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Parashat Lekh Lekha Part I Abraham

1. Background

After the Flood, the behavior of mankind was again unsatisfactory to G-d, as illustrated by the narrative of the Tower of Babel. Again, after a period of ten generations, a time span that reflects His patience with man, G-d intervened in human affairs but in a totally different manner than previously. He decided to work through a remarkable individual who possessed great potential to initiate a new approach for the improvement of society: Abraham (Gen. 12:1). G-d's intention was to provide the world an opportunity to move forward through the example and influence of a nation that derives from a man who was fully dedicated to "the way of Hashem" and who was expected to transmit his values to his descendants (18:19).

Thus, the selection of Abraham to found a new nation in a specially chosen land was for the long-term purpose of bringing blessing to the world (12:2-3). Eventually, his progeny was to comprise a nation focused on living a life of righteousness, kindness and justice, that through its example would inspire the other nations to direct themselves toward implementation of those principles.

With the story of Abraham the Torah's focus shifts from the generalities of world "prehistory" to the beginnings of "biblical history" and the nation of Israel. The remainder of *Sefer Bereshit* will be devoted to one aspect or another of the growth and development of Abraham's descendants into a clan on the path to becoming a nation.

Terah intended to move with his son Abram, Abram's wife Sarai (G-d later changed their names to Abraham and Sarah) and his orphaned grandson Lot from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan. Upon reaching Haran,

however, for some unspecified reason, he remained there. This reflects a migration trend of those times that saw people moving from the exceedingly populated Mesopotamian centers of the East to the more lightly populated West, as well as a religious and cultural correspondence that obtained between Haran and Ur.

Hashem called upon Abram to leave his land, his family* and his father's home to go to an undisclosed destination to found a new nation. We subsequently learn that His intention was that Abram migrate to the land of Canaan, Terah's original destination. As is often the case, the divine command blends in with the natural order. Canaan, with its sparse population, was a region more suitable for the founding of a new nation. It also had the great advantage of being at the crossroads of the two preeminent centers of civilization of the ancient Near East, Mesopotamia and Egypt, affording the new nation opportunity to interact with leading nations and fulfill its responsibility to influence the world. (Of course, interaction with these nations was also a challenge, one that was an ongoing problem for the nation of Israel.)

2. Merit

Contrary to the cases with Noah and Moses, the reader is not provided any description of character or background material to shed light on Abram's worthiness for election. However, his accepting the long-term mission that G-d presents to him, with the enormous test that it contains, is all the information needed to appreciate his extraordinary merit. He is asked to take leave of family and society for the sake of a distant vision that may some day materialize – of course, providing that his progeny cooperate to maintain their commitment to the goal – but a vision

that in any event neither he nor his immediate descendants will see fulfilled in their lifetimes. It is the most righteous of traits for an individual to sacrifice a significant degree of present comfort and pleasure for the purpose of an improved society in future generations.

This call for Abram to break with the ancient culture of Mesopotamia as well as his family – which even in the case of his father and siblings involved idolatrous worship (Josh. 24:2) – to be dedicated to the one G-d, following Him to where he knew not, sets the tone for the future nation. Indeed, the three opening verses that contain the directive to Abram (Gen 12:1-3) pithily summarize the essence of the new nation's mission and destiny. It was to separate itself from the idolatry and practices of the neighboring nations to enter into a relationship with G-d, and thereby establish a society based on adherence to His will. This would bring His blessing upon them and through them all the families of the earth would be blessed.

In the last two of the three opening verses Hashem employs the “blessing” stem (ברכה) in clause after clause, highlighting the extraordinary potential He placed on this enterprise. After promising, “I will make you into a great nation,” He adds, “and I will bless you and make your name great” (v. 2). This blessing appears to be a general one, implying success in all spheres.

As we pointed out in our discussion on the Tower of Babel, “make your name great” seems intended to contrast with the motivation of the builders of the tower. Their goal in reaching the heavens was to “make a name for ourselves” (11:4), that is, promote their personal glory. It is Abraham, who is not seeking personal aggrandizement but who accepts G-d's mission to sacrifice in order to better society and who “calls in the name of Hashem” (12:8), who receives the blessing “I will make your name great” (12:2).

The final clause in verse 2, “you shall be a blessing,” apparently means that as G-d fulfills His promises in response to Abram's dedication (his teachings, personal example and contact with others) Abram would radiate blessing to others. Then, with “I will bless those who bless you and he who curses you I will damn,” Hashem extends His blessing to those who respect Abraham and identify with his values and

the new program he will bring into the world. Hashem's declaration that He will “bless those who bless you” foresees a plural subject, while damning “he who curses you” speaks of a singular subject. This points to the expectation that there will be many more who bless him than the reverse. (Does this mean that it is expected that there will inevitably be some who curse him, who so ardently reject his values?)

