

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

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

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

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

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

Why then does the entire story shift in Genesis 12? From here onward it is no longer about humanity as a whole but about one man, Abraham, one woman, Sarah, and their children, who by the time of the book of Exodus have become a large and significant people—but still no more than one nation among many.

What is happening here? Does G-d lose interest in everyone else? That surely cannot be the case. At the end of Genesis Joseph says to his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but G-d intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen 50:20). It may be that the phrase "many lives" means no more than the lives of his own family (so Targum Yonatan understands it). But the plain sense of the phrase *am rav*, "a great people,"

suggests Egypt. Not until Exodus are the Israelites called *am*, a people. Joseph is saying that G-d sent him not merely to save his family but also the Egyptians.

That too is the point of the book of Jonah. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, the Assyrian city, to persuade the people to repent and thus avoid their own destruction. In its closing words G-d says to the prophet, "Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left?" (Jonah 4:11, and see Malbim ad loc.). G-d is concerned not only with Israel but with the Assyrians, despite the fact that they would become Israel's enemies, eventually conquering the northern kingdom of Israel itself.

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

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

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

That, it seems, is what the Torah is doing when it shifts focus from humanity as a whole to Abraham in particular. The story of humanity from Adam to Noah tells us that people do not naturally live as G-d would wish them to live. They eat forbidden fruit and kill one

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another. So after the Flood, G-d becomes not only a Creator but also a teacher. He instructs humanity, and does so in two ways: i.e. and e.g. He sets out general rules-the covenant with Noah-and then He chooses an example, Abraham and his family. They are to become role models, compelling examples, of what it means to live closely and faithfully in the presence of G-d, not for their sake alone but for the sake of humanity as a whole.

That is why five times in Genesis the patriarchs are told, "Through you all the families, or all the nations, of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:2, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14). And people recognise this. In Genesis, Malkizedek says about Abraham, "Praise be to G-d Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand" (14:20). Avimelekh, king of Gerar, says about him, "G-d is with you in everything you do" (21:22). The Hittites say to him, "You are a prince of G-d in our midst" (23:6). Abraham is recognised as a man of G-d by his contemporaries, even though they are not a part of his specific covenant.

The same is true of Joseph, the only member of Abraham's family in Genesis whose life among the gentiles is described in detail. He is constantly reminding those with whom he interacts about G-d. When Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him he says, "How could I do such a great wrong? It would be a sin before G-d!" (39:9). To the butler and baker whose dreams he is about to explain, he says, "Interpretations belong to G-d" (40:8). When he is brought before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, he says: "G-d will give Pharaoh the answer he desires" (41:16). Pharaoh himself says of Joseph, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of G-d?" (41:38).

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

Jews are not called on to convert the world to Judaism. There are other ways of serving G-d. Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, is called "a priest of G-d Most High" (Gen. 14:18). Malachi says a day will come when G-d's name "will be great among the

nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets" (1:11). The prophets foresee a day when "G-d will be king over all the earth" (Zechariah 14:9), without everyone converting to Judaism.

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

It sometimes seems to me that we are in danger of forgetting this. To many Jews, we are merely one ethnic group among many, Israel is one nation-state among many, and G-d is something we talk about only among ourselves if at all. There was recently a television documentary about one British Jewish community. A non-Jewish journalist, reviewing the programme, remarked on the- to her, strange-fact that Jews never seem to talk about their relationship with G-d. Instead they talk about their relationship with other Jews. That too is a way of forgetting who we are and why.

To be a Jew is to be one of G-d's ambassadors to the world, for the sake of being a blessing to the world, and that necessarily means engaging with the world, acting in such a way as to inspire others as Abraham and Joseph inspired their contemporaries. That is the challenge to which Abraham was summoned at the beginning of this week's parsha. It remains our challenge today. © 2011 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and *torah.org*

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

**W**ho is a Jew?' is a question that has plagued Israeli society since the inception of the state, and at times threatens the crucial alliance between American Jewry and its Middle Eastern motherland.

I suggest that without a clear understanding of the covenant between G-d and Abraham described in this week's biblical reading, little light can be shed on the issues.

