the perfect setup for a grand-slam fundraising pitch. Rabbi Riff readied himself for what he assumed was the foregone conclusion to the shiur: “Kol yisrael arevim zeh la’zeh, who are the arevim (cosigners) for the bnei Torah back in Europe? It is you, their brethren in America!”

Rav Boruch Ber, however, had other ideas. The fundraising pitch never came. Rav Boruch Ber would never dream of “tarnishing” such a pristine shiur with talk of money. Instead, it was up to Rav Reuven to try and salvage the evening with an appeal of his own.

Rabbi Riff then made sure to help Rav Boruch Ber by personally accompanying him on his appointment with Mrs. Miller later that week.

Samuel Daroff, President of Bnai Jeshurun and the son of a wealthy Volozhin graduate Harry Daroff, participates in the distribution of matzos in Strawberry Mansion before Pesach. Such local tzedakah projects were extremely important to Jennie — and she devoted much of her time to developing and fostering them

Commanded by Rav Chaim Ozer

Sometime later, Rabbi Riff once again traversed the Delaware River in a taxi across the brand-new Benjamin Franklin bridge to pay a visit to Mrs. Miller. His heart was pounding in his chest, for this time was different. Rabbi Riff had been instructed by the gadol hador, Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski himself, to seek urgent assistance for the Ramailes Yeshiva, which was teetering on the brink of financial ruin.

Normally, Rabbi Riff would make an appointment with Mrs. Miller before visiting her, but this was an emergency. Rav Chaim Ozer had sent a telegram with strict instructions to act immediately. Rabbi Riff wondered how he would explain the gravity of the situation. Just a short while before, he had introduced Rav Boruch Ber Leibowitz as the greatest Talmudic scholar of his time. How could he now convey the towering stature of Rav Chaim Ozer, the leader of world Jewry?

As he approached Mrs. Miller’s home, he saw her stepping out of her house and getting ready to enter her limousine. His heart sank; he had no choice but to act quickly.

“Where are you headed?” he blurted out, unsure of how to begin. Mrs. Miller replied that she was going to a show. Without thinking, Rabbi Riff quickly said, “Don’t you know that it’s Sefiras Ha’omer, which is a time of mourning for the Jewish people and we don’t attend the theater.”

Mrs. Miller was taken aback. She turned to her driver and said, “John, put away the car, we are not going to the theater today — the rabbi says that it’s better for us not to go.” She then invited Rabbi Riff inside and offered him his usual glass of tea.

They engaged in a brief discussion, and Rabbi Riff made his pitch on behalf of Rav Chaim Ozer, highlighting the stark difference between the two Torah giants of the era.

Mrs. Miller listened attentively to his appeal and then replied, “Of course, dear rabbi, I will make a generous donation. Thank you for your visit!”

The Ramailes Yeshiva would survive, thanks to Mrs. Miller’s generosity and his quick thinking.

As I shared with Rabbi Gettinger the story of the Telshe brochure that had originally alerted me to Jennie Miller, he was reminded of yet another story he’d heard from his illustrious grandfather.

When Rav Elya Meir Bloch and Rav Mottel Katz escaped from Telshe to America in 1940, they sought a suitable place to open up an American branch of the yeshivah. As part of their efforts, they visited Rabbi Riff in Camden.

At some point during the conversation, Jennie Miller’s name was mentioned and the Telzer roshei yeshivah began to describe how the yeshivah and the local economy back in Telshe relied heavily upon the great Philadelphia philanthropist: “Credit was extended to the yeshivah

by local vendors for food and other supplies by virtue of the fact that everyone knew exactly when the monthly allotment from Mrs. Miller would arrive. So much so that if the yeshivah were ever late paying bills, the local merchants would complain, 'What is going on with the American woman? When do you expect her money to arrive?' "

Suddenly, I recalled of one of the first stories that Rav Shmuel had told us about Jennie, back on our first visit to his home:

Every month, on Erev Rosh Chodesh, come rain or shine, a resolute Jennie Miller set out on the short trip from her palatial home on North 33rd Street to the post office at 19th and Oxford Street in the heart of Strawberry Mansion. She carried a handful of postal money orders, lifelines to the Torah institutions across Eastern Europe, Mandatory Palestine as well as a growing list of institutions in America.

By now, she could practically repeat the list of recipients by heart. Mir, Telshe, Ponevezh, Slabodka, Radin, Grodno, Kelm, Chachmei Lublin, Mesivta of Warsaw, Etz Chaim, Merkaz HaRav, Torah Vodaath, RJJ.... Each received monthly donations varying from a modest \$10 to a generous \$500. To these institutions, Jennie's support was more than just a kind gesture; it was the sustenance that kept their doors open, lights on, and students fed.

In return, the yeshivos were quick to acknowledge the timely arrival of these vital funds. Their gratitude, evident in the fervent letters they sent back, was a testament to the importance of Jennie's unwavering commitment. For them, her punctuality was not only a sign of generosity but also a demonstration of the compassion that bound them together. Her sensitivity towards their plight was evident in the two times a year she visited the post office a few days early, the days prior to Tishrei and Nissan when funds would be needed to pay for Yom Tov necessities.

But even heroes have their moments of weakness. One fateful day, Jennie arrived at the post office just as the last rays of sunlight were disappearing behind the horizon. In her haste, she realized that she had left her money at home. Her heart sank, her eyes filled with tears, and the weight of her mistake threatened to crush her spirit. She imagined the thousands of students in the yeshivos she supported, their hunger gnawing at their insides, all because of her error.

The teller at the post office noticed Jennie's distress and with a reassuring smile, offered to advance the funds for her, trusting that she would return the next day to make amends for the overdraft — an unheard-of act during the days of the Great Depression. The teller's gesture was more than a simple act of kindness; it was a testament to the impact of Jennie's devotion on those who crossed her path.

