

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Leaders lead. That does not mean to say that they don't follow. But what they follow is different from what most people follow. They don't conform for the sake of conforming. They don't do what others do merely because others are doing it. They follow an inner voice, a call. They have a vision, not of what is, but of what might be. They think outside the box. They march to a different tune.

Never was this more dramatically signalled than in the first words of G-d to Abraham, the words that set Jewish history in motion: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you."

Why? Because people do conform. They adopt the standards and absorb the culture of the time and place in which they live – "your land." At a deeper level they are influenced by friends and neighbours – "your birthplace." More deeply still they are shaped by their parents and the family in which they grew up – "your father's house."

I want you, says G-d to Abraham, to be different. Not for the sake of being different, but for the sake of starting something new: a religion that will not worship power and the symbols of power – for that is what idols really were and are. I want you, said G-d, to "teach your children and your household afterward to follow the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just."

To be a Jew is to be willing to challenge the prevailing consensus when, as so often happens, nations slip into worshipping the old gods. They did so in Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. That was the age of nationalism: the pursuit of power in the name of the nation-state that led to two world wars and tens of millions of deaths. It is the age we are living in now as North Korea acquires and Iran pursues nuclear weapons so that they can impose their ambitions by force. It is what is happening today throughout much of the Middle East and Africa as nations descend into violence and what Hobbes called "the war of every man against every man."

We make a mistake when we think of idols in terms of their physical appearance – statues, figurines, icons. In that sense they belong to ancient times we have long outgrown. Instead, the right way to think of

idols is in terms of what they represent. They symbolise power. That is what Ra was for the Egyptians, Baal for the Canaanites, Chemosh for the Moabites, Zeus for the Greeks, and missiles and bombs for terrorists and rogue states today.

Power allows us to rule over others without their consent. As the Greek historian Thucydides put it: "The strong do what they wish and the weak suffer what they must." Judaism is a sustained critique of power. That is the conclusion I have reached after a lifetime of studying our sacred texts. It is about how a nation can be formed on the basis of shared commitment and collective responsibility. It is about how to construct a society that honours the human person as the image and likeness of G-d. It is about a vision, never fully realised but never abandoned, of a world based on justice and compassion, in which "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11: 9).

Abraham is without doubt the most influential person who ever lived. Today he is claimed as the spiritual ancestor of 2.4 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims and 13 million Jews, more than half the people alive today. Yet he ruled no empire, commanded no great army, performed no miracles and proclaimed no prophecy. He is the supreme example in all of history of influence without power.

Why? Because he was prepared to be different. As the sages say, he was called ha-ivri, "the Hebrew," because "all the world was on one side (be-ever echad) and he was on the other" (Genesis Rabbah 42: 8). Leadership, as every leader knows, can be lonely. Yet you continue to do what you have to do because you know that the majority is not always right and conventional wisdom is not always wise. Dead fish go with the flow. Live fish swim against the current. So it is with conscience and courage. So it is with the children of Abraham. They are prepared to challenge the idols of the age.

After the Holocaust some social scientists were haunted by the question of why so many people were prepared, whether by active participation or silent consent, to go along with a regime that they knew was committing one of the great crimes against humanity.

One key experiment was conducted by Solomon Asch. He assembled a group of people, asking them to perform a series of simple cognitive tasks. They were shown two cards, one with a line on it,

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NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
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the other with three lines of different lengths, and asked which was the same size as the line on the first. Unbeknown to one participant, all the others had been briefed by Asch to give the right answer for the first few cards, then the wrong one for most of the rest. On a significant number of occasions the experimental subject gave an answer he could see was the wrong, because everyone else had done so. Such is the power of the pressure to conform that it can lead us to say what we know is untrue.

More frightening still was the Stanford experiment carried out in the early 1970s by Philip Zimbardo. The participants were randomly assigned roles as guards or prisoners in a mock prison. Within days the students cast as guards were behaving abusively, some of them subjecting the "prisoners" to psychological torture. The students cast as prisoners put up with this passively, even siding with the guards against those who resisted. The experiment was called off after six days, during which time even Zimbardo found himself drawn in to the artificial reality he had created. The pressure to conform to assigned roles is strong enough to lead people into doing what they know is wrong.