Maimonides in his introduction to the Laws of Idolatry maintains that Abraham (Abram), the first Hebrew, had already deduced the new revolutionary faith in a single, unique, non-corporeal G-d before the Almighty spoke to him. At the opening of this week's reading, G-d commands Abram to leave his "country, birthplace and father's house" and set out for the Land of Israel. G-d pledges to make him the paterfamilias of "a great nation through which all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12: 2-3).

After a number of peregrinations and a war against the four tyrants of the fertile crescent which Abram miraculously wins, G-d enters into a formal covenant in which He guarantees Abram innumerable

direct descendants and their eventual possession and control of the Land of Israel (Gen. 15). Clearly, progeny and a homeland are the two fundamental ingredients of a family-nation-state - a peoplehood, if you will.

It is important to note that G-d is the proactive partner in this covenant. Moreover, from their very first encounter, G-d charges Abram with becoming a source of blessing for the entire world. In the next chapter, Abram is given a son, Ishmael, who will be blessed and from whom will emerge 12 princes. Then, in chapter 17, G-d gives Abram an ethical command to walk before Him and be whole-hearted as the necessary condition for the covenant (17:1). He changes Abram's name to Abraham (father of a multitude of nations) and ratifies His covenant with Abraham's biological descendants (through Isaac, 17:19, 21) with the rite of circumcision - a patently religious ritual.

All of this comes together in chapter 18 when, after again declaring that "through Abraham all the nations of the earth shall be blessed," G-d explains that He initially chose and loved Abraham "in order that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by acting with compassionate righteousness and moral justice" (Gen. 18:18-19). Hence the very roots of our nationality and peoplehood were informed with the G-d-consciousness of ethical monotheism, "whole-hearted" compassionate and moral conduct, and male circumcision.

Abraham was given a mandate to transmit our mission to subsequent generations in order that we may truly become the blessing for the nations that G-d promised we would be. This covenantal idea is fleshed out in Exodus, when the descendants of Abraham emerge from Egypt as a full-fledged nation. Under the leadership of Moses, all the children of Israel are confronted with G-d's revelation of the Ten Commandments at Sinai (Exodus 20) and then, after receiving many other civil and ritual laws, as well as a confirmation of G-d's pledge to give us the Land of Israel, G-d repeats His covenant with the nation (Ex. 24). What emerges is a nation formed from the matrix of a G-d Idea and Ideal - a national and a faith community inextricably bound together. Are we a nationality or a religion? The truth is we are both together and each separately.

Because we are a nation, those who have biological roots through a Jewish mother, although they may be atheists, are nevertheless Jews; and because we are a religion, we managed to survive and even flourish as Jews during a 2,000-year exile.

As a result of this unique hybrid status, we cannot simply dichotomize between state and religion the way Americans can. Our religious narrative and mission is also our national origin and culture.

Jewish law provides for conversion, and no ancient halachic authority demanded total compliance with "Orthodox" law as a necessary condition. The convert must be taught "several of the more stringent

and several of the more lenient laws" (the Talmud in Yebamot 45, 46 mentions the Sabbath, parts of kashrut and the tithes or charity), he must in principle formally accept all the commandments, and must undergo ritual immersion in a kosher mikve. Further, all males must be circumcised.

Ritual immersion symbolizes entry into the Jewish nation; the acceptance of commandments symbolizes entry into the Jewish religion. For Russian citizens of Israel whose fathers were Jewish and who serve in the IDF, there are even further leniencies, and it is certainly in our national interest to convert these citizens. © 2011 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

**T**he obvious question that troubles us when we read this parsha, or when we think of our father Avraham in general terms, is why was Avraham successful in influencing his generation and all subsequent generations while the great pious Noach who preceded him was apparently incapable of being such a force? The obvious answer to that obvious question is, in my opinion, that Avraham was a people person.

He did not build arks nor did he warn of impending disasters. His methodology for spreading monotheism and goodness in the world was by example, by being a powerfully good person. People respond to people.

All of us who have engaged in fundraising for worthwhile causes are aware that people give mainly because of the relationship of the individual representing the institution or cause than to the objective merit of the cause or institution itself. Again, people respond to people.