G-d concludes the cluster of blessings with, “and shall be blessed through you all the clans of the earth.” This seems to mean that many will appreciate and adopt Abraham's belief and practices, thus leading to benefit for all mankind. This is along the lines of the prophetic visions of a future in which all mankind will adopt the values of the one G-d and serve Him alone. Some interpret this clause as saying that “all the clans of the earth will refer to you as the example when they bless themselves.” However, the reflexive form of וְנִבְרַכְתָּ supports the first explanation.

3. Building Altars and Calling in Hashem's Name

After recording Abram's arrival in the promised land the Torah describes his travels and construction of altars to Hashem. The first altar was in Shechem (Gen. 12:7), the first Canaan location he “officially” stopped at, where he received his first divine communication within the land. He then builds an altar near Bethel, at which “he called out in Hashem's name.” Subsequently, he returns to the latter altar to once again “call out” in Hashem's name (13:4). The third altar we are told he established was in Hebron (13:18).

An altar is a medium for worship generally involving sacrifices – מִזְבֵּחַ is derived from זָבַח (a sacrifice). Strikingly, we are never explicitly told that Abraham offered a sacrifice on the altars he built except on the occasion of the *aqedah* (the binding of Isaac). In that case, G-d's test involved a sacrifice and, with the test concluded, Abraham substituted a ram – seemingly providentially made available for the purpose – for his son. Abraham's altars represented religious centers that he established for the new religious outlook that he propounded. That the actual sacrifice of animals is never mentioned, although we may presume they took place, is consistent with the understanding that they are not essential features of worship of G-d as emphasized later in the Bible. In viewing the meaning

of Abraham's service one may ignore them. Sacrifices may have been necessary accompaniments to worship that Abraham may have employed because of the prevalent beliefs in the region concerning religious protocol. But the Torah leaves no doubt that they played no role in his teaching.

"Calling out in Hashem's name" reflects advocacy of a theological viewpoint, bringing knowledge of the Deity's ways to a populace steeped in paganism. Whereas the other religions focused on ritual, magic and mechanistic acts, believing in invoking powers that may influence the gods to do their bidding, we should imagine Abraham teaching that there is only one G-d and that He desires a society of justice, righteousness and kindness, that He cannot be influenced to do iniquity, that magic cannot override His will, etc.

The animals Abram brought for the *Berit ben Habetarim* (15:10 ff.) were not sacrifices; G-d requested them for "cutting" a covenant. They were part of covenant protocol, providing relevant symbolism, a procedure widely practiced in the ancient Near East (see Jer. 34:18).

It surely is significant that in his later life, subsequent to the great covenantal events, Abraham builds no more altars except for the one on Mount Moriah for the binding of Isaac, in response to the test (Gen. 22:9). As explained earlier, that is an exception with its own explanation.

After concluding a treaty with Abimelech, subsequent to the latter's departure, instead of building an altar, Abraham plants an *eshel* in Beersheba at which he calls out in Hashem's name (21:33). This represents a new type of religious center, one without an altar. An *eshel* is very possibly a tamarisk tree, which suits the region and provides substantial shade, benefiting the people who pass there. In Mesopotamian culture certain trees served as holy sites to which an individual may retreat to meditate and aspire to receive an oracle. At this point in his life it appears that Abraham felt he could dispense with the superficial public prop of the altar altogether in favor of a higher level of service of G-d and teaching about His will, an approach that is consistent with the deeper message of the Torah.

4. In Egypt

Despite Abram's great trust in G-d, his having moved to Canaan at His behest and having received His promise for the land, when confronted with a famine, he and Sarai went to Egypt and there comported in a most practical manner. It is not the way of authentic religious spirits to rely on miraculous divine intervention for their personal welfare.

Abram perceived the situation in Egypt as potentially life-threatening and felt vulnerable. He feared that the presence of a highly desirable woman such as Sarai, protected only by a husband who is a stranger with no allies in the land, might create a temptation to have him killed in order to obtain her. Many societies, despite law codes and long espousing traditions of civilization, possessed only a surface veneer of disciplined behavior. On the other hand, an attractive single woman accompanied by a brother whose responsibility it was to be her guardian leads to a very different reaction. The woman will usually be courted while her brother would be treated courteously; she would have the opportunity to be coy while he would have to be won over. This creates the possibility to decline suitors and stall until they are able to depart the country. Accordingly, Abram asked Sarai to say she was his sister, concealing the fact of her married status. Although deceptive, it was apparently technically true as he subsequently stated in response to Abimelech's question concerning a similar deception he perpetrated in that king's land, that she was his half-sister from his father (Gen. 20:12). Abram could not anticipate that G-d would intervene on her behalf to the extent that He did.

It should not be thought that asking Sarah to pretend to be his sister and not his wife is a selfish act, compromising her safety and welfare for his own. She does not desire to be taken by another man. Abraham's well-being is her well-being; if he is killed she is devastated.**

Similar episodes are related in connection with Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 20) and with Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 26). Although each narrative contains unique features, it appears that there is a deeper, symbolic, meaning to the patriarchs' conceiving a threat to their lives to appropriate their wives.