Chapter VI: Loss and Light

When Harry Miller passed away in 1923, he left his widow with an exorbitant amount of money. But, as Rav Shmuel had alluded during our first visit, a major issue arose. Since the Millers did not merit any children, Jennie could not remarry without first undergoing chalitzah. This should have been a fairly simple halachic procedure, except it seems that Harry's brother decided that his now wealthy sister-in-law's religious obligation was his ticket to prosperity.

On every visit I made to Philadelphia, Rav Shmuel emphasized the rare piety of Jennie, mentioning this episode as perhaps the most glaring example: "Her brother-in-law refused to go ahead with the chalitzah unless she agreed to pay him \$150,000! Do you know how much money that was in those days?"

In January 1929, following the chalitzah ceremony, Jennie married for a second time. Her new husband, the 56-year-old widower Nathan Faggen, was an influential Philadelphia businessman who had come to America from Chernigov (current day Ukraine) as a 15-year-old in 1888. He opened a shirt-manufacturing business along with his wife's family, the Tutelmans, but eventually went off on his own and opened the Lomar Manufacturing Company, which primarily manufactured men's sleepwear. A local newspaper wrote that "He was among the first to popularize pajamas among Americans, who had previously retired to sleep in nightshirts."

More importantly, he shared Jennie's appreciation for communal work, serving as the president of Bnei Jeshurun as well as the president of the local Vaad Hakashrus and the Yeshiva Ohel Moshe. He also began a regular chavrusa with Rabbi Riff.

We knew from the chalitzah episode as well as other sources that Jennie never had any children of her own. But both Rebbetzin Kamenetsky and Rebbetzin Gettinger alluded to a tragic loss of a child that Jennie suffered during her lifetime, which changed her forever. I assumed that the loss was probably one of her stepchildren via Nathan Faggen (who had six children from his previous marriage), but I was soon to learn otherwise.

In Cherished Memory

The exact nature of Jennie's life-changing loss was unveiled in an obituary and a series of news stories that ran in the Jewish Exponent in November 1929, regarding 11-year-old Cecelia Cohen. According to a great-niece that I interviewed, Cecelia (Tzirel) was a niece Jennie had "adopted" in infancy and raised as her own. It is unclear how or why that happened, but it seems to have been a gesture of love from her brother Samuel, who'd been blessed with four children of his own and watched his childless sister suffer in her grand, empty home.

This same great-niece (who vividly recalled Jennie from her childhood) shared that her grandfather, Jennie's brother, was unemployed for a time, and Jennie would send her driver to his home every week to take the family shopping for groceries and occasionally a show.

The young Cecelia, who was "especially gifted and much beloved," was to appear in the annual Chanukah production at Philadelphia's Miller Community Center as she did every year. Then, on a Thursday night visit to the home of her neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Cohen, at 1821 North 33rd street:

She stepped into a darkened closet with a lighted candle in hand while playing a game called "fortune-telling."

A second after she had entered the closet, where another girl attired as a witch was to tell her what the future held in store, Cecelia dashed from the darkened cell, a pillar of flames. The candle had ignited her flimsy masquerade costume.

Mr. Cohen, hearing the child's screams, dashed in from an adjoining room and smothered the flames with his coat. He then took the child to the Mary J. Drexel Home where she was treated for serious burns about the face, and body. Her condition was reported critical. Mr. Cohen was slightly burned about the hands while smothering the flames.

A few days later, young Cecelia succumbed to her injuries. Her shattered aunt made certain that each yeshivah she supported would honor Cecelia's memory on her shloshim and every subsequent yahrtzeit, so much so that "Tzirel bas Reb Shlomo Zalman" became a household name in yeshivos across the world.

The revered Rav Meir Shapiro himself recited Kaddish and dedicated an extraordinary shiur to the cherished memory of the girl who had left this world too soon. Year after year, heartfelt letters from Rav Boruch Ber Liebowitz would reach Jennie, conveying the news that he had arranged a deeply meaningful learning session in Cecelia's memory at his yeshivah.

Another archive contained a letter from Chachmei Lublin sent to Jennie in 1935 following Cecelia's eighth yahrtzeit:

"Yesterday, the sixth day in Cheshvan, the Yeshivah observed the yahrtzeit of Tzirel bas R. Shlomo Zalman a"h, your brother's daughter. All the assembled talmidim of the shiur heard the memorial service and stood in honor of the important deceased who is inscribed in fiery letters in the history of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin."

Rav Leizer Yudel Finkel wrote of the profound sorrow that weighed upon his soul after the tragic loss of the pure-hearted girl, whom Jennie had raised as a daughter. He assured her that he would personally recite the Kaddish and that the entire yeshivah would study Mishnayos in Cecelia's memory.

When Ner Israel was founded in Baltimore thanks to the efforts of Rabbi Riff and Rabbi Levinthal, Jennie became a significant benefactor. Rav Ruderman continued the poignant tradition of honoring Cecelia's memory

by ensuring that a special learning session would be dedicated to the precious soul who had touched so many lives.

While Jennie would spend the rest of her life mourning her dear niece, a distraction arrived soon after the tragedy. She learned that Rav Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson, the Frieddiker (previous) Lubavitcher Rebbe also known by his initials as the “Rayatz,” would soon be traveling to America, and Philadelphia was to be a stop on his itinerary.

Jennie’s husband Nathan Faggen was (according to several Chabad sources) a relative of Reb Yechezkel “Chatche” Feigin, the famed secretary of the Rebbe who was accompanying him on this trip, and so the Faggens invited the Rebbe and his delegation to stay with them at their home — as well as offering to chair the welcoming committee for the visit.

Throughout the Rayatz’s stay at the Miller-Faggen residence, a diverse array of visitors from across the city came to see him. These included politicians who sought photo opportunities with the revered leader, as well as European immigrants who desired to offer their American-born children a brief encounter with the “old world” that had, sadly, been reduced to little more than folklore, cultural practices, and perhaps culinary traditions for the younger generation.

There were also some encouraging moments involving the steadfast Jews who had preserved their traditions and yearned to simply bask in the presence of their esteemed leader.