Avraham and Sarah were exemplary people and people listened to them and responded to their ideas and message. All great movements in Jewish history were created by people and became popular because of the people who founded and led them. For example, one need only look at the Chasidic movement of the eighteenth century and the Mussar movement of the nineteenth century. The ideas and goals of these movements were far reaching and appealing but their popularity was based solely on the relationship of its leading people to other people.

The Baal Shem Tov and his followers and Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant and his followers made those movements successful in their time because of their ability to relate to people, both one on one and generally as well.

Avraham had boundless faith in the innate ability of people to do good. Even in dealing with the wicked populations of Sodom and Amorah in next week's parsha, he is convinced that there is a hard core of goodness even in that evil population. Maybe that is

unrealistic on his part in practical result but that is his nature and inclination.

And, it is his natural ebullience and care for others that eventually causes even those lukewarm to his ideas to proclaim that "you are a prince of the Lord who lives in our midst." Avraham faced many disappointments and frustrations in his long life. Family problems abounded and wars and conflicts were his lot in his earthly existence. The rabbis taught us in Avot that Avraham was tested ten times. Nevertheless his faith and good nature, developed over his lifetime, carried him through all of those tests, severe as they may have been.

He was able to encompass in his thoughts and efforts all peoples and nations - and he became the father of a multitude of peoples and societies. Though the Jewish people are a particular and even parochial group of human individuals, our Torah demands of us a universal outlook as well. This is an inheritance from our father Avraham and reflects G-d's concern, so to speak, for all of His creatures. That is why the Torah demands that we in our personal lives measure ourselves according to the yardstick established by Avraham and Sarah, the founders of our people. © 2011 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**T**erah, Avraham's (Abraham) father, is often viewed as an evil man and nothing more than an idol worshipper. A review of the text indicates otherwise. First of all, Terah's son, Haran, dies during Terah's lifetime. The Torah's description of his demise - "in the face of his father Terah" - expresses Terah's deep pain. (Genesis 11:28) This is certainly understandable. After all, the way of the world is that children sit shiva for parents, not the reverse.

Second of all, Terah acts with great responsibility toward his family. Rather than leaving Haran's child Lot to be raised by others, Terah takes him in. This is truly a noble deed, especially when considering the pain Terah felt upon losing his own child. Notwithstanding this suffering, Terah has the inner strength to raise his grandchild as his own. (Genesis 11:31)

Third of all, Terah seems to understand the importance of the land of Israel. Years before Avraham is commanded by G-d to go to the Holy Land, Terah decides on his own to do so. He instinctively recognizes the centrality of Israel. (Genesis 11:31)

Finally, Terah must have been a man of considerable spiritual energy. Consider his three children: Avraham, of course, would become the first patriarch. Nahor's granddaughter was Rebecca who

would become the second matriarch. And Haran's son, Lot, fathers Moav from whom Ruth and King David were born, and from whom the Messiah will one day emerge.

Of course, Terah was no Avraham. G-d does not speak to him. He sets out to the land of Israel but never arrives. Still, the Torah, as it begins the narrative about Avraham and Sarah, seems to underscore the contribution that Terah makes to the development of the people of Israel.

Unfortunately, it is too often the case that successful children forget the roles their parents played in shaping their personalities and careers. It shouldn't be this way. Children should always be aware of the seeds planted by their parents and grandparents.

Thus, it is important that we appreciate Terah, the father of the Jewish people. He was the foundation from which the patriarchs and matriarchs emerged. Hence his name, Terah -from the word ruach, spirit. Indeed, it was from Terah, whose name begins with the letter tuf, which denotes future, that Am Yisrael would be born. © 2011 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School - the Modern and Open Orthodox Rabbinical School. He is Senior Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, a Modern and Open Orthodox congregation of 850 families. He is also National President of AMCHA - the Coalition for Jewish Concerns.