That is why Abraham, at the start of his mission, was told to leave "his land, his birthplace and his father's house," to free himself from the pressure to conform. Leaders must be prepared not to follow the consensus. One of the great writers on leadership, Warren Bennis (in his book *On becoming a leader*, Basic Books, 1989, 49), writes: "By the time we reach puberty, the world has shaped us to a greater extent than we realise. Our family, friends, and society in general have told us – by word and example – how to be. But people begin to become leaders at that moment when they decide for themselves how to be."

One reason why Jews have become, out of all proportion to their numbers, leaders in almost every sphere of human endeavour, is precisely this willingness to be different. Throughout the centuries Jews have been the most striking example of a group that refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith. One other finding of Solomon Asch is worth noting. If just one other person was willing to support the individual who could see that the others were giving the wrong answer, it gave him the strength to stand out against the consensus. That is

why, however small their numbers, Jews created communities. It is hard to lead alone, far less hard to lead in the company of others even if you are a minority.

Judaism is the countervoice in the conversation of humankind. As Jews we do not follow the majority merely because it is the majority. In age after age, century after century, Jews were prepared to do what the poet Robert Frost immortalised in *The Road Not Taken, Birches, and Other Poems*:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

It is what makes a nation of leaders. © 2013

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd he built there an altar to the Lord and he called out in the name of the Lord” (Genesis 12:8) Abraham is the first Hebrew, the founder of the Hebrew nation and the path-breaker who created the Hebrew religion. From this portion in the 12th chapter of the Book of Genesis until the last word of the Book of Deuteronomy, it is Abraham’s Israelite descendants who are the major subjects of the Bible.

Fascinatingly, G-d commands Abraham to leave his country, his birthplace and his father’s house to travel to the unknown land of Canaan (Israel) without any introduction to Abraham’s personality or his previous connection with G-d. Indeed, G-d elects Abraham as the progenitor or patriarch of “a great nation which will become a blessing to all the families of the earth” without any mention of Abraham’s worthiness.

This is very different from G-d’s commandment to Noah to build an ark, which comes after the Bible has already informed us that Noah “was a righteous man, wholehearted in his generation. Noah walked with G-d” (Gen. 6:9). It also contrasts with G-d’s charge for Moses to lead His people in the Book of Exodus, which comes after Moses left Pharaoh’s palace to empathize with his Hebrew brethren and put his life on the line by slaying the Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Hebrew slave.

So why did G-d choose Abraham? Maimonides is apparently struck by this question. His approach is paraphrased in a famous exchange. British anti-Semite William Norman Ewer wrote, “How odd of G-d to choose the Jews,” to which American poet Ogden Nash responded, “It wasn’t odd; the Jews chose G-d.”

Abraham chose G-d. Maimonides maintains that Abraham found G-d through his own reasoning powers:

“After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Though he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering,” until, as a result of his own correct

understanding, he reached the truth." (Laws of Idolatry, Chapter 1, Halacha 3)

From Maimonides's perspective, it is not only that Abraham understood that there must be one Power above all powers, one Lord above all lords who is the Master of the Universe and therefore traded in paganism for monotheism. Abraham realized that this Unity behind the apparent diversity that fills the world is an ethical and moral force that insists on righteousness and compassion; Abraham knew that it is not sufficient to be a monotheist but that it is necessary to be an ethical monotheist. The Bible itself tells us this: "Because I [G-d] have known [loved, chosen] Abraham because he commands his children and his household after him to observe the way of the Lord to do compassionate righteousness and moral justice."

Once Abraham discovered this great truth, it gave him no rest. He continually built altars and called upon people to accept his ethical G-d. It is important to note that on none of the altars recorded in our portion does Abraham present an offering, a sacrifice to G-d; he rather calls out to individuals to join him in his faith and in his ethical actions.

Maimonides continues in his description of Abraham's mission: "Once Abraham recognized and understood the ethical G-d, he began to tell the idolaters that they were not pursuing the true path; he broke their idols and informed the people that it is only proper to serve the G-d of the world... he stood up and called out in a great voice to the entire world that there is only one G-d in the entire universe and it is only Him that they must serve. He would walk about, call out and gather people from city to city and from kingdom to kingdom until he reached the land of Canaan, and he called out there in the name of the Lord of the universe. The people would gather around him and ask him questions and he would teach each of them according to their respective knowledge, until he would bring them to the path of truth..."