It took 50 years for what was perhaps the most heartening moment of the stay to be revealed to the public — when a letter was penned to the Jewish Press in 1980 in response to a comprehensive feature on the Rayatz published a week before.

Dear Editor:

I read with pleasure your article on Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson. I had the great fortune to personally experience this remarkable rabbi’s dedication to helping Jews return to the observance of mitzvot. Even today, many decades later and despite the anemia of old age, I blush when I recall the chutzpah displayed by six of my friends and I towards Rabbi Schneerson, and how we were gently turned around.

It was in 1929, when several articles appeared in various Jewish newspapers available in Philadelphia in those days about one Rabbi Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. These articles quoted the Rebbe at great length and in much detail. My friends and I read these articles and wondered amongst ourselves whether the Rebbe was actually planning to replace the Al-mighty. We discussed this with an official of our synagogue, and he suggested that we visit the Rebbe and ask him what he had in mind.

One of the articles mentioned that he had been given the use of a house on 33rd Street by Mrs. Faggen-Miller, a woman well-known for her charitable nature. Accordingly, late one Saturday evening, we all piled into the car and drove to the listed address. Our intention was to confront the Rebbe and challenge him that we thought he was trying to displace G-d.

As we climbed the steps to the front porch, we saw through the window that the living room was crowded with men. We rang the doorbell, and a dignified, bearded man came to the door and inquired what we wanted.

One of us responded: “We’d like to speak to the Rebbe. We have an important question to ask.”

All this time the man was taking notes. We subsequently found out that he was Rabbi Yechezkel Feigen, the Rebbe’s personal secretary. “About what?” he said: “The Rebbe must know the question before he can see you.”

“We’d like to know how he expects us to keep an old-fashioned religion in a modern country.” (We knew we couldn’t tell this man our originally intended question.)

...He ushered us into the house, through the crowded living room, and up the stairs. We wondered why we had been admitted before all those people downstairs who had been there before us.

At the top of the stairs stood the Rebbe. He was handsome and saintly looking, with gleaming, bright eyes. He wore a large fur hat. His hand was

outstretched in greeting. I was surprised since I never knew that Chassidic rebbes extended their hands in greeting.

...Once we were seated he took a long look at each one of us and then began: “You look like very intelligent young men, and therefore I must speak on your level. You are wondering about those people downstairs who were here before you. Well, here are some of the problems for which they are asking help.

“One man’s daughter is seriously ill. What can I do? Nothing more than he can do, provided he approaches G-d. He should be able to ask for a complete recovery.

“Another has a lawsuit and wants me to pray that he will win. I do not know who’s right, but he can pray that the L-rd will give justice. There is a man who wants to buy a business and wants me to intercede to make sure it succeeds. If I could do that, I’d be a rich businessman.

“But if I could not answer your question, I’d have no right to be a rabbi.”

The Rebbe smiled and continued. “First, I must admit a great secret, which I trust you will most likely keep. There are 613 mitzvot, and while the Lubavitcher Rebbe tries to keep them all, he finds it impossible to keep them all. So what does he do? Discard 613 mitzvot? No, he keeps as many of them as humanly possible.”

With these few words he removed the venom we had brought with us. Then he asked us to try and keep as many mitzvot as we could. If we kept as many as we could, then we’d be doing the same thing as the Lubavitcher Rebbe!

Then he asked for our Jewish names and the names of our mothers. We also offered our legal names and addresses but he said he had no use for them. Several of the boys put their hands in their pockets, but he stopped them with a gesture, thanked us, and said he had no use for money; what he wanted was mitzvot.

He asked us whether we put on tefillin every day. Several admitted they had given up. Whereupon he offered them tefillin so they could fulfill the mitzvah. All of us promised to try to live up to his suggestions. He then blessed us individually and shook hands with us again, and we left. We stood on the porch for nearly two hours digesting the visit.

Everyone agreed to pray at least once a day. One said he would give up his Saturday work as a dental technician, and some months later, he even prevailed upon his employer to do the same.

One of us, Gabriel Lowenthal, of blessed memory, attached himself to a synagogue and taught what he had learned from the Rebbe’s philosophy to many others. I have lost track of some of the boys, but I’m sure that the ten minutes we spent with the Rebbe strengthened the spirit of Judaism for all of us.

The Depression and later World War II gave me little hope of ever gaining more light from Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak. However, I found continued inspiration from his son-in-law, the present Rebbe, to keep as many of the 613 mitzvot as I can.

The timing of Rayatz’s visit coincided with a highly turbulent economic era in American history. His arrival in September saw the Dow Jones Industrial Average plummet by over 40 percent before the year’s end, with no clear signs of recovery.

However, inspired by the presence of the Rebbe and with the encouragement of his wife, Nathan Faggen, who served as the Philadelphia chairman of Agudath Chasdei Chabad, pressed on with the crucial fundraising initiative. His dedication bore fruit, as he oversaw a grand fundraising dinner on December 25th. The event drew over 500 attendees and featured heartfelt speeches from Nathan Faggen, Rabbi Levinthal, and his son Louis. A total of \$15,000 was raised, with the most generous contribution of \$5,000 coming from Jennie, who later raised the donation to \$8,000 plus \$1,000 for the Rebbe personally.

Country of Blessed Refuge

The Rayatz’s historical journey to Philadelphia

While many of Europe’s prewar rabbanim and chassidic rebbes had only negative things to say about America, the Rayatz of Chabad had a

different view. In America, he saw a land of security and potential for spiritual growth.

The Rayatz's links to America and to his Chassidim there were well-established prior to his historic 1929 visit to the United States. Recognizing the necessity of organizing Chabad communities outside of Russia, the Lubavitcher Rebbe had formed Agudas Chassidei Chabad of the USA and Canada and remained in constant contact with his followers there. When the Rebbe was jailed by Communist authorities in 1927, his American chassidim mobilized US government officials to lobby the Soviets for his release.

Upon his arrival in New York, he greeted the waiting crowd with a message that differed from the many rabbinic greats who had looked askance at America, declaring, "May the Al-mighty bless this great country which has been a [place of] refuge for our Jewish People."