#### **RABBI DOVID SIEGEL**

### **Haftorah**

**T**his week's haftorah teaches us never to despair or feel abandoned. The Prophet Yeshaya opens with sharp words of rebuke to the Jewish people for their shameful attitude regarding Hashem's concern for them. He asks, "Why does Yaakov say, 'My path is concealed from Hashem and my judgment alludes Him?'" This desperate plea is based on the tight control the nations exercise over the Jewish people during their seemingly endless years of exile. They exclaim in bewilderment, "If Hashem really cares how could He allow the world to continue on its present course!? Where is the Jewish nation's reward for their perseverance throughout the ages? Why doesn't Hashem respond to the nations' cruelty and deliver them their well deserved catastrophic blows?" These emphatic cries reflect the Jewish people's deep-seeded feelings of pain and anguish during their difficult moments in exile.

Yet, this similar perspective is shared by the mighty powers of the world who perceive themselves in total control. They see Hashem as aloof from His world and incapable-Heaven forbid-of interfering with their vicious hatred towards His devout children. In this week's haftorah, Hashem responds to the Jewish nation's plea and calls the world's mighty powers to task. Hashem engages them in heavy dialogue and invites them to defend their audacious position about Him. Hashem says, "Be silent distant nations and

mighty powers recharge yourselves. Draw near and speak; come together for judgment. Who inspired the (dweller) of the east to proclaim My righteousness with his every step; delivered nations into his hands and gave him the control over the kings? Who transformed dirt into his sword and chaff into his bow?... It is I, Hashem, who declares the generations from the beginning. I am the first and will remain with the final ones." (41:1,2,4)

The Sages explain that the "dweller of the east" here refers to our patriarch Avrohom Avinu. (Breishis Rabba 43:3) In this moving dialogue Yeshaya reveals to us the secret behind Avrohom Avinu's success. In truth, Hashem was responsible for this total turnabout of an entire world. Hashem inspired this lone soul, Avrohom to reject the universally accepted practice of paganism that had distorted the view of every known human being on earth. Hashem kindled the fire within Avrohom Avinu to educate the entire world about their perversions. Hashem, likewise, protected Avrohom Avinu against every attempt to thwart his sacred undertaking of preaching the unpopular to the masses. And Hashem assisted Avrohom Avinu in his miraculous war against the four mighty kings that resulted in Hashem's universal acceptance by all leading world powers. (See Breishis Rabba 42:3; Rashi Lech Lecha 14:17)

The above words send a powerful message to all regarding Hashem's active concern for the world and its affairs. Historically speaking, Avrohom Avinu's generation could have brought anyone to total despair. The entire world- save a hidden pocket of Shemites-had no clue of Hashem's existence and were engaged in aggressive idolatry. Yet, even during those times, Hashem controlled His world and ministered its spiritual development. In response to this tremendous spiritual decline Hashem designed from the outset for Avrohom Avinu to be born in that dark era. Hashem armed Avrohom Avinu with an incredible mind to oppose an totally misguided generation and launch a single-handed campaign in the belief in the one, true Hashem. In fact, Meiri teaches us that through lectures, writings and personal example Avrohom Avinu convinced most of the world's population to believe in Hashem. (Intro to Avos) This incredible accomplishment, against all odds, displays Hashem's interest and involvement in His world. Hashem secured the world's direction by planting Avrohom Avinu-the greatest of all thinkers-in the generation most needy of him.

This remarkable upheaval serves as perfect testimony to Hashem's ability and involvement. The fact that one lone soul convinced an entire generation to abandon its previous beliefs speaks for itself. The shocking phenomena that Avrohom was not executed for his beliefs but was instead miraculously spared and victorious against the mightiest powers tells the complete story. Obviously, Hashem controls the world and is constantly leading it to its necessary perfection. Consequently one must conclude that even the nations'

control over Hashem's people only happens with His permission. With these words Yeshaya addressed the Jewish people and emphatically declared Hashem's concern for them. When Hashem appears to be removed from them this can only result from their wrongdoings.

