

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093 718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Lekh Lekha Part II Abraham, Continued

1. Abraham in Battle

Despite Lot's separating from Abram in a disrespectful manner and eventually settling in Sodom, a city of wicked people, the uncle's great devotion to his nephew continued. This is illustrated, together with Abram's vigor, courage and military skill, in the narrative that follows.

An alliance of four Mesopotamian kings arrives in Canaan to subdue Sodom and its four sister city-states. Those eastern monarchs had previously established dominance over Sodom and its neighbors, and when the latter rebelled (perhaps refusing to pay tribute) the erstwhile rulers returned to suppress the rebellion. The Mesopotamians were a mighty force; upon arriving in the region, before battling the Sodom group, they vanquished a number of regional states. They defeated Sodom and the local kings and took captives and possessions including Lot and his possessions, and departed.

Abram was then living in Hebron, which had no connection to the hostilities. When word reached him that his nephew had been taken captive, he immediately went into action. He musters his retinue of 318 men (חֲנִיכָיו, perhaps "trained" men, חֲנִיכָיו בְּיָתוֹ, born into his household, a private militia) and calls upon allies that he had established in Hebron. Ignoring the numbers, he pursues the four kings for more than one hundred miles, catches up to them by the city of Dan (possibly an anachronism for the northern city Laish, as per Judg. 18:29), divides his forces for a multipronged nighttime attack and defeats the alliance. The "mopping up" operation was near Damascus. He brought back all the possessions as well as Lot and the other captives.

Since Abram did not deem it proper to rely on miracles (as manifest in his going to Egypt during the

famine), was not such a confrontation foolhardy? Yaakov Elman suggests that perhaps he merely planned a surprise raid for the limited purpose of rescuing Lot but ultimately accomplished much more than anticipated. Others suggest that Abraham was confident that a well-trained band that springs a surprise attack from several sides on an unguarded foe at night could rout the enemy.

Upon Abram's successful return from battle the king of Sodom came forth to greet him. In the midst of the narrative relating of their interaction there is a three-verse interposition (Gen. 14:18-20) regarding Melchizedek (lit. "my king is righteous" or "the righteous king"), the king of Salem – probably Jerusalem, see Psalm 76:3 – who was a priest to El Elyon.* Although not from the immediate vicinity, he brought forth bread and wine in celebration of the occasion, obviously impressed by Abram. He blessed Abram to G-d, creator of heaven and earth, and expressed gratitude to G-d for having intervened in Abram's favor. Abram recognized that this priest had high standards; apparently he was, or was on the path to becoming, monotheistic. He gave him a tenth of all [the possessions he brought back?].

The king of Sodom said to Abram: "Give me the people and you take the possessions." In their society, a guiding principle was "to the victor belongs the spoils," generally including the people. Since the Torah does not attribute to the king a word of gratitude or of blessing (as was the case with Melchizedek – a contrast highlighted by the interposition), we wonder if he, the head of Sodom, reflects his townspeople's values. Abram's response to him is an oath to G-d that he would not take so much as a "thread or sandal strap of what is yours" so that you shall not be able to say you made Abram rich (Gen. 14:21-22). The always-courteous Abram is surprisingly explicit with the king; he is not concerned

that his statement may offend the king who may consider himself being suspected to act in a dishonorable manner. Abram accepted out-of-pocket expenses, as it would be wrong to leave that with Sodom. He also arranged for his allies to take their share for he had no right to impose his personal lofty standards on them.