On December 15th, the Rayatz boarded a train for Philadelphia, the birthplace of American democracy, where he was invited by Mr. William Thatcher, the secretary of Mayor Harry Mackey, to visit Independence Hall, home of the Liberty Bell.

The Rebbe recorded his impressions of the large parade that accompanied him en route to Independence Hall in his diary: "A few hundred other cars followed us. All the streets were closed and we traveled with a police honor guard (unlike in the past, the one that brought me to Spalerna [prison in the USSR])."

At Independence Hall, the Rebbe was accorded the rare honor of sitting in George Washington's chair and then taken to see the Liberty Bell. The words of the pasuk (Vayikra 25:10) "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" emblazoned across the iconic bell, are a reference to the 50th year of the Yovel cycle, when slaves receive emancipation. The subtle connection was likely noticed by the Rayatz — who was months from his 50th birthday and had recently been freed from a Soviet prison, through pressure from the United States government.

Reflecting on his rescue from Soviet religious oppression, he stated in Yiddish, "I think it is obvious to everyone what a fine impression such a warm and humanitarian reception would have on someone who was imprisoned for his religious and moral endeavors. It is difficult to find the appropriate words of appreciation."

Much of the information that we have on the Rayatz's visit comes from various newspaper reports as well as his journal. Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson, an important Lubavitcher activist who arrived in America in 1925 and laid much of the groundwork for the future of the movement in America, chronicled this visit as well. In his memoirs, he relates that "During his first visit to the United States, the Rayatz became acquainted with the Miller-Faggen family. Mrs. Miller was American born, only spoke English (Rav Shmuel disagreed with this notion), and observed Torah and Mitzvot (according to the level of her knowledge). She was fabulously wealthy and supported Torah institutions with an open hand."

Chapter VII: The Yeshivah's Moment Arrives

Among those who worked behind the scenes to ensure the success of the Rayatz's visit to Philadelphia was one of the city's preeminent Lubavitcher Chasidim, Rabbi Sholom Schneiderman. A student and close chassid of the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Rashab, he came to Philadelphia in the 1920's to lead a local shul called Dorshei Sholom.

As the Jewish community in Strawberry Mansion grew in the post-World War I era, Jennie realized that vast majority of Jewish children in the neighborhood were not receiving any sort of secondary Jewish education. Therefore, with the encouragement of Rabbi Yolles, Rabbi Riff, and other local rabbis, she decided to open a branch of the Mishkan Israel High School in Strawberry Mansion, called Ohel Moshe. Rabbi Schneiderman was enlisted as dean of the new yeshivah, which opened following Pesach of 1936 at 3001 Berks Street.

Rabbi Schneiderman went beyond the call of duty, working tirelessly to recruit students and introduced them to high level learning. The students were given glimpses of gedolei Yisrael when Rav Elchonon Wasserman and other Torah giants visiting the city, delivered shiurim, and offered chizuk to the students there.

Rabbi Schneiderman proved he could be a strong educator and leader and the high school attracted several local teens, even forging a relationship with RIETS in New York — hoping to attract its graduates to attend a full-time yeshivah in New York. Still, rampant assimilation and the decline of the neighborhood led the yeshivah to struggle for most of its 15 years or so of existence. By 1952, the yeshivah was ready to close its doors.

Behind the scenes, however, plans for another type of yeshivah were brewing.

A Rebbe with a Vision

In today's yeshivah world, Philadelphia is synonymous with a Lithuanian-style institute of Torah learning. But ironically enough, two of its "founding fathers" belonged to the world of chassidus. One was Chabad chassid Rabbi Sholom Schneiderman. The other was known simply as "the Philadelphia Rebbe."

Along with the Tolner Rebbe, Rav Moshe Tzvi Twersky; and the Monastricher Rebbe, Rav Yaakov Rabinowitz; Rav Moishele Lipshitz was one of several chassidic rebbes who had made Philadelphia their home in the 1920s. (Some locals joked that there were more rebbes in Philadelphia than practicing chassidim).

Reb Moishele was born in the town of Vyeliopoli to his father, Rav Dov Aryeh Liphshitz-Brizel, scion of a rabbinic dynasty. In 1913 he immigrated to America and he began to lead a chassidic court, where he would conduct many tishen and other chassidish-style events. Steadily, he developed a following, and while outside of the city he was known as "The Philadelphia Rebbe," locally he was called "Der Zegster Tzadik" (The Tzaddik of Sixth Street) for his acts of kindness which extended well beyond the confines of his neighborhood. He named his shul Machzikei Hadas (those who strengthen the religion), because that is what he toiled greatly to do, expending much effort on shemiras Shabbos and other areas of Yiddishkeit.

(His son Reb Chaim Uri Lipschitz, later a Rav in Brooklyn and the managing editor of the Jewish Press, was extremely active in galvanizing the local youth, organizing Philadelphia's first branch of Tzeirei Agudath Israel as well as founding Beth Jacob, the first local day school. In both projects he was assisted by Jennie Miller.)

Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky shared with us that during Rabbi Levinthal's lifetime, he resisted attempts to open a proper full-day mesivta or post high school yeshivah in Philadelphia, as he did not want to agitate the local rabbinic leaders, who by then were predominantly Conservative.

Even Bnei Jeshurun, the shul that Jennie and Harry had cofounded (and funded) upon their move to Strawberry Mansion 40 years earlier, reached a point where it debated whether to join the United Synagogue and add mixed-seating pews. One Philadelphian we interviewed pointed out that as soon as an aging Jennie Miller stopped coming to shul, these changes were implemented. As Philadelphia gained a reputation as Conservative Judaism's "capital city," the city's Orthodox future seemed less likely than ever.

Then, upon Rabbi Levinthal's passing in 1952, the torch of leadership was passed to Rabbi Yolles. Rav Moishele Lipschitz determined that the time was ripe to follow the example of the other major Jewish metropolises across America and finally establish a proper yeshivah in Philadelphia.