The Kesef Mishneh commentary to Maimonides makes the point that Shem and Eber – although great individuals who were also close to G-d and who according to the Midrash established a great yeshiva where Isaac went to study immediately after the akeda (binding) – were not chosen to be the first Jews precisely because they only taught about G-d to those who came to study in their yeshiva; they were rashei yeshiva (yeshiva heads), whereas Abraham was a rabbi – an outreach worker, in the style of Chabad and Ohr Torah Stone.

This is what the Bible means when it speaks about "souls that Abraham and Sarah made in Haran" (Gen. 12:5). The Midrash explains that Abraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women. Maimonides further rules that the commandment to love G-d includes "making G-d beloved to all the people of the earth" (Book of Commandments, 5) and he insists that Jews must even coerce the gentiles to accept the

seven laws of morality (Laws of Kings, 8:10). We are not in any way commanded actively to convert the gentiles to Judaism; but it seems that, at least according to Maimonides, we are commanded to convert the world to ethical monotheism. © 2013 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

At Sarah's insistence, Abraham marries Hagar. Soon after, Hagar becomes pregnant and Sarah then becomes enraged. Here, the Torah uses the word *va-te-a'ne-hah*, which is commonly translated "and she (Sarah) oppressed her (Hagar)." (Genesis 16:6)

Rabbi Aryeh Levin, the late tzaddik of Jerusalem, insists that *va-te-a'ne-hah* cannot literally mean that Sarah oppressed Hagar. Sarah actually treated Hagar no differently than she had treated her up to that time. However, now that Hagar had become pregnant and perceived herself as Abraham's true wife, the simplest request that Sarah made of Hagar was considered by Hagar to be oppressive.

Nachmanides disagrees. For him, *va-te-a'ne-hah* literally means oppression. So outrageous was Sarah's conduct, that her children, until the end of time, would always suffer the consequences of this wrong. In Nachmanides' words, "Our mother Sarah sinned...as a result Hagar's descendants would persecute the children of Abraham and Sarah."

But what is it that Sarah did wrong? After all, Sarah had unselfishly invited Hagar into her home. Soon after, Hagar denigrates Sarah. Didn't Sarah have the right to retaliate?

Radak points out that Sarah afflicts Hagar by actually striking her. It is here that Sarah stepped beyond the line. Whatever the family dispute, physically striking the other is unacceptable. An important message especially in contemporary times when physical abuse is one of the great horrors challenging family life.

For Nehama Leibowitz, Sarah had made a different mistake. By inviting Hagar in, she doomed herself to failure by "daring to scale unusual heights of selflessness." "When undertaking a mission," says Nehama, one must ask whether one can "maintain those same high standards to the bitter end. Otherwise, one is likely to descend from the pinnacle of selflessness into much deeper depths..." It is laudable to reach beyond ourselves, but to tread where we have no chance to succeed is self-destructive.

Sarah's wrong is compounded when considering the following. While in Egypt with Abraham, Sarah was afflicted by Pharaoh, the master of the land. She barely escapes. (Genesis Chapter 12) Instead of learning from her oppressor never to oppress others, she did the opposite, persecuting Hagar, causing her to flee. Having herself been victimized, Sarah should have

been more sensitive. Hence, whatever her rationale, her retaliation was inappropriate. The message is clear. Victims of oppression should reject rather than incorporate their oppressor's ways. Love the stranger, the Torah exhorts over and over, "For you too were strangers in Egypt." (Leviticus 19:34)

But whether one maintains this position or the position of Radak or Leibowitz, underlying this disturbing fact of Sarah's oppression is an extremely important message. In most faiths, leaders or prophets are perfect. They can do no wrong and any criticism of their actions is considered sacrilegious. While strong sentiments within Judaism exist to defend biblical spiritual leaders as perfect, there is, at the same time, an opposite opinion in Jewish thought. It maintains that our greatest biblical personalities, while holy and righteous, were also human and made mistakes. They were real people...not G-d.