In the Midrash we read that Rabbi Phinehas in the name of Rabbi Oshaya the Great noted a number of concepts and phrases of the Abraham and Sarah experience in Egypt that appear in the later accounts of Israel in Egypt and interpreted the events of the former as reflected in the latter. He stated: “The Holy One Blessed Be He said to Abraham, ‘Go and smooth the path before your sons,’ for you will find all that is written concerning Abraham [descending to Egypt] is written concerning his sons” (*Gen. Rab.* 40:6).

Some of the linkage he cited: Abraham and Sarah leave the promised land to go to Egypt because of a famine as Jacob and his children do; Sarah is subjected to abuse as was Israel; in both cases they interact with Pharaoh; in both cases G-d brings plagues upon the captors; Abraham and his family as well as the nation of Israel are sent out by the Egyptians; in both cases they depart with great wealth presented to them by the Egyptians; Abraham’s fear that they will kill him and allow Sarah to live (וְאַתָּה יָחִי) is reminiscent of the decree to kill the male children and let the females live (וְכָל הַבָּת תְּחִיִּי).¹

In the words of later rabbis, מַעֲשֵׂי אֲבוֹת סִמָּן לְבָנִים, the doings of the fathers serve as a sign for the children. Of course, both surface details and inner associations require explication.

5. Separating from Lot

When Abram departed from his father’s home he took his orphaned nephew Lot along with him. The consistently gracious manner in which he treated him set an outstanding example for the new nation of how to relate to one’s bereaved relatives. When both had prospered and conflict set in between their shepherds, Abram sensed that remaining together would eventually lead to their own conflict, which should be prevented since “we are brethren” (*Gen.* 13:8). He suggested separation. Magnanimously, he offered Lot first choice in selecting available land, setting a precedent of placing family peace and unity and concern for a kinsman ahead of personal materialistic considerations.

Lot does not protest the suggestion to separate from his noble uncle, who at this time had no children, and in whose destiny he could expect to share. Neither does Lot defer to his uncle regarding first choice of

land. Sensing opportunity, he selects the more verdant region even though it borders on the wicked cities of the plain. We may assume that Abram was bothered by Lot’s decisions, but realized that it would do no good to protest. Soon thereafter, Lot’s selfish and ungrateful behavior brings him only trouble. The Torah depicts his behavior as leading to the formation of the prehistory of two of Israel’s eventual neighbors – Ammon and Moab.

Hashem communicates with Abram “after Lot separated from him” (13:14) to confirm His promises of land and progeny. He instructs him to view the land roundabout that will belong to him and his descendants and adds: “Rise, walk through the land, its length and breadth” (v. 17). This, perhaps, was in accordance with the practice in the ancient world that through such symbolic action a recipient of land established his possession (Rabbi Eliezer, *b. B. Bat.* 100a). The Torah’s specific statement introducing this prophecy with the words that it was “after Lot separated from him” has been seen by some as an indication that Lot’s close and constant attachment to Abram had been a spiritual hindrance to the patriarch and, despite the uncle’s great concern for his nephew, being at a distance from each other allowed Abram to more fully concentrate on his mission (cf. Rabbi Nehemia, *Gen. Rab.* 41:8).

In any event, this divine communication (G-d’s actual words, *Gen.* 14b-17), comprises forty-nine words (seven times seven). Since this prophecy precedes establishment of G-d’s Covenant with Abram, with its new symbolism based on the number eight, it reflects the “old order,” based on the number seven, which indicates perfection as then symbolized in the ancient Near East.

Endnotes

* In some contexts מוֹלְדֵתָךְ, connected to יָלַד (child, birthing), translates well as “birthplace,” but it should not be so translated here because our passage speaks of Abram leaving Haran, having previously left his birthplace. It should rather be taken as referring to the group one is related to by birth, namely, family, as indicated in several other places, such as when Jacob’s sons relate that the viceroy asked concerning וְלִמְוֹלְדֵתָבוּ (*Gen.* 43:7; also see *Esth.* 2:10, 20; 8:6).

** The Ramban (on Gen. 12:10) expresses the opinion that “Abraham our father committed a major transgression, albeit unintentionally, subjecting his righteous wife to a sinful challenge because of his fear that they might kill him. He should have trusted in Hashem to save him and his wife.” Moreover, he is of the opinion that “His having left the land because of a famine was also a transgression, for G-d would have redeemed him from death in the famine.” Finally, he states, “Because of this act it was decreed that his descendants were to be exiled to Egypt under Pharaoh

and, in place of justice, there was wickedness and sinfulness there.” However, even totally righteous individuals do not necessarily know their status in G-d’s eyes and there is no indication in the text to make such assumptions of criticism. The assumption that Abraham’s act of going to Egypt played a role in G-d’s decree that his descendants were to be exiled to Egypt is not indicated in the text.

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