Rav Moishele Lipschitz, "Der Zegster Tzaddik," made himself relevant toward all Jews, even Albert Einstein in nearby Princeton

Rav Moishele made several visits to Lakewood, where the fledgling Beth Medrash Govoha had proved that Torah learning could in fact take root in America, and beseeched Rav Aharon Kotler and the mashgiach Rav Nosson Wachtfogel to help open a post high school beis medrash in Philadelphia. A proper yeshivah, he believed, could counter the downward surge of the city's Orthodox faction by serving as a spiritual citadel and rallying point for bnei Torah.

But in the yeshivah world, the initial response was skeptical. Anyone familiar with Philadelphia's religious climate considered his quest unrealistic at best.

It was the legendary Rav Nosson Wachtfogel who took Rav Lipschitz seriously. Rav Nosson was always on the lookout for opportunities to expand the horizons of Torah in America, and he was not daunted by what others perceived as insurmountable obstacles. Thus it was he, along with Rav Meir Mintz, who suggested Lakewood talmid Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky for the position of Philadelphia's pioneering rosh yeshivah. While Rav Lipschitz originally hoped to open a post-high school beis medrash, Rav Nosson and Rav Shmuel felt that it was most critical to reach high-school aged boys in assuring the future of Torah Judaism in Philadelphia. Ultimately, the decision was reached to open a pilot beis medrash-level class that would serve as the nucleus around which a high school would subsequently be formed.

This venture could only succeed, however, with the assistance of local rabbanim, whose endorsement would hopefully convince wary residents to embrace the new yeshivah. To this end, Rav Nosson and Rav Meir Mintz worked tirelessly, campaigning and garnering both moral and monetary support, laying the necessary groundwork for the yeshivah to flourish. In a short time, many local rabbanim and leading balabatim were galvanized into action and became strong advocates of the yeshivah's mission.

Meanwhile, it became clear that the monumental task of opening and successfully conducting a yeshivah was not a job for one individual. Rav Shmuel chose Rav Aharon's son-in-law, Rav Dov Schwartzman, who was then delivering chaburos at Mesivta Yeshiva Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, to be his partner (in 1956 Rav Dov departed and was replaced by Rav Elya Svei).

Rav Sholom Hatzaddik

It was not until our third visit with Rav Shmuel that I fully comprehended the role of Rabbi Sholom Schneiderman in the story of the Philadelphia Yeshiva. A few weeks earlier I visited Rav Yechiel Perr, rosh yeshivah of Yeshiva Derech Ayson in Far Rockaway and one of the original beis medrash bochorim sent from Lakewood in December 1953 to help bolster the nascent Philadelphia Yeshiva.

He remembered the name Jennie Miller and recalled some basic facts about her charitable giving. But it was when we began discussing Rav Sholom Schneiderman that his eyes lit up. "Rav Sholom was a real tzaddik!" he said fervently. "He was the one who obtained a building for the yeshivah and then took responsibility for the yeshivah's fundraising." Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky later filled out the story: When the idea surfaced to establish the new yeshivah, Rabbi Schneiderman immediately embraced the project by offering the building that housed his shul and Talmud Torah at 3003 West Berks Street in Strawberry Mansion to serve as the yeshivah's first home — cost free. Not only that, but he was also wise enough to make the offer covertly, lest it raise the ire of the yeshivah's many opponents.

And so it was, on Chanukah 5714 / December 1953, that nine bochorim harking from various mesivtos in New York, convened in the Talmud Torah building for their first zeman at the Talmudical Yeshiva of Philadelphia. That structure would serve the multiple functions of beis medrash, dormitory, kitchen, and dining room. It was also host to a shiur from Rav Aharon Kotler.

Jennie Miller was no longer a wealthy woman at that point, but she still played in a role in the development of the yeshivah. "She was so excited to have the yeshivah there and offered whatever she could to help," Rav Shmuel said. "She even bought the yeshivah its first Shas and would regularly ask what the students were learning!"

Now it was my turn to put on my historian cap and speak up. The Hashgachah here was unmistakable. In 1903, the Ridbaz had pleaded with the residents of Philadelphia to establish a yeshivah in town. With the support of the Millers, Rabbi Levinthal heeded the message, opening advanced Talmud Torahs like Mishkan Israel and later Ohel Moshe to serve the older boys who were ready to learn Gemara.

But the people of Philadelphia never completed the task of opening a proper, full-day yeshivah. As a result, Torah Judaism in the city did not fully flourish.

Yet exactly 50 years later, in the same building complex that once housed Ohel Moshe, the Ridbaz's call was finally heeded with the founding of a yeshivah that would become renowned — not just in Philadelphia but across the world.

Sadly, Rabbi Sholom Schneiderman did not live to see the fruits of his toil. On March 4, 1955, en route to a fundraising event for the new yeshivah, he was struck by a car while crossing the street at the busy intersection of North 9th and Roosevelt Boulevard. With emotion, Rav Perr recalled sitting at his bedside as this saintly figure who had devoted his life to Torah writhed in pain. Shortly thereafter, on March 15th, he passed away.

Rav Sholom and his Rebbetzin Charna, who both toiled for Torah and for the community, were not blessed with children of their own. Their legacy lives on in the Philadelphia Yeshiva and its talmidim.

And he has a namesake as well: Just a few months after his passing, Rebbetzin Temi Kamenetsky gave birth to a son, who was named Sholom. Today, Rav Sholom Kamenetsky serves as one of Philadelphia's roshei yeshivah alongside his father shlita.

The Hanhalah of the Philadelphia Yeshiva in 1964

The yeshivah grew steadily, and in 1956 it moved from Strawberry Mansion to its current campus. Throughout those years and even after Jennie's move to Atlantic City a short while after, the Kamenetsky family maintained a close relationship with her, writing letters and visiting her whenever they could.

Jennie passed away on September 4, 1968. It remains unknown exactly how many people beyond her immediate family attended her funeral, but it is clear that the event was small and quiet.

Recently, a member of the Philadelphia community suggested that I reach out to a local resident named Arthur Rosenthal. He had grown up right outside Strawberry Mansion and knew a story about Jennie that he thought I'd appreciate. He was right.