This position makes the biblical narrative much more believable. Moshe, our great leader, sins by hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. The great King David gives into sexual temptation and sins. It is precisely because these holy, inspirational leaders, including Sarah herself, were so human that we are able to look to them and say that maybe, just maybe, we, in all of our flaws and faults, can strive to be great leaders too. © 2010 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah now proceeds from the general and universal story of humankind to concentrate on the particular and individual story of the founding of the Jewish people. The story of Avraham and Sarah, their difficulties and challenges, their loneliness and spiritual quest, form the essence of this parsha and the next one as well. In this life story they create the prototype for all later Jewish and familial society.

The Torah, unlike many more pious modern books of today, avoids painting for us a blissful picture of righteous people being blessed with serenity and perfection of character and behavior. Rather, it shows us the ever present challenges to faith in the Almighty, the difficulties of maintaining domestic harmony and of creating a positive worldview while surrounded by enemies, jealousy and an immoral general culture.

Tradition and the Mishna crown Avraham with the laurel of having withstood and overcome ten major challenges in his lifetime. It is interesting that the great Jewish commentators to the Torah differ as to which ten challenges the Mishna is referring to. Thus, if we combine all of their opinions, there are a significantly greater number of challenges in the life of Avraham than just ten.

The Torah's portrayal of these events – the wandering and rootlessness of coming to the promised land of Israel, the disloyalty of Lot, the difficulties with Sarah and Hagar, the behavior of Pharaoh and his courtiers, to mention some of them – all portray for us a life of struggle, of pain, of striving and of hurdles to overcome.

In spite of all of these very troubling details and incidents as recorded for us in the parsha, there is a tenor and tone of optimism and fulfilled purpose that permeates the entire parsha. Even the cursory reader senses that Avraham and Sarah are up to something great – that this is no ordinary tale of pioneering and struggle. There are G-dly covenants and blessings, commitments made that surely will be met and a vision presented of a great and influential people and of a holy land.

G-d's relationship with humankind generally will be centered in His relationship to the family and progeny of Avraham and Sarah. Nations and beliefs will vie for the honor of being the descendants and followers of Avraham. Millions will adopt his name and follow his monotheistic creed. He and Sarah will be some of the most influential personages in world history. They will not avoid trouble and travail in their personal and family lives but great will be their reward in spiritual and historical achievement.

As such, they truly are the forerunners of the story of the Jewish people – a small and lonely people, wanderers and beset by inner disloyalty and external persecution – which nevertheless is optimistic and vastly influential in a manner that belies its physical numbers and temporal power.

Generally, Avraham is the father of many nations and of all monotheistic believers. But particularly he is the founder and father of the Jewish people whose march through human history parallels the life of Avraham itself. And, the G-dly covenant and blessings will assuredly be fulfilled through the accomplishments of the Jewish people, its nationhood and land. © 2013 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Embedded in this week's Parsha, Lech Lecha, is Avram's asking Hashem (G-d) "how will I know that I will inherit it (the land)?" This seems strange, because Avram was already promised that he would have children, and that his children would be as many as the stars. If he believed G-d about having children (which would be a great miracle at his age), why would he need reassurance about a much less miraculous promise of inheriting the land?

The Sforno explains that Avram had no doubt that he would have children, and that they would inherit the land. What he needed reassurance about what his concern that his children might forfeit their future by faltering, because unlike the stars, they would be living among temptations and impurities. G-d's response is "you shall surely know" that they will indeed rise above their struggles. How? Rashi (commentary) says because of the Korbanot (sacrifices) that they will bring. The root of the word Korban means "close", which lends great insight into giving: The more we sacrifice to others, the closer we are to them. If we give to each other, despite our surroundings, we are assured of inheriting a prosperous and fulfilling future. © 2013 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Long Distance Call

Good deeds deserve good dividends, but there is one deed mentioned in this week's portion that is veiled in anonymity. However, its dividends lasted so forcefully that the impact was realized almost 500 years later.

