

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.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We mourn those of our people who have perished since attacks have resumed. May the IDF and the U.S. soon force Iran to seek peace, and may 5787 bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

After the generation of the flood, Hashem tells the people to spread across the land, be fruitful, and fill the earth. The people discover Shinar, decide that it is a nice place to live, create a city, and decide to make the city great. They invent bricks, hard as the stones that God had created for them, and decide to construct tall buildings to reach to the sky – so they can create compete with God and build a legacy for themselves. Hashem wants the people to create a great relationship with God and to obey his order to spread out and populate the earth. He therefore mixes up the languages of the people and makes it difficult for the people to communicate. God waits for a person who shares His values, someone with whom he can create a model nation. Avram appears at the end of parshat Noach, and the Torah now turns to the story of how a righteous man and his family start influencing the world toward a proper path.

How did Hashem know that Avram had the qualities that He was seeking? The people of Shinar sought to create a legacy for themselves by ignoring God's wishes, turning away from the rocks that God had created as building materials, and refusing to spread across the earth to populate the land. Avram's father, Terach, moved his family to the west, in the direction of Canaan. Avram's brother Haran died young. Avram and his brother Nahor married Haran's daughters, Sarai and Milcah. By marrying Haran's daughters, any children of Sarai and Milcah would carry on Hanan's legacy and would have the status of Haran's grandchildren (similar to what later became the laws of Levirate marriage). Instead of trying to create a legacy for himself, Avram focused on building a legacy for his deceased brother. Also, instead of staying in a city, Avram moved from place to place – and always called out in the name of Hashem. Before having any direct contact, Avram carried on the values of Hashem.

When God calls out to Avram (when he is 75 years old), God tells Avram to leave his father's family and to move to a place that He will show to Avram. Hashem tells Avram that following this path will bring him great blessings – especially by fulfilling Avram's greatest desire. God tells Avram that he will become the father of great nations – Hashem will be his God, Avram will have many descendants, and he will have a special land. Since Sarai has been unable to have any children, the promise of children and many descendants is the most important promise for Avram. Taking his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot, Avram sets off toward the land that God promises to show him.

As the story of Avraham and his family unfolds over the next several weeks, some of the Devrei Torah I have selected for this week discuss various aspects of Avraham's legacy. Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander discusses what to me is a shocking halakhic ruling from Rabbi Dov Lior, former chief rabbi of Kiryat Arba and Hebron. Rabbi Lior issued a halakhic ruling permitting Jews to harvest olives from Arab-owned groves throughout Judea and Samaria. This ruling would be shocking at any time, but especially as we start discussing the legacy of Avraham Avinu. Avraham and Torah values have always stood for honesty and property rights, for both Jews and non-Jews. In our parsha, Lot's shepherds encourage their cattle to graze on other people's pastures. Avraham would not be associated with such theft, so he tells Lot that they must

move away from each other. Lot decides to move east, near Sodom (city with the evilist people in the world). Avraham stays in the mountains, where the only water for the cattle comes from Hashem bringing rain. The Torah states explicitly that taking produce from another person's land is theft (ch. 13) – how could Rabbi Lior come out with a directly opposite halakhic ruling the same week that we read the proper ruling in the Torah?

As we explore Avraham's legacy, we shall shortly come to the Akeidah. Rabbi Ysoscher Katz struggles with Avraham's response to the Akeidah: *"As a parent, I find it difficult to imagine that drawing closer to God could require me to turn away from my children."* Rabbi Katz claims that our commitment to our children differs fundamentally from our obligation to our parents, that we cannot relinquish our obligations to the children whom we decided to bring into the world. We follow a God who never abandons His children, and we must not abandon our children either. The Akeidah has long troubled many Jews – look forward to more discussion in a few weeks.

Rabbi Mordechai Kemenetzky first discussed suicide moms in connection with Hagar in 1985. The willingness of Arab parents to sacrifice their children to kill Jews has been difficult for Jews to understand for three thousand years. We Jews have great difficulty accepting Avraham's behavior at the Akeidah – and we should have at least as much difficulty accepting the willingness of Arab parents to encourage and praise their children to give their lives to commit suicide if they can kill Jews. Three years after the horrible massacre that Hamas started and continued against our people in and around Gaza, the bloody reaction continues. What I find even more difficult to understand is that so many supposedly educated people throughout the world – even in the United States – claim that Hamas are the good guys and that the Israelis are the evil ones in this struggle. In the past three years, the world has become much more dangerous for Jews. Who would have thought that it would be dangerous for Jews to travel to most countries in Europe and to identify as Jews in many parts of the United States? How has the country where I have lived all my life come to a point where the largest political party puts forward blatantly anti-Semitic candidates for the Senate? How can it be that New York, the city with the largest number of Jews in any country, selects a strongly anti-Semitic mayor – one who continues to deliver hatred about Jews and Israel every week? Why is every leading candidate for President of the leading political party for 2028 advocating policies against Israel? How has the world – even in the United States – turned away from the legacy of Avraham Avinu?

Shabbat Shalom,

Alan & Hannah

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. 2026 has been an especially difficult year for AlephBeta.org, so please consider donating now.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeez Esther; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Rena Michal bat Sara, Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, 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.

Haftarat Parshat Lech Lecha: The Challenge to Avraham's Legacy

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander

President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone 5787 (2026)

Devrei Torah and Haftorah from Ohr Torah Stone this week are dedicated for a refuah shleimah for Maayan Leora bat Shlomit Feiga.

Our haftarah speaks enigmatically of the *“one from the east”* (Isaiah 41:2), whom God called forth to usher in a new age of justice and goodness. Our Sages identify this man as Avraham Avinu, the central figure of our parsha, who is referred to tenderly just a few verses later as *“Avraham, who loved Me”* (v. 8). As we read this week of Avraham's first steps into the land of Canaan, the haftarah reminds us that we return to this land as his heirs – inheriting his moral legacy along with the promised return. This week that legacy was challenged publicly, and I believe the challenge demands an answer.

In a letter published last week, Rabbi Dov Lior issued a halakhic ruling permitting Jews to harvest olives from Arab-owned groves throughout Judea and Samaria. His reasoning runs as follows: The Jewish people never despaired of the land. Since land cannot be stolen, it never left our ownership. The owners cannot reach their orchards for security reasons, so they must have despaired of the fruit. Any claim they had for planting the trees has long been repaid by the fruit they have eaten. He therefore concluded that harvesting their olives is permitted, and even meritorious, because it asserts our ownership and fulfills the mitzvah of conquering the land.

This stands in stark contrast to the message of our haftarah. I do not write this in the hope of changing the mind of the rabbi who wrote the letter. **I write out of responsibility to our youth, who are searching for direction. They must not mistake his letter for sound halakhic analysis; the opposite is true.** [emphasis added]

Chillul Hashem is not a matter of public relations. It concerns how our words and actions represent God's name in the world. *“Do not profane My holy name – that it may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelites.”* (Leviticus 22:32). **When our Torah is presented as permission to take a person's property simply because that person is not Jewish, it is made to stand against Torah values, distorting the very Torah it aims to uphold.**

Furthermore, the Ramban teaches that the technical rules of halakha cannot address every situation. The Torah therefore commands us to do *“what is right and what is good”* (Ramban on Devarim 6:18), insisting that Torah values must guide our conduct in complex situations, when the halakhic outcome is not always clear.

On the halakhic level, our people's eternal bond with the land and the mitzvah to settle it do not make every plot and parcel the collective property of the Jewish people. They do not strip non-Jewish residents of their property rights. The principle that land cannot be stolen is a rule within the laws of theft. It cannot be turned into proof of title to a particular plot. A long line of authorities, from Tosafot and the Meiri to Rav Kook and Rav Herzog, limit the prohibition of *lo techonem* (selling or renting land to non-Jews) to idolaters, and thus Christians and Muslims have the right to be landowners.

Abandonment (*ye'ush*) of the fruit cannot be presumed just because harvesting is difficult, and it certainly cannot be presumed when the IDF and Jewish volunteers stand ready to help the owners reach their trees. Above all, the halakha is explicit: it is forbidden to steal even the smallest amount, whether from a Jew or a non-Jew (Rambam, *Hilkhot Gezela Vaaveida* 1:2; Shulchan Arukh, *Choshen Mishpat* 359:1). The Tosefta goes further and calls theft from a non-Jew more severe, because it brings chillul Hashem (Tosefta *Bava Kama* 10:8).

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, the Netziv, in his introduction to *Bereshit*, writes that the *Avot* are called *yesharim*, the upright, because they treated the nations around them with care and love, including idolaters. Avraham even prayed on behalf of the people of Sodom and Amora, despite rejecting their ways. Avraham *“walked before God”* (Genesis 17:1). As the haftarah reminds us, he is *“one from the east”* who spread godliness through the world. Yet he also insisted on dealing fairly with the people who lived in the land before him.

Rashi explains that the quarrel between the shepherds of Avraham and the shepherds of Lot mentioned in our parsha was about exactly this. Lot's shepherds grazed their flocks in other people's fields, and Avraham's shepherds rebuked them for theft. Lot's men answered that the land had been promised to Avraham and that Lot was his heir. The Torah rejects that answer with a single clause: *“the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled then in the land”* (13:7; Rashi *ad loc.*). The promise was real, but it did not entitle anyone to take what belonged to others. The argument of Lot's shepherds has been revived in our day. The Torah long ago made clear which side of the argument it supports.

To be Avraham's children is to be ethical ombudsmen to the world. When words like Rabbi Lior's are presented as the voice of the Torah and of truth, we cannot remain silent. We must teach the next generation the Torah of Avraham: respecting our neighbors' property does not lessen our love for the land. It is how we live in the land according to the Torah,

and how we honor the legacy of our forebears and live up to the example they set: “You are My servant; You have I chosen, and I will not reject you” (Isaiah 41:9).

Shabbat Shalom.

* President and Rosh Yeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone.

[Ed. note: I hope that many readers are as shocked as I am at the “ruling” of Rabbi Dov Lior that seeks to justify theft as consistent with halacha – especially as we begin to read about the life, morals, and legacy of Avraham Avinu.]

<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-lech-lecha-rabbi-brander-5787/?pfstyle=wp>

Parshat Lech Lecha: Walk Towards Your Destiny

By Keren Epstein *

In the portion of Lech Lecha, we encounter Avraham Avinu — the first Jew and father of us all — for the first time. On a personal note, I feel a deep connection to this portion, particularly to the figures of Avraham and his wife, Sarah. They embody immense strength and resilience. What resonates with me most, though, is the opening command from God to Avraham:

“Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house to the land I will show you” (Bereshit 12:1).

This command marked the beginning of Avraham’s journey, and also the first of ten trials he would face. He wasn’t just instructed to leave his home and family; he was told to leave behind all that was familiar — his friends, city, and his homeland. When you reflect on this Divine command, its complexity and difficulty become even clearer.

This is why Lech Lecha resonates so deeply with me. As a new olah myself, I, too, left behind my home, friends, and country. I know firsthand how challenging such a transition can be — it is anything but easy! What amazes me most about Avraham’s story is that, unlike me, who knew where I was headed and why, Avraham didn’t receive a clear destination. God simply told him, *“go...to the land I will show you,”* without revealing where or what lay ahead. God didn’t promise success or comfort in this new land — He simply asked Avraham to trust Him fully. This kind of blind faith, this unwavering trust without any assurances, is nothing short of extraordinary.

Even after reaching Canaan, Avraham and Sarah’s struggles didn’t end. A severe famine struck, forcing them to flee to Egypt to survive. Yet despite these hardships, Avraham never questioned God’s plan. His steadfast belief that everything ultimately unfolds for the best remains a powerful source of inspiration.

Reflecting on Avraham’s story and the origins of our nation, it’s impossible not to see parallels with the challenges we face today in the Land of Israel. As the Jewish people endure hardship and war — fighting for our home and the land God promised to Avraham — there is so much to learn from the strength and faith of Avraham and Sarah. From the outset, life in this land was never easy. We came not because God promised comfort, but because He commanded us to do so. Trials, enemies, and even hunger were part of the journey, yet through it all, God remained present, guiding them step by step. Just as He was with Avraham, so He is with us today.

In much the same way that God acted with Avraham Avinu, so too does He act with us now. Despite the challenges we face, we must never forget — even for a moment — that God is always with us, just as He was with Avraham, our forefather, who believed with unwavering faith. Through the storms of uncertainty, our mission is to draw on that same faith, knowing that, like Avraham, we are not alone in this journey.

The Netivot Shalom offers another beautiful interpretation of the command “lech lecha” – “go!” He explains that the phrase means to walk toward one’s destiny — the mission and rectification of one’s soul in this world. This is what God

commanded Avraham — and, by extension, all of Am Yisrael: to fulfill the task assigned to us in this world, thus bringing about the soul's spiritual completion.

Each individual, like Avraham Avinu, must find his or her purpose in this world. We must ask: What does God want of me? What is my role here? Once discovered, he must leave everything behind and pursue that purpose fully.

In our time, Am Yisrael as a nation is moving toward its destiny. We are fighting an existential battle for our home, our holy land, for our future, and for our redemption. Every Jew is part of this story — part of this struggle. Each of us must ask ourselves: What is my role here? What is my purpose? What am I doing to move toward that goal and achieve it?

May we know better days for Am Yisrael, in Eretz Yisrael, with complete faith and trust in God!

* 2009 alumna of OTS's Spanish language Amlat Program for students from Latin America. She works as the educational consultant at Ulpanat Segula in Kiryat Motzkin.

<https://ots.org.il/keren-epstein-lech-lecha/>

Drasha: Parsha Lech-Lecha: Suicide Moms *

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky (1985)

For [many] 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.

Good Shabbos

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

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/drasha-5785-lechlecha/>

Abraham the Weaver

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2016, 2019

I have recently begun learning Midrash Tanchuma weekly with Rabbi Avi Weiss, and this week, I share some reflections on the two opening passages of Midrash Tanhuma to parashat Lekh Lekha.

In the middle of the first passage, the Midrash portrays a classic rabbinic image of Avraham as a devout Jew who kept every detail of the halakha:

We find with Avraham, that he was punctilious in observing the mitzvot and therefore he was called the beloved of God, as it is written, *"The seed of Avraham my beloved."*... Even *eruv tavshilin* was observed in the household of Avraham our father... God said to him, *"You are punctilious regarding my mitzvot and you are sitting among the idolaters?! Get out from their midst, 'Lekh lekha mei'artzekha...,'"* Go out from your land...

In this telling, Avraham kept not only the laws but did what was necessary to safeguard them, even adopting the practice of *eruv tavshilin* to protect the honor of Shabbat and Yom Tov. Avraham must leave his place of birth not to bring God's message to the world, but to extract himself from the corrosive influence of his surroundings so that he can fully observe the mitzvot.

Midrash Tanchuma precedes this description of Avraham with the following halakhic discussion:

Let our Master teach us: May a person accept the yoke of the kingdom of heaven (i.e. recite the Shema) when he is walking? ... It is forbidden for a person to accept upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven when he is walking. Rather, he must stand in one place... with fear, dread, trembling and sweating...and recite *"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One,"* ... and when he begins *"And you shall love [the Lord your God...]"*, if he wishes he may stand, or walk or sit...

The first verse of Shema expresses recognition of God as king and is rooted in fear of God – submission to God's will, awe and trembling of being in God's presence, and fear of transgressing God's commands. It is an act of standing still. Fear paralyzes; it roots you to your spot terrified of doing something wrong. When submission to God's will requires action, you take meticulous care to get everything exactly right.

This, says the Midrash, must be the starting point. Only after reaching this state may a person move on to *vi'ahavta*. Loving God propels movement; it drives a person to seek God at every moment, to find God in every mundane action, whether standing, sitting, walking, or driving a car. This is the love of God that Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev chose to see demonstrated by the wagon driver who davened mincha while changing the wheel of his wagon. *"Master of the Universe,"* he said, *"See how much your children love you! Even when their hands are filled with grease, they are thinking of you!"*

These two components – awe of God and love of God – complement each other. Love of God is nurturing, inspiring, and motivating. Love leads to grand gestures but not to a punctilious care of details. Fear of God brings about *dikduk bi'mitzvot* but it can freeze a person in place.

Avraham is the figure we identify most often with love of God, with movement – *lekh lekha* – with finding God everywhere and calling out in the name of God – *va'yikra bi'shem HaShem* (12:8, 13:4, 21:33, 22:14). This midrash reminds us of Avraham's other essential quality; it was fear of God, not love, that compelled Avraham to bind his son to the altar, *"For now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son, from Me."* (22:12).

The greatness of Avraham was found in the combination of these two traits. Love of God gave Avraham the confidence to argue with God in defense of the people of Sodom; fear of God made it acceptable for him to do so: *"Behold I have begun to speak to God, and I am yet dust and ashes"* (18:27). Fear of God brought about scrupulous observance of mitzvot; love of God names this scrupulousness an act of love, not slavish obedience. *"You find that Avraham was a punctilious in observing the mitzvot and therefore he was called the beloved of God..."* While Avraham exemplifies both traits, for this midrash it is fear of God that comprises his core characteristic and identity.

The second passage in Tanchuma draws a different picture:

Rav Berakhya opened, *"We have a little sister..."* (Shir HaShirim 8:8). To whom is the verse referring? To Avraham. For when Nimrod cast him into the furnace, he was little; God had not yet

performed miracles on his behalf. And why is he called a sister (achot)? Because he stitched / united (*eecha*) the world before God, like a person who rends a garment and then stitches it...

You find that Terach, Avraham's father, fashioned idols and would worship them. God said to Avraham, "*Lekh lekha mei'artzekha*," Get out of your land [and your birthplace and your father's house]."

In this passage, Avraham is one who is driven by love of God and seeks to spread the word of God throughout the world. As Rambam writes: The mitzvah to love God includes the directive to call to all people to serve God and to believe in God. For when someone loves another, he will sing the other person's praises and call others to love him as well... as we find by Avraham... as it says, '*The souls that they made (the people that they converted) in Haran*' (*Book of Mitzvot, Positive Mitzvah 3*).

Here Avraham is called achot, a sister, midrashically, a weaver. This echoes what we find in the Torah, where Avraham is described and describes himself frequently as an *ach*, a brother: "*Behold we are brothers*" (13:8), "*And they separated one man from his brother*" (13:11), "*Avraham heard that his brother was taken captive*" (14:14) and, of course, "*Please say that you are my sister*" (12:13).

Avraham is not out to conquer the world with the belief in a single God. In this midrash, he is not Avraham ha'Ivri, standing on one side with the rest of the world on the other. To see those who act or think differently as enemies to be vanquished is to be driven by fear. Rather, he is portrayed as *Avraham ha'Ach*, a person who sees everyone as members of his family, as potential partners, as people with whom to share his passion and whom to inspire. Avraham the brother dreams to unite people, to stitch them together with his love of God.

It was this love of God that drove Avraham to preach in the land of Nimrod and to be prepared to martyr himself for the God he believed in. But this love could not succeed in the land of his father. **He could not form a new family built on love of God, when his own father rejected all that he stood for, when his message was undercut from within his own house.** Hence, God instructs, *lekh lekha*, go to a new place where your message can be heard and you can truly transform the world. [emphasis added]

These two portraits of Avraham present two different aspects of a Jew's mission in this world: the first Avraham is the frum Jew, committed to his own practices and way of life; the second Avraham is the visionary seeking to create a universal Godly community. Both models are essential. In the aftermath of this election, we all need Avraham the weaver to unite us during these divisive days. If we continue to invoke an "us/them" narrative, to see those with whom we disagree as evil, we will only deepen the divide. At the same time, we cannot pretend and act as if we all are, or should be, the same. We need to also be the first Avraham, to value and deepen our own particularistic commitments and identity. And we need to respect this in others, even when those others have identities, commitments and values that differ significantly from our own. Our own rootedness, and that of others, will give us all the confidence and the strength to build a more global, universal community, seeking not to conquer one another, but to cherish our differences and to find the common ground that weaves us together, brothers and sisters before God.

From my archives.