Earlier, when in Egypt, the Torah states that “Abram was dealt with well because of her [Sarai] and he had sheep, oxen, donkeys, male slaves...” (12:16). There, it seems that he accepted gifts.** But the contexts are dissimilar. In Egypt, Abram may have been needy, while here he was a well-to-do individual. The king of Sodom, in his presumed exaggeration, would possibly later take false credit for what was an ongoing process of divine providence in Abram’s favor; this would diminish the public appreciation for the continual blessing G-d showered upon Abram. And Abram would not want it thought that his motivation in going to battle was to receive reward or that his wealth came through that channel. In addition, to accept a “gift” from Sodom, a city of ultra-wicked people, would besmirch the taker.***

Another consideration is that the riches attained in Egypt may have resulted from Sarai’s having been taken to Pharaoh, since “and Abram was dealt with well because of her” (12:16) is stated as the direct continuation of that action. And the quarreling between Abram’s and Lot’s shepherds that follows appears to have resulted from those riches. Thus, Abram may have regretted those gifts and his refusal to accept benefit from Sodom may have been a correction.

Finally, we cannot rule out the possibility that “Abram was dealt with well” (v. 16) means that although a stranger in Egypt he was allowed to function and prosper, not that he directly took gifts there. However, this does not seem to be the straightforward explanation.

2. The Covenant

Subsequent to the battle with the four kings, Hashem appears to Abram in an extended prophetic vision that results in the transformation of His previous promises of progeny and land into a formal covenant (Gen. 15).

He begins by promising Abram great rewards, to which the latter responds with an expression of deep feelings of frustration and anxiety. His faith in and commitment to Hashem is strong and sound, but he has a perspective on his personal situation that he wished to express. Maintaining a personal perspective on matters even when they intersect with the subject of a prophecy is a common feature of genuine prophets; their human understanding of things is not nullified by the experience of prophecy. Abram queries G-d regarding his not having been granted a child, whereupon G-d provides him a full measure of reassurance.

In language well attested in contemporaneous Near Eastern covenants (and as employed in the opening of the Decalogue, a proclamation formulated as a miniature covenant in itself), Hashem identifies Himself as He who took Abram forth from Ur of the Chaldeans to give him the land of Canaan as a possession. Following up on this statement, Abram requests a guarantee: בְּמָה אֶדְעֶה כִּי אֵיךְ אֶשְׁנָה – “by what [instrumentality] may I be assured that I [my progeny] will possess the land?” (Gen. 15:8). Hashem instructs him to bring certain animals and birds, in accordance with the protocol for transacting a covenant, to make the divine promises more definite, i.e., less contingent on exigencies that may arise. Abram cuts the animals in two, placing the halves facing each other, leaving room to pass between them. (In Jer. 34:18-19, passing between the halves of a split animal was described as part of the covenant ceremony.) Hashem, the primary party making the commitment on this occasion, causes a smoking oven and flaming torch – obviously His representatives – to pass between the parts.

Consistent with a covenant’s integrity, it was necessary for Abram to know what he was getting himself and his progeny into and accept the necessary consequences associated with the process, including a period of extreme adversity. G-d informs him that his descendants must be aliens in a foreign land for four hundred years – at some point being “enslaved and afflicted” (understanding the latter phrase as parenthetical, not applying to the whole duration). Eventually He will execute judgment on the nation they had served after which his descendants will exit there with great wealth to return to possess the promised land (Gen. 15:13-14).

How are we to understand a divine decree placed upon the as-yet-unborn members of the nation-in-formation that they must at some point undergo slavery and affliction undeservedly? Some have answered that the Israelites could never achieve the prodigious degree of sensitivity to the plight of others required by the Torah without having the experience of slavery and affliction etched into their national consciousness. That experience would often be invoked as a motivational factor in the Torah's presentation of its laws. It is a case of imposing suffering to achieve a goal that cannot be achieved otherwise, suffering which the future generations, when it is over, will presumably consider worthwhile because of the great benefit derived.

One may wonder if G-d's words could be understood as, "You must know [although I am giving you a guarantee regarding progeny and inheriting this land] that it is possible your descendants will be aliens...for four hundred years" etc., not that it must necessarily be, but rather that future circumstances might make it so.

In any event, Abram accepted on behalf of himself and his progeny.