The Torah tells us about a war that took place. Avram's nephew Lot was captured. The Torah tells us "Then there came the fugitive and told Abram, the Ivri, who dwelt in the plains of Mamre..." (Genesis 14:13) It obscures the name of the refugee and does not even directly state his message. The next verse, in a seemingly disjointed manner, tells us, "and Abram heard that his kinsman was taken captive, he armed his disciples who had been born in his house -- three hundred and eighteen -- and he pursued them as far as Dan" (ibid v.14). The Medrash tells us that the refugee was Og, a giant of a man who escaped an attack on his fellow giants. He informed Avram that his nephew was alive, albeit taken prisoner with malevolent intent. He figured that Avram would try to liberate Lot and be killed in battle. Og would then marry Sora. (Perhaps that is the reason that the Torah seems to separate what Avram heard from what the refugee told.) For this piece of disguised information, Og receives a seemingly disproportionate reward. He is granted not only longevity, as he lived until the final days of the Jews' sojourn through the desert, but also the impact of his deed was so potent that Moshe was afraid to attack him before entering the Land of Canaan! Imagine. Og lived for 470 years after the deed, and then Moshe had to be reassured that he need not fear his merits!

Rabbi Berel Zisman, one of the few remaining from his illustrious family of prominent Lubavitch Chasidim spent a portion of World War II in a concentration camp in Munich. After the war, he was allowed entry to the United States, but had to wait in the town of Bremerhaven for six weeks. During that time he decided to travel to Bergen-Belsen the notorious concentration camp which was transformed to a

displaced person camp to visit a cousin who was there. Dozens of inmates came over to him with names of loved ones scattered across the free plains of the USA. They wanted to get them messages. Berel took their messages. To Sam Finkel from Abraham Gorecki: "I am alive and recuperating. Please try to guarantee employment to allow me to enter the US." And so on. One card was for Jacob Kamenecki from a niece from Minsk. "Please be aware that I survived the war and will be going back to Minsk."

Armed with lists of names and some addresses, Berel arrived in the US where he became a student in the Lubavitch Yeshiva in Crown Heights. Knowing no English, upon his arrival he asked a cousin to address postcards. Each had a message written in Yiddish "My name is Berel Zisman. I have just arrived from Europe -- and have regards from..." He filled in the blanks and ended the brief note on each card with, "for further information, I can be contacted at the Lubavitch Yeshiva, corner Bedford and Dean in Crown Heights."

Rabbi Zisman does not really now how many people received his cards, but one person who lived in a basement apartment on Hewes Street definitely did. When Rabbi Jacob Kamenecki, one of the United States' leading sages, came to the Lubavitch yeshiva looking for Berel Zisman, a war refugee who had arrived at the yeshiva only a week ago, no one knew why.

Berel was called out of the study hall and met the elderly man, filled him in on all the particulars about the status of his relative, and returned to his place. When the young man returned to his seat, he was shocked at the celebrity treatment he once again received. "You mean you don't know who that Rabbi was? He is the Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Voda'ath!" Berel shuddered, feeling terrible that he made the revered scholar visit him. A while later, he met the Rosh Yeshiva and approached him. "Rebbe, please forgive me, I had no intention to make you come to me to get regards. Had I known who you were I would surely have gone to your home and given the information to you in person!"

Reb Yaakov was astounded. He refused to accept the apology. "Heaven forbid! Do you realize what kind of solace I have hearing about the survival of my relative. I came to you, not only to hear the news, but to thank you, in person, for delivering it!"

Imagine. Avram was nearly 80 years old, he had no descendants, and the only link to the house of his father's family -- at least documented as a disciple of Avram's philosophies -- was Lot. Now even the whereabouts and future of that man were unknown. And when Og delivered the news of his whereabouts, perhaps Avram's hope for the future was rekindled. Perhaps his gratitude toward Og abounded. And though Og spoke one thing, and Avram heard another, the reward for the impact on Avram's peace of mind was amazingly powerful.

We often make light of actions and ramifications. The Torah tells us this week, in a saga

that ends five books and some four hundred years later, that small tidings travel a very long distance. © 2013 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week we read the parsha of Lech L'cha where Hashem commands Avrohom Avinu {the Patriarch, Abraham} to leave his country, birthplace and home, with the promise that he'll become a great nation.

The acts of the Forefathers serve as indications of what will unfold for their descendants throughout the map of their history. By scrutinizing their responses to different situations we gain an understanding of how we can best maneuver through the mazes that we will encounter.