Insights from Chassidic Tradition

Lech Lecha: What Faith Asks of a Parent

By Rabbi Ysoscher Katz *

At the beginning of this week's parsha, God tells Avraham, "*Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father's house.*" Avraham leaves his family, his community, and the world that shaped him.

His departure establishes a demanding religious principle: sometimes one's values must take precedence over one's kin. Familial commitments cannot always determine the convictions we hold or the lives we choose to lead.

But as Avraham's story unfolds, this principle seems to extend beyond its original circumstances. Having left his father's home to follow God, he will come to relinquish his own children in service of a higher calling.

As the arc of his story continues in next week's parsha, Avraham expels Yishmael at God's instruction and later prepares to sacrifice Yitzchak. The religious demand changes, but the underlying assumption remains: even our closest familial relationships must yield to God's will.

This is where I struggle with Avraham's story. Leaving one's parents to follow God and relinquishing one's children cannot be justified on the same grounds. Choosing our own religious path does not release us from responsibility for the children we brought into the world. As a parent, I find it difficult to imagine that drawing closer to God could require me to turn away from my children. [emphasis added]

Indeed, the Zohar and talmidei ha-Baal Shem Tov emphatically reject the idea that devotion to God can justify abandoning one's children. The Zohar voices that criticism in startling language.

As father and son walk toward the altar, Yitzchak asks where the animal for the offering is. Avraham answers that God will provide. The Torah introduces his answer with "Avraham said." Why, the Zohar asks, does it not say "his father said"?

Its answer is harsh: "It does not say, *'His father said,'* because he was not standing toward him as a father; rather, he was in conflict with him" (Zohar I, 120a).

At that moment, Avraham is no longer acting as Yitzchak's father. His willingness to sacrifice his son has displaced the paternal relationship. The Torah's wording registers that loss: the man answering Yitzchak is called Avraham, without the designation "his father." [emphasis added]

The Zohar seems to be criticizing Avraham here. In preparing to sacrifice his son, he has failed him as a father. His willingness to obey God does not shield him from that criticism. Strikingly, the Zohar finds the criticism in the Torah itself: God's own word withholds the designation "his father."

The lesson of Lech Lecha, then, has its limits. **Our commitment to our children differs fundamentally from our obligation to our parents.** Leaving the home into which we were born and sending a child away from the home we created carry very different moral weight. [emphasis added]

Our parents chose to have us; we had no say in the matter. We owe them gratitude and respect, but we are not unequivocally indentured to them. If our conscience leads us elsewhere, we may have to follow it.

Not so with our offspring. Since we chose to bring them into this world, we assume a responsibility we cannot simply relinquish. Their presence may complicate our faith and hinder our spiritual growth. They may challenge our values or choose lives we struggle to understand. None of that releases us from being their parents. We do not cut ties with them.

The Haggadah, read through a Chassidic lens, likewise insists that religious devotion cannot come at our children's expense.

At the seder, the Haggadah describes the *ben harasha*, the wicked child, as excluding himself from the community by asking, "What is this service to you?" To you, rather than to us. It instructs us to respond sharply: "knock out his teeth," and tell him, had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.

For years, I struggled mightily with this passage. He is sitting at our table, asking his question, however provocatively. Are we really supposed to respond so harshly and tell him that there is no place for him?

Eventually, this passage was redeemed for me by a teaching of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The crucial word, he explains, is *שם*, "there." There, in Egypt, before Mattan Torah, this child would not have been redeemed. After Sinai, however, our

relationship with God is irrevocable. God addressed each of us personally: *"I am the Lord your God."* That bond cannot be severed. Even the ben harasha will ultimately be redeemed.

The rebuke remains, but it must convey the certainty of his belonging: even as we challenge what he says, we refuse to give up on him. Whatever he says about his relationship with God and the Jewish people, he cannot undo it.

We might imagine that receiving Torah would make belonging more conditional: now there are commandments to observe, expectations to meet. Yet the Rebbe finds in Mattan Torah the assurance that the bond endures even when those expectations go unmet.

That spiritual claim has profound consequences for parenthood. Our children's place in our lives cannot depend on their religious choices. Their bond with God reaches deeper than the beliefs they articulate or the practices they observe. Our responsibility is to remain their parents while we struggle with those differences.

Lech Lecha teaches us that serving God may require leaving our parents' home. But the Torah we received at Sinai binds us to a God who does not relinquish His children. Invoking our closeness to God as a reason to abandon our own children misunderstands the relationship we seek to deepen. Our faithfulness to God must include an enduring commitment to them.

* Chair of the Talmud Department and the Director of the Lindenbaum Center for Halakhic Studies, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Bronx, NY.

<https://library.yct Torah.org/2026/10/lech-lecha-what-faith-asks-of-a-parent/>

Blessings and Curses: Thoughts for Parashat Lekh Lekha

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

"And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing. And I will bless those that bless you and curse the one who curses you; and through you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Bereishith 12: 2-3).

God makes a lofty promise to Abram, assuring him that he will influence humanity in wonderful ways. His teachings will be a source of blessing to all the families of the earth. But God adds a caveat: He will bless all who bless Abram and will curse anyone who curses Abram. Question: since Abram (later to be renamed Abraham) will be the epitome of righteousness and blessing, why would anyone want to curse him?

God, in his infinite wisdom, knows human nature. No matter how good or wise a person is, there will always be detractors. Some are jealous; some are malicious; some are egotists who despise anyone who seems to surpass them in any way. God informs Abraham from the outset: you will do great things but you will also attract enemies who curse you. The road to greatness is not smooth. Many will appreciate you but others will do their best to defame you and block your way. They will curse you, spread lies about you, challenge your teachings, threaten you and your followers. Don't be deterred. God will curse those who curse you — but what will this curse be?

I suggest that the curse is included in the very passage cited above: God will curse the curser when it is realized that through Abraham *"all the families of the earth will be blessed."* The curser will become increasingly miserable and bitter as Abraham succeeds. With every blessing Abraham receives, the curser is stung with envy and anger. It is an immense curse to have hatred and jealousy at the center of one's life. Instead of living lovingly and generously, one suffers from a syndrome of internal decay.

God's promises to Abraham have been fulfilled in many ways. Abraham's descendants — the people of Israel — have been a remarkable source of blessing to humanity. The Hebrew Bible has vastly shaped western civilization. Individual Jews throughout history have provided humanity with vital insights in morality, science, literature, commerce, the arts etc. Although Jews are a minute fraction of humanity, the number of Jewish Nobel Prize winners and other top thinkers is

astounding. (Google reports that Jewish individuals account for approximately 22% of all Nobel Prize winners globally since 1901, despite making up less than 0.2% of the world's population. 36-37% of American Nobel Prize winners are of Jewish ancestry, although Jews are about 2% of the American population.) The Jews of the State of Israel have created a dynamic democracy. Although a tiny nation (around 10 million people out of a world population of around 9 billion!), Israel is a world leader in technology, agriculture, defense, medicine and so many other fields.

But as God foretold to Abram, there will always be cursers and haters who seek to diminish your achievements, undermine your teachings, and seek to destroy you. The cursers will indeed be cursed: their lives will be poisoned by hatred and envy, lies and self-destruction.

Those who bless Abraham will be blessed. They will live wholesome lives dedicated to righteousness and goodness. While the cursers stew in their jealousy and malice, the blessers will enjoy loving, generous lives.

God's promises to Abram were true then. They are true today.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Lekh Lekha: Abraham and Sarah's Laughter

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel *

When God promises Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son in their old age, both respond with laughter. Their reactions appear remarkably similar, yet God responds to them differently. Abraham receives reassurance, while Sarah is challenged for her apparent disbelief. Why does God treat their seemingly identical reactions so differently?

When God informs Abraham that Sarah will bear a son, the Torah relates: Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, *"Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"* And Abraham said to God, *"O that Ishmael might live by Your favor!"* God said, *"Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac"* (Genesis 17:17–19).

In the following chapter, Sarah overhears the promise that she will bear a son: And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, *"Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment, with my husband so old?"* Then the Lord said to Abraham, *"Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?"* (Genesis 18:12–14).

Both Abraham and Sarah laugh, expressing astonishment that they could have a child at such advanced ages. Yet God does not explicitly criticize Abraham, whereas Sarah's laughter elicits a divine rebuke. Classical commentators offer several approaches to this striking discrepancy.

Onkelos distinguishes between the two instances of laughter. He translates Abraham's laughter as *va-hadei*, indicating joy, while rendering Sarah's laughter as *ve-haykhat*, suggesting laughter expressing disbelief. According to this approach, Abraham rejoiced at God's promise, whereas Sarah doubted its fulfillment. Rashi and Ramban similarly distinguish between the intentions underlying their laughter. Although the Torah employs the same Hebrew verb in both accounts, their emotional and spiritual responses were fundamentally different.

Targum Yerushalmi, however, translates both instances of laughter with forms of the same verb, *tamah*, expressing astonishment. Ibn Ezra and Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann likewise understand Abraham and Sarah as reacting with wonder to the extraordinary promise. This interpretation preserves the close parallel between the biblical accounts, but it leaves the central difficulty unresolved: If both expressed essentially the same astonishment, why did God rebuke Sarah but not Abraham?

Rabbi Saadyah Gaon offers a different solution. He maintains that Abraham, no less than Sarah, demonstrated insufficient faith in God's promise. However, God's rebuke of Sarah was intended to address Abraham indirectly as well. By challenging Sarah's incredulity in Abraham's presence, God indirectly rebuked Abraham as well, enabling him to recognize his own failing without confronting him explicitly. Midrash HaGadol and several later commentators adopt this approach.

This interpretation has a particular advantage: It preserves the similarity between Abraham's and Sarah's reactions while explaining how both were subject to divine criticism. Nevertheless, it raises a further question. Why would God spare Abraham the embarrassment of a direct rebuke while openly challenging Sarah? Indeed, God addresses Abraham when questioning Sarah's laughter, making the difference in their treatment all the more conspicuous.

Each interpretation illuminates an important dimension of the narrative, but each also encounters difficulties. Onkelos explains God's different responses by distinguishing between two forms of laughter, although the biblical text uses the same verb. Targum Yerushalmi preserves the parallel between Abraham and Sarah but struggles to explain God's different reactions. Rabbi Saadyah Gaon offers an ingenious reconciliation, yet his interpretation raises questions of its own.

The account of Abraham and Sarah's laughter thus illustrates an essential principle of biblical interpretation. Genuine textual difficulties do not always lend themselves to definitive resolution. The classical commentators offer thoughtful and compelling explanations, but the text does not provide sufficient evidence to determine conclusively which approach is correct. Recognizing the strengths and limitations of each interpretation is itself an important part of studying the Torah with intellectual honesty and humility.

* National Scholar, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and faculty of Yeshiva University for many years. Rabbi Angel is a prolific scholar who speaks frequently at many venues.

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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>

What Did the Neighbors Say?

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shleima for Cholei Yisroel

Our father Avraham was seventy-five when G-d gave him the directive to travel to what would become the land of Israel. Until then, he was doing his best to live and teach according to his beliefs in an Almighty G-d. Surely, Avraham had made some local impact. The directive to travel caught him by surprise. But he and his loyal wife Sara accepted the directive and prepared for the journey to an unknown future. The question that I would like to pose is: What did the neighbors say?

In my mind's ear, I can hear the local women clucking their tongues about the decision to move on. "We have such nice parks here for them to enjoy in their retirement," one lady would say. "Such a nice couple," another would chime in. "To think that they don't know anything about where they are going." No, I don't think the neighbors could identify with the decision of Avraham and Sara. Life was pleasant enough without change. Yet, G-d told them that their true destiny still beckoned. And so, they packed their bags, wished their neighbors well, and went on to their destiny to create the Jewish people.

What strikes me is that, with perfect hindsight, the scene is nothing short of comical. Avraham and Sara presumably were viewed as odd for moving on, while those who stayed were viewed as normal. But those neighbors who "knew it all" and were full of news and commentary, are relegated to the dustbins of history, while Avraham and Sara were able to achieve eternal meaning.

Often in life, we hesitate to make decisions because we are concerned about what other people will think. It could be as simple as, "Should I light chanukah candles?" or "Should I build a succah?" or as significant as, "Who should I marry?" or "What community should I live in?" Whatever you decide, it will be analyzed by neighbors, friends and relatives. News and commentary will abound. But ultimately it is you and your family who will have to live with the decisions that you make.

The lesson of Avraham and Sara is not only about where they went. The lesson of Avraham and Sara is also about what they were willing to leave behind. At the time of a fateful decision, some wonder what their friends will say. But their way may be the road that you do not choose to take. And, a few years down the road, they will have to live with their decisions, and you will live with yours. May our decisions be like those of Avraham and Sara, and may we be happy people indeed.

For Family Discussion:

- Is there a difference between ignoring the neighbors and ignoring good advice? How can you tell whether a voice is wise counsel or just noise?
- Avraham had already been living and teaching his beliefs, yet G-d still told him his destiny "still beckoned." What might that mean for us when life feels settled and comfortable?

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos.

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of over 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi

Lech Lecha -- The Key to Living Inspired

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2022

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From my archives.

* Rav at Sha'arei Tefilla and the co-founder of the RI Torah Network in Providence, Rhode Island. For several years, Rabbi Singer was the Rabbi at Am HaTorah Congregation in Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer's recent Devrei Torah normally

come as podcasts rather than texts.

Messages from and About Israel

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

To be a Jew **

By Talia Laniado [invited guest author] (October 2023) ***

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

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

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

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

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

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

To be Jewish is to be a moving target.

And yet.

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

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

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

* Senior Rabbi, Congregation Ramath Orah (New York, NY); Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Previously, 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 include Hebrew text, which I must delete

because of issues changing software formats. Rabbi Ovadia retains all rights (copyright) to this and all other Devrei Torah that he permits me to share.

A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz *

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation **

We are very excited to welcome our new shlichim, Nadav and Hodaya Pearl, to our community! We look forward to seeing everyone come and give them a warm welcome.

We will also have a beautiful sponsored Kiddush, with Rebbetzin Avital speaking about aliyah. There will be plenty of food, so come hungry and help us finish it!

In this week's Parasha, we meet Avraham Avinu, the first Jew in the world. The Midrash tells us that Avraham saw that the world was lit and asked, "Who is the owner of this world?" It's a little like looking at a beautifully lit building and asking, "Who turned on the lights?"

President Ronald Reagan once described an idea of preparing a massive feast, inviting atheists, and asking them whether they believe there is a chef who made the food, or whether the food simply created itself. But what I find fascinating about the Midrash is that the word lit has two completely opposite meanings. It can mean that the world is glowing with beauty, or that the world is literally on fire. Perhaps both are the same question. Whether we look around and see a world filled with beauty, or a world that seems to be burning, we should be asking the same thing: Who is the Master of this world?

May we always merit to see the beauty in the world, and to do our part to bring more light into it.

B'ahavat Yisrael,
Rabbi Netanel

[Ed.:] On Simchat Torah, the AHC shlichim, Roni and Ariel, Tomer and Arbel HaCohen, said good-bye to the shul after three special years in Auckland, as they return home to Israel. Roni and Ariel left Israel for New Zealand on October 8, 2023 – almost immediately after one of the worst days in the history of our people – and quickly became a part of the AHC community. The new shlichim, Nadav, Hodaya and Tzur Pearl, have arrived in Auckland, and the community welcomes them this Shabbat.

The annual Kristallnacht Commemorative Concert in Auckland on November 10 will celebrate the extraordinary Holocaust survivors and refugees who found sanctuary in New Zealand and transformed the nation's classical music landscape.

* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is now Rabbi of the ACT Jewish Community in Canberra, the capitol city of Australia. I hope to be able to include his Torah insights soon.

** Rabbi Kaszovitz is now posting his Devrei Torah and classes on You Tube: <https://youtube.com/c/TheNairobisher> .

Rav Kook Torah

Lech Lecha: Father of Many Nations

Notarikon in the Torah

Abbreviations and acronyms are familiar features of rabbinic literature, but they are rare in the Torah itself. Even so, the Sages observed that a few examples of notarikon (Aramaic for 'acronym') are embedded within the Biblical text.

The first and clearest instance appears in the new name that God bestows upon Abram:

No longer shall you be called Abram. Your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of many nations. (Gen. 17:5)

With this change, God endowed Abram with a new identity and mission.

The name Avraham is short for av *hamon goyim*, "the father of many nations."

Yet the Talmud (Shabbat 105a) was not satisfied with this simple explanation. While the Torah presents Avraham as a syllabic abbreviation of av hamon, the Sages expanded it into a full notarikon. Each of the six Hebrew letters of av hamon (אָהֲמֹן) reveals a different facet of Abraham's spiritual stature and influence in the world:

Aleph for Av: you are a father to the nations.
Bet for Bachur: you are chosen among the nations.
Hei for Haviv: you are beloved among the nations.
Mem for Melech: you are a king over the nations.
Vav for Vatik: you are exemplary among the nations.
Nun for Ne'eman: you are faithful among the nations.
Of all the names in the Torah, why should Abraham's be an abbreviation? And why did the Sages choose to expand this abbreviation letter by letter?

Abraham's Dual Influence

It would be a mistake to regard a notarikon as merely a homiletic or mnemonic device. It is, rather, a window into levels of meaning in the text. In addition to a literal understanding of the words, there is a wealth of profound ideas contained within the written text. This is similar to the workings of an acronym, where from each letter we extrapolate an entire word.

What is striking is that the Sages chose the name Abraham for such an interpretation. Why this name, of all others?

Abraham's life-mission was to found the Jewish people. All three patriarchs, the Sages taught, are called "*Israel*" (Breishit Rabbah 63:3). This is because their primary goal was to establish a nation that would be a "*kingdom of priests and a holy nation*."

Yet Abraham's influence did not end there. He had a powerful impact on all nations, introducing a world steeped in idolatry to the idea of One God.

The Sages analyzed Abraham's influence, noting that it incorporated six qualities, corresponding to the six letters of av hamon.

Thus, like a notarikon, Abraham's influence was on two planes. His explicit life-goal was to establish a holy nation. But Abraham had an additional level of influence, as he disseminated the ideals of monotheism and morality among all peoples.

Six Dimensions of Abraham's Influence

Each letter of the phrase av hamon reveals a different facet of Abraham's influence on humanity.

He was an Av, a spiritual father and mentor to many people. Abraham was a source and model for true knowledge of God in the world.

His teachings were Bachur — chosen and pure, far removed from the jumble of pagan superstitions and myths. And because truth has a beauty of its own, his faith was Haviv — beloved. Its inner radiance drew hearts toward it; people felt its authenticity and were inspired by its moral grace.

Because of his stature and integrity, Abraham was revered as a Melech, a king. “*A prince of God are you among us*,” his neighbors told him (Gen. 23:6). Like a king on the battlefield, he led the fight for truth in a world shrouded in darkness and ignorance, victorious by virtue of the truth of his vision.

He was also Vatik, respected for his integrity and unwavering principles. His Torah was no abstract philosophy. It was a way of life, refining conduct and character alike, elevating the everyday through holiness, morality, and justice.

And finally, Abraham was Ne'eman, a man of steadfast faith. As the Torah records, “*He believed in God, and it was counted to him as righteousness*” (Gen. 15:6).

Abraham and his revolutionary faith kindled a nascent spark of faith among the nations. This flame of faith continues to illuminate the paths of many nations — a flame that will be elevated in the future into a pure and perfected faith in God.

(Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. IV, p. 264.)

https://ravkooktorah.org/lech_lecha_68

Lech Lecha: Journey of the Generations (5776, 5783)

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

Mark Twain said it most pithily:

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

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

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

But then comes the time, as we approach adulthood, when we have to learn to make our own way in the world. Those are the years of searching and in some cases, rebellion. They are what make adolescence so fraught. The Hebrew word for

youth – the root is n-a-r – has these connotations of ‘awakening’ and ‘shaking’. We begin to define ourselves by reference to our friends, our peer-group, rather than our family. Often there is tension between the generations.