When Jennie passed away, Arthur told me, she was left with very little money; her last dollars were spent on medical care following a stroke she suffered during her final years. Following her passing, her relatives arranged for a small, simple matzeivah; they were not wealthy people and couldn't afford anything too stately.

When they contacted Wertheimer-Liberty Monuments to make the arrangements, Morris Wertheimer, one of the proprietors of the multi-generational business, inquired as to the identity of the deceased. When he found out that it was Jennie Miller Faggen, he scrapped their plans for a simple headstone, saying, "A woman like that deserves something better." He then upgraded the matzeivah to a large, prominent one befitting a great woman.

On a recent visit to Rav Shmuel, he summed it up best.

"What is the legacy of Jennie Miller?" I asked. The rosh yeshivah paused and then said clearly: "She was a great tzadeikes, there's no sh'eilah(question) about that. People can learn from her to be erliche froyen (upright women), erliche menschen (upright people), but her true legacy is that she gave everything away. Her life was the yeshivos that she helped. She lived on the tzedakah that she gave."

Finally, I asked Rav Shmuel the question that had long tugged at the edge of my consciousness, the question that likely spurred this long, convoluted search through archives and graveyards, unveiling and untangling hidden skeins of a century of history: "How is it possible that a woman with so many zechusim, a woman who accrued such merit, has been almost completely forgotten?"

He smiled. "Who knows?" he said. "But whatever you can do for the aliyah of her neshamah — she deserves it. It's a mitzvah to publicize her story. She was a true tzadeikes who did so much for Klal Yisrael."

"A tzadeikes gevehn; she was a tzadeikes, a true tzadeikes. It's nisht poshut, not simple." — Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky

A House of Celebration and Houses of Mourning

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

When my cousin's daughter asked me to officiate her wedding in Israel the week after Sukkos, how could I say no? Her mother, my beloved first cousin, passed away at a young age from cancer. She loved Israel and at several points in her too-short life wanted to live there but never had the chance to realize that dream. Her daughter, passionate about Torah, the Jewish people, and Eretz Yisroel, moved to Israel shortly after getting up from shiva. She enlisted, rose to be an officer in the IDF, and proudly wore her olive green IDF skirt throughout. She met her husband, an amazing young man who, like her and like Avraham Avinu before them, got up, left his family to answer the call of Lech Lecha, and went to settle in Hashem's land. After learning in Yeshiva he too served in the IDF. These two beautiful souls finding each other and committing to building the Jewish people in the Jewish homeland was truly a special occasion not to be missed.

And now, at a magnificent chuppa with the hills of Yerushalayim as the backdrop, I had the tremendous honor and privilege to marry them. But there was something I needed to do first.

In Koheles (7:2), Shlomo HaMelech, the wisest of all men, taught, טוֹב לָלֶכֶת אֶל בֵּית אֲבִל מִלָּקֶת אֶל בֵּית מִשְׂתֵּה בָאִשָּׁר הוּא סוּף כָּל הָאָדָם וְהָיָה אֵל לִבּוֹ, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of celebration; for that is the end of every man, and a living one should take it to heart."

As Israel's longest war in its history continues to rage on across multiple fronts, we tragically, regularly continue to see and hear the most dreaded words: "Released for publication." Heroic, seemingly ordinary but truly extraordinary soldiers continue to make the ultimate sacrifice, their families paying the ultimate price to protect, defend and fight for the Jewish people. Indeed, as our rabbis taught two thousand years ago (Berachos 5a), Eretz Yisroel nikneis b'yesurin, the land of Israel is acquired and held with sacrifice and struggle.

I paid a shiva call to the family of Rav Avi Goldberg Hy"d. A tent was set up to accommodate the countless visitors who came from all over: friends, family, political leaders, and "strangers" like me who came to comfort, share in the pain and pay tribute to this incredibly special man. It was heartbreaking to see his children clutch framed pictures of him. It was moving to hear his wife Rachel talk about him and offer a heartfelt plea for all segments of Am Yisroel to share in the burden of this war. R' Avi loved and excelled at music, using it to arouse the souls of many, and so the family requested music be part of the shiva. Accompanied by a guitar and a violin, the many packed in the tent joined in a slow, stirring niggun. At that moment, eyes closed and swaying in unison, all those gathered were singing the song of the Jewish people, the song of pain and of joy, a song of eternity.

That day, I was scheduled to meet with R' Avi's brother Eliezer about another matter. We indeed met, but instead of at a coffee shop or in an office, it was with him sitting in a low chair and my desperately trying to find words that would be meaningful. He shared about his brother's special character and impact and I communicated that I represented not only myself, my family and our community, but I was there on behalf of all Am Yisrael around the world sharing in their pain and expressing our boundless gratitude.

I shared the same message at the second shiva call, to the family of Sammy Harari Hy"d. Sammy came to yeshiva for his gap year and decided to stay and serve in the IDF and build his life in Israel. His dedication to our people and to our country was unwavering. He was 35 years old and lived in Tzefat with his wife, Anna, and their three children.

"It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of celebration." Commentators explain that Shlomo HaMelech encouraged going to a shiva home over a simcha because a simcha is prospective. We share our hope, dreams and ambitions for the future of this new couple, this Bar Mitzvah boy or Bat Mitzvah girl, this new baby. A shiva home is retrospective, reflective of the legacy, influence and impact the person made. Each of these precious soldiers, our kedoshim who are now sitting next to the Kisei HaKavod, directly adjacent to Hashem's throne, leave the highest legacy of having been moseir nefesh for the Jewish people.

On this short trip, I also visited Hadassah Hospital to spend time with injured soldiers. Unlike previous trips in which the injured were young soldiers in the middle of their mandatory service, each of those I visited this time was a reservist, these were people who had left their family multiple times to fight, often on different fronts.