Of the many events that transpire in this week's parsha, the one that struck me the most was the war that Avrohom fought. "And it was in the days of Amraphel, King of Shinar, Aryoch, King of Elasar, Kdarlaomer, King of Ailam and Sidal, King of nations. [14:1]"

These four kings battled against five kings and even though they were outnumbered, they totally crushed them. Among the captives taken was Lot, Avrohom's nephew, who had been living alongside S'dom, one of the five nations that were beaten. When Avrohom was told of Lot's capture, he rallied his small group and bravely went to battle against this massive army of four powerful kings. Avrohom was victorious and he liberated not only Lot but also all the captives and property that had been taken.

The Ramban explains that these four kings represent the four kingdoms under whose dominion the Bnei Yisroel {Children of Israel} would be exiled. Shinar is actually Babylonia, the first exile that the nation experienced. Elasar, the Ramban writes, was probably part of the Medean/Persian Empire and Ailam a part of Greece, representing the second and third exiles. The last king, called the King of nations, represents the exile of Rome, more generally known as the exile of Edom, which is the exile we are presently in. His being called the King of nations brought to mind the 'melting pot' that is now leading a coalition in war...

Avrohom's victory over these kings represents the ultimate victory that Bnei Yisroel will have, sanctifying Hashem's Name and revealing the sovereignty that Hashem had hidden behind the mask of this world. As always, Avrohom's actions and attitude serve as a guiding light for his descendants, so many generations later.

After his victory, Avrohom was approached by the King of S'dom. "Return to me my people (the captives that Avrohom had freed) and you can keep the property. [14:21]"

Avrohom's response was immediate and emphatic. "I lift up my hands to Hashem... if from a

string to a shoe-strap" if I'll take from all that is yours. [14:22-23]"

The Talmud [Chulin 88B] teaches that in the merit of Avrohom's refusal to take even a string, his descendants, Bnei Yisroel, merited the mitzvah {commandment} of the strings of tzitzis. In the merit of his refusal of even a shoe-strap, Bnei Yisroel merited the straps of tefillin.

What is the connection between Avrohom's refusal to take spoils and these two mitzvos that Bnei Yisroel merited? Rav Yehoshua Leib Diskin zt"l explains in the following way. Spoils of war are 'earned' as a result of the physical and material risks that one takes in battle. Avrohom recognized that his winning this war while suffering no losses whatsoever clearly showed the intimate involvement of Hashem's miraculous intervention.

Avrohom said: "I lift up my hands to Hashem..." realizing that his hands did absolutely nothing while Hashem had won the battle. Not even "a string to a shoe-strap" was lost.

Avrohom's foremost desire was to publicize to the world Hashem's greatness and honor. Let it be known that it was Hashem who had fought and won this battle--not he. He showed this by taking no spoils--it wasn't my victory, I deserve no spoils.

As a result he merited that his descendants would have the two mitzvos of tzitzis and tefillin, signs worn outwardly that portray Hashem's greatness and power and our allegiance to Him.

The acts of the Forefathers serve as guiding lights for their descendants. In the war of Gog Umagog {Armageddon} we will lift up our hands to Hashem, witnessing and acknowledging His greatness and honor. © 2013 Rabbi Y. Ciner and torah.org

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And (the Almighty) took (Avraham) outside and He said to him, 'Look up, please, at the heavens and count the stars, if you can count them.' And He said to him, 'So, too, will be your descendants'" (Genesis 15:5).

Was the Almighty just telling Avraham about the number of his descendants -- or was there a deeper message?

The Baal Shem Tov explained that the descendants of Avraham are like stars. We see the stars from a great distance and they appear to be mere tiny specks, but in reality in the heaven they are gigantic. So, too, in this world many people look very small. However, in reality they have greatness!

When you look at another person -- particularly, a child -- realize that he is like a star. He might seem small to you. He might not appear as having accomplished very much. Gain an awareness of the

great potential of each person. View each person as an entire world, as an enormous being in the cosmos.

When you see people in this light you will behave towards them with great respect. When you show others this respect, they will gain greater respect for themselves. This can give a person the encouragement he needs to live up to his potential greatness! *Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin. © 2013 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd Avram passed through the land... and the Canaanites were then in the land” (B’reishis 12:6). Being that the text of the Torah was given to the nation before Moshe died (see D’varim 31:26), and this part of the Torah was part of “the Book of the Covenant” that Moshe wrote down and read to the nation at Sinai, 40 years before he died (see Rashi on Sh’mos 24:7), saying that the Canaanites were “then” in the land seems out of place. Since the Land of Canaan wasn’t conquered until after Moshe’s death, obviously during Avr[ah]am’s time the Canaanites were still there. What is the Torah trying to tell us by mentioning that when Avraham traveled through the Promised Land the Canaanites were there?