The literary theorist Harold Bloom wrote two fascinating books, *The Anxiety of Influence* and *Maps of Misreading*,^[1] in which, in Freudian style, he argued that strong poets make space for themselves by deliberately misinterpreting or misunderstanding their predecessors. Otherwise – if you were really in awe of the great poets that came before you – you would be stymied by a sense that everything that could be said has been said, and better than you could possibly do. Creating the space we need to be ourselves often involves an adversarial relationship to those who came before us, and that includes our parents.

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

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

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

Perhaps it is only as we grow older that we are able to go back and read the story again, and realise the significance of the passage at the end of the previous parsha. It says this:

Terach took his son Avram, and his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Avram's wife, and together they set out from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan. But when they arrived at Harran, they settled there. Gen. 11:31

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

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

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

When we are young we hear the enchanting – indeed empowering – story of Abraham breaking his father’s idols, with its message that a child can sometimes be right and a parent wrong, especially when it comes to spirituality and faith. Only

much later in life do we hear the far deeper truth – hidden in the guise of a simple genealogy at the end of the previous parsha – that **Abraham was actually completing a journey his father began.** [emphasis added]

There is a line in the book of Joshua – we read it as part of the Haggadah on Seder night – that says:

In the past your ancestors lived beyond the Euphrates River, including Terach the father of Avraham and Nahor. They worshiped other gods. Joshua 24:2

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

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

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

FOOTNOTES:

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

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

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

Around the Shabbat Table (Questions to Ponder)

1. How are you similar to your parents, and how are you different?
2. Are you continuing the journey your parents began?
3. If Terach worshipped idols, why do you think it is important for Rabbi Sacks to suggest that Avraham was still influenced by him and continued his journey?

Because Likutei Divrei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, among other compilations, reprint columns by Rabbi Sacks for the current and last year, I select a different Dvar Torah from a different year.

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/lech-lecha/journey-of-the-generations/>

Who Wrote Adon Olam and How Did It Become So Famous?

By Yehuda Shurpin *

Despite there being no mention of the hymn in Talmudic times, Adon Olam ("Master of the World") is found in many prayer books, including those of the Ashkenaz, Sefard, and Yemenite communities.

In many communities, Adon Olam is recited at the beginning of the morning service, before Shacharit. But this was not always the case. In medieval times, it was customarily said on the night of Yom Kippur, and over the centuries it migrated to other parts of the prayers, so that practices now vary widely.

Some communities say it before Shacharit, while others say it after Shacharit or Maariv. Many Ashkenazic communities in Israel conclude the Friday night service with Adon Olam, whereas Sefardic and Yemenite communities conclude the Shabbat morning service with it instead. In the Babylonian tradition, it closes the Bakashot (the pre-dawn supplications), and some communities recite it around Selichot during Elul and the High Holidays. Moroccan Jews also customarily sang it before the bride was escorted to the chuppah.¹

So while it is always tempting to theorize that it became popularized due to well known singers and cantors putting it to catchy tunes, it is really the other way around.

To understand why this is, let us start with a bit of background.

What Is the Hymn About?

At a basic level, the hymn praises G d as the world's eternal Creator and Guide. He was, He is, and He will be. His greatness transcends the world and is entirely independent of it. It concludes with a declaration of our trust in Him, as we entrust our bodies and souls to His care, both when we go to sleep and when we awake.

Who Wrote It?

No one knows for certain, and several candidates have been proposed.

The hymn is often attributed to the poet Rabbi Shlomo ibn Gabirol (1021-1058),² but there is no solid evidence. It is not included in his works and its meter does not match his other compositions. On the other hand, the theme and even some of the words seem to be similar to those used in his philosophical works.³

Others attribute it to Rav Sherirah Gaon (c. 906 – c. 1006) or to Rav Hai Gaon (939-1038),⁴ and some, like Likkutei Mahariach in the name of Sefer HaTechiyah, trace it as far back as the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai.⁵ Still others suggest Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra,⁶ based on the poem's style and its first appearance in Western Europe.

Some write that the Babylonian Geonim instituted its recital on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in response to Christian claims about the Trinity.⁷

Earliest Extant Manuscript Mentioning Adon Olam

The earliest dated reference to Adon Olam in a liturgical work comes from 13th-century England. In *Etz Chaim*, a comprehensive code of Jewish liturgy completed in London in 1287 by Rabbi Yaakov ben Yehuda Hazzan, Adon Olam is listed as the hymn to be recited after the morning Aleinu on the fast of 9 Av.

Significantly, the author does not write out the text of the hymn but refers to it only by name. This suggests that it was already well known to the community and had been in use for some time.

Etz Chaim was completed just three years before King Edward I expelled the Jews of England in 1290. The manuscript survived and is preserved today in the Leipzig University Library.

Earlier versions of the hymn exist in a fragment from the Cairo Genizah and in a manuscript preserved at Oxford.⁸ Since neither is dated, however, it is impossible to say for certain whether they predate *Etz Chaim*.

This brings us back to the question of the importance of this prayer.

Why Did Adon Olam Become So Famous?

For starters, the 16th-century Matteh Moshe (by Rabbi Moshe of Premyslan) cites a tradition attributed to Rabbi Yehuda HaChassid, Rav Hai Gaon, and Rav Sherira Gaon:⁹ Those who recite Adon Olam with proper intent will have their prayers heard, and no adversary will be able to prosecute against them, even on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Some add that even their evil inclination will make peace with them, as King Solomon says:¹⁰ *“When a man’s ways please G d, even his enemies will make peace with him.”*¹¹

The Sixth Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, explains that this is the reason Adon Olam is the first hymn of praise we say in the morning.¹²

What Is So Special About It?

The Shulchan Aruch rules that when saying a blessing, one should have in mind the meaning of G d’s Name, both as it is read and as it is written.¹³

As it is pronounced, A-do-nai means *“Master of all.”* As it is written, Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh, it means that G d *“was, is, and will be.”*

Adon Olam expresses both these ideas. The three lines of its opening stanza reflect the three tenses of the Name:

Past: “Master of the world, Who reigned before any being was created.”

Present: “When all was made by His will, then His name was proclaimed King.”

Future: “And after all has ceased to be, He alone will reign in awe.”

Reciting Adon Olam before prayer was instituted so that this intent would remain fresh in one’s mind throughout the service.¹⁴ This is why the Geonim taught that whoever concentrates on Adon Olam at the beginning will have their prayers heard.

On a Deeper Level

The Kabbalists explain that the words Adon Olam [אֲדֹנָיִם] have the same numerical value (gematria) as *Ein Sof*, “the Infinite One” [אֵין סוֹף]. This alludes to G d’s infinite will, which existed before Creation. That it is only hinted at in the words suggests that in this world, the Infinite is concealed.¹⁵

About the line, “Master of the world, Who reigned before any being was created,” the Sixth Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, asks: There is a well-known principle that “there is no king without a people.” How, then, can G d be called King before there was anyone to rule over?

Based on the explanation of the Shelah, he answers that Adon Olam has the same numeric value as Ein Sof, which refers to G d’s very essence, beyond any level or category. Since the “reign” mentioned here is rooted in G d’s all-powerful essence, He can be King even without a people.¹⁶

The Future Revelation

This hymn also hints to the Future Redemption. Rabbi DovBer, the Second Rebbe, explains that the line, “And after all has ceased to be, He alone will reign in awe,” refers to the revelations of the Messianic era.¹⁷

May we experience it speedily in our days!

Footnotes:

1. It should be noted that Sefardic and Yemenite communities have a longer version of the hymn. Some suggest that part of the additional text belonged to the original poem, which, for whatever reason, never made it to the Ashkenazic and Italian prayer books, while other parts (or as others postulate, all of the extra parts,) were added at a later time.
2. See, for example, commentary Tikun Tefilah on Adon Olam in Siddur Otzar Hatefilot.
3. See Harvey, Warren Zev. "מלוע וודא" תא בתכ לוריבג נבא המלש 'ר מאה? Tarbiz, vol. 88, no. 1, 2021, pp. 57–72; Harvey, Warren Zev. "מלוע וודא' ג"בשר לע דוע", published independently online, July 2023, pp. 1–2.
4. See Rabbi Pinchos of Koretz, Imrei Pinchas, Shaar 3, 92. See also Mateh Moshe, 31 who quotes the Geonim discussing it. Va'Ani Tefilasi, vol. 1, p. 34.
5. Likutei Maharich, Adon Olam.
6. Kimelman, Reuven. (2019). The Poetics and Theology of Adon Olam.
7. See Rabbi Shlomo Shick, in Siddur Rashban, 19.
8. MS Oxford 1195.
9. Incidentally indicating that it comes from at least the geonic period.
10. Proverbs 16:7
11. Mateh Moshe, 31.
12. See Sefer Hamamarim 5703, p. 11.
13. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 5.
14. See Taamei HaMinhagim, sec. 29; Imrei Pinchas, Shaar HaTefillah, sec. 60.
15. Shelah, in his Siddur (Shaar HaShamayim), based on Pardes, Shaar Atzmut VeKelim, ch. 5. Elyah Rabbah 46:15. Mateh Moshe 31, citing the Geonim. Yaavetz, in his siddur (Beit Yaakov).
16. See Sefer Hamamarim 5703 pg. 10.
17. Ataret Rosh 8a.

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Lech Lecha: The Foundation of Jewish Education

By Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky *

Abraham said to G-d, *"If only Yishmael would live in awe of You."* (Gen. 17:18)

Yishmael was born under natural circumstances, whereas Yitzchak's birth was miraculous. Furthermore, Yishmael was circumcised at an age at which he could comprehend the significance of the act, whereas Yitzchak was circumcised as an infant, before his mind could grasp its importance.

Yishmael's birth and development followed a natural and logical order. His connection to G-d hinged on his own understanding. In contrast, Yitzchak's birth and development reflect the fact that his bond to G-d was immutable, transcending nature and reason.

G-d therefore told Abraham that Yitzchak, not Yishmael, would be the forebear of the Jewish people. Isaac's early life encapsulates the unique and eternal bond between G-d and the Jewish people.

Yitzchak's birth and upbringing serve as the model for Jewish education. A Jewish child should be raised from birth to live a G-dly, spiritual life. We must not wait idly for the children to grow up, hoping that they develop a commitment to Judaism on their own. As Yitzchak's life teaches us, the Jewish people's connection to G-d is entirely supra-natural and not bound by the limitations of human intellect. [emphasis added]

– From *Daily Wisdom* 3 *

* Insights by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on the weekly parashat from Chabad's *Daily Wisdom* 3 by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky.

Gut Shabbos.

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
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Volume 33, Issue 3

Shabbat Parashat Lech Lecha

5787 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Our Children Walk on Ahead

The call to Abraham, with which Lech Lecha begins, seems to come from nowhere: "Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father's house, and go to a land which I will show you."

Nothing has prepared us for this radical departure. We have not had a description of Abraham as we had in the case of Noah ("Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noah walked with God"). Nor have we been given a series of glimpses into his childhood, as in the case of Moses. It is as if Abraham's call is a sudden break with all that went before. There seems to be no prelude, no context, no background.

Added to this is a curious verse in the last speech delivered by Moses' successor Joshua:

And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the river (Euphrates), Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nachor; and they served other gods. Joshua 24:2

The implication seems to be that Abraham's father was an idolater. Hence the famous midrashic tradition that as a child, Abraham broke his father's idols. When Terah asked him who had done the damage, he replied, "The largest of the idols took a stick and broke the rest".

"Why are you deceiving me?" Terah asked, "Do idols have understanding?"

"Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying," replied the child. Bereishit Rabbah 38:8

On this reading, Abraham was an iconoclast, a breaker of images, one who rebelled against his father's faith.

Maimonides, the philosopher, put it somewhat differently. Originally, human beings believed in one God. Later, they began to offer sacrifices to the sun, the planets and stars, and other forces of nature, as creations or servants of the one God. Later still, they worshipped

them as entities – gods – in their own right. It took Abraham, using logic alone, to realise the incoherence of polytheism: After he was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. Day and night, he thought and wondered, how is it possible that this celestial sphere should be continuously guiding the world, without something to guide it and cause it to revolve? For it cannot move of its own accord. He had no teacher or mentor, because he was immersed in Ur of the Chaldees among foolish idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and he worshipped with them. He continued to speculate and reflect until he achieved the way of truth, understanding what was right through his own efforts. It was then that he knew that there is one God who guides the heavenly bodies, who created everything, and besides whom there is no other god. Maimonides, Laws of Idolatry 1:2

What is common to Maimonides and the Midrash is discontinuity. Abraham represents a radical break with all that went before.

Remarkably however, the previous chapter gives us a quite different perspective: These are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot . . . Terah took Abram 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 together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran. Gen 11:27-32

The implication seems to be that far from breaking with his father, Abraham was continuing a journey Terah had already begun.

How are we to reconcile these two passages? The simplest way, taken by most commentators, is that they are not in chronological sequence. The call to Abraham (in Gen. 12) happened first. Abraham heard the Divine summons, and communicated it to his father. The family set out together, but Terah stopped halfway, in Haran. The passage recording Terah's death is placed before Abraham's call, though it happened later, to guard Abraham from the accusation that he failed to honour his father by leaving him in his old age (Rashi, Midrash).

Yet there is another obvious possibility. Abraham's spiritual insight did not come from nowhere. Terah had already made the first tentative move toward monotheism. Children complete what their parents begin.

Significantly, both the Bible and rabbinic tradition understood divine parenthood in this way. They contrasted the description of Noah ("Noah walked with God") and that of Abraham ("The God before whom I have walked", Gen. 24:40). God Himself says to Abraham "Walk ahead of Me and be perfect" (Gen. 17:1). God signals the way, then challenges His children to walk on ahead.

In one of the most famous of all Talmudic passages, the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Metzia 59b) describes how the Sages outvoted Rabbi Eliezer despite the fact that his view was supported by a Heavenly Voice. It continues by describing an encounter between Rabbi Natan and the Prophet Elijah. Rabbi Natan asks the Prophet: What was God's reaction to that moment, when the law was decided by majority vote rather than following that Heavenly Voice? Elijah replies, "He smiled and said, 'My children have defeated Me! My children have defeated Me!'"

To be a parent in Judaism is to make space within which a child can grow. Astonishingly, this applies even when the parent is God (Avinu, "our Father") Himself. In the words of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik: "The Creator of the world diminished the image and stature of creation in order to leave something for man, the work of His hands, to do, in order to adorn man with the crown of creator and maker." Halachic Man, p. 107

This idea finds expression in halachah, Jewish law. Despite the emphasis in the Torah on honouring and revering parents, Maimonides rules: Although children are commanded to go to great lengths [in honouring parents], a father is forbidden to impose too heavy a yoke on them, or to be too exacting with them in matters relating to his honour, lest he cause them to stumble. He should forgive them and close his eyes, for a father has the right to

By David Abrams
in commemoration of
the 13th Yahrzeit of Cynthia Abrams, z'l,
4 MarCheshvan 5787

By Sari and Russell Mayer, Avi, Atara and
Arella, on the occasion of the 24th yahrzeit
(13 Marcheshvan) of Sari's mother,
Mrs. Rita M. Walker, z'l, (Rivka bas Reuven)

forgo the honour due to him. Hilchot Mamrim 6:8

The story of Abraham can be read in two ways, depending on how we reconcile the end of chapter 11 with the beginning of chapter 12. One reading emphasises discontinuity: Abraham broke with all that went before. The other, continuity: Terah, his father, had already begun to wrestle with idolatry. He had set out on the long walk to the land which would eventually become holy, but stopped halfway. Abraham completed the journey his father began.

Perhaps childhood itself has the same ambiguity. There are times, especially in adolescence, when we tell ourselves that we are breaking with our parents, charting a path that is completely new. Only in retrospect, many years later, do we realise how much we owe our parents – how, even at those moments when we felt most strongly that we were setting out on a journey uniquely our own, we were, in fact, living out the ideals and aspirations that we learned from them. And it began with God Himself, who left - and continues to leave - space for us, His children, to walk on ahead.

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 father’s 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 (See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry, 1, 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

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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” (Gen. 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 parsha, 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” (Gen. 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.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Avram Was the First to Call the Almighty "Adon Olam"

The Gemara says (Brachos 7b) that from the time the world was created, no one used the term "adon" (master) until Avram came along and called the Almighty "Adon," as it is written "And he said, 'Ado-shem 'how will I know that I will inherit it?'" (Bereshis 15:8). The Maggid of Vilna wrote a Chumash commentary called *Ishei Yisrael*. The Maggid of Vilna raised the question, why do the morning prayers begin with the recital of "Adon Olam" (Master of the World)? (Many of us only begin the morning prayers with Adon Olam on Rosh Hoshana and Yom Kippur; however, in virtually all siddurim, Adon Olam is printed right at the beginning of every day's morning prayers.)

The Maggid of Vilna answered his question by citing a Gemara in *Maseches Tamid* (30a): The morning Tamid offering was slaughtered as early as possible. The Gemara says that when the approximate time for slaughtering the Korban Tamid arrived, the person in charge sent a designated individual to check on the status of the sky. When the time arrived, the designated person proclaimed "Bar-ka-ee" (indicating that the time had arrived). At that point, the person in charge asked: "Has the eastern sky lit up all the way to Chevron?" (which is southwest of Yerushalyim, so the sun usually rises later there). If the answer was in the affirmative, the shechting (ritual slaughter)

of the Tamid would proceed. Now, if the sun had already risen in Yerushalyim, why was it important that the sky also be illuminated all the way to Chevron? The answer is that as we start the avodas hayom (daily service) in the Beis Hamikdash, we want to invoke the zechus avos (patriarchal merit) of those who are buried in Chevron.

The Maggid of Vilna says that it is for a similar reason that we begin Shacharis with the words "Adon Olam," because it was Avraham who first called the Ribono shel Olam by the name Adon. Therefore, to invoke his memory, we begin our prayers by invoking the title "Adon Olam".

The 'Pere Adam' Is a Worse Adversary than the Four Animals Mentioned in Doniel

One of the recurring themes of Sefer Bereshis is that the actions of the Avos foreshadow the actions of their offspring (Ma'aseh avos siman l'banim). This is almost a scary idea. In effect, Sefer Bereshis is the blueprint for what is going to happen to the Jewish people throughout the millennia. The incidents we read about that we may think are insignificant or esoteric make a profound difference on all of Jewish history.

Parshas Lech Lecha is a prime example of the import and the impact that Sefer Bereshis has on Klal Yisrael.

Rabbeinu Bechaye (1255-1340) was a "Rishon" (an early commentator). In Bereshis 21:14, he states that there is no nation in the world who hates the Children of Israel more than the descendants of Yishmael. Much of the tzoros that we suffer today are the result of things that happened in Parshas Lech Lecha.

For example, in perek 16 pasuk 5-6, Avram took Hagar as a concubine, she became pregnant, and then became disrespectful towards Sora. Avram, therefore, gave Hagar back to Sora and allowed her to do whatever she wished with the concubine. The pasuk says that Sora oppressed her and Hagar fled from her presence.

The Ramban writes that (on a level that is probably imperceptible to us) our matriarch committed some level of aveira (sin) by this oppression of Hagar. Avram was also guilty for allowing it to happen. Hashem therefore heard the cry of Hagar and gave her a son who became a "pereh adam" (wild man), who would torture the children of Avram and Sora with all types of torture.

The suffering that occurred, and continues to occur, at the hands of the Bnei Yishmael began in Parshas Lech Lecha when Sora sent away Hagar, her husband's concubine. According to the Ramban, the punishment for this aveira

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was the suffering Hagar's son caused throughout the generations to the offspring of Avraham and Sora.

This is an example of "Ma'aseh avos siman l'banim." What Avraham and Sora did has an effect to this very day. A second example of this phenomenon appears in perek 17 pasuk 18. The Ribono shel Olam comes to Avraham Avinu and tells him that he would have a son from Sora. Avraham's almost immediate response was "Lu Yishmael yichyeh l'fanecha." Rashi interprets: Halevai that Yishmael should live. In other words, Avraham gave a Bracha to Yishmael that he should live. Those words infused Yishmael with the 'kochos' that he has to this very day. Now clearly, Avraham did not mean that Yishmael's descendants should torment Yitzchak and his descendants until the end of time, but those words, spoken innocently, foreshadowed and to some extent determined the situation we are in today.