In one room were three men who had been injured less than a week before in Lebanon. Hezbollah fighters saw them coming and released gas in the house they were entering. In many countries, gas companies add a chemical with a distinctive smell to alert people to a gas leak but natural gas has no odor and so these soldiers had no idea they were entering a home filled with gas. Protocol calls for opening fire when entering an area with terrorists. When these soldiers entered the home and the first one opened fire, it ignited the gas, causing an explosion. The terrorists were positioned nearby and opened fire after the explosion. One of the soldier's legs was literally on fire while he continued to shoot back and fight the terrorists.

Hanging next to his hospital bed are the remnants of the uniform, a testament to the miracle of his being alive. These soldiers had bandages on their legs, fingers and one had burns on his face. One of them has four children, the youngest two months old, born during his service. Another got married in between serving his reserve duties. They all spoke with faith, determination, gratitude, positivity and a message to Jews everywhere that it is time to come home and be part of this destiny.

In another room was a soldier who was injured on Yom Kippur night in Lebanon. His father shared that he was so badly compromised, losing so much blood, that at one point they felt he wouldn't survive and no more resources or time should be spent on him. Nevertheless, they continued and there he was recovering and improving, eager to return home to his wife and children. The soldier mentioned that in his life he had donated a lot of blood, never knowing that he was actually making a deposit for one day needing to take a withdrawal to save his life. As hashgacha had it, his uncle is a friend of mine, someone I went to Yeshiva with.

In a third room was a soldier injured on the border with Syria. He was the quietist, and seemed to be struggling the most physically and emotionally, but after spending a few minutes, showering him with love, as we were leaving his room, he perked up to call to us and say, "Am Yisrael Chai."

On this trip, I spent time with my heroic friend who fought in Gaza, saw and experienced horrific things, and has been suffering with diagnosed PTSD. Despite support, medication, and therapy, he continues to have panic attacks, and it isn't unusual for him to wake up in the middle of the night from a nightmare, drenched in sweat and with a racing heart.

He shared with me that he had recently been in the park with his children when they saw a young boy on the playground crying. He approached the boy asking what is wrong, is he hurt. The boy responded, no I am angry and there is nothing you can do about it. He asked the boy what happened and the young boy explained that his father is back in milu'im, reserve duty, and his uncle picked him up from school instead of his father and he is very upset about it. My friend said, are you hungry, let's go buy a treat and the boy said, no I am not eating. He asked, why not and the boy said, I don't want to eat until my father comes home and we can eat together.

After spending some time showing some love and support, the boy calmed down and went home to get something to eat. There are literally thousands of children in Israel like this young boy, some expressing their feelings, many not, and we cannot lose sight of how many families continue to feel the impact of this war on a daily basis.

This past year I have been fortunate to have gone to Israel for numerous missions, visiting army bases, hospitals, hostage families, displaced families, and doing all kinds of volunteering. As Yom Tov here ended and I prepared for this trip, I thought, perhaps naively, that I was going for a wedding and to see my family. I thought that the chamals, cheder milchamah, the wartime volunteer command centers were closed, the volunteer opportunities had grinded to a halt, but I was terribly wrong. There is still so much to do, so much love to show and share, so much support, financial, emotional to provide, so many people to spend time with.

The director of Hadassah hospital told me that visits have slowed down but there are still so many soldiers recovering and in rehab who cherish the chance to tell their story, to receive some love and to connect with Jews, particularly from outside of Israel.

It has now been more than a year. Fatigue may have set in for many, but it can't for our soldiers. They are still fighting on multiple fronts, their families continue to have to experience and navigate their absence while they serve. For the new orphans and widows there is nothing old about this war.

They are doing their part. We must continue to do ours. A member of our community visited an army rest area outside Gaza over Sukkos. One of the tables still holds a letter a child wrote that we delivered back in March.

Continue to write letters to soldiers. Continue to learn and daven for those serving and all those injured physically and emotionally. When planning winter vacation or your next trip, consider going to Israel to visit hospitals, those still displaced from the north, or army bases.

We daven and long for the day that we go to Israel only to attend simchas and happy occasions.

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Reuven ben Yosef.

For Heaven Sake!

Avram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all their belongings, as well as the people they had made, and they left – heading toward Canaan (12:5).

Rashi (ad loc) explains that “the people they had made” refers to gathering them “under the wings of the Divine Presence.” Rashi goes on to say that Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women, and that the Torah considers those conversions as if Avraham and Sarah had “made” them.

Rambam (Yad Avodah Zara 1:3) elaborates on this theme. He relates that once Avraham recognized Hashem he began to admonish the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim, telling them that they were not following the proper path. He went on to break their idols and to teach them that it is only fitting to serve the God of the world; to Him alone is it fitting to bow down and offer sacrifices and libations. All idols and images must be destroyed lest others err.

Raavad (ad loc) wonders why it is that only Avraham made it a point protest the idolatrous behavior of others and set about to destroy their

idols? After all, there were others alive at that time, notably Shem and his grandson Ever, who knew the truth. They both recognized Hashem; why didn't they protest or make it their mission to destroy idols?

Raavad goes on to suggest that perhaps they did protest, and that the idolaters hid their idols. Avraham, however, had the opportunity to break his father's own idols. This is a difficult answer to accept as it presupposes facts about Shem and Ever for which we have no evidence.

Ramabam refers to Avraham as a “pillar of the world.” Clearly, he stood out even when compared to the greatness of those before him. But what made Avraham so unique?

Rashi (24:7) explains Avraham's impact on the world: Prior to Avraham, Hashem was only the God of the heavens. However, once Avraham made everyone aware of the presence of Hashem, He became God of the earth as well. In other words, Avraham was different from all who preceded him in that he made it his mission to ensure everyone recognized Hashem as the one and only God. All the great men who preceded him were content to focus on the proper way to live as a subject of Hashem; they weren't, however, concerned with bringing Hashem down to the earthly realm.

This explains why Maimonides only credits Avraham Avinu with trying to convince others to his way of thinking and actively destroying idol worship. Avraham's mission was to bring the knowledge of Hashem to the rest of the world. This is his legacy and that of the Jewish people as well.