Ibn Ezra points out that the word “then” fits if the Canaanites conquered the land from someone else, as they were “then” in the land even though they hadn’t been there previously. However, since the Land of Canaan is described as being the “borders” of Canaan’s descendants from the time the world was re-inhabited after the flood (B’reishis 10:19), it would be difficult to say that it originally belonged to others and was later conquered by the Canaanites. We would also need to figure out why the Torah wanted us to know that the Land of Canaan had belonged to others before the Canaanites conquered it.

Along similar lines, Rashi explains the verse to mean that “Canaan was then in the process of conquering the land from the descendants of Shem.” Although this explains why the Torah uses the word “then” (as that was the precisely when Canaan was conquering the land), it raises other issues. Besides the Torah indicating that the land was initially inhabited by Canaan (and not Shem), why would they conquer it from Shem’s descendants rather than directly from Shem himself? I addressed these and other issues several years ago (www.aishdas.org/ta/5765/lechLecha.pdf), suggesting that although the land was given to Shem, it was assigned to his servants, Canaan, to take care of until the time came for the Chosen People (who were descendants of Shem) to inherit the Promised Land. However, instead of fulfilling their role as caretakers, the Canaanites took possession of the land with the intent of becoming its owners, thereby “conquering” it from the

descendants of Shem (as opposed to from Shem himself, who still lived there). As far as why the Torah tells us this, Rashi continues by saying “therefore ‘and G-d said to Avraham (paraphrasing the next verse) I will give this land to your descendants,’ [i.e.] I will, in the future, return it to your sons who are descendants of Shem.” In other words, the reason G-d told Avraham that his descendants would be given the land was to alleviate his concerns about the Canaanites conquering the land from Shem.

[Even though this is the first time the Torah mentions that the Promised Land will be given to Avraham and his descendants, since this conversation took place when Avraham was 75 years old (12:4), and the “covenant between the pieces” took place when he was 70 years old (see Rashi on Sh’mos 12:40; Avraham was 100 when Yitzchok was born, which was 30 years after this “covenant” was enacted), Avraham had been told that he (15:7) and his descendants (15:18) would be given the Promised Land at least five years earlier. Therefore, upon Avraham seeing the Canaanites take possession of land that belonged to Shem, G-d reassured him that even though he (Avraham) would be considered a “stranger” in the land, eventually his descendants would become its rightful owners.]

In “Recalling the Covenant,” Rabbi Moshe Shamah (discussing Avr[ah]am and Terach’s leaving Ur Kasdim) mentions a “migration trend of those times that saw people moving from the exceedingly populated Mesopotamian centers of the East (i.e. Ur) to the more lightly populated West” (i.e. Charan). Referring to Avraham’s subsequent move to Canaan, he writes, “Canaan, with its sparse population, was a region more suitable for the founding of a new nation.” Chasam Sofer, expanding upon the difficulty Avraham faced moving from familiar surroundings to Canaan, says the following: “[Avraham] expected that [G-d] would bring him to one of the countries that was still uninhabited, for this occurred shortly after the dispersion (after the attempt to build the Tower of Bavel, when the nations were scattered, see B’reishis 11:1-9), as Avraham was 48 when the dispersion took place (see Rashi on 19:20) and was now 75, and in those 27 years not every country was settled, and [Avraham] thought G-d would have him take hold of one of the areas that was uninhabited, [that he would] live there and grow.” Chasam Sofer continues by saying that this was the significance of “and the Canaanites were then in the land,” meaning that contrary to what Avraham thought, the place that G-d led him too was in fact already inhabited. Instead of being able to start a new nation and religion in a new, uninhabited country, he would have to do so in a place that was already settled, where he would be a “stranger.” According to this, rather than the word “then” implying “but not before” (as Ibn Ezra implies) or “during that time” (as Rashi understands it), it would mean “already by that time,” as, much to

Avraham's surprise, the Canaanites had already settled the land.