Rav Elya Svei, zt"l, quotes Rav Mendel Kaplan, zt"l, who used to often quote a Zohar (Chelek 2 32:1), which explicitly supports this idea that our suffering at the hands of Yishmael is a direct result of Avraham's prayer "Lu Yishmael yichyeh l'fanecha."

There is a third incident in Parshas Lech Lecha that has profound influence until this very day. The Ribono shel Olam gave Avraham the mitzvah of milah. Avraham circumcised himself at the age of 99 and he circumcised his son Yishmael when the latter was 13 years old. The Zohar states "Woe to the world that Yishmael was born and that he had bris milah." This, says the Zohar, is what gives him a "yad" (hand; handle) in Eretz Yisrael.

As a result of the combination of these three incidents: Sora sending out Hagar, Avram saying "Lu Yishmael yich-yeh l'fanecha," and Avram circumcising Yishmael, we are suffering at the hands of the Bnei Yishmael.

But perhaps the scariest of all is what Rav Chaim Vital (1542-1620) writes. Rav Chaim Vital was the premier disciple of the Ari z"l. Rav Chaim Vital writes that because Yishmael was the son of Avraham Avinu and he had been circumcised, he is called a 'pere adam'. This is contrasted with our other exiles (as enumerated in the book of Doniel) where the nations who ruled over us are all compared to animals. In addition to the Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman exiles alluded to in the book of Doniel by their animal representations, there is a fifth exile, the exile of Yishmael, which is the exile we are currently experiencing. The reason why it is the worst of the exiles is because the world power behind this exile is not compared to an

animal, it is compared to a person ('pere adam'). That makes it much worse!

Rav Chaim Vital continues by interpreting a pasuk in Tehillim – Chapter 124:2 “–If not for the fact that Hashem was with us, b'kum aleinu adam (when an adam rose against us).” Who is this adam? This refers to Yishmael, the 'pere adam. 'Dovid Hamelech, in much of the Shir HaMa'alos, is referring to the time of the future redemption. When Dovid says, “If not for the fact that Hashem is with us when an adam rises against us, they would swallow us alive...” this refers to Yishmael, the 'pere adam', whose evil intentions and actions we know so well.

When we look around the world and look at what has been happening in Eretz Yisrael for the last 75+ years, when we look around the world in general and look at what has been happening with Jihad and Islamic fundamentalism, the great powers of the world are thinking “We will have this peace plan or that peace plan...” However, they are spinning their wheels in vain. What is transpiring is not just the typical disputes between countries, which can be solved with peace proposals. This is an epic battle – a battle until the end. This is a battle that won't be won until the coming of Moshiach.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Every single one of us can do extraordinary things. In Parshat Lech Lecha we are told about the very first occasion on which a person was taken hostage, when Lot was captured. Abraham, his uncle, realised that he needed to be rescued and so the Torah tells us that Abraham mobilised every single person within his household – altogether three hundred and eighteen men – and together they went to Damascus, and they achieved their goal of rescuing Lot.

There is a fascinating Rashi on this. Rashi hardly ever resorts to Gematria, the numerical equivalent of words in the Torah but on this occasion he does, and he tells us that the name of Eliezer – who was the chief steward of Abraham's household – in Gematria, is equal to three hundred and eighteen. Therefore, Rashi suggests that actually, there was just one person who rescued Lot – it was Eliezer.

I find this quite amazing, because the Torah spells out for us that there were three hundred and eighteen, so why resort to Gematria to say there was only one person?

And I think that the message of our Torah must be as follows. Of course, there were three hundred and eighteen people, but, each one of them took it upon themselves at the time to do their utmost to achieve the goal of rescuing Lot. And therefore, the success of the mission

is ascribed to each individual person.

I believe that this is exactly what we have seen over the past two years. Ever since that black day of Shmini Atzeret, the 7th of October 2023, when over two hundred and fifty people were taken hostage. So many people right around the world, in their individual capacities took on the responsibility to do something. We have seen amazing efforts; demonstrations, vigils, protests, davening, Tehillim, adopting families of hostages, meeting world leaders – the list is endless. Ordinary people came to the fore and they said, I want to do something.

And, if we are going to give thanks to one leader, it must be to President Donald Trump. Thank God for his efforts in facilitating and arranging what has transpired. But ultimately, it has been a joint effort of individuals – thousands upon thousands of individuals, in Israel and throughout the diaspora, each one doing whatever he or she could do. And the result is that, thank God, at long last, we have seen most of the hostages come back home.

So, from this remarkable Rashi, let us never forget the lesson that each one of us can move mountains to achieve the unachievable. Together in partnership with Hashem, the sky is the limit.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

The Unique Virtue of the Land of Israel Rabbi Jhonathan Yeffet

Every year, the Israeli education system marks Aliyah Day, which coincides with the aliya of Avraham Avinu to the Land of Israel, following God's command: “Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you” (Bereshit 12:1).

The Midrash in Bereshit Rabbah portrays Avraham's journey toward the unknown as one of continuous exploration and examination:

“And Avram went as the Lord had spoken to him. 'Rabi Levi said: When Avraham was traveling through Aram-Naharayim and Aram-Nachor, he saw people eating, drinking, and behaving frivolously. He said, 'May I have no share in this land. 'When he reached the Ladder of Tyre (Sulam Tzur), he saw people weeding when it was time to weed, and hoeing when it was time to hoe. He said, 'May my portion be in this land. 'The Holy One blessed be He, said to him: 'To your descendants I will give this land.'”

The Midrash describes Avraham walking through the world, wondering at each place whether this was the land to which God had sent him. It also reveals that Avraham had preferences — lands he hoped would not be the destined one. As he observed the work of

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the local farmers, he used their labor as a measure for the worthiness of the land.

When Avraham reached the northern border of the Land of Israel, the Ladder of Tyre, he was deeply impressed by the diligence of the farmers. There, seeing them laboring with precision and care, he hoped this would be the promised land.

What so impressed Avraham about these farmers? The Midrash says he saw that they were “weeding when it was time to weed, and hoeing when it was time to hoe.” But what was so special about that? Would not any intelligent farmer do the same?

The Alei Tamar (Rabbi Yissachar Tamar on the Talmud Yerushalmi, tractate of Kil'ayim 4:4) explains: “Certainly, in Aram-Naharayim they too plowed, sowed, and harvested. But they were lazy in their work, and the land did not yield its produce properly — it lacked weeding, hoeing, and other necessary agricultural labors. The Canaanites, by contrast, were industrious and diligent. They were experts in agriculture and in the nature of the land. They would even taste the soil and smell the earth, discerning its properties with remarkable skill and devotion. Therefore, Avraham said: 'May my portion be in this land, whose farmers labor faithfully and know the nature of the earth in such depth.'”

Avraham assessed the character and diligence of the local farmers and was impressed by their devotion. He recognized in their work a profound bond between farmer and soil: when a farmer works faithfully, the land itself responds with faithfulness, yielding its finest fruits. This, teaches the Midrash, is the unique quality of the Land of Israel — its produce depends on the integrity and devotion of those who cultivate it.

Only after Avraham expresses his wish for this land does God affirm his choice, declaring: “To your descendants I will give this land.” The connection between the people of Israel and the Land of Israel is therefore not only a Divine decree; it also depends on the people of Israel's physical presence in the land and their loyalty to it — through their labor, their cultivation, and their growth in every aspect of life.

This idea is beautifully reflected in the words of the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh: “As it says in the Sifrei, 'For I dwell in their midst' — meaning, I dwell among the children of Israel; the Divine Presence rests only upon Israel when they are in the Land. Thus, God said to Avraham: 'To the land that I will show you' — a land worthy of you, and you worthy of it. The phrase means: I will show you to it, and it to you, for without this mutual worthiness, the

Divine Presence and abundant blessing cannot rest there.”

The bond with the Land of Israel, then, is shaped by human action. The land develops and elevates its inhabitants; its character is reflected in those who work it and in their way of life. The deep, inner connection between the people of Israel and the Land of Israel creates a perfect harmony — producing both the finest fruits of the soil and the fullest flourishing of the people of Israel who toil the soil of the land.

Even in our own day, those who dwell in the Land of Israel, and those who make aliya by choice and are privileged to perceive its exalted virtue, merit to receive the land's gracious radiance — the abundance it bestows — and to be elevated to a higher plane of personal and spiritual growth.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

The Gifts of Eretz Yisrael and Torah: the Mila Connection

I. Two covenants are forged between the Creator of everything and our holy grandfather, Avraham Avinu, in our parasha. In the first, the b'ris bein habesarim, Hashem promises the land of Israel to Avraham and his descendants; in the second, the b'ris of mila, the gift of Eretz Yisrael is repeated implying that it is dependent on fulfillment of this commandment. Why does the gift of Eretz Yisrael only come through the mitzvah of mila? Furthermore, the Gemara (Shabbos 130a), commenting on the verse in Tehillim, "שש אנכי על אמרתך כמוצא שלל רב" – I rejoice over your word like one who finds great spoils" (Tehillim 119:162), interprets that this is referring to the mitzvah of mila. Since the Jewish people have accepted it with great joy (ששוק), it is still celebrated with great joy. What is the basis of the specific association of joy and the mitzvah of mila?

The Midrash Tanchuma (Tazria 5) records the following conversation between R. Akiva and the Roman governor, Turnusrufus (somewhat paraphrased): Turnusrufus asked R. Akiva, "Whose handiwork is more beautiful, G-d's or man's?" He responded: "Man's are more beautiful!" ... Turnusrufus asked, "Why are you circumcised?" He replied: "I knew you would ask that, and that is why I preempted [you] and said to you that the handiwork of man is more beautiful than that of G-d." R. Akiva brought ears [of grain] and cakes. He said to him: "These are the handiwork of G-d, and these are the handiwork of man... Are these [the cakes] not more beautiful than the ears?!" Said Turnusrufus to him, "If he wanted circumcision, why doesn't the baby exit already circumcised from the womb?!" Said R. Akiva to him, "Why does the baby exit with the umbilical cord still connected to its belly,

and the mother needs to sever it! That which you asked why isn't [the baby] already circumcised, it is because G-d gave the mitzvos to Israel to purify them..."

What fundamental theological principles are at the root of this debate between the saintly sage, R. Akiva, and the wicked Turnusrufus?

Rav C. Y. Goldwicht zt"l, founding Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, under whom I was privileged to study, elucidates these mysteries as follows:[1] One receiving a free gift never truly owns it in the fullest sense of the term, since his debt of gratitude constantly impinges upon a sense of true ownership. By contrast, one who purchases something, even if – through the beneficence of the seller – pays only a discounted price does acquire a sense of total ownership and the item is truly "theirs." Similarly, there are two kinds of Divine bestowals: one which is just a gift without any "purchase price" and one which is more similar to a sale whereby the recipient, in order to receive the Divine blessing, "pays" for it through his actions. Only the latter will securely remain in the domain of the recipient eternally, and only with regard to the latter will the recipient be granted a true sense of ownership.[2]

The Midrash (Shemos Rabba 1:1, also see Berachos 5a) teaches:

... this refers to Hakadosh Baruch Hu who loves Israel, as it is written, "I loved you, says Hashem" (Malachi 1:2). [As a result,] He increases their suffering (perhaps: He raises them with suffering). You find that HKB"H gave to Israel three good gifts, and He gave all of them only through suffering: Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come.

How is causing suffering an expression of Divine love? Why do these magnificent gifts have to come through suffering? Based on the fundamental concept Rav Goldwicht presented above, he explains that Hashem wishes to transform these gifts into a "purchase" so that they become our eternal heritage, not subject to constant Divine scrutiny whether we are worthy of the gift. The suffering mentioned in this context does not refer to punishment for sins but to soul-wrenching struggles and mesirus nefesh, a demonstration of singular, wholehearted devotion to the study of Torah, to commitment to the land of Israel and to Divine service in general, thus earning our Olam Haba. This form of suffering serves as the "purchase price" through which these gifts truly become ours.

Based on this, Rav Goldwicht addresses the above sources concerning the covenant of mila. Hashem created an imperfect world as proven by R. Akiva to the Roman governor. His goal in doing so was to allow man to

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partner with Him in the "acquisition" of Divine blessing. Before the soul descends into the world, the Divine radiance it enjoys is incomplete pleasure, referred to by Ramchal as "nahama d'chisufa - the bread of embarrassment." Circumcision represents the revelation of the inner sanctity endowed to man by his Creator enabling him, through wholehearted, selfless devotion to His Creator's will (yissurin) to be worthy of Divine bounty. Only through this effort, does he earn his eternal reward and succeeds in transforming the "bread of embarrassment" into a complete expression of Divine pleasure in the World to Come. R. Akiva demonstrated that even the physical world reflects this truth, namely, that only through hard work is man able to transform the initial Divine gifts into items of greater beauty. Our bodies are created in an imperfect state as evidenced by the need to cut the umbilical cord. On a spiritual plane, the mitzvah of mila represents the need, through hard work, to fully acquire the Divine blessings granted to us.

This is also why the mitzvah of mila specifically is associated with joy since absolute joy only comes with something that is truly acquired through considerable effort . "יגיע כפיך כי תאכל" – [when] the toil of your hands you partake of, happy are you, and it is good for you!" (Tehillim 128:2).

II. Our era has seen the Divine blessing of the return of millions of Jews to the holy land of Israel. The Divine promise to Avraham Avinu is, with Hashem's kindness, once again on the road to total fulfillment. The Gaza strip, wholly part of the land of Israel (see Rashi to Bereishis 26:2), has always been a seemingly unconquerable section of the Holy Land. Although often settled, including in our recent era, by Jewish communities, currently it is solely inhabited by the descendants of Yishmael. We hope and pray that these last two years of battle, punctuated by the tremendous mesirus nefesh exhibited by tens of thousands of Jewish soldiers – regular troops and reservists – who have left their families for months on end to fight against a ruthless, cruel enemy in this area of Eretz Yisrael, over a thousand of whom have given their lives and tens of thousands of whom have lost limbs and are otherwise suffering, should serve as a tremendous merit for the Jewish people to even more greatly acquire one of the three gifts given through suffering and allow us to return and settle this part of the Holy Land as well in the near future.

This Thursday, hundreds of thousands of Jews will gather in Jerusalem in a demonstration of prayer and solidarity with the supreme value of Torah study and loyalty to Torah values. To be sure, the context in which this is being done – the imprisonment of Yeshiva students labeled as "draft-dodgers" by the Israeli military – is

fraught with controversy revolving around the proper balance between devotion to Torah study and army service as well as, more fundamentally, how religious segments of Jewry should relate to the currently secular State of Israel.[3] Many, even in the religious world, will not be attending, disturbed by the perception of “shirking of responsibility” they perceive in certain segments of Jewry. Rabbi David Fendel shlit”a, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Hesder Sderot, the students of which certainly were at the center of the war in Gaza, will be attending. He beautifully explained his decision by stressing the merit of the prayer by so many Jews, the centrality of Torah study which is not fully recognized by so many segments in Israeli society, and the need to find a solution for a proper framework of army service for those not involved in full-time Torah study. Only further strife and division will be caused by continuing arrests of Yeshiva students.

I humbly add to Rav Fendel’s words my fervent wish that regardless of one’s stance on this prayer rally, that it be used as an opportunity to deeply reflect on two out of the three of the tremendous Divine gifts granted to us by our loving Father in Heaven, Torah and Eretz Yisrael, and to recall Rav Goldwicht’s elucidation why both are only acquired through yissurin, whole-hearted devotion, without self-centeredness, with a sense of ultimate mission and connection to Klal Yisrael. May we merit to fully devote ourselves to these two central gifts and see the day when the various segments of Jewry will live together in harmony united by the dual values of our holy Torah and the Holy Land, the reblossoming of both of which we have merited to see before our very eyes.

[1] Azufas Ma’arachos, Lech Lecha, “Sasson Hamila”, p. 177 ff. Any errors in conveying the concepts presented by Mori v’Rabi are my own.

[2] See the above essay where Rav Golwicht applies this to the study of Torah quoting the midrash concerning Shlomo Hamelech: “אמר רב אבהו: תורה: אמר רב אבהו: 'נתקיימה בי בזמנתי, אף' שלמתי'” (Koheles Rabba 2:9).

[3] See the eye-opening article, Obfuscation, by Mori v’Rabi, Rav Mordechai Willig shlit”a.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah-by Rabbi Label Lam

HASHEM Said So! - And an angel of HASHEM found her by a water fountain in the desert, by the fountain on the road to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, Sarai’s servant, where are you coming from, and where are you going to?” And she said, “From before Sarai my mistress, I am fleeing. And the angel of HASHEM said to her, “Return to your mistress, and allow yourself to be afflicted under her hands.” (Breishis 16:6-9)

When Hagar was fleeing from Sarai, she met up with a Malach HASHEM, an angel who gave us a marvelous diagnostic psychological

tool. He asked her two questions; 1) “Where are you coming from?” and 2) “Where are you going to?” She answered only one, “from before Sarai my mistress, I am fleeing.” So, the Malach advised her to return to Sarai, her mistress, and submit herself.

Usually when a person is only running from and they don’t know where they are going to, there is some unfinished business in the place where they are fleeing from and lessons to be learned. There is a great likelihood that whatever the problem was, will follow them wherever they go, and that difficult relationship will repeat itself over and over again.

Sometimes, as a principal, I have had a child come into my office all defensive and actively denying that he had done anything wrong, and pointing fingers and blaming, and deflecting. I have a very effective strategy that I have used very often to get to the heart of the matter. I will tell the child, “I was not there and I do not know what happened but let’s figure this thing out together. First of all, you are not in trouble!” (The child relaxes somewhat but remains skeptical) “Let me explain please. If you learn something from what happened today and from being here, then today was a very good day because you learned something important. If you don’t learn anything then you are in trouble, but you are not in trouble with me.

You are in trouble with yourself, because what happened is likely to happen again and repeat itself until you learn what needs to be learned. Whatever happened, happened here in school and the consequences are minimal, but someday you will be a married man, with children, and you will have in-laws and a boss. Let’s not wait till then to figure this out. Let’s begin to explore together!”

A person only “fleeing from”, will run out of steam on the journey. Avraham and his father Terach led a mission to the Land of Israel at the end of Parshas Noach, and it came up short, because they were only fleeing persecution in Ohr Kasdim. Later, Avram was told by HASHEM, “Go to (or for) 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)

That command has both elements of “from” and “to”. Dovid HaMelech, with all his wisdom tells us this formula, “Turn from bad and do good – seek peace and pursue it.” Sometimes when a person is only running “from” then, when they are distant enough “from” then they begin to float directionless and lose motivation and momentum. “FROM” is insufficient! So, getting up and just going

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somewhere won’t help until we first graduate from “here”.

The greatest feature in Avraham’s success can perhaps be understood by way of analogy. Many children’s games have important life skills and lessons hidden within them. “Mother May I” is a classic. Mother may I take one giant step forward. If mother says you may, then you may. If mother does not say you may, then, if you take a step you have to go back and wait for mother to say so. Avraham’s first mission fell short because HASHEM did not say so. Then, when HASHEM told Avraham Avinu Lech Lecha, to go, he went and we keep on going because HASHEM said so!

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez - “Ki Anashim Achim Anachnu – We Are Brothers”

In this week’s parasha, Avraham and Sarah – the founding father and mother of the Jewish people – teach us what it truly means to belong to Am Yisrael.

When tension arises between Avraham and his nephew Lot, Avraham turns to him and says those timeless words: “Ki anashim achim anachnu” – we are brothers. Why are we fighting? We’re family.

From that moment on, Avraham sets the pattern for what it means to be part of the Jewish people: the integrity of the family comes before ideology. When you’re a family, it doesn’t matter who’s right – what matters is staying together and holding on to your shared destiny.

So when Lot is later taken captive in Sodom, Avraham risks his life to save him – not because he agrees with him, but because he’s his brother. Without being commanded, he acts from his heart. That’s what brothers do.