Ramchal teaches us that, in truth, Hashem is involved at all times in leading the world to perfection. Overtly, Hashem operates the world through the system of reward and punishment allowing for free will, good and bad. This general policy leaves room for one to perceive that Hashem is not involved in His world. He permits evil to reign in untold proportions and allows His dearest to suffer for their most minute of transgressions. True reward and punishment is reserved for afterlife and only faint traces of Hashem's response can be discerned during one's lifetime. Yet, irrespective of all the above Hashem is secretly leading His world to its fulfillment. Working under cover, Hashem is perpetually involved in directing all world events in preparation for the final day of redemption. (see the Knowing Heart section 48)

Avrohom Avinu's era is a perfect example of this. On the surface, the world was as far away from its purpose as one could fathom. Civilization already experienced partial and total destruction during the days of Enosh and the devastating flood. The world's population was forced to separate and disperse in response to their rebellious attempt to build the tower of Babel. Yet despite all the above humanity did not learn its lesson and was totally absorbed in the ugly practices of idolatry. This was the world's record within the system of free will, good and bad, reward and punishment.

However, Hashem conducts His world with a second system of sovereignty wherein He directs the world to its ultimate purpose. According to the time tables of this system the time had arrived for Hashem's truths to illuminate the world. The Sages explain that Hashem's original plan of creation called for six thousand years of existence divided into three equal segments. The first of them allowed the world to remain spiritually void, the second demanded the dissemination of the Torah's truths and the final segment was designated for the years of Mashiach. (see Mesichta Avoda Zara 9a) Prior to Avrohom Avinu, the first segment was drawing to a close with practically no trace of Torah ideals or people to personify Hashem's truths and ethical lessons. The sad reality was that not one person existed who could be entrusted with the sacred task of furthering the world's spiritual development.

Suddenly, out of nowhere emerged the perfect candidate. Avrohom Avinu, born to a family of idolators discovered the truth of Hashem and developed into the pillar of the world. His contagious and uncontrollable love for his newly discovered Creator inspired everyone who came within his midst to sign up to the program. Within a span of fifty years there was not a person in

the world who had not heard of Avrohom Avinu and his principles of faith.

In addition to Avrohom's personal lessons Hashem extended these truths through miracles and revelations revolving around Avrohom Avinu. Until this point Hashem's overt involvement in this world was limited to severe punitive responses to mankind's wrongs. Avrohom Avinu, however, merited Hashem's constant protection manifested through open tangible miracles. These experiences convinced the world of Hashem's existence and involvement and eventually led them to crown Avrohom as the prince of Hashem.

Avrohom Avinu's story is perfect testimony to Hashem's system of sovereignty. During those days one could never have imagined how the world would shape up. Virtually no one was on the proper path or even reflected interest in getting there. Yet, Hashem's system of sovereignty called for the world's accelerated upswing. Immediate action needed to transpire with a relentless commitment to the furtherance of truth. The answer came within the system of free will and the world was privileged to the shining beacon of Avrohom Avinu. Hashem inspired, guided and protected Avrohom Avinu throughout his struggle until the world was eventually pointed in the direction of perfection.

The Prophet Yeshaya reminds the Jewish people that their path is never concealed from Hashem. The world is constantly moving towards its ultimate purpose with the Jewish people playing the lead role in this development. Hashem spares no effort in accomplishing His goal and, as we learn from Avrohom Avinu's era, steps in and guides the entire world towards its necessary spiritual climax.

This timely insight is so apropos for our times. The rapid moral decline in our times coupled with mass rejection of the practice of Judaism are certainly significant factors for despair. The descending direction of the world's population through secularism and immorality projects its ultimate detachment from Hashem. However, Hashem declares that He never loses sight of His world and His people. He secured Avrohom Avinu's appearance in his appropriate time and inspired him to lead his nearly insurmountable campaign. In this same vein Hashem secured the salvation of His world through the eventual arrival of Mashiach. Hashem pledged to send the world an individual of Davidic descent wiser than Shlomo Hamelech blessed with a similar prophetic level to that of Moshe Rabbeinu. Mashiach, like Avrohom Avinu, will totally devote himself to Torah and Mitzvos, educate and inspire all Jewish people in the Torah's ways and fight the wars of Hashem. (see Rambam Hilchos M'lochim 2:4 and Hilchos Tshuva 9"2) Hashem never forsook His world or people and secured their spiritual perfection since the beginning of time. Mashiach's successful campaign, like Avrohom Avinu's, will eventually educate the entire world and bring them to

the true recognition of Hashem in its fullest capacity.  
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#### **RABBI NAFTALI REICH**

### **Legacy**

**P**eople who have experienced a miraculous rescue will usually tell you that their lives are forever changed. Mundane matters that had once loomed large and important, such as the pursuit of financial success and status, are suddenly rather inconsequential, while spiritual matters become the focal points of their lives. They begin to think about mortality and eternity, about the rewards of kindness, of tending primarily to the needs of the soul rather than the body. They live with a new perspective, a new awareness.