This leads us to a famous question: Since G-d decreed the enslavement and affliction of Israel, why should He punish the oppressors (the Egyptians) for fulfilling a predestined role? Rambam answers that the decree did not specify who is to do the oppressing, only that it will be done by some nation; Pharaoh and those of his governing circle chose that role in an exercise of their own free will (*MT, Laws of Repentance* 6:5). Many have rejected this approach with the argument that since G-d's decree must necessarily be fulfilled by someone, there is a severe crimp on someone's free will. The Ramban, based on *Exodus Rabbah*, suggests that the Egyptians afflicted the Israelites far beyond what was necessary in fulfillment of the decree; the additional portion of affliction resulted from their free-willed cruelty and so they were culpable. This would be comparable to Hashem's explanation in another context as to why He was angry at certain nations: "For I was angry a little and they helped [overdid] giving the punishment" (Zech. 1:15).

Immediately following establishment of the Covenant, we read about the very human effort of Sarai and

Abram to have a child through Hagar, Sarai's maidservant. Although the Covenant is in place, Sarai had not yet been assured to have a child, so what was Abram to do? As a result of this endeavor, Ishmael is born when Abram is eighty-six years of age (Gen. 16:15-16). This passage that depicts the striving of Abram and Sarai after the first-phase Covenant appears linked to it in some manner.

Thirteen years later Hashem appeared to Abram to expand on the Covenant. He mandates circumcision as its sign, changes the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah and affirms that Sarah will bear Abraham a son (Gen. 17). There is an extraordinary number of Covenant markers – and markers of various types – manifest in that chapter, which we will discuss in our next study.

Endnotes

* In Near Eastern religions El is a god; it appears to have been the proper name of the sky god or a god at the top of the pantheon. "Elyon" was an epithet for the god "Baal" in Canaanite and Ugaritic religions. The combination of the two words "El Elyon" may be a reference to a specific god in Mesopotamian lore. Perhaps its usage in our context reflects a process analogous to that pertaining to the term *elohim*. The Near Eastern term *elohim*, clearly a plural, meant "gods" in pre-Torah religious culture. In the monotheistic revolution of the Torah it was transformed to refer to the one G-d (signifying that all the powers of the so-called gods are in reality subsumed into the one G-d.) Here too, the Torah may have "sanitized" a term and adopted a new meaning for it, "G-d the Most High."

** Rashi and Ibn Ezra even interpret Abram's request to Sarai upon entering Egypt to say she was his sister "in order that it will be well with me on your account and I will live due to you" (Gen. 12:13), as indicating that he was interested in gifts from the very beginning. This interpretation, however, does not seem to be the *peshat*. "That it will be well with me" is parallel to and probably connected with "and I will live due to you." Accordingly, Abram is saying that they will then leave him alone that he may live. When Jeremiah informed King Zedekiah that Hashem wanted him to surrender to the Babylonians, the king expressed the

fear that the Babylonians would place him in the hands of the Judean defectors and they would abuse him. The prophet replied that if you comply with Hashem's word, וַיִּטֵּב לְךָ וְתָהִי נִפְשָׁךְ, ("It will go well with you and you will live" Jer. 38:20). There is no consideration in that context for gifts; the king desires not to be tortured or disgraced. These are the same key words that Abram stated to Sarai (Gen. 12:13): לְמַעַן יִיטֵב לִי בְעַבְדֶּיךָ וְתִהְיֶה נַפְשִׁי בְּגִלְלֶךָ. (Sarna considers it a hendiadys.) In other contexts, when not part of a larger statement that expands on "living," the root of טוב could of course refer to gifts.

*** It should be noted that the name of the king of Sodom was בְּרַע, which perhaps is to be understood as "in evil," and the name of the king of Gomorrah was בְּרָשָׁע, which translates as "in wickedness." A third king was called שְׂמֵאֶכָר, which is composed of the letters רַב אָשָׁם, which means "much guilt." (Allusions through anagrams are not uncommon in Tanakh.) It often is the case in Tanakh that names reflect on one aspect or another of the individual or the entity the individual represents.

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