To this day, that same spirit defines Am Yisrael. When a fellow Jew is in captivity or in pain, we feel it as our own. The world can’t understand the price we’re willing to pay – or the depth of our pain – because what connects us is not nationalism, but family. May we continue to see one another not through the lens of ideology, but of family.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm’s Derashot Ledorot

Jewish Youth Is Not What It Used to Be

Jewish youth is not what it used to be. When I was a youngster, religious Jews usually preferred to make themselves inconspicuous. Jewish youth today, by and large, present themselves as what they are, no more and no less. When I was a youngster, committed Jews were often apologetic about their Jewishness. Today, they are proud and assertive. A generation or two ago, most middle-class and

upper middle-class Jews, even if they were positive about their Jewishness, were rather embarrassed by fellow Jews who looked too Jewish, who were dressed in immigrant or Hasidic garb. One of the better pieces by Philip Roth, "Eli the Fanatic," described just that situation of a meshulah who wandered into Westchester, to cause chagrin and embarrassment for all the Jews who were ashamed to be identified with him. Today, most young Jews have no such "hang-ups," and they are Jews without embarrassment or apprehension.

In general, a new spirit seems to prevail amongst committed Jewish youth of today that distinguishes them from their predecessors. They are forward, open, even aggressive. It is in this connection that I draw your attention to the story of Abraham in today's Sidra. After he returns from a battle against an alliance of chieftains, which he undertakes in order to save his nephew Lot, who had been taken captive with the other people of Sodom, he is greeted by Malkizedek with a gift of bread and wine. Why bread and wine? My grandfather, זצ"ל, offers an interpretation which is very much to the point.

When Abraham heard that his kinsman Lot had been taken captive, he did not become super-pious and fatalistic, declaring that it is all God's will and that it is not for him to interfere in the divine design. Instead, he girded for action and undertook it. He did not look for an excuse for doing nothing, considering himself as a man of the spirit and above such material matters. Rather, he armed himself, raised troops, and undertook a difficult military campaign.

But consider how shocked his peers must have been. How they must have shaken their heads in disbelief, and clucked their tongues at the change of "image" by Abraham! Here was a man who was an old patriarch, the teacher of monotheism, a great spiritual leader and man of lovingkindness, who suddenly girds his loins, raises a sword, and shows himself a soldier like all soldiers. Those pagan warlords of old must have gathered together in a kind of mini United Nations, and condemned his campaign as a piece of racism. Is not Abraham, after all, a racist rather than an idealist when he undertakes to do battle merely in order to save his kinsman? Would it not have been more in place for him to teach matters of the spirit, as he used to, instead of resorting to war and armaments? Abraham has certainly changed! He is no longer the same Abraham.

I can even imagine that there must have been amongst them at least one warlord who was the prototype of the Syrian delegate who fouled the airways of the United Nations yesterday, and besmirched the already polluted air of this city, when he delivered himself of a piece of unparalleled hypocrisy when he declared his respect for Judaism as a moral code applying to the relations between man

and his Creator, but condemned Zionism as nothing but racist colonialism. So those contemporaries of Abraham, the spiritual if not biological ancestors of today's Third World, in all likelihood thought that Abraham had changed, that he was no longer a man of God, that he had become an imperialist and war-monger.

Thus we read אל עמק... ויצא מלך סדום לקראתו. השה. Abraham was greeted in the Valley of Shaveh. But the word also has a specific meaning in Hebrew, namely, "equal" or "uniform" or "the same." The ancient chieftains now considered that Abraham had become the same as they! Both then and now, when they criticized Abraham, it was not for being less than they were, but that he had become just as materialistic as they are. When we hear all those sordid accusations against Israel and the United Nations nowadays, we may be sure that what is meant is that Israel is being charged with being as base – or "normal" – as its critics. And then too, Abraham was criticized for coming down to their level, for being שווה, the same as they.

It is for this reason that we read מלכיצדק מלך ששלם הוציא לחם ויין that Malkizedek greeted Abraham with bread and wine. Bread and wine, my grandfather maintains, are symbols. In order to understand this symbolism, let us turn to the Halakhah. In the laws relating to blessings, the ברכה הנהנין, the principle is that there is a hierarchy of blessings, depending upon the food. Ordinary water, for instance, takes the blessing נהיה בדברו, whereas a vegetable takes בורא פרי האדמה, which is a higher level. Higher than that is בורא פרי העץ, etc. If, however, a food is changed from its natural form into some other form, it always goes down a level in its blessing. Thus, for instance, apples require the blessing בורא פרי; but if one makes applesauce out of apples, and it loses the physical form of apples, one makes the blessing נהיה בדברו.

There are two exceptions to this rule. These are, wheat and grain. If one makes bread out of wheat, the blessing goes up, and not down: one recite המוציא לחם מן הארץ, which is the highest blessing for any solid food. And when one makes wine out of grapes, the blessing does not go downwards, from בורא פרי העץ, but upwards to בורא פרי הגפן, the highest blessing over any liquid. Why is this so? Because in these two cases of bread and wine, the change is considered נשתנו, they have changed for the better. Change yes, but a change to the better, not to the worse.

That is what Malkizedek wanted to teach the nations of the world when they wondered at the change that had overcome Abraham. Yes, he meant to tell them, Abraham has changed. But it is the change that is symbolized by bread and wine. It is נשתנו למעלייתא. Abraham has changed for the better. The same ideals, the same spirit, the same dedication, the same goodness – but now he has revealed the ability

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to take action in order to advance his cause, the ability to implement his ideals, the talent to fight for what he knows is right.

It is in this sense that I am pleased that Jewish youth is not what it used to be. It is, to a large extent, more militant and outgoing, but not any less Jewish than its counterpart a generation or two ago. Like bread and wine, it has changed for the better. Unquestionably, this is due to a large extent to the influence of the State of Israel, which is, after all, part of the beneficent heritage of the founding of the State. Thus it is, that when I was a youngster, religious people would feel uncomfortable about reading a Hebrew Sefer or a Hebrew or Yiddish newspaper on the train or in public. Today, youngsters have no such qualms, and do not feel queasy about it.

A generation or two ago, religious Jews accepted the alienation of the Jewish establishment and large Jewish organizations as a fact of communal life. They made no effort to arouse the establishment organizations to an awareness of their existence. Today, young, committed Jews make their voices heard and demand that our great charitable institutions be responsive to the needs of Jewish education and the Jewish poor.

When we were young Jews, we were satisfied to practice our Judaism by ourselves, and felt no particular responsibility to other Jews who were not observant. Today's young religious Jews have a sense of outgoing obligation, a feeling of duty towards other Jews who have not been exposed to Judaism, and by the medium of Shabbatonim and Seminars they participate in an outreach program. A generation or two ago, religious Jews wore kippot. But we were frightened when it came to wearing them publicly, except for the most densely Jewish populated area, such as Williamsburg or Boro Park. We were physically afraid of doing so, because of anti-Semitic taunts and attacks. Socially, there were those who were very strict about forbidding religious students from wearing the kippah in public. Today, one finds the kippah in secular high-schools and colleges, in graduate schools and professional schools, and in the streets as well.

When we were children, we simply avoided anti-Semites to the best of our ability. If we encountered them, we fled. Many of today's Jewish youngsters are training themselves to offer resistance and not "take it lying down." I admire such spunk and pride. Of course, I do not agree that such militancy must be the automatic response of Jewish leadership. Indeed, I am distrustful of any automatic response by leadership! Every issue must be analyzed according to its merits. Youth must "do its thing," but leaders must do "their thing" – and that is, act responsibly. Whether it be a militant reaction or a decision to say nothing, it must be undertaken on the basis of the merits of specific issues.

But the larger questions of communal policy aside, our religious Jewish youth today is an improvement over much of the past. This is true not only for Orthodox youth, but also for much of non-Orthodox youth which in so many ways is superior to their counterparts of 20 or 40 years ago! Jewishly committed youth, even if non-observant and non-Orthodox, is often sensitive and searching and respectful. Anyone wants a description of the boorishness and vulgarity and self-hatred of non-religious Jews of a couple of generations ago, consider how many of them are no different today, show that they are far from young. Thus, this week there appeared the following small item in The New York Times:

The International Ladies 'Garments Workers Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the Seafarers International Union, gave a cocktail party one evening in honor of the Jewish Daily Forward, the Yiddish language paper that bills itself as "America's only daily labor newspaper."

On the tables of hors d'oeuvres were ham, bacon, large and small shrimps and Alaska king crab.

Said one of the imbibers, "There is nothing here that a Jew could eat."

I doubt if that could happen today, most certainly not in quite so vulgar a manner, by young Jews. But then again, the Jewish Daily Forward is the same newspaper that about 50 years ago, in response to a letter from a reader in its famous "Bintel Brief," declared that circumcision was *א פארשימעלזטע מנהג*, a moldy custom that we should long ago have gotten rid of!

Of course, this by no means implies that young Jews of the past were all stagnating and negative, while all young Jews today are paragons of virtue. Not at all! Such an assertion would be guilty of being as simplistic as the reverse thesis. But I do want to question, even if hyperbolically, the assumption that things are always getting worse. They are not, in this respect, and we ought to be extremely pleased at this phenomenon.

So, to our young people of The Jewish Center who today celebrate Youth Shabbat, I would hold up Abraham as the model of their aspirations. Give up nothing of the greatness of the past, but improve on it instead!

The Rabbis tell us that Abraham, who was the chief of a great tribe, struck a coin for his realm, and it was an unusual one: *קטן וקטנה מצד*. בחור ובתולה מצד אחד, אחד. On one side was the picture of an old man and an old woman, on the other side a picture of a boy and a girl. Both of these are necessary. Do not yield on the old virtues, represented by the *קטן* and *קטנה*: Continue undiminished the entire, sacred heritage of Jewish character of compassion, kindness, modesty, Torah, mitzvot, self-sacrifice. But always improve on the past! Bring to these principles the gifts of youth: passion, pride, optimism, verve, vigour, all the qualities associated with *בחור ובתולה*.

On this Youth Shabbat, we affirm that we are proud that our young people are continuing the past; prouder yet, that they are improving it; and proudest of all, that all of us realize that the older generation (symbolized by the old man and old woman) and the younger generation (symbolized by the boy and girl) are merely two sides of the same coin.

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Adapted from

הגות בפרשיות התורה by **Rav Yehuda Nachshoni**
Lech Lecha: The Making of Avraham Avinu
Part I: Where Did Avraham Come From?

The end of Parshas Noach leaves us with an immediate problem. The Torah says of Haran, *וימת הרן על פני תרה אביו בארץ מולדתו באור כשדים - Haran died in the lifetime of Terach his father, in the land of his birth, in Ur Kasdim* (Bereishis 11:28). A few pesukim later, Terach takes Avraham, Sarah and Lot, *ויצאו אתם מאור כשדים ללכת ארצה כנען - they set out together from Ur Kasdim to go to the land of Canaan* (11:31). Yet only afterward does Hashem tell Avraham, *לך מ'ארצך - Go from your land, from your*

birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I will show you (12:1). Where, then, was Avraham born? What was his מולדת? And if the family was already traveling toward Canaan, when was Lech Lecha commanded? **The Ibn Ezra: The command came earlier.** The Ibn Ezra understands that Avraham was born in Ur Kasdim and that Lech Lecha had already been commanded there. The events are not in strict chronological order: Avraham was commanded to leave, Terach went with him, and when Terach stopped in Charan, Avraham continued. Thus מ'ארצך וממולדתך is literal. The **Ibn Ezra** also rejects the Midrashic connection between Ur Kasdim and Nimrod's fiery furnace. If such an extraordinary miracle and act of mesiras nefesh had occurred, why would the Torah omit it? He therefore understands Ur Kasdim simply as a place-name.

The Ramban: Charan was Avraham's homeland. The Ramban strongly disagrees. Avraham belonged to the world of Shem and of עבר הנהר - beyond the River. Yehoshua says, *ב'עבר הנהר ישבו אבותיכם - Your forefathers dwelt of old beyond the River*, and ואקח את אביכם את אברהם מעבר הנהר - *I took your father Avraham from beyond the River* (Yehoshua 24:2-3). The Ramban reconstructs the family history accordingly. Terach originally lived in Charan-Aram, where Avraham and Nachor were born, and later moved to Ur Kasdim, where Haran was born. After Haran died, Terach returned toward his ancestral homeland and stopped in Charan. There Avraham received ב'ארץ. This explains the Torah's precise description of Haran, *מולדתו באור כשדים*: Ur Kasdim was Haran's birthplace, not Avraham's. It also explains why Avraham later tells Eliezer, *כי אל ארצי ואל מולדתי - go to my land and to my birthplace* (Bereishis 24:4), and Eliezer goes to Aram Naharayim. Yet the **Ramban** fully accepts Chazal's tradition that Avraham was persecuted in Ur Kasdim and miraculously rescued. Hashem says, *אני ה' אשר הוצאתיך מאור כשדים - I am Hashem Who brought you out of Ur Kasdim* (15:7). The word הוצאתיך suggests a rescue, like the Exodus from Egypt. The Torah does not recount the miracle, he explains, because that would have required entering into the idolaters' claim that Avraham's survival was sorcery.

The Abarbanel: Hashem had already prepared the way. The **Abarbanel** accepts the Ramban's basic approach but adds that Terach's earlier departure from Ur Kasdim was itself part of Hashem's providence. Had Avraham still been settled there, surrounded by home and family, the command to leave would have been far harder. Instead, the family had already reached Charan. Terach stopped; Avraham was commanded to continue. What appeared to be a family migration had prepared the way for Avraham's mission. The Abarbanel also accepts that Avraham had already rejected the beliefs of Ur Kasdim. Through his own thought he recognized that the heavenly bodies were not independent powers but servants of one Creator. Before Avraham left the land, he had already left its beliefs. **The Maasei Hashem. Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi**, author of the **Maasei Hashem**, suggests that Aram Naharayim may itself have been under Kasdim rule. Avraham could therefore have remained geographically within the world of Shem while living under Kasdim political and religious domination. The details differ, but the larger point is the same: by the time Hashem says Lech Lecha, a deeper journey has already begun.

Part II: Why Does the Torah Tell Us Nothing About Avraham Before Lech Lecha?

There is a deeper question at the beginning of the parsha. With Noach, the Torah first tells us, *Noach was a righteous and wholehearted man in his generations*. Only afterward does Hashem speak to him. With Avraham, there is nothing. The Torah does not tell us that he discovered Hashem, rejected idolatry or risked his life for his faith. Avraham simply appears, and suddenly *לך אל אברם* *to you*. Yet Chazal tell us much about what came before. Bereishis Rabbah 38:13 describes how Terach made and sold idols and left Avraham in charge. Avraham mocked the idea that a man of fifty or sixty should bow to an idol made only yesterday. When a woman brought an offering, Avraham smashed the idols except the largest and put the stick in its hand. He told Terach that the idols had fought over the offering and the largest had smashed the others. Terach protested that idols cannot speak or act. Avraham answered, *ולא ישמעו אזניך מה שפיך אומר* - *Should your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?* Terach brought him before Nimrod. Nimrod told Avraham to worship fire; Avraham answered that water extinguishes fire. Water, clouds, wind, man - every supposed power led to another question. Nimrod finally abandoned argument and threw Avraham into the furnace, but Avraham emerged alive. Haran, who had waited to see which side would prevail, then declared himself with Avraham. He too was thrown in, but died. The Midrash thus connects *וימת הרן על פני תרע אביו בארץ* with the fire of Kasdim.

The **Rambam** describes Avraham's rise from a different angle. Avraham *השיג דרך האמת והבין קו הצדק מתבוננת הנכונה* - attained the path of truth and understood the way of righteousness through his own sound reasoning (Hilchos Avodah Zarah 1:3). He recognized one Creator Who made and directs the world, while mankind had confused the servants with the Master. The Moreh Nevuchim likewise records traditions of Avraham's struggle against the Sabians and the suffering he endured for his faith. Yet the Torah tells us almost none of this. The **Ramban** therefore asks: why would Hakadosh Baruch Hu choose Avraham and command him to leave his land without first telling us what made him worthy? **The Ramban: The missing story was already known.** The Ramban answers that the Torah relied upon facts already well known. Avraham's rejection of idolatry and the danger he suffered in Ur Kasdim formed the background to Lech Lecha. He had already begun toward Canaan; Hashem now told him to complete the journey and there call mankind to His service. The blessings answer that earlier experience as well. Avraham had been mocked and cursed; now Hashem promises, *ואברכה מברכך ומקללך אאר* - *I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse* (Bereishis 12:3). The man rejected by his generation would become a source of blessing to the nations.

The Burning Palace - בירה דולקת. The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 39:1) gives another answer: *אמר רבי יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום וראה בירה אחת דולקת אמר תאמר שהבירה הזו בלא מנהיג הציץ עליו בעל הבירה אמר לו אני הוא בעל הבירה כך לפי שהיה אבינו אברהם אומר תאמר - שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג הציץ עליו הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמר לו אני הוא בעל העולם* - *Rabbi Yitzchak compares Avraham to a traveler who sees a palace burning and asks, Can this palace have no master? The owner looks out and says, I am the master of the palace. So too Avraham asked, Can this world be without a Master? Hakadosh Baruch Hu revealed Himself and said, I am the Master of the world.* **Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi** understands the Midrash as filling in the missing

beginning. Avraham was already searching, examining the beliefs of his world and rejecting what could not be true. Revelation did not replace his search; it came at the point to which that search had brought him. **The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh** asks why Hashem speaks to Avraham before first appearing to him. Perhaps Avraham needed no preliminary revelation because he had already discovered Hashem through his own wisdom. Or perhaps Hashem deliberately withheld fuller revelation because Avraham first had to be tested: would he obey without demanding an explanation or a sign? Only afterward would he merit the fuller revelation.

The Maharal: Perhaps nothing is missing. The Maharal takes an entirely different approach. Perhaps the Torah deliberately omits Avraham's merits so that Hashem's choice will not appear dependent upon them. Had the Torah first described a great tzaddik who rejected idolatry and risked his life for Hashem, we might conclude that he was chosen because of those deeds, an *אהבה התלויה בדבר* - *a love dependent upon a particular cause*. Noach was chosen as an individual because of his righteousness. Avraham is told *ואעשך לגוי גדול* - *I will make you into a great nation*. He is being chosen as the beginning of Klal Yisrael. The bechirah of Avraham and his descendants therefore does not rest upon any particular merit. This is connected to *מריה דאברהם* - Master of Avraham. Avraham's greatness began with asking the question everyone else had stopped asking: *Can this world be without a Master?* It challenged the accepted beliefs of an entire civilization.

A G-d Hidden in Concealment. There is a striking pattern in Avraham's story. His past is hidden, the reason for Hashem's choice is hidden, and even his destination is hidden. Hashem says only *אל הארץ אשר אראך* - *to the land that I will show you*. What He does make clear is what Avraham must leave: *מאוצר* - *treasure*. Chazal explain *אברהם העברי* by saying that the entire world stood on one side and Avraham on the other. Before he could influence the world, he had to stand apart from it. The **HaKsav VeHaKabbalah** notes that the order seems backwards. Physically, one first leaves his father's house, then his surroundings, and finally his country. The Torah reverses the order because it describes an inner departure: easiest is separation from the broad culture of one's country, harder from one's immediate surroundings, and hardest from *בית אביך*, the ideas absorbed at home. Avraham had discovered the truth intellectually. Lech Lecha demanded that he build his life around it.