Remarkably, one of those great men – Shem (called Malki-Tzedek in this week's parsha; see Rashi 14:18) – is the first one who uses this appellation to describe Hashem (“Possessor of Heaven and Earth”) in his blessing to Avraham Avinu.

Avraham had just miraculously defeated the most powerful army on earth. Shem observed that Avraham had now shown the entire known world the dominance of Hashem, and that Hashem's active presence could now be felt on earth as well.

Teaching: Lessons for Life

Then And Avraham heard that his brother had been taken captive, and he mobilized his disciples (14:14).

Avraham was informed that Lot, his brother-in-law, had been taken captive by the army of the four kings. He quickly mobilized his fighting force of 318 men, soundly defeated the invaders, and brought back Lot and all the property that had been seized.

The word that the Torah uses to refer to students is “chanichav” – the root being chinuch, commonly translated as education. Rashi (ad loc) explains that this refers to those whom Avraham had “initiated” to mitzvos. Rashi goes on to explain why chinuch refers to education; “This is a language of beginning of the entry, of a person or a vessel to a future use that they will be destined to stay.”

Therefore, the primary goal of chinuch is to initiate a student to the path on which he will stay. This understanding of chinuch is a big departure from how most of our education systems operate today. Most schools measure the success of their educational programs quantitatively: How much material did the students absorb? How does this compare with other schools? What is the average score of a given class on their standardized tests and how does this compare nationally?

In reality, these school administrators are asking all the wrong questions. Of course, it is important to have a metric for properly measuring outcomes of educational programs. But the questions they should be

asking are: Have we instilled within our students a love for learning that will put them on the path for lifelong learning? Have we inspired within our students a love for Judaism and its core values so that they will want to make it a meaningful part of their lives long after they leave our school?

In other words, most schools miss the point. Though we can force students to learn information for a few years, if the knowledge acquired or the process of learning isn't inspiring, we can be assured that they will abandon it shortly after they leave our charge.

This is how American Jews lost a whole generation of students in the 1940's and 50's who went to cheder and other after school programs. These programs were almost always staffed with very knowledgeable but totally unrelatable (and elderly) European teachers. Their methods didn't speak to the American mentality and nearly all who attended those programs learned that Judaism isn't for the 20th century American. Sadly, they abandoned their heritage and most every vestige of Judaism. The devastation that this caused is obvious; more than half of Halachic Jews (those born to a Jewish mother) have nothing to do with Judaism and (sadly) will slowly disappear over the next few decades.

Unfortunately, we are, by and large, failing a significant portion of today's student population as well. In today's "exciting" world, our children have literally everything at their fingertips. Now, more than ever before,

knowledge is a short Google query away. Yet, our schools' primary focus is mired in imparting information. Even when our students are successful in absorbing all the material, we usually fail poorly in making the material inspiring and uplifting.

We aren't training our teachers to inspire, we are simply giving them better methods for conveying information. Our schools have forgotten the key definition of chinuch is really the responsibility for setting students on the path that they are destined to be. No wonder so many of our students have "gone off the derech;" we never properly put them on the right path in the first place! In fact, as bad as the situation is, we should be thankful that it isn't worse. This isn't a situation that will repair itself, we need a paradigm shift, and quickly.

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PARSHAT LECH L'CHA

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

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

Did Avraham Avinu simply win a 'Divine lottery'?

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

THE SIN OF "DOR HA'PLAGAH"

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

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

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

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

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

So what did they do that angered God?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BET-EL & SHEM HASHEM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A 'STRATEGIC' LOCATION

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

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

A BIBLICAL THEME

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

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

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

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

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

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

IN MESSIANIC TIMES

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

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

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

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

The following table reviews this contrasting parallel:

MIGDAL BAVEL	BET HA'MIKDASH
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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'Btarim [*15:13-19]
16:1-16	The birth of Yishmael
17:1-14	Brit Milah [*17:7-8]
17:15-27	The promise of the birth of Yitzchak [*17:19]

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

THE FIRST HITGALUT - BECOMING GOD'S NATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FIRST 'SPLIT'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let's explore that possibility.

LIKE NEPHEW LIKE SON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LEAVING AVRAHAM OR LEAVING GOD?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BRIT BEIN HA'BSTARIM - THE FIRST COVENANT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is the meaning of this question?

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

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

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

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

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

NOT IN YOUR LIFETIME!

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

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

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

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

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

A PROOF FROM VA'EYRA

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

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

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

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

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

LAND - FOR A PURPOSE

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

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

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

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

THE BIRTH OF YISHMAEL

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

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

BRIT MILAH

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

- 1) The significance of "brit milah" on the 'eighth day' was discussed at length in our shiur for Shmini Atzeret (sent out a few weeks ago/ see TSC archive for Parshat Tazria).
- 2) The thematic connection between "brit milah" and "brit bein ha'btarim" was discussed in our shiur for Chag ha'MATZOT and on Parshat Bo and on MAGID.
- 3) The meaning the borders of the Land of Israel as detailed in "brit milah" (and "brit bein ha'btarim") was discussed in our shiur on Parshat Masei (see archive).

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

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

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

Parshat Lech Lecha: Trust in Training

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

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

AVOID DISAPPOINTMENT: LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS!

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

A FEW GOOD MEN:

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

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

AVRAHAM: THE FIRST TO PASS:

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

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

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

BEREISHIT 15:1-18 --

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOW FOR SOME ANSWERS:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:

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

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

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

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

THE CIRCUMCISION COVENANT:

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

BEREISHIT 17:1-14 --

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom

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

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly, there is a broadening of the information provided:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 Avrahamic) migration. Why did the Torah introduce Lot in this fashion?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Where does Mo'av come from?

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

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

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

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

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

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

III. CHAPTERS 1-11: A BRIEF RECAP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

V. OLAM HESED YIBANEH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VI. AND THEY SEPARATED...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VII. BACK TO MEGILLAT RUTH...

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

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

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

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

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

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

VIII. ...AND BACK TO LOT

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

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

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

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