In this week's Torah portion, however, we find the exact opposite happening. During the time of Abraham, the Babylonian Empire was the dominant force in the Middle East, and the small kingdoms of Canaan paid annual tribute to the imperial coffers, as did every other principality that didn't want to be invaded and crushed. But the thought of paying tribute was irksome, and Sodom and four neighboring cities formed an alliance and rebelled. A few months later, the Babylonians arrived in force and easily defeated the rebels. They took Abraham's nephew Lot hostage and carried off the bulk of the wealth of the vanquished cities. When he heard the news, Abraham and his small retinue pursued the imperial armies, miraculously routed them and freed Lot. He also recovered all the captured wealth of the defeated cities and returned it to the original owners, without taking even a shoelace for himself.

What an astonishing spectacle the people of Sodom witnessed! First, they saw the clear intervention of Heaven to effect Abraham's victory over the massive imperial armies. Second, they saw the most phenomenal altruism on the part of Abraham, refusing the customary victor's share of the spoils. The rapid recovery of their former grandeur and prosperity was undoubtedly the farthest thing from their minds, and yet, in not much longer than the blink of an eye, it happened.

What effect should this miraculous turn of events have had on the people of Sodom? Surely, they should have undergone a radical change of perspective, a total shift of focus. But they did not. In next week's Torah portion, we read about the utter degeneracy of their lifestyle and its destruction by a rain of fire and brimstone. Why were they impervious to the miracles that took place in their behalf? Why did they remain the as self-centered and greedy as ever?

The commentators explain that clear vision requires a certain detachment, an ability to step outside oneself and do some critical self-examination. Abraham in his youth was able to step back from his

aristocratic background and privileged social status and take a hard, objective look at the world around him. This ability opened his eyes and allowed him to recognize the existence of the Creator. The people of Sodom, however, had become so entangled in their physical existence that they were no longer able to view themselves with any degree of detachment. They saw everything through a sensual fog, and the most obvious miracles could no longer redirect their jaded minds.

A drunk was sitting at the curbside, taking huge gulps from a bottle of wine. His clothes were filthy and disheveled, and chunks of grime lodged in his hair. "I don't understand you," a disgusted passerby berated the drunk. "You want to drown your life in a bottle? Fine. But why do you have to be such a slob? Why can't you at least shake the grime out of your hair?"

"If I had the sense to shake the grime from my hair," said the drunk with a twinkle in his eye, "I'd have the sense to go home and have a normal life."

In our own lives, we often get caught up in the mad rush of daily life. We become absorbed in our businesses and professions and the myriad little tasks of maintaining a good standard of living. But we must never forget to retain a healthy measure of detachment, to keep everything in perspective, to know which things are truly essential and which are just pleasant appurtenances. And every once in a while, we should take the time to step back and examine our lives with as much honesty as we can muster. At the very least, it will engender in us the habit of seeking the truth, a habit that can only bring us benefit and fulfillment. © 2011

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### RABBI DOV KRAMER

## Taking a Closer Look

**“Y**our descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will make them work and afflict them, for four hundred years” (B'raishis 15:13). As Rashi points out, these 400 years cannot be referring to how many years Avraham's descendants spent in Egypt, as K'has, Levi's son, was among those who came down to Egypt with his grandfather, Yaakov (B'raishis 46:11), and K'has' grandson, Moshe, was 80 years old (Sh'mos 7:7) when he led the Children of Israel out of Egypt. Since K'has lived for 133 years (6:18), several of which were before he came to Egypt, and Amram (Moshe's father) lived for 137 years (6:20), several of which overlapped with Moshe's years and with K'has' years, the total amount of time in Egypt had to be less than 350 years (80+133+137=350). Rather, the 400 years started with the birth of Yitzchok (Avraham's son, and therefore the first "descendant" that was "a stranger in a land not his," as Canaan wasn't given to Avraham or his descendants until they conquered it 40 years after leaving Egypt).