The First Mitzvah. The Ostrovtzer Rebbe [Rabbi Meir Yechiel Halevi Halstock (1852-1928)] points out that the first explicit command to Avraham is bound up with Eretz Yisrael. Terach had begun toward Canaan but stopped in Charan; Avraham continued. The **Sforno** explains that Canaan was suited for contemplation and the service of Hashem, while the **Ramban** emphasizes that Avraham still did not know the precise destination. Hashem said only *אל הארץ אשר אראך*. The Sforno gives *אשר אראך* a deeper meaning: not merely the land Hashem will show Avraham, but the place where Hashem will reveal Himself to him. Avraham therefore continues until Shechem, where the Torah finally says *וירא ה' אל אברם ויאמר לו רעך אתן* - *Hashem appeared to Avraham and said, To your descendants I will give this land* (Bereishis 12:7). The journey toward Eretz Yisrael becomes a journey toward revelation. **The Blessing That Emerged.** Yet revelation and separation are not the

end. Hashem tells Avraham והיה ברכה - *You shall be a blessing*, and *All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you* (12:2-3). The **Abarbanel** explains that Avraham is not merely to receive blessing but to become its source, spreading recognition of Hashem beyond himself. The man who can stand on one side when the world stands on the other is ultimately charged with bringing blessing back to that world.

Conclusion. Avraham's story begins with what the Torah does not tell us. We are not told clearly where he was born, how he came to recognize Hashem, or why he was chosen. Even his destination remains hidden: *to the land that I will show you*. But perhaps the concealment is itself part of the message. Avraham had learned to look beyond what everyone else accepted, to ask whether a world could exist beyond the goal. Hashem tells him והיה ברכה. Avraham first had to be willing to stand alone; only then could he bring something back to the world. That is the movement of Lech Lecha: from searching to revelation, from separation to mission, and from one man willing to stand alone to a people charged with bringing the knowledge of Hashem and His blessing into the world.

Adapted from

עטרה למלך, based on talks by **Rav Avraham Pam** (1913–2001)
Chesed L'Avraham

The Torah tells the story of Avraham Avinu's hospitality at unusual length because it contains many *fundamental lessons* in *chesed*. One detail is especially striking. When the three wayfarers appeared, Avraham was receiving the Shechinah, which had come to visit him in his illness. At that moment he was far removed from ordinary physical concerns. Yet as soon as he saw strangers in need, he ran to greet them and hurried to satisfy their every bodily want. A man basking in the radiance of the Shechinah turned at once to questions of appetite and taste, taking pains to serve his guests the finest food, down to *three tongues with mustard* (Bava Metzia 86b).

What Chesed Really Requires

The *Mesillas Yesharim* (ch. 15) describes how fleeting the pleasure of eating really is. It lasts only while the food passes through the throat, and a few moments later it is gone as though it had never been. Avraham Avinu certainly lived on that level. Food and physical pleasure meant very little to him. But that was the standard he demanded of himself. It had nothing to do with what he should give someone else. His *perishus* was for himself, not for his guests. Rav Itzele Peterburger describes his rebbe, Rav Yisrael Salanter, in much the same way. Rav Yisrael התבל מכל המודות - *was free of every worldly desire*, yet he understood very well the desires and sensitivities of other people. He wanted no honor for himself, but was careful *to honor people with all the customary courtesies*. This is one of the great lessons of Avraham Avinu. A person can become so absorbed in his own spiritual standards that he begins measuring everyone else by them. Avraham taught the opposite. The higher he rose personally, the more room he had to understand what another person needed.

That is why Avraham could say *I am but dust and ashes* (Vayeira 18:27), while at the same time treating complete strangers with extraordinary honor. The Midrash says that he observed that the travelers were *showing honor to one another*, and recognized that they were *decent and worthy people* (Bereishis Rabbah 48:9). He then stood over them and served them himself. There is no contradiction between humility and showing honor to others. Quite the reverse. The person who needs little honor for himself has more room to give honor to someone else. This gives added meaning to *welcoming guests is greater than receiving the Shechinah* (Shabbos 127a).

Avraham did not turn away from Hashem when he ran toward the guests. Serving Hashem's creatures was itself a way of drawing close to Hashem.

One Love, Not Two

This leads to a deeper question about Avraham. He is the great model of *chesed*, but he is also the father of *emunah*. Chazal explain אברהם - *gaze from the summit of faith* (Shir HaShirim 4:8) as referring to Avraham, of whom the Torah says *and he believed in Hashem*. Are these simply two different parts of Avraham's greatness, one *bein adam laMakom* and the other *bein adam lachaveiro*? They are not. One who truly loves Hashem wants to do what Hashem desires, and Hashem is *for this He desires chesed* (Micha 7:18). *for this* - לשם כך ברא עולמו להיטיב לברואיו. *He created His world, to bestow good upon His creatures*. תורה - תחלתה גמילות חסדים וסופה גמילות חסדים - *the Torah begins with acts of kindness and ends with acts of kindness* (Sotah 14a). Love of Hashem therefore leads naturally to concern for His creatures.

But it also works in the other direction. Avraham's *קל עולם* - *calling out in the name of Hashem, G-d of the world* (Vayeira 21:33) was itself an *outgrowth of his middah of chesed*. If Avraham knew the greatest good in the world, how could he keep it to himself? *Chesed* could not end with feeding a hungry person. It also meant *to open blind eyes* (Yeshaya 42:7), bringing light to another person so that he too could experience *then you shall delight in Hashem* (Yeshaya 58:14). Thus Avraham's love of Hashem and his love of people were not two separate loves. *Love of Hashem and love of chesed, in their fullness, are one, and each completes the other*. *for this is the whole of man*.

Giving Creates Love

But how does an ordinary person reach such love of others? We usually assume that *chesed* begins with love: I care about someone, and therefore I want to help him. Chazal teach that the process also works in reverse. *Maseches Derech Eretz Zuta* (ch. 2) says *if you wish to cleave to the love of your friend, occupy yourself with his welfare*. The *Orchos Tzaddikim*, in *Shaar HaAhavah*, similarly teaches that the way to come to love another person is *to do good for him*. Giving is not merely the result of love. Giving creates love. When a person thinks about another's needs, worries about him and invests himself in his welfare, that person becomes precious to him. The Gemara (Bava Metzia 32b) makes the point sharply. If a friend needs help unloading his animal and an enemy needs help loading his, one should first help the enemy, *in order to subdue his yetzer*. Why specifically through helping the enemy? Because doing good changes the heart. *Chesed* does not merely express what a person already feels. It can change what he feels. Give to the person you resent, concern yourself with his welfare, and slowly the resentment itself begins to weaken.

Making Room for Another Person

There is, however, a price to *chesed*. To make room for someone else, I must surrender some of the space occupied by myself. True *chesed* requires a person to be *to contract his own concerns and make room for another*. Someone needs my time when I had other plans, my attention when my mind is elsewhere, or my patience precisely when patience is inconvenient. *The world is built on chesed* (Tehillim 89:3). Of course there must be limits. There is no fixed measuring stick telling a person how much time he must give or when another person's needs must take precedence over his own responsibilities. But before asking where the limit lies, there is a more basic question: Do I notice the other person at all? Avraham was occupied with something incomparably greater than anything that occupies us. He was receiving the Shechinah. Yet he saw three people walking in the heat and immediately noticed what they needed. The ability to see beyond oneself is the beginning of *chesed*.

The Chesed of Everyday Life

Once a person begins looking, opportunities for *chesed* are everywhere. Sometimes the entire *chesed* is a word. The Rambam (Hilchos Deos 5:7)

writes that a *talmid chacham* מקדים שלום לכל האדם - *greets every person first*. A greeting that costs us nothing may tell someone who is usually overlooked that he matters. Sometimes the *chesed* is not speaking but listening. Shlomo HaMelech says דאגה בלב איש ישחנה - *worry in a person's heart weighs him down* (Mishlei 12:25), and Chazal explain that he should speak it out to another person (Yoma 75a). We are often eager to give advice, but a person in pain does not always need an answer. Sometimes he needs someone willing to hear him. In my childhood in Lithuania a woman whose mind had been broken by suffering and whom people generally avoided. My mother would listen patiently as she poured out her troubles and speak gently to her until she became calm. No problem had been solved, but for those moments a suffering person was no longer alone. That too is *chesed*.

And sometimes nothing need be said. Chazal teach that one who receives another פנים נעים - *with a pleasant countenance*, even if he gives him nothing, is considered טובות שבעולם - *as though he had given him all the good gifts in the world* (Avos d'Rabbi Nosson 13). A warm face tells another person that he is welcome. The *Sefer Yereim* teaches the other side as well: a cold or angry face can itself violate עמיתו - *you shall not wrong one another* (Behar 25:17). *Chesed* is not only what we give with our hands or our money. It can be given, or withheld, by the way we look at another person.

The Soul That Embraces Others

There are ultimately two ways a person can live. יש נשמה שמסוגרת בתוך הגוף - *a soul enclosed within its own body*, whose world is bounded by its own needs and concerns. And there is נשמה עילאה המקיפה נשמות הרבה - *a higher soul that embraces many souls*, whose world has grown large enough to include other people. That was Avraham Avinu. He was above the pleasures of food, yet served his guests delicacies. He called himself dust and ashes, yet gave strangers extraordinary honor. He loved Hashem, and therefore loved Hashem's creatures. He loved people, and therefore wanted to bring them close to Hashem. He needed very little for himself, and precisely because there was so little self filling his world, there was room in it for so many others.

This is the *chesed* of Avraham. It begins not with how much we give, but with whether another person has entered our world. Once he has, we begin to see what he needs: perhaps money, perhaps time, perhaps guidance, perhaps a kind word, perhaps only an ear or a warm face. And as we give, our own world becomes larger. ומתוק האור - *the light is sweet* (Koheles 11:7). The light of a life that has room for others is very sweet indeed.

Adapted from

Rav Asher Weiss on the Parashah

A Sacrifice of Love

The Covenant of the Body

In this week's *parsha*, Hashem commands Avraham Avinu to circumcise himself and the members of his household, and to establish the covenant of *Bris Milah* for all generations:

ואמר אליקים אל אברהם ואתה את בריתי תשמר אתה וזרעך אחריו לדורתם - *And you shall keep My covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations*

זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין זרעך אחריו המול לכם כל זכר - *This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your offspring after you, every male shall be circumcised* (Lech Lecha 17:9-10)

The *Torah* then tells us:

ואברהם בן תשעים ותשע שנה בהמלו בשר ערלתו - *Avraham was ninety-nine years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised* (Lech Lecha 17:24)

The meaning of *Bris Milah* is that our covenant with Hashem is not limited to the soul. The physical body itself is brought into His service. A Jew does not serve Hashem despite having a body. The body itself must

become *aa vessel of service*. For this reason, the Zohar compares a child entering the *bris* to a *korban* brought before Hashem.

The Zohar describes the father *as one who brings his son for this offering* כל קרבנין and says that it is , *as though he offered all the offerings in the world* (Zohar, Lech Lecha). The covenant is written into the body because the entire person belongs to Hashem.

Why Did Avraham Have to Suffer?

There is a remarkable Midrash concerning Avraham Avinu's *Bris Milah*. The *Torah* says:

On that very day Avraham was circumcised (Lech Lecha 17:26). The Midrash records:

נמול אברהם אמר רבי אבא בר כהנא הרגיש ונצטער כדי שיכפל לו הקדוש ברוך הוא שכרו אמר רבי לוי מל אברהם אין כתיב כאן אלא נמול בדק את עצמו ומצא עצמו מהול אמר רבי ברכיה בהדיא עיתא אקיל רבי אבא בר כהנא לרבי לוי אמר לה שקרנא כזבנא את אלא הרגיש ונצטער כדי שיכפל הקדוש ברוך הוא שכרו

R' Abba bar Kahana understood that Avraham experienced the pain of the *milah*, and that this suffering increased his reward. R' Levi understood the wording differently. The *Torah* does not say that Avraham circumcised himself, but that he was circumcised.

According to R' Levi, Avraham examined himself and discovered that he was already circumcised (Bereishis Rabbah 47:9). The Midrash records that R' Abba reacted with extraordinary sharpness to R' Levi's explanation and accused him of speaking falsely.

Why such a fierce response? This cannot be explained as a personal dispute between two Amoraim. On the contrary, the Yerushalmi relates that R' Abba once heard R' Levi teach *Torah* and was so moved that he kissed him on the head and gave him a heartfelt *berachah* (Yerushalmi Horayos 3:5). Koheles Rabbah likewise records R' Abba kissing R' Levi. Why, then, did this particular interpretation provoke such a reaction?

The answer goes to the heart of what *Bris Milah* represents. R' Abba understood that the covenant established by Avraham Avinu had to involve personal sacrifice. If Avraham simply discovered that he was already circumcised, then the pain, the struggle and the *mesirus nefesh* would be missing. But it was precisely Avraham's willingness to suffer for the covenant that created a bond capable of enduring throughout Jewish history.

From where did generations of Jews living under persecution draw the strength to cling to this covenant? From Avraham Avinu. His act did not remain a private event in his own life. It established the spiritual capacity within his descendants to sacrifice for Hashem even under the harshest conditions of *Galus*. That is why R' Abba regarded this point as essential rather than incidental. The pain was part of the covenant itself.

The Mitzvah Must Be Personal

There is a general principle of *it is preferable to perform a mitzvah oneself rather than through an agent* (Kiddushin 41a). This has particular force with *Bris Milah*. A father who personally performs the *milah* must overcome the most natural compassion a father feels toward his infant son. The very difficulty of the act becomes part of its expression of love and dedication to Hashem.

The Ksav Sofer explains the *Torah's* description of Avraham circumcising Yitzchak:

Avraham circumcised his son Yitzchak at eight days old, as G-d had commanded him (Bereishis 21:4)

Why does the *Torah* - *emphasize as G-d commanded him*? Just as Hashem had personally commanded Avraham concerning the *bris*, Avraham personally fulfilled it. He did not delegate the act to someone else.

Sacrifice That Became an Inheritance

The history of *Klal Yisrael* contains extraordinary examples of this devotion. One *mohel* traveled secretly from city to city in Russia, performing *Bris Milah* despite the danger of severe punishment. On one occasion he circumcised a three-month-old child whose *bris* had been delayed because of the circumstances. The moment the *bris* was completed, the mother took the baby from the *sandek* and covered him with hugs and kisses.

She explained that she had been terrified that she might never be able to bring her son into the covenant. To strengthen herself, she had resolved not to kiss or embrace him until he had entered the *bris* of Avraham Avinu. Her joy after the *milah* expressed both the sacrifice and the love bound together in this *mitzvah*.

A second story is told of a clandestine *Bris Milah* in the Kovna Ghetto during the Holocaust. Ten Jews had secretly gathered in a cellar. In the middle of the *bris*, someone rushed in to warn them that the Germans were conducting a raid. The men attempted to erase every sign that a *bris* was taking place, but the mother insisted that the *milah* be completed immediately. If her child was to die, she said, she wanted him to die as a Jew who had entered the covenant of Avraham Avinu.

These stories bring us to a remarkable teaching of Chazal. The Gemara says:

- כל מצוה שמסרו ישראל עצמן עליה למיתה - *Every mitzvah for which the Jewish people gave themselves over to death*

- היא מוחזקת בידם - *remains firmly held in their hands*

The Gemara also teaches:

- כל מצוה שקיבלו עליהם בשמחה - *Every mitzvah which they accepted with joy*

- *they continue to perform with joy* (Shabbos 130a)

And the example Chazal give is *Bris Milah*.

At first these two ideas seem to point in opposite directions. *Mesirus nefesh* speaks of sacrifice and pain, while *simchah* speaks of joy. Yet *Bris Milah* contains both. Avraham Avinu accepted the covenant through sacrifice, but he accepted it with love. Therefore his descendants inherited not only the willingness to sacrifice for this *mitzvah*, but also the ability to rejoice in that sacrifice.

The Eighth Day

The Gemara elsewhere uses the striking expression *until the soul departs* in its discussion of *milah* (Avodah Zarah 27a). The language points to the deeper character of the covenant. *Bris Milah* represents a Jew's willingness to give himself completely to Hashem. The Maharal explains that seven represents *the natural world*, while eight represents *that which is above nature*. There are seven days of creation. *Bris Milah* is performed on the eighth day.

The father is asked to rise above a natural instinct that tells him to protect his child from every pain. When that natural love itself becomes an instrument for serving Hashem, the act enters the realm of eight, beyond ordinary nature.

The Baal HaTurim finds an allusion to this in the pasuk:

Who will ascend to Heaven for us (Devarim 30:12) מי יעלה לנו השמימה - The first letters of

the Name of *milah* lifts a Jew beyond the limits of the purely physical world and binds him directly to Hashem.

A Midrash takes this idea still further

Look to the covenant: even if Israel has no other good deeds, Hakadosh Baruch Hu redeems them in the merit of milah (Aggadat Bereishit 17:1). In Egypt, at the Yam Suf, and later at the Jordan, the covenant accompanied them and became a source of redemption. At the Yam Suf, the Midrash says - *when the sea saw the milah, it fled*.

The covenant therefore contains both the beginning and the future of *Klal Yisrael*. Avraham accepted it through pain and through love. His children carried it through exile, persecution and danger, not merely as a mark upon the body, but as an enduring declaration that the entire Jew belongs to Hashem. In that merit, may the covenant that protected our fathers continue to protect us and bring our final redemption.

Rav Yisroel Meir Kagan zt"l

Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshiva Toras Chaim of Denver

This week, the week of Parshas Lech Lecha, Klal Yisroel lost a Rosh Yeshiva whose life echoed the parsha's opening command.

Rav Yisroel Meir Hakohen Kagan zt"l was born into the world of the Chofetz Chaim. His father, Rav Yehuda Leib Hakohen Kagan zt"l, later a Rosh Yeshiva at RJJ, was a talmid of the Chofetz Chaim and was present at his petira in 1933. When his son was born very soon afterwards, he named him Yisroel Meir after his rebbe. Rav Yisroel Meir Kagan's mother, Rebbetzin Devorah, of the Kossowsky family, was a niece of Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski zt"l. His wife Leah a"h was the daughter of the Mattersdorfer Rav.

He became one of the foremost talmidim of Rav Aharon Kotler zt"l at Beth Medrash Govoha. In 1967 he left Lakewood with Rav Yitzchok Wasserman, to bring that mesorah to Denver, a city then far removed from any established Torah center.

For close to sixty years he sat in that quiet place and built a makom Torah. For many years it was the closest yeshiva for bachurim from Seattle, Los Angeles, Vancouver and Mexico, and thousands of talmidim carried his Torah and hashkafa into homes and communities across the world.

His talmidim describe him in different ways. Some speak of the depth and breadth of his shiurim, which were easy to follow yet held a great deal. Others speak of his love for them, how approachable he was, and how freely they could bring him whatever was troubling them. All speak of his hasmadah. He was in the beis medrash before Shacharis and left only after Maariv, to go home and prepare the next day's shiur.

His middos were refined to the point of chumra. He once mentioned to a member of the hanhalah that he had found \$75 and put it into the pushka. When asked why, since al pi halacha the money was his, he answered that \$75 is a significant sum, and the one who lost it was surely distressed. "How can I enjoy something that caused someone else agmas nefesh?"

Above all he fled from kavod. He left few public recordings and almost no published writings, because putting himself forward was not his way.

He was niftar after an illness this past Monday, in his 93rd year. Levayos were held in Denver and in Lakewood, and he was brought to kevarah in Har Hazeisim.

One of Rav Yisroel Meir Kagan's last projects was the republishing and expansion of his father's sefer *Halichos Yehudah*. The following dvar torah from the *Halichos Yehudah* is adapted and translated below.

Adapted from

Halichos Yehudah by Rav Yehudah Leib HaKohen Kagan (1894-1972)

Contentment and the Good Eye

ויאמר מלך סדם אל אברם תן לי הנפש והרכש קח לך ויאמר אברם אל מלך סדם הרימתי ידי אל ה' אל עליון קנה שמים וארץ אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל ואם אקה מכל *The king of Sodom said to Avram: Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself. Avram said to the king of Sodom: I have raised my hand to Hashem, G-d Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth. I will take neither a thread nor a shoelace, nor anything that is yours, so that you cannot say, I made Avram rich, except only what the young men have eaten* (Lech Lecha 14:21-24).

A Thread and a Shoelace

The Torah places before us a remarkable scene. Avraham Avinu has just defeated four powerful kings who had conquered nations and plundered entire countries. ויקחו את כל רכש סדם ועמרה *They took all the possessions of Sodom and Amorah* (Lech Lecha 14:11). Avraham defeated them and recovered everything they had seized. וישב את כל *He brought back all the possessions, and also brought back Lot his kinsman and his possessions, and also the women and the people* (Lech Lecha 14:16).

תן לי הנפש *The king of Sodom, defeated and powerless, tells him* *Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself.* Avraham had every reason to accept. The king himself offered him the property, and Avraham had a valid claim to what he had rescued. Yet he answers *I have raised my hand to Hashem, G-d Most High.* He takes a solemn oath that he will accept nothing, *not even a thread or a shoelace.*

Why was this refusal so significant? Chazal saw extraordinary meaning in those few words. בשכר שאמר אברהם אבינו אם מחוט ועד שרוך *In the merit of Avraham Avinu saying, not a thread nor a shoelace, his children merited two mitzvos, the thread of techeiles and the strap of tefillin* (Sotah 17a). Bereishis Rabbah (43:9) finds within the same words allusions to the Mishkan, korbanos and *aliyah laregel*, מה יפו פעמיו *How beautiful are your footsteps in shoes* (Shir HaShirim 7:2). The Tanchuma adds the Korban Pesach, ונככה תאכלו אותו מתניכם *This is how you shall eat it, your loins girded and your shoes on your feet* (Bo 12:11).

Chazal did not attach so many mitzvos and rewards to an insignificant gesture. חסדא must contain something fundamental.

There was also a halachic act here. והרימתי ידי אל ה' *was an oath.* The Sifrei teaches אדם להשביע את יצרו שכן אתה מוצא בכל מקום שהצדיקים *A person must bind his inclination with an oath, for*

we find that the righteous would bind their inclination with an oath, and cites Avraham as its example (Sifrei Devarim 33). Nedarim 8a likewise teaches that one may swear to strengthen himself in the performance of a mitzvah. Avraham therefore regarded his refusal as important enough to bind himself by an oath.

To understand why, we must go back to the struggle between Avraham and Amraphel.

Avraham and Amraphel

The immediate reason Avraham entered the war was *וישמע אברם כי* *Avram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive and armed his trained men* (Lech Lecha 14:14). Lot had been captured. But behind that immediate cause lay an older struggle.

And it was in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar. Megillah 10b brings this pasuk as an example of *כל מקום* *wherever vayehi appears it denotes distress.* What was the distress? *עשו מלחמה* *they made war.* Chazal describe Amraphel and his allies as opening the world to war, conquest and bloodshed. *The wicked have drawn the sword and bent their bow* (Tehillim 37:14). Their punishment would be *הרבם תבוא בלבם וקשתותם תשברנה* *their sword will enter their own heart and their bows will be broken* (Tehillim 37:15), and Avraham would be the one to carry it out.

The contrast could not be sharper. Amraphel represents conquest, idolatry and the drive to take. Avraham is the first *Ivri*, the man who recognized *יש בעל הבירה* *there is a Master of the palace*, and went from place to place proclaiming Hashem's name. ויבן מזבח לה' ויקרא *He built an altar to Hashem and called in the name of Hashem* (Lech Lecha 12:8).

Nor was this their first encounter. The Gemara identifies Amraphel with Nimrod. חד אמר נמרוד שמו ולמה נקרא שמו אמרפל שאמר והפיל לאברהם *One opinion says his name was Nimrod and he was called Amraphel because he ordered Avraham cast into the fiery furnace; the other says his name was Amraphel and he was called Nimrod because he caused the entire world to rebel against Hashem through his rule* (Eruvin 53a).

That was their first battle. Nimrod sought to destroy Avraham and everything he represented. Avraham entered the furnace for *kiddush Hashem*. Chazal relate that Gavriel offered to save him, but Hakadosh Baruch Hu replied *I am One in My world and he is one in his world; it is fitting for the One to save the one* (Pesachim 118a).

Nimrod could cast Avraham into the furnace, but he could not burn Avraham's Torah, his *emunah*, or the ideals for which he stood. The miracle itself demonstrated Avraham's teaching: fire has no independent power. *כי הוא אמר ויהי* *For He spoke and it came into being* (Tehillim 33:9). The Master of the palace rules the fire as He rules everything else.

That was Avraham's first victory over Nimrod. Years later came the second.

The Second Victory

Avraham went out against Amraphel-Nimrod and his allies and defeated them. *ויחלק עליהם לילה* *He divided himself against them at night* (Lech Lecha 14:15). Chazal see even the night joining Avraham's battle. He struck the kings, pursued them and recovered the captives and their property.

The nations saw a brilliant commander. יוצא מלך סדם לקראתו אחרי שובו. *The king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from defeating Kedarlaomer and the kings who were with him, to the Valley of Shaveh, which is the King's Valley* (Lech Lecha 14:17).

Bereishis Rabbah (42:5) explains that the nations gathered there and acclaimed Avraham: מלך אתה עלינו נשיא אתה עלינו אלוך אתה עלינו. *You are our king, you are our prince, you are a godlike figure over us.* They saw the victory and attributed it to Avraham.

Avraham corrected them: אל יחסר העולם מלכו ואל יחסר העולם אלוך. *Let the world not be without its King and let the world not be without its G-d.* The strength was not his. The victory belonged to Hashem.

Then the king of Sodom made his offer: תן לי הנפש והרכש קח לך. Avraham could take everything with the king's consent. Instead he swore: אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל ואם אקח מכל אשר לך. Not a shoelace. Nothing.

The normal victor takes. The conqueror enlarges his wealth.

Avraham had entered battle without becoming a man of battle. He had defeated the taker without becoming a taker himself.

What Is an Ayin Tovah?

The Rambam's commentary to Pirkei Avos opens the meaning of the entire episode. The Mishnah says עין טובה ורוח נמוכה ונפש שפלה. *A good eye, a humble spirit and a modest soul are the characteristics of the talmidim of Avraham Avinu* (Avos 5:19). What is an *ayin tova*?

The Rambam explains עין טובה כבר בארנו פעמים רבות שענין עין טובה היא *We have explained many times that a good eye means contentment.* And where do we find Avraham praised for it? In his answer to the king of Sodom. He could leave behind great wealth and refuse to benefit from it *even in the smallest amount.* This, says the Rambam, is תכלית ההסתפקות *the ultimate expression of contentment.*

Midrash Shmuel explains similarly: עין טובה הכוונה כי תשבע עינו במה *A good eye means that a person's eye is satisfied with what Hashem has granted him; whether little or much, he rejoices in his portion.* Avraham did not hunger for wealth merely because it was available to him. His eye was satisfied with what Hashem had given him.

This touches something basic in human nature. Man enters the world as a receiver. His existence, his breath and every moment of his life come from Hashem. Precisely because receiving is built so deeply into human existence, the desire to receive can become limitless. אין אדם יוצא מן העולם וחצי תאוותו בידו יש לו מנה רוצה מאתים יש לו מאתים רוצה *A person does not leave this world with even half his desire fulfilled. If he has one hundred, he wants two hundred; if he has two hundred, he wants four hundred* (Koheles Rabbah 1:13).

The Gra compares the world to salt water: העולם דומה לשוטה מים מלוחים *The world is like one who drinks salt water; he imagines that he is satisfying his thirst, but he becomes even thirstier.* The more a person trains himself to take, the more he needs to take. Unchecked, that hunger becomes desire for another person's money, theft and conflict. Amraphel is that instinct enlarged onto the stage of history.

But the same hunger can be directed upward.

The Desire for Mitzvos

The ways of Hashem are straight; the righteous walk in them and sinners stumble in them

(Hoshea 14:10). A human drive can become destructive, or it can become a force for *avodas Hashem*.

Chazal apply *One who loves money will not be satisfied with money* (Koheles 5:9) to Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe knew that the three *arei miklat* he designated east of the Yarden could not function until three others were designated in Eretz Canaan.

Nevertheless, מצוה שבאת לידי אקיימנה *A mitzvah that has come into my hand, I will perform* (Makkos 10a).

The Rambam, in his commentary to Avos 4:2, notes that Moshe would not allow even what he calls a חצי מצוה *half a mitzvah* to escape his hand. The appetite to acquire was transformed into an appetite for Torah and mitzvos.

Avraham's greatness was likewise not that he had ceased to be human. It was that he ruled the human desire to take. When the king of Sodom placed an enormous fortune before him, Avraham knew that this was precisely the moment when the *yetzer* needed to be bound: הרימתי ידי אל ה'.

And there was an even deeper reason. Taking the spoils would have contradicted the entire meaning of his war. Amraphel's world was built upon conquest and the hunger to possess what belongs to another. Avraham had gone to war to defeat that world. He could not emerge from the victory by adopting its values. His answer therefore had to be absolute: אם מחוט ועד שרוך נעל.

Avraham and Bilam

This is why the Mishnah calls the person with an *ayin tova* a talmid of Avraham Avinu. A talmid learns his rebbe's way and follows it. Avraham taught man to be satisfied with what Hashem has given him and not to hunger for what belongs to another.

Avraham himself went much further. He was the great man of *chesed*. But the entranceway to *chesed* is *histapkus*. Before a person can truly become a giver, he must learn not to be a taker. This was the first lesson Avraham could teach the people of Sodom.

And this lesson is not only for Klal Yisrael. The Mishnah speaks of the talmidim of Avraham, אב המון גוים *the father of a multitude of nations* (Lech Lecha 17:5). *Ayin tova* is a necessary *middah* for human society itself.

The opposite is Bilam Harasha. *Even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold* (Balak 22:18). Rashi comments למדנו שנפשו רחבה ומחמד ממון אחרים *We learn that his appetite was broad and that he desired the money of others.* Bilam was ruled by the hunger to acquire. Avraham ruled that hunger.

What the Young Men Ate

This also explains the Gemara in Chullin 89a cited earlier. קשה גזל הנאכל שאפילו צדיקים גמורים אינן יכולין להחזירו שנאמר בלעדי רק אשר אכלו *Consumed stolen property is especially severe, for even completely righteous men cannot return it, as it says: except only what the young men have eaten.*

At first this seems impossible. Are Chazal describing Avraham Avinu as retaining stolen property? The Maharsha explains that they are not. The recovered property could legally have belonged to Avraham, and the king of Sodom expressly told him to take it. Avraham nevertheless treated benefiting from it as though it were *gezel*, because his standard went beyond strict law.

The sefer takes the point one step further. Even the food consumed by Avraham's men was part of the lesson. During war the Torah permits things that would ordinarily be forbidden, to the point that

Chazal speak of כְּתִילֵי דַחֲזִירֵי *pork* becoming permitted under the special conditions of warfare (Chullin 17a). Yet Avraham's attitude was that, had what the young men ate still been recoverable, he would have returned that as well.

That is the depth of *histapkus*. Avraham was not merely a wealthy man who declined a gift. He had confronted the first great conqueror, the man who introduced the sword and the hunger to take into the world, and defeated him twice. He defeated Nimrod first by walking into the furnace rather than surrender his *emunah*. He defeated him a second time on the battlefield. But the final victory came after the battle, when all the wealth of Sodom lay before him and he refused to become, even in the smallest measure, what he had fought against. *Not a thread and not a shoelace*. That is the *ayin tovah* of Avraham.

אמרי נא אחתי את – Say you are my sister

Collected by **Chaim Ozer Shulman**

Why Avraham Asked Sarah to Say She Was His Sister

A. Two Questions

As Avraham and Sarah approached Egypt, Avraham said to Sarah: והיה כי יראו אתך המצרים ואמרו זאת והרגו אתי ואתך יחיו אמרי נא אחתי – את למען ייטב לי בעבורך וחיתה נפשי בגללך – When the Egyptians see you, they will say, She is his wife, and they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, so that it will go well with me because of you, and my life will be spared because of you (Lech Lecha 12:12-13).

Two questions immediately arise. First, if the Egyptians wanted Sarah and were prepared to take her against her will, why would they have to kill Avraham? What would be gained by saying that he was her brother? Second, although Avraham says – וחיתה נפשי בגללך – my life will be spared because of you, he first says – לי בעבורך – so that it will go well with me because of you. What was this טובה, and why is it mentioned before saving his life?

B. The Beis HaLevi: Why Saying "My Sister" Would Protect Avraham

The Beis HaLevi answers the first question. Avraham did not assume that an ordinary Egyptian could simply take Sarah against her will. As long as Sarah was Avraham's wife, a man who desired her would know that she would never agree to marry him while her husband was alive. Avraham was therefore the obstacle. If he were killed, Sarah would become a widow and the man could hope that she might then agree to marry him.

This was the purpose of אמרי נא אחתי את – Please say that you are my sister. If Sarah appeared unmarried, killing her supposed brother would accomplish nothing. הגם שהיא פנויה הרי בידה שלא להתרצות להנשא – although she was unmarried, it remained within her power to refuse whoever sought to marry her. The protection therefore came from Sarah herself. Her supposed brother did not stand in the way of the marriage, because whether she married remained her decision.

The Beis HaLevi also explains why the plan failed. Avraham assumed that Sarah would be dealing with an ordinary man who needed her consent. וזה לא עלה בדעתו שהמלך אשר בידו ליקח אותה שלא – מדעתה ירצה בה – It did not occur to him that the king, who had the power to take her without her consent, would desire her. Pharaoh needed no consent. Therefore, ותוקה האשה בית פרעה – the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house (12:15).

But the second question remains. What did Avraham mean by למען ייטב לי בעבורך?

C. What Was the טובה?

The Radak gives the simplest answer. למען ייטב לי בעבורך פירושו וחיתה – "So that it will go well with me because of you" means that his life would be spared. והטובה שלא יהרגו אותו – the טובה was simply that they would not kill him. Radak therefore adds, חלילה לו – Far be it from him to gain honor through her disgrace, for her disgrace would be his disgrace. The Ramban understands the טובה somewhat more broadly. Avraham had gone to Egypt because of the famine and intended to remain only until it passed. He wanted that כל ימי היותנו גרים בארץ הזאת עד עבור – throughout the period that they were sojourners there until the famine passed, they would be able to survive the famine there and ultimately return to Eretz Canaan. According to both Radak and Ramban, למען ייטב לי does not refer to material gain.

But Rashi, based on the Midrash Rabbah, gives the familiar explanation: יתנו לי מתנות – they will give me gifts. This reading appears to be supported by what actually occurs: ולאברם היטיב בעבורה – And he treated Avram well because of her, and he had sheep, cattle, donkeys, servants, maidservants, female donkeys and camels (12:16). Avraham says למען ייטב לי בעבורך, and shortly afterward the Torah says ולאברם היטיב בעבורה.

This sharpens the problem. Why would Avraham be thinking about gifts when his life and Sarah's safety were in danger? And if the gifts were secondary, why does למען ייטב לי come before וחיתה נפשי?

D. Sforno: The Gifts Were Part of the Plan

The Sforno answers both questions together. If Sarah were known as Avraham's wife, a man who desired her would know that Avraham would never agree to surrender her. וחיתה נפשי – they will kill me, because – שלא יקוו שאסכים לתתך להם – they would have no hope that I would agree to give you to them.

But if Sarah said that Avraham was her brother, the situation changed. יקוה כל אחד מהם שאשיאך לו ולא יחשוב שום אחד מהם להרגנו – each man would hope that I would marry you to him, and no one would think of killing us. Instead of killing Avraham, the prospective suitor would try to persuade him. – ייטיב לי במהרה ובמתן – he would treat me well with a dowry and gifts.

The gifts were therefore not the purpose of the plan. They were evidence that the plan was working. A suitor would negotiate, offer gifts and seek Avraham's favor. That would take time. ובין כך חשב – in the meantime, Avraham planned to leave Egypt. Calling Sarah his sister converted Avraham from an obstacle who had to be removed into the person whose agreement the suitor hoped to obtain.

One difficulty nevertheless remains. If the טובה was merely the means of preserving Avraham's life, why does the pasuk mention וחיתה נפשי before למען ייטב לי?

The Haamek Davar responds by distinguishing the two phrases. למען ייטב לי means that Avraham would be in a favorable position, which itself would be for Sarah's benefit, because he would then be able to act to save her. וחיתה נפשי – הוא יותר משוב – more than merely טוב, and בגללך describes the further chain of events that would ultimately bring Avraham great wealth.

E. The Derishah: Why ייטב לי Comes First

The Derishah preserves Rashi's reading that the involved favorable treatment, but explains why it comes before נפשי וחיתה. He asks: נפשי בגללך – Why did Avraham place the secondary matter, that it would go well with him because of her, before the primary matter, that his life would be spared?

His answer is that Avraham expected many important Egyptians to desire Sarah. שכל השרים והמושלים יחניפו לי בעבורך בסברם שאתן אותך להם – all the officers and rulers would seek my favor because of you, thinking that I would give you to one of them as a wife. Each would seek Avraham's goodwill because each hoped to be chosen. That competition would itself protect Avraham. ולא יהיה שום אחד רשאי – none would dare harm me, because he would fear the other officer who also desired her and would protect my life from the others. למען ייטב – therefore comes first because it is the cause of נפשי וחיתה. Precisely because the various noblemen would seek Avraham's favor, each would have an interest in keeping him alive.

F. Where the Plan Failed

Sforno himself points to the moment Avraham's plan broke down. At first, the Egyptians reacted as expected. A man who wanted Sarah would approach Avraham and try to persuade him. But when Pharaoh's officers saw Sarah, הם בטלו – they upset the plan involving the general populace. Instead of first approaching Avraham and trying to win his agreement, they brought Sarah directly to Pharaoh. This was also the point at which the other explanations of Avraham's plan failed. According to the Beis HaLevi, an ordinary suitor needed Sarah's consent; Pharaoh did not. According to Sforno, an ordinary suitor needed Avraham's agreement; Pharaoh did not. According to the Derishah, competing noblemen would restrain one another, but once they all deferred to Pharaoh, there was no longer any competition.

Avraham's plan could therefore work so long as he was dealing with ordinary men. The Beis HaLevi relied on Sarah's ability to refuse, Sforno on the suitor's need to persuade Avraham, and the Derishah on the competition among the noblemen. Pharaoh was different. He needed neither Sarah's consent nor Avraham's agreement, and there was no rival powerful enough to restrain him.

At that point, the plan could go no further. The next pasuk therefore tells us: - וינגע ה' את פרעה וגזלים ואת ביתו על דבר שרי אשת אברם – Hashem afflicted Pharaoh and his household with great plagues because of Sarai, the wife of Avram (12:17).

When Avraham's own plan had reached its limit, Hashem Himself intervened and saved them.

G. Summary of the Main Approaches

View	How Does the Plan Protect Avraham?	טיבה Meaning of the	Why Does It Fail with Pharaoh?
Beis HaLevi / Radak	If Sarah appears unmarried, killing her brother accomplishes nothing because she can still refuse the suitor.	According to Radak, the טובה is survival itself.	Pharaoh can take Sarah without her consent.
Sforno	A suitor tries to persuade Sarah's supposed brother rather than kill him.	Gifts are part of negotiations that buy time for Avraham and Sarah to escape	Pharaoh needs neither Avraham's agreement nor negotiations.

View	How Does the Plan Protect Avraham?	טיבה Meaning of the	Why Does It Fail with Pharaoh?
Derishah	Several suitors compete for Avraham's favor and therefore protect him from one another.	Their favorable treatment itself produces נפשי וחיתה.	The noblemen defer to Pharaoh, so the competition disappears.

Adapted and summarized from the *Halachipedia* entry *Brit Milah*

Bris Milah

The Importance of the Mitzvah

The mitzvah of milah is equivalent to all the other mitzvot of the Torah combined, and without it the world would not exist. In its merit Hashem split the sea for the Jewish people, and in its merit Aharon Hakohen entered the Kodesh Hakodashim each year.

The Night Before (Brit Yitzchak)

In Sephardic communities, it is customary on the night before a brit to gather ten men, including Torah scholars, in the home to read special passages from the Zohar to protect the baby. Reading the Zohar has value even if one does not understand it. Ideally this is done in the house where the baby is, but another location is acceptable if necessary. During the gathering, the mother should come to a side room and recite Birkat Hagomel. Bread is not required at this meal. If bread is served, the meal still is not a seudat mitzvah and does not permit eating meat during the Nine Days.

If the brit is postponed past the eighth day, the learning takes place on the night before the actual brit. If the brit is on Shabbat morning, the learning is done Thursday night, and if possible, ten men should also gather to learn on Friday night.

The Father's Obligation

A father must circumcise his son himself or appoint a G-d-fearing mohel to do it on his behalf. The father should stand near the mohel to show that the mohel is acting as his agent.

When the Brit Takes Place

The brit is performed on the eighth day after birth and may not be done earlier. Poskim disagree about whether a milah done before the eighth day requires hatafat dam brit on the eighth day. The brit may be done any time during the day after sunrise (netz hachama). Because of *zerizin makdimin lemitzvot*, one should try to perform it early in the morning. If the brit was performed after dawn (alot hashachar) but before sunrise, the obligation is fulfilled. If an early brit would cause family conflict, it may be delayed, but it should still be held as early as possible.

If there is any health concern, the brit is postponed until the baby is healthy. For some illnesses the brit is done as soon as the baby recovers. For others, seven full days must pass after recovery. A rabbi must be consulted.

A baby born during bein hashemashot (twilight) has his brit on the ninth day [the eighth day from after bein hashmashos], since it is unclear whether he was born by day or by night. Determining bein hashemashot in practice is complicated, so a rabbi should be consulted.

The Brachot

Before the milah, the father recites, standing: ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם אשר קידשנו במצותיו וציונו להכניסו בבריתו של אברהם אבינו

The mohel recites, standing: ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם אשר קידשנו במצותיו וציונו על המילה. The text is the same whether the mohel or the father is performing the milah.

Sephardim recite Shehecheyanu at a brit. Ashkenazim traditionally do not, except when the baby is a firstborn who requires a pidyon haben. Today the Ashkenazic practice outside Israel is not to say it at all.

After the milah, Borei Pri Hagafen is recited over wine, followed by the bracha אשר קידש ידיד מבטן. The person reciting the brachot should taste the wine before the paragraph אלוהינו ואליהו אבותינו קיים את הילד הזה, in which the baby is named and a prayer is said for the baby and the mother. Tasting the wine is enough. He does not need to drink a cheekful.

At the words ואומר לך בדמך היי, the mohel dips his finger in the wine and places a drop on the baby's lips.

During אשר קידש ידיד מבטן, the Ashkenazic practice is for the sandak to stand holding the baby. Sephardim have the sandak remain seated. On Shabbat, if the person reciting the brachot has not yet made Kiddush, he should drink a cheekful (melo lugmav) plus an additional revi'it. Sephardim require only a revi'it or a cheekful in total.

The father and mohel do not need to close their eyes or cover the baby when reciting the brachot. However, the baby must be clean of any soiling before a bracha is said.

The Mohel and the Sandak

Sephardim allow a woman to serve as mohel. Ashkenazim hold that a woman should not, unless no man is available.

A G-d-fearing sandak should be chosen. The father places the baby on the sandak's lap. Ashkenazim do not appoint the same person as sandak for more than one of their sons.

The Ceremony

When the baby is brought in, those present say *Baruch Haba* aloud. The father says אשרי תבחר ותקרב ישכון הצריך and those present respond נשבעה בטוב ביתך קדוש היכלך. Everyone stands throughout except the sandak.

After the father's bracha, those present answer Amen and say כשם כשם שהנחנו לברית כן תכניסנו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים. Sephardim address the father directly: כשם כשם שהנחנו לברית כן תכניסנו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים. If the father is not present, they say כשם כשם שהנחנו לברית כן תכניסנו לתורה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים.

The mohel places the baby on the Kisei shel Eliyahu and says זה הכסא של אליהו הנביא מלאך הברית. Some light candles in honor of the brit. The custom is to bury the orlah in earth. Some say נחש עפר לחמו while doing so.

Sephardim recite the Thirteen Middot of Rachamim immediately after the father's bracha. The Jerusalem Sephardic custom is to recite ה' שיר המעלות אשרי כל ירא ה' and Kaddish at the end.

Tallit and Tefillin

Ashkenazim keep their tefillin on during the brit, because both milah and tefillin are an *ot*, a sign between Israel and Hashem. Sephardim generally remove them, though those who keep them on have a basis to rely on.

On Rosh Chodesh, if the congregation has already removed their tefillin, the Ashkenazic custom is for the father, mohel and sandak to put them back on. Sephardim do not. The sandak and the father wear a tallit.

A Minyan

Ideally the brit should take place before a minyan, both to publicize the mitzvah of bringing the child into the covenant of Avraham Avinu and to thank Hashem publicly for the birth. Poskim disagree about whether a brit may be delayed in order to have a minyan. It should not be delayed to get a minyan for the seudah.

A person does not need to interrupt his Torah learning to attend a brit or its seudah, unless his presence is needed to complete the minyan.

The Seudah

It is proper to hold a meal on the day of the brit, and it is a seudat mitzvah. It should include bread. The custom is not to formally invite guests, since declining an invitation to a brit seudah is problematic. Ideally the meal should include meat, but chicken or fish fulfills the custom. Those who serve a dairy meal should at least serve wine. The custom is to have a minyan at the seudah, but the seudah remains valid without one.

On Sukkot, the seudah must be held in the sukkah. If not everyone fits, a minyan should eat in the sukkah. If even a minyan cannot fit, some allow eating outside with a minyan, while others hold it is better to eat in the sukkah without a minyan.

A Delayed Milah

A delayed milah does not override Shabbat or Yom Tov. Ashkenazim permit a delayed milah on Thursday or Friday, even though healing complications might then require Shabbat to be violated for pikuach nefesh. Sephardim do not perform a delayed milah on Thursday or Friday. All agree that a baby born during bein hashemashot on Wednesday may have his brit on the following Thursday, since that day was its proper time and the milah is not considered "delayed."

Milah on Shabbat and Yom Tov

Sephardim do not divide the milah and the periah between two mohalim on Shabbat. There is a dispute about whether the same applies on Yom Tov. A father may perform the brit on Shabbat himself even if someone else is available.

If holding the brit on Shabbat will cause relatives to violate Shabbat to attend, many poskim hold it should be postponed to Sunday. Others hold it should still be done on Shabbat. A mohel concerned about witnessing Shabbat violations at a brit should still go and perform the milah.

A baby born during twilight on Friday evening, or delivered by C-section, does not have his brit on Shabbat or Yom Tov. A delayed milah does not override Yom Tov Sheni. Where a C-section baby's eighth day falls on Yom Tov Sheni, or where it is uncertain whether the eighth day is the first or second day of Yom Tov, poskim disagree.

The Procedure

The milah has two required stages. Milah is the cutting of the orlah covering the atarah. Periah is peeling back the thin membrane beneath it until the atarah is uncovered.

The final stage is metzitzah. There is a significant debate about whether it is an integral part of the mitzvah or a medical practice from the time of the Gemara, and whether it may be done with an instrument instead of by mouth. Because of the health risk, many poskim hold it should not be done by mouth. Others continue the practice of metzitzah b'peh where there is no concern of danger.

A mohel may wear gloves.

For the full article with sources and footnotes, see *Halachipedia*, "Brit Milah," https://halachipedia.com/index.php?title=Brit_Milah

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Spending a Lifetime Protecting My Coping Mechanisms, How Do I Hear the Call?

by Rabbi YY Jacobson

G-d Speaks to Every Soul; One Man Heard It -- and the Rest is History

The Question of the Ramban

One of the most important commentaries on the Torah was written by Nachmanides, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (1194–1270), known as the Ramban. He is considered one of the greatest medieval personalities in the Jewish world—an extraordinary scholar, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator. He was raised and lived in Girona, Spain for most of his life. Toward the end of his life, he was forced to leave Spain (after winning a debate in 1263 against Pablo Christiane, a Jew who converted to Christianity) and relocated to Jerusalem. He is also considered to be an important figure in the re-establishment of the Jewish community in Jerusalem following its destruction by the Crusaders in 1099.

The Ramban is from the few commentators who focus on the structure of the Torah. Most commentators focus on the meaning of a verse, a story, or a law; but the Ramban, in addition, focuses on the structure of the Torah.

Nachmanides raises a fascinating question about the opening of this week's portion, Lech Lecha. What happened to the bio?

The Tanach constantly introduces us to new characters assuming different roles, and fulfilling different tasks. Before we begin to hear their story, we are told a few words about their background to give us context, allowing us to understand why they were chosen for the role. Take Noah. The Torah does not begin his story by telling us that G-d told him to build an ark and rescue himself and his family from the Flood. First, the Torah gives us background information. "The earth was corrupt. And Noah founds grace in the eyes of G-d. This is the story of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, wholesome was he in his generation. Noah walked with G-d." Only then does the Torah go on to tell us that G-d spoke to Noah about the flood and instructed him to build an ark. So now we understand why him.

Take Moses. The Torah does not begin his story by telling us that G-d showed up one day in his life and summoned him to redeem the people. First, we learn of his background. He grew up in Pharaoh's palace; then we learn of how he saved a Jew from an Egyptian beating him to death, how he tried to stop two Hebrews from quarreling, and how he saved young women from shepherds harassing them at the Midian well. When Moses is chosen, we already know that here is a man of royal upbringing (who knows the workings of the palace) and of moral courage. We understand why him.

The same is true about Samson, Samuel, David, and Jeremiah. Their story does not emerge from a vacuum.

There is one exception in the entire Tanach, and arguably it is its most important figure: Abraham.

"G-d said to Abram, 'Go to yourself, from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing . . . all the families of the earth will be blessed through you.'"

Why Abraham?

Why was he chosen? What did he do to earn this special call from G-d? The Torah says nothing about Abraham prior to this encounter.

All we are told at the end of Noah is that a man named Terach had three sons, Nachor, Abraham, and Haran; Haran died while his father was alive. Nachor married a woman named Milka; and Abraham married a woman named Sarei, who was barren. That's it. As far as we are concerned, Abraham is a regular guy living in Charan, in present-day Iraq.

And then, suddenly, out of the blue, the Torah tells us how G-d spoke to Abraham, told him to leave his land, and relocate to a new land, Canaan, and promises him that he will change the world! G-d says to him that he will father a great nation and that all nations will become blessed by him; G-d promises him the Land of Canaan as an eternal inheritance and turns him into the father of a new civilization, charged with the mission to change the landscape of the planet. The entire rest of the Torah hinges on this opening commandment to Abraham.

Why him?

To be sure, the Talmud and the Midrashim offer numerous stories about Abraham's youth, his search for truth, his endless inquisitiveness and yearning to discover the origin of existence; his battle with his countrymen and the king; his sacrifices for the truth and for the convictions he espoused. Yet, from the biblical text, it seems like a random selection! Not even a single narrative is told about Abraham's unique virtues to underscore his greatness. There is not even a single verse relating his greatness.

This is the keen question raised by the Ramban.

One Man Heard It

Many answers have been suggested.[1] Today, I will share an insight by the Sefas Emes, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter, the third Gerer Rebbe, based on a teaching of the Zohar. It is short, simple, and profound.[2] The words "Lech Lecha" are always said by G-d to everyone. It was just Abraham who heard the call.

The Torah does not discuss Abraham's background to explain why G-d spoke to him because G-d did not speak (only) to him; G-d spoke it, and speaks it, to every human person. "Go to yourself, from your land, your birthplace, and your father's home, to the land that I will show you" is the Divine call to every soul.

Communication is about two people bonding. If I speak, but you do not listen, or you do not hear, I'm not talking to you. "G-d spoke to Abraham," not because G-d spoke to Abraham, but because Abram listened. He had the emotional, psychological, and spiritual "antenna" that allowed him to internalize the Divine call.

My wife can speak to me, but it does not mean I am capable of hearing what she says. There are truths I heard 20 years ago, but I lacked the openness to hear them at the time.

"This person really speaks to me" is an expression we use. They may be speaking to others as well, but somehow, with his teacher, I know how to listen; I get it. "The bird spoke to me" is an uncommon expression—not because birds do not speak to me; the birds nesting in the trees behind my home talk to me all the time, as do the gazelles, the groundhogs, the turtles, the trees, and even the rocks. They speak, they exude energy, life, messages, songs, chemicals, and odors, but I do not hear what they have to say. I lack the tools to appreciate their music, so they are not speaking to me.

G-d speaks to each of us. And His message is "Lech Lecha." Move

on. Get out of your rut. Step out of your biases, blind spots, fears, insecurities, traumas, and all the voices that limit you, and turn you into a limited and fearful human being. Open yourself up to Divine expansiveness; expand your horizons and become larger than your smaller self. Allow yourself to go on a journey—toward the destination G-d creates for you, even if it means letting go of everything familiar to you.

Go away from your superficial self and open yourself up to the Divine infinite light at the core of your being. Create a paradigm shift from self-centeredness to infinite-centeredness. G-d calls to each of us and says: Step away from your narrow perspective and begin to see things from My perspective, from the vantage point of ultimate truth and infinite oneness. Go out of your narrow, selfish orbit and change the world! And in that, you will arrive at your truest self, at your deepest core.

It is a call to every human heart, but can I even hear it? If I spent my life creating and then managing my coping mechanisms, and I managed to "polish" them to perfection, so they seem sophisticated and logical, how do I even notice the inner still voice resonating in my inner untainted core?

It was Abraham who heard the call—and acted on it. Abraham became the person to whom G-d spoke these fateful words because he heard them!

That's how and why he became the first Jew—and changed history. When we can each open ourselves to that vulnerable call, we become partners with Abraham and Sarah: We begin to change the inner and outer landscape of our lives and radiate it to all those around us. It begins with awareness, with "hearing" the call. Can you notice the triggers? Hold space for the anxiety? Can you be curious about the dissonance, and observe the mental chaos with compassion? Can you then tune in to the inner voice behind them all, whispering to the beautiful, wholesome, glorious, and Divine core-self: "Lech Lecha."

The Story of Reb Avraham Vetzler

Do you know who heard the call of Lech Lecha? Another man named Avraham—Avraham Vetzler.

A number of years ago, Rabbi Chaim Heber, the Chabad ambassador to Beer Sheva, Israel, received a call.

"Hi, my name is Avraham Vetzler. I am 90. Before G-d takes my soul, I want to learn Torah."

A strange telephone call, to say the least.

"Sure," says the Chabad rabbi. "I will come to your home, and we will study Torah."

"No. You can't eat anything in my home. It is completely non-kosher. I will come to you."

They began to study Torah together. After a few months, Avraham celebrated his bar mitzvah at the age of 90. Sometime later, he began to observe the Shabbos. And then, one day, he called the rabbi and said: "I stopped buying non-kosher meat, come make my kitchen kosher!"

In 2017, Avraham had a Sefer Torah (Torah Scroll) written in the memory of his parents—and the whole community danced as he led the new Torah into the synagogue.

Rabbi Heber turned to him and said: Avraham! You need to explain the mystery to me. What happened suddenly at the age of 90?

He said: I am a Hungarian Jew. I was born in 1927. In 1944, we were deported by the Germans. My parents were murdered. They were Torah observant Jews, holy, pious people. I got so angry at G-d and

at Judaism. When I came out of the death camps, I decided to cast away all of Judaism and Jewish life.

Some time ago, a neighbor invited me for a Friday night dinner. I came to their home, and I saw the hostess, Chana Rechima, light Shabbos candles. I have not seen a woman light Shabbos candles in more than 80 years.

Suddenly, I had a flashback. I am a child, at my home in Hungary, it is Friday evening, and my mother lights the candles, and prays to G-d silently, with tears streaming down her face. It all came back to me at that moment.

The next day I phoned you and asked to start learning Torah.

Imagine: 80 years ago, a Jewish woman lit candles, and asked G-d that her son grow up to be a good and proud Jew. Then she is taken by the Nazis and murdered, her son survives but throws it all away.

The flame of Yiddishkeit, it seems, has been extinguished, at least for this family.

But 80 years later, that boy Avraham, hears the call "Lech Lecha!"

His grandfather, the first Abraham, bequeathed that gift to each of us. If we listen, we too can hear that call.

Reb Akiva began learning the Torah at 40; Avraham Vetzler began learning at 90.

On October 27, 2020, 9 Cheshvan, 5781, Avraham Vetzler from Hungary returned his soul to its maker in Israel. He was 94.

After 75 years, he met his parents again. He died knowing how much he made his mother and father proud. His mother's prayers at the glowing candles were not in vain.

At 90, Avraham heard the call of Lech Lecha.

I hope I, and all of us, can hear my Lech Lecha before I turn 90.

[1] See Ramban ibid. Likkutei Suchos vol. 25 Lech. In a sermon some years ago we explored the answer by the Maharal, Netzach Yisroel ch. 11

[2] שפת אמת לך לך: רמב"ן הקשה שנאמר לך לך בלי שנוכח מקודם חיבתו. ובזה"ק נראה כי זה עצמו השבח ששמע זה המאמר לך לך שנאמר מהשי"ת לכל האנשים תמיד כמ"ש וי לאינון דשינתא בחוריהון [=אבוי לאלה שישנים בחוריהם]. ואברהם אבינו עליו השלום שמע וקיבל. וממילא נקרא רק הדיבור אליו כי הלא לא נמצא מיוחד לשמוע רק הוא, אבל בודאי זה השבח בעצמו שהי' מוכן לקבל המאמר

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Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT LECH L'CHA

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

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

Did Avraham Avinu simply win a 'Divine lottery'?

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

THE SIN OF "DOR HA'PLAGAH"

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

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

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

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

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

So what did they do that angered God?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BET-EL & SHEM HASHEM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A 'STRATEGIC' LOCATION

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

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

A BIBLICAL THEME

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

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

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

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

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

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

IN MESSIANIC TIMES

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

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

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

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

The following table reviews this contrasting parallel:

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

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

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

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

REWARD OR PURPOSE

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom,
menachem

=====

FOR FURTHER IYUN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PARSHAT LECH L'CHA -Part Two

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

THE FIRST HITGALUT - BECOMING GOD'S NATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE FIRST 'SPLIT'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let's explore that possibility.

LIKE NEPHEW LIKE SON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LEAVING AVRAHAM OR LEAVING GOD?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, Lot's choice carried spiritual ramifications as well.

As Parshat Ekev explains:

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

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

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

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

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

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

BRIT BEIN HA'B'TARIM - THE FIRST COVENANT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is the meaning of this question?

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

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

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

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

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

NOT IN YOUR LIFETIME!

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

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

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

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

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

A PROOF FROM VA'EYRA

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

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

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

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

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

LAND - FOR A PURPOSE

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

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

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

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

THE BIRTH OF YISHMAEL

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

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

BRIT MILAH

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

- 1) The significance of "brit milah" on the 'eighth day' was discussed at length in our shiur for Shmini Atzeret (sent out a few weeks ago/ see TSC archive for Parshat Tazria).
- 2) The thematic connection between "brit milah" and "brit bein ha'btarim" was discussed in our shiur for Chag ha'MATZOT and on Parshat Bo and on MAGID.
- 3) The meaning the borders of the Land of Israel as detailed in "brit milah" (and "brit bein ha'btarim") was discussed in our shiur on Parshat Masei (see archive).

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

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

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

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

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly, there is a broadening of the information provided:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Where does Mo'av come from?

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

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

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

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

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

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

III. CHAPTERS 1-11: A BRIEF RECAP

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

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

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

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

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

Almost immediately after coming out of the Ark, No'ach descended into becoming a "man of the earth" (9:20; the intent is clearly pejorative - see B'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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Parshat Lech Lecha: Trust in Training

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

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

AVOID DISAPPOINTMENT: LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS!

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

A FEW GOOD MEN:

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

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

AVRAHAM: THE FIRST TO PASS:

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

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

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

BEREISHIT 15:1-18 --

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOW FOR SOME ANSWERS:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:

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

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

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

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

THE CIRCUMCISION COVENANT:

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

BEREISHIT 17:1-14 --

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shabbat Shalom