One advantage Chasam Sofer's approach has over Rashi's is that it fits better with a similar verse later on (13:7), "and the Canaanites and the Perizites were then dwelling in the land." Although the context of this statement indicates that the information is relevant to the quarrel that took place between Avraham's shepherds and Lot's shepherds (as having others who lived there meant that the grazing land had to be shared by that many more people; Rashi explains it to mean that since the land belonged to others, Avraham and Lot had no right to graze on it), and the word "then" can be explained the same way in this verse as it was for the previous one, the addition of the word "dwelling" complicates matters. According to Chasam Sofer, since the point of saying "then" is that they were already living there, mentioning that two Canaanite families already lived there is easy to understand. According to Rashi, though, was there really enough time between Avraham and Lot's move to Canaan (when the Canaanites were "conquering" the land) and their return to Canaan from Egypt for the "conquerors" to now be considered "dwellers?" Wasn't their act of "conquering" continuous, building up and living in the area as if they were its owners rather than its caretakers? On the other hand, according to Chasam Sofer, the fact that the Canaanites were "dwellers" was mentioned the second time because being "dwellers" gave them the rights to the grazing land, a point that was irrelevant the first time.

Another aspect that Chasam Sofer's approach brings out is why Avraham traveled from place to place even after he arrived in the Promised Land. Although G-d explicitly told him to travel its length and breadth (13:17), those instructions weren't given until after Lot had separated from him and moved to Sodom; Avraham moved from place to place right away, "passing through the land" (12:6) and continuously traveling (12:8-9). If Avraham was expecting to find an uninhabited place to live, we can understand why he kept searching for an area that was vacant. It was only after G-d told him that the entire area would be his (13:14-15), even though they were already inhabited, that Avraham stopped looking for a "private" area to live, and started to "dwell" with those who were already there (13:18). © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

“**T**he heavens / ha'shamayim declare the glory of G-d, and the firmament tells of His handiwork" (Tehilim 19:2). [How can this be?] The heavens are fixed in their place and do not move! Rather, although everything is His and everything is His handiwork, He rejoices only with the descendants of Avraham, as it is written (ibid. v.3), "Day following day

utters speech." What is the nature of these days? This refers to Moshe's day, which foretold Yehoshua's day. [The midrash continues by describing how Moshe made the sun stand still during the wars against Amalek and Sichon and how Yehoshua made the sun stand still during the war against the Canaanites.] (Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabbah, ch. 2)

This midrash obviously requires explanation. R' Shmuel Heide z"l (died 1685) explains as follows:

When we say that heavenly bodies praise and glorify Hashem, we refer to the fact that their movements in their orbits in accordance with His Will declare that He is their creator. The proof of this is that when Yehoshua wanted the sun to stand still, he did not say, "Sun, stand still," but rather (Yehoshua 10:12), "Sun, be silent." The sun's [perceived] movement is its praise of G-d. To the sun, being silent and standing still are synonymous.

In contrast, the heavens themselves are inanimate; they are always "silent." How then do the heavens declare the glory of G- d?

Because of this question, the midrash concludes that the reference to "heavens" is a metaphor. Indeed, the gematria of "ha'shamayim" equals the gematria of "neshamah" / soul. Just as when a person praises Hashem, it is not his body which offers the praise—the body by itself is lifeless— but rather it is his neshamah, so the "shamayim" of our verse also refers to something living: the descendants of Avraham.

Why the descendants of Avraham? We read in our parashah (14:19), "Blessed is Avram to G-d, possessor of heavens and earth." Avraham, says another midrash based on this verse, acquired the heavens and the earth through his deeds. (In fact, says that midrash, the sun refused to obey Yehoshua until Yehoshua reminded it that Avraham had previously "acquired" the heavens.) We also read in our parashah (15:5) that Hashem told Avraham to gaze towards the heavens, for his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. This symbolizes, say Chazal, that Avraham and his descendants would not be subject to the laws of nature (for Avraham and Sarah were naturally infertile).

Rather, Avraham's descendants would be subject only to Hashem's direct providence. The many miracles that Hashem was destined to do for Avraham's descendants would themselves "declare the glory of G-d and... tell of His handiwork." (Zikukin De'nura) © 2001 S. Katz and torah.org



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