The Torah gives us another number for the amount of years the Children of Israel lived in Egypt--

430 (Sh'mos 12:40). [How these years are considered to be "in Egypt" is a topic of much discussion, one that we will put aside for now.] The most widely given explanation for this discrepancy (see Mechilta Bo 14) is that Avraham was informed that his descendants will be in exile 430 years before it ended. Using simple math, we can figure out that Avraham was 70 years old when this occurred—he was 100 when Yitzchok was born (B'raishis 21:5), and if the exodus occurred 400 years after that, Avraham must have been told about the exile 30 years earlier (430-400=30), meaning he was 70 (100-30=70). However, Avraham was 75 when he left Charan for Canaan (B'raishis 12:4), and he was informed about the exile after he was already in Canaan (16:18). How could he be in Canaan when he was 70 if he didn't move to Canaan until he was 75?

B'raishis Rabbah (39:8) tells us that Avraham made two trips from Charan to Canaan. Seder Olam (1) says that Avraham left Canaan when he was 70, right after the "covenant between the pieces" ("B'ris bain Ha'besarim," or "BBhB") with G-d was enacted (during which he was informed about the 400 year exile) and returned to Charan, then left Charan for good when he was 75. There are several different timelines given for Avraham's trips between Charan and Canaan. Sefer Hayashar says Avraham moved from Charan to Canaan when he was 55, moved back to Charan when he was 70, and made his permanent move to Canaan when he was 75. Midrash HaGadol (B'raishis 11:31 and 12:4) says that Avraham left Charan for Canaan when he was 70, but traveled back and forth between the two for five years, moving to Canaan permanently when he was 75. According to these commentaries, the narrative of the BBhB was inserted out of chronological order, but everything else was taught in chronological order. Tosfos (Daas Zekaynim and Rabbeinu Baalay HaTosfos on B'raishis 12:4) says that Lot went with Avraham the first time, when he was captured. This allows for the entire narrative to be in chronological order, but means that Lot must have already moved to Sedom when Avraham was 70 (as that's where he was captured from), and also means that the famine that led to the trip to Egypt took place years earlier than the text indicates. (In Berachos, Tosfos "proves" that Avraham was 73 when he fought the kings; if he was 70 at the BBhB, these events were not taught in chronological order, which is the point Tosfos is trying to make.) The very same verse that tells us that Lot moved to Canaan with Avraham also says that Avraham moved when he was 75 (B'raishis 12:4), implying that they hadn't yet separated (and out of chronological order if the BBhB took place when Avraham was 70). Be that as it may, the bottom line is that the 400 years started from Yitzchok's birth and the 430 years started from the BBhB (during which Avraham was told about the exile), five years before his permanent move to Canaan.

B'raishis Rabbah (46:2) discusses why Avraham didn't have his circumcision after the BBhB,

when he was 85 years old. If Avraham was 85 when he was told about the 400 year exile (only 15 years before Yitzchok was born), the 430 years could not have started from the time Avraham knew about it (and his "exile mindset" could be included). [It should be noted that most commentaries adjust the wording of this Midrash, either changing Avraham's age from "85" to "70" or inserting the word "or" between "85" and "when G-d spoke to him between the pieces." However, these changes are made based on questions that can be addressed (thus negating the need to make them), and not every commentary changes the text.] If the BBhB was not 430 years before the exodus, what do the 430 years signify?

Ramban and Abarbanel (Sh'mos 12:40) suggest that although there was a decree that Avraham's descendants would be "strangers in a land that is not theirs for 400 years," because the nation had sinned while in Egypt, an additional 30 years were added on. Kli Yakar adds that 80% of the nation perishing in the plague of darkness attests to their wickedness; descending to the 49th level of spiritual impurity also does. Obviously, if the extra 30 years were after Yitzchok was born, there is no issue with the BBhB being only 15 years before he was born (and not 30). [It should be noted that this year being 5772 is based on the assumption that there were only 400 years from Yitzchok's birth until the exodus; if all the other parts of the equation stayed the same, it would really be 5802.]

Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer (48) says that Efrayim and Menashe were born five years before Yaakov and the rest of the family came to Egypt. Since they were considered full "Tribes" (see B'raishis 48:5), it is as if the "Children of Israel" were in Egypt for 215 years, not just 210. If we take into account that the Egyptians made them work day and night, it is as if they were there for twice as many years (see Rashi on D'varim 15:18), or 430. (However, since the servitude didn't start until after the last of Yaakov's sons died, years worth of nights should not have counted.)

Aside from the BBhB being 30 years before Yitzchok was born, the most common explanation for the 430 years (see Ibn Ezra and Bechor Shor on Sh'mos 12:40, Rabbeinu M'yuchus on B'raishis 12:4, and Gra's comments on Seder Olam; see also R' Saadya Gaon's Emunos v'Dayos 8:4) is that Avraham left Ur Kasdim, his hometown, when he was 70, and Avraham's "sojourning" are included in the 430 years. The Talmud (Avodah Zara 9a) telling us that Avraham had successfully converted many in Charan to monotheism when he was 52 seems to preclude the possibility that he didn't leave Ur Kasdim until he was 70. Malbim (Sh'mos 12:40) and Netziv (ibid) also make suggestions as to how the 430 years are based on things that happened the year Avraham was 70. Once the 430 years are not based on when the BBhB occurred, there is no reason to insist that it occurred when Avraham was 70.

As I alluded to earlier, one of the issues the 430 years raises is that the Children of Israel were in Egypt for less than half that amount of time. In his shorter commentary (Sh'mos 12:40), Ibn Ezra quotes a suggestion that Canaan was part of the Egyptian empire, allowing all of the years spent in Canaan (and G'rar) to be considered time spent "in Egypt." Although Ibn Ezra rejects this notion because he had no evidence for it, Torah Sh'laimah (Sh'mos 12:601) cites letters discovered in Egypt and Assyria that say Canaan was under Egyptian control during the period of the Patriarchs, and Midrashic sources that say that anyone moving from "the other side of the river" into Canaan had to pay a fee to Pharaoh. However, if Avraham moved to Canaan when he was 75, we would still only have 425 years of "Israelites" (see B'raishis Rabbah 63:3) living "in Egypt."

Although the Torah (B'raishis 12:4) says that Avram followed G-d's instructions, Rosh (Yevamos 6:12) says that he was lax in fulfilling G-d's word. It is possible that when G-d told him to move to Canaan (years after he had moved from Ur Kasdim to Charan), rather than just picking up and moving everybody and everything right away, he made an exploratory trip to Canaan, to scout out where he would live and what he would need. (He may have even made several trips back and forth, in preparation for, and as part of the process of, his final move.) He wasn't defying G-d's request, just extending the period of time it took to fulfill it. "And Avram went" (12:4), without moving yet, "as G-d had spoken to him;" G-d had only told him to "go" to Canaan (12:1), and Avram did just that, he "went" to Canaan, without leaving Charan just yet. It is even possible that on his exploratory trip Avram found an uninhabited area to move to, but by the time he actually moved there, the Canaanites had spread out and it was no longer available (12:6). Lot went with Avram the first time (12:4), and moved with him when he, along with the rest of his family and belongings, relocated there (12:5). The latter happened when Avram was 75 (12:4), but we are not told when G-d had asked him to go, or when he made his exploratory trip.

If G-d had told Avram to "go" when he was 70, and for five years he was involved in the process of moving (it is likely that he had to pay the Egyptian "entrance fee" on his first trip, after telling the border guards why he was coming to Canaan), we can understand why even those five years could be considered "living in Egyptian-controlled Canaan." This is especially so when considered as part of a 430-year period, starting from when Avraham was told to leave Charan, whereby 425 years were fully within the Egyptian empire and five were partially in. The "Children of Israel," starting from when Avraham was told to leave Charan and he started the process of leaving, lived in "Egypt" for 430 years, even if the BBhB occurred years after the 430-year period began. © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer