

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

In an extraordinary series of observations on this week's parsha, Nahmanides (Ramban, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman Gironi, 1194 – 1270), delivers harsh criticisms of Abraham and Sarah. The first has to do with Abraham's decision, after arriving at the land of Canaan, to leave and go to Egypt because "there was a famine in the land." On this Nahmanides says: Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that G-d would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for G-d surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine G-d would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children.¹

According to Ramban, Abraham should have stayed in Canaan and had faith in G-d that he would sustain him despite the famine. Not only was Abraham wrong to leave. He also put Sarah in a position of moral hazard because, as a result of going to Egypt, she was forced to tell a lie, that she was Abraham's sister not his wife, and because she was taken into pharaoh's harem where she might have been forced to commit an act of adultery. This is a very harsh judgment, made more so by Ramban's further assertion that it was because of this lack of faith that Abraham's children were sentenced to exile in Egypt centuries later.

Later in the parsha, Ramban criticizes Sarah. Despairing of having a child, she asked Abraham to sleep with her handmaid Hagar in the hope that she might bear him a child. Abraham did so, and Hagar became pregnant. The text then says that Hagar "began to despise her mistress." Sarah complained to Abraham, and then "afflicted Hagar" who fled from her into the desert. On this, Ramban writes: Our mother [Sarah] transgressed by this affliction, as did Abraham by allowing her to do so. So G-d heard her [Hagar's] affliction and gave her a son who would be a wild ass of a man to afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all

kinds of affliction.²

Here the moral judgment is easier to understand. Sarah's conduct does seem volatile and harsh. The Torah itself says that Sarah "afflicted" Hagar. Yet Ramban seems to be saying that it was this episode in the ancient past that explains Jewish suffering at the hands of Muslims (descendants of Ishmael) in a much later age.

It is not difficult to defend Abraham and Sarah in these incidents and other commentators did so. Abraham was not to know that G-d would perform a miracle and save him and Sarah from famine had they stayed in Canaan. Nor was he to know that the Egyptians would endanger his life and place Sarah in a moral dilemma. Neither of them had been to Egypt before. They did not know in advance what to expect.

As for Sarah and Hagar, although an angel sent Hagar back, later when Ishmael and Isaac were born, Sarah once again banished Hagar. This time, though Abraham protested, G-d told him to do what Sarah said. So Ramban's criticisms are easily answered. Why then did he make them?

Ramban surely did not make these comments lightly. He was, I believe, driven by another consideration altogether, namely the justice of history. Why did the Israelites suffer exile and slavery in Egypt? Why in Ramban's own age were Jews subject to attack by radical Islamists, the Almohades, who brought to an end the Golden Age of Spain they had enjoyed under the more tolerant rule of the Umayyads.

Ramban believed, as we say in our prayers, that "because of our sins we were exiled from our land," but what sins had the Israelites committed in the days of Jacob that merited exile? He also believed that "the acts of the fathers are a sign for the children," and that what happened in the lives of the patriarchs foreshadowed what would happen to their descendants. What had they done to Ishmael to earn the scorn of Muslims? A close reading of the biblical text pointed Ramban in the direction of Sarah's treatment of Hagar.

So Ramban's comments make sense within his reading of Jewish history, but this too is not without its difficulties. The Torah states explicitly that G-d may punish "the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation" but not

¹ Ramban, Commentary to Genesis 12: 10, based on Zohar, Tazria, 52a.

² Commentary to Genesis 16: 6.

beyond. The rabbis further restricted this to cases where “the children continue the sins of the parents.” Jeremiah and Ezekiel both said that no one would any more say, “The parents have eaten sour grapes and their children’s teeth are set on edge.” The transfer of sins across the generations is problematic, Jewishly and ethically.

What is deeply interesting about Ramban’s approach to Abraham and Sarah is his willingness to point out flaws in their behaviour. This answers a fundamental question as far as our understanding of the narratives of Genesis is concerned. How are we to judge the patriarchs when their behaviour seems problematic: Jacob taking Esau’s blessing in disguise, for example, or Shimon and Levi’s brutality in the course of rescuing their sister Dina?

The stories of Genesis are often morally perplexing. Rarely does the Torah pass an explicit, unequivocal verdict on people’s conduct. This means that it is sometimes difficult to teach these narratives as a guide to how to behave. This led to their systematic reinterpretation by rabbinic midrash so that black and white take the place of subtle shades of grey.

So, for example, the words “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian ... mocking,” were understood by the sages to mean that the thirteen-year-old Ishmael was guilty of idolatry, illicit sex or murder. This is clearly not the plain sense of the verse. It is, instead, an interpretation that would justify Sarah’s insistence that Ishmael be sent away.

Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes explained that the entire tendency of midrash to make the heroes seem perfect and the villains completely evil is for educational reasons. The word Torah means “teaching” or “instruction,” and it is difficult to teach ethics through stories whose characters are fraught with complexity and ambiguity.

Yet the Torah does paint its characters in shades of grey. Why so? For three reasons: The first is that the moral life is not something we understand in depth all at once. As children we hear stories of heroes and villains. We learn basic distinctions: right and wrong, good and bad, permitted and forbidden. As we grow, though, we begin to realise how difficult some decisions are. Do I go to Egypt? Do I stay in Canaan? Do I show compassion to my servant’s child at the risk that he may be a bad influence on my child who has been chosen by G-d for a sacred mission? Anyone who thinks such decisions are easy is not yet morally mature. So the best way of teaching ethics is to do so by way of stories that can be read at different levels at different times in our life.

Second, not only are decisions difficult. People are also complex. No one in the Torah is portrayed as perfect. Noah, the only person in Tanakh to be called righteous, ends drunk and dishevelled. Moses, Aaron and Miriam are all punished for their sins. So is King

David. Solomon, wisest of men, ends his life as a deeply compromised leader. Many of the prophets suffered dark nights of despair. “There is none so righteous on earth,” says Kohelet, “as to do only good and never sin.” No religious literature was ever further from hagiography, idealisation and hero-worship.

In the opposite direction, even the non-heroes have their saving graces. Esau is a loving son, and when he meets his brother Jacob after a long estrangement, they kiss, embrace and go their separate ways. Levi, condemned by Jacob for his violence, counts Moses, Aaron and Miriam among his grandchildren. Even Pharaoh, the man who enslaved the Israelites, had a moral heroine for a daughter. The descendants of Korach sang psalms in the Temple of Solomon. This too is moral maturity, light-years removed from the dualism adopted by many religions, including some Jewish sects (like the Qumran sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls), that divides humanity into children of light and children of darkness.

Lastly and most important, more than any other religious literature, the Torah makes an absolute distinction between earth and heaven, G-d and human beings. Because G-d is G-d, there is space for humans to be human. In Judaism the line dividing them is never blurred. How rare this is was pointed out by Walter Kaufmann:

In India, the Jina and the Buddha, founders of two new religions in the sixth century BCE, came to be worshipped later by their followers. In China, Confucius and Lao-tze came to be deified. To the non-Christian, Jesus seems to represent a parallel case. In Greece, the heroes of the past were held to have been sired by a god or to have been born of goddesses, and the dividing line between gods and men became fluid. In Egypt, the Pharaoh was considered divine.

In Israel, says Kaufmann, “no man was ever worshipped or accorded even semi-divine status. This is one of the most extraordinary facts about the religion of the Old Testament.” There never was a cult of Moses or any other biblical figure. That is why “no man knows Moses’ burial place to this day,” so that it could never become a place of pilgrimage.

No religion has held a higher view of humanity than the book that tells us we are each in the image and likeness of G-d. Yet none has been more honest about the failings of even the greatest. G-d does not ask us to be perfect. He asks us, instead, to take risks in pursuit of the right and the good, and to acknowledge the mistakes we will inevitably make.

In Judaism the moral life is about learning and growing, knowing that even the greatest have failings and even the worst have saving graces. It calls for humility about ourselves and generosity toward others. This unique blend of idealism and realism is morality at its most demanding and mature. ©2014 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd there came one that had escaped, and told Abram the Hebrew: now he dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, the Amorite, brother of Eshcol, and brother of Aner; and these were confederate with Abram." (Genesis 14:13)

"Go away, for your own good, from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I shall show you. "I will make you into a great nation... You shall become a blessing... All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3)

Our portion opens with the first Divine Commandment to the first Jew - the command to make aliya.

Why did G-d choose Abraham and why was it so important for him to move to the Land of Israel? Maimonides, basing himself on earlier midrashim, maintains that Abraham discovered the concept of ethical monotheism - a single Creator of the universe who demands justice, compassion and peace.

Abraham shattered the idols in Ur Kasdim, was chased to Haran where he continued to preach his newfound religion, was addressed by G-d and sent to the Land of Israel (Mishneh Torah, "Laws of Idolatry" 1,3).

It is the propagation of this new credo that is the source of the Abrahamitic blessing for the world and is the essence of his election.

Not only does G-d stipulate that "through [Abraham] all the families of the earth shall be blessed," but Maimonides also pictures the first Jew as an intellectually gifted forerunner of "Yonatan [Johnny] Appleseed," planting seeds of ethical monotheism and plucking the human fruits of his labor wherever he went. This "missionary activity" on behalf of G-d which was established by Abraham is a model for all of his descendants, and even according to many authorities an actual commandment! The midrash interpreting the commandment "to love the Lord your G-d" teaches: "[We are commanded] to make Him [G-d] beloved to all creatures, as did Abraham your father, as our text

states, 'the souls which they [Abram and Sarai] made in Haran' (Gen. 12:5). After all, if all the people of the world were to gather in order to create one mosquito and endow it with a soul, they would be incapable of accomplishing it, so what is the text saying in the words, 'the souls which they make in Haran'? This teaches that Abraham and Sarah converted them and brought them under the wings of the Divine Presence."

The midrash confirms that the propagation of ethical monotheism was Abraham's major vocation and this is why he was commanded to move to Israel.

"Rabbi Berachia said... Abraham can be compared to a vial of sweet-smelling spices sealed tightly and locked away in a corner - so that the pleasant aroma could not spread. Once the vial began to be transported, its aroma radiated all around. So did the Holy One Blessed be He say to Abraham, 'Move from your place, and your name [and message] will become great universally.'" This midrash flies in the face of the biblical text after all, it was in Ur Kasdim, and then in Haran - places in the Diaspora - that Abraham and Sarah won converts to their religion. And this is confirmed by a daring Talmudic statement, "Rabbi Elazar said the Holy One Blessed be He sent Israel into exile amongst the nations of the world only in order to win converts...."

So if propagating the faith is so essential to the Jewish election and mission, why did G-d command and send Abraham (and his descendants) to live in one place, Israel? It would seem that a large Diaspora would be far more efficacious in bringing multitudes of souls into our faith! The answer lies in the fact that we are a nation as well as a religion, a people imbued with a mission not only to serve G-d but also - and even principally - to perfect society. From our very inception, the Bible understood that nations are interdependent, and that an ethical and moral code of conduct is central to the survival of a free world, and it is only another nation that can be in the position to influence other nations. Our goal must be to influence others to strive to emulate us. We must be a nation, but not a nation like all nations, but rather "a light unto the nations."

No one can influence another unless they know their self-definition.

A minority group dominated by a host-culture majority will expend so much energy merely attempting to survive that there will be little ability or will left over to develop a unique culture as a model for others. And unless one controls the society, there is no living laboratory to test one's ethical and moral ideas, to see if they can be expressed in real-life situations.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, expressed it very well. There were three brilliant and disenfranchised Jews who developed unique world outlooks. Karl Marx argued that human beings are controlled by economic forces, Spinoza maintained that humanity is controlled by nature and

natural instincts, Freud believed we are formed by our parents' home, fraught with traumas of Oedipus and Electra complexes.

G-d commands Abraham: "Free yourself of Marxian, Spinozistic and Freudian determinism. All of these will have an influence, but human freedom as children of the G-d of love will empower us to transcend these limitations and create a more perfect society."

Hence G-d tells Abraham that he must leave to forge a unique nation dedicated to the ultimate values of human life and freedom, societal justice and compassion, so that through his special nation the world will be blessed and humanity will be redeemed.

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Relocating one's self is a challenging task at any age. Doing so in the later stages of life is doubly challenging. It is no wonder that the rabbis of the Mishnah characterized our father Avraham's move from Mesopotamia to the Land of Israel as being one of the ten major tests of his turbulent life. Leaving all that is familiar and attempting to integrate one's self in a new and strange environment is a very taxing experience.

We are all aware of the immigrant experience of our forebears, whether in Western countries or here in the State of Israel. The language is different, the streets are unfamiliar, the customs and mores of everyday life are foreign to us and one has a feeling of being a permanent alien.

Avraham himself expresses this feeling when, after decades of successful living and earning the respect of the local population, he describes himself as a mere stranger and a sojourner in their midst. He is not native born, he speaks the language with an accent and though his inner spiritual self tells him that this place – the Land of Israel – is his G-d-given true home, he nevertheless feels the angst of being considered a stranger in a strange land.

Avraham becomes the prototype for Jewish existence throughout the millennia. And even when returning home to the Land of Israel, it has taken generations for Jews to fully realize that they are finally home and are no longer strangers or aliens in someone else's country.

If Avraham been born in the Land of Israel, perhaps all of Jewish and human history would have been different. But the Torah itself describes Avraham as a wandering Aramean and so he remains throughout Jewish tradition and Torah commentary.

The Lord, in telling Avraham to leave his home, does not specify the exact location where he is now allowed to reside. G-d promises him that He will yet show him the new place. Avraham instinctively travels to the Land of Israel and it is there and only then that G-d confirms that this is to be not only his place of

residence but the eternal home of the Jewish people.

There is an inner drive of holiness within human beings that brings them to come to the Land of Israel. Whereas it was persecution and the absence of other options that brought hundreds of thousands of Jews to settle in the Land of Israel in the twentieth century, the overwhelming trend of new immigration to our country today is by choice. The inner drive of connection to our homeland – to our past and future at one and the same time – is the driving force of the recent increased immigration of Jews to the State of Israel.

The rabbis taught us that Avraham's personal greatness could only be realized in the Land of Israel. The truth be said, the development and fulfillment of the greatness of the Jewish people apparently is also contingent upon their living in the Land of Israel. As such, we have only to emulate our father Avraham, in his attitude, fortitude and love for the land that spoke to his soul and guaranteed his eternity. © 2014 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

What makes the story of Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah going to Egypt important enough to be included in the Genesis narrative? (Genesis 12:10-20)

Ramban suggests that this is an example of the maxim that what occurred to our patriarchs and matriarchs will one day occur to the Jewish people. Note that Avraham migrates to Egypt because of a famine. There, his wife Sarah is taken hostage; G-d intervenes by smiting Pharaoh and his people-ultimately Pharaoh ushers Avraham and Sarah out of the country.

This precisely mirrors what happens later on in Bereishit. Jacob comes to Egypt with his family because of a famine. In time, the Jews, like Sarah, are enslaved; G-d intervenes with plagues and Pharaoh, King of Egypt, insists that the Jews leave. (Ramban, Genesis 12:10)

Another observation. G-d's covenant with Avraham includes a promise of land and children. Relative to both of these commitments, Avraham is tested. Among all the lands, the one that is promised to Avraham, the land of Canaan, is stricken with famine. Later, G-d asks that the only child born of Avraham and Sarah, Yitzhak, be taken to Moriah to be slaughtered. (Rashi, Genesis 12:10, 22:12)

These two chapters are strikingly similar. In the Binding of Isaac story G-d steps in to save the child at the last moment. The covenantal promise of family is

secured. Here too, in the Egypt narrative, G-d steps in, punishing Pharaoh. Avraham returns to Canaan. The covenantal promise of land is sustained.

The upshot: Covenants do not guarantee that the road will be smooth. Sometimes, even after the covenant is proclaimed, there are set-backs. The test of belief is whether one can maintain belief during periods of challenge as did Avraham. This is a central message of the Avraham -Sarah story in Egypt.

One last thought. The importance of this chapter may be the beginning of the covenantal promise to Sarah. Up to this point, only Avraham was promised children. Was Sarah part of this commitment? After all, in this section, Avraham asks Sarah to proclaim she is his sister. Children are not born from sibling relationships. In fact, in Egypt Avraham is given shefakhot (hand maids). (Genesis 12:16) One of them is probably Hagar whom Avraham ultimately marries. (Genesis 16:1)

In the end, however, the Torah declares that G-d smites Pharaoh, "concerning Sarah, Avraham's wife." (Genesis 12:17) Here, for the first time G-d acts on behalf of the relationship between Sarah and Avraham. From Sarah and not from Hagar, would come the child who would be the second patriarch. This commitment from G-d makes this section extraordinarily important in understanding the unfolding of the Jewish people. ©2012 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

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

In this week's parashah, we read that Hashem promised Eretz Yisrael to Avraham's descendants. In Divrei Hayamim I (16:16-19 -- recited every day in the Hodu prayer), we read similarly, "That He covenanted with Avraham, and His oath to Yitzchak... saying, 'To you [singular] I shall give the Land of Canaan, the lot of your [plural] heritage.' When you were but few in number, hardly dwelling there." R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) comments on these verses:

Eretz Yisrael is suitable for the Congregation of Yisrael as a whole, in all generations, forever and ever, yet it also is suitable for every individual Jew according to his nature, his needs, and his essence. This fit is precise, for it was measured out by Hashem, who gave His beloved Land to His holy people. This is why the verse begins in the singular -- "To you [singular] I shall give the Land of Canaan" -- and ends in the plural -- "The lot of your [plural] heritage."

Regarding the verse, "When you were but few in number, hardly dwelling there," R' Kook writes: The tie between Yisrael and its Holy Land is not like the natural tie that connects other nations to their lands.

Generally, a connection between a nation and its land develops over time based on events that happen there and continued expansion and building as a result of population growth. This is not true in the case of the Divinely-ordained connection between the Congregation of Yisrael and the holiness of the Beloved Land. Even when we were few in number [i.e., Avraham and Sarah alone], there already was a special connection between our nation and its land. (Olat Re'iyah p.203)



"On that day Hashem made a covenant with Avram, saying, 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates River'." (15:18)

"When Avram was ninety-nine years old, Hashem appeared to Avram and said to him, 'I am Kel Shakkai. Walk before Me and be perfect. I will set My covenant between Me and you, and I will increase you very, very much'." (17:1-2)

R' Leib Mintzberg shlita (Yerushalayim) asks: Why did Hashem make two covenants with Avram/Avraham separated by many years? Why wasn't one covenant enough?

He explains: The Jewish People's reason for existence has two aspects, each of which is represented by one of these covenants.

First, the Jewish People are mankind's representatives to serve Hashem. Because Hashem created the world, all creations are obligated to honor and serve Him, their Master. However, Hashem selected the Jewish People to be a nation of kohanim / priests to serve him on behalf of all of mankind.

Second, the Jewish People in their own right, not just as representatives of all of Creation, have found favor in Hashem's eyes. Hashem views us as His relatives, his children. Because of this, Hashem pays special attention ("hashgachah") to us and provides us with special blessings. It is because of this, as well, that He gave us the opportunity, as well as the obligation, to receive the Torah. This requires a higher level of service from us, more than just being good people.

The beginning of our parashah speaks of the first relationship. Thus, for instance, it refers to "the souls they made in Charan" (12:5), which our Sages understood to mean "converts." This describes Avraham in his role vis-?-vis the world. Similarly, the Gemara (Berachot 7b) notes that Avraham was the first person in history to address G-d as "Master." In this passage, Avraham is reaching out to the world and is compared to the world's other inhabitants. When Avraham takes an oath in the first half of our parashah, it is to "the Creator of heaven and earth" (14:22). The promise that is made to Avraham at the beginning of this parashah is, "I will make of you a great nation" (12:2) -- a "nation" among other nations, a player on the

world's stage.

At the time of the second covenant, however, the covenant (brit) of milah (circumcision), Avraham is told, "Walk before Me and be perfect." The relationship is between Avraham and Hashem. No one else in the world is mentioned. And, the promise that is made to Avraham at this time is, "I will increase you very, very much." Hashem said further: "I will ratify My covenant between Me and you and between your offspring after you, throughout their generations, as an everlasting covenant, to be a G-d to you and to your offspring after you" (17:7) -- not a covenant with a nation, but rather with a family. (Ben Melech: Shir Ha'shirim p.20) ©2014 S. Katz and torah.org

RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG

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"Harimosi -- I lifted my hand to Hashem...if I will take anything of yours, so you will not say 'I made Avram rich'" (Bereishis 14:22,23). Rashi explains that Avram's lifting of his hand signifies that he was taking an oath. The Meshech Chochma offers an alternative explanation of Avram's actions, namely that Avram lifted his hand, which signified the strength he used in the war, to Hashem to demonstrate that he attributed his victory to Hashem and not to his wisdom or his strength. As such, the spoils of war are not Avram's, and he therefore refused to take anything.

"You may say in your heart, 'My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth (chayil)' Then you must remember Hashem and that it is He Who gives you strength to make wealth" (Devarim 8:17,18). The Ramban links "chayil" to military victory. We must realize that victory is Hashem's doing, and therefore even mightier nations and fortified cities can be conquered (9:1-3). Moreover, miraculous sustenance in the desert came from Hashem (8:15,16) and the wealth made with our strength when we entered Eretz Yisrael also came from Hashem, "Who gives you strength."

A similar idea is expressed by the Ramban (Shemos 13:16) who says, "from the great open miracles, a person acknowledges the hidden miracles which are the fundamentals of the entire Torah...that all our matters and happenings are miracles, not nature and the way of the world...but all by Divine decree." Just as redemption is miraculous, so is sustenance -- a natural occurrence -- miraculous, as it says: "Hashem saved us from our enemies, and gives nourishment to all" (Tehilim 136:24,25) (Bereshis Raba 20:9). The change of tense is instructive -- from past miracles we learn that present sustenance is from Hashem Whose kindness endures forever. Similarly, the Medrash cites an additional juxtaposition: Hashem Who shepherds me, His angel redeems me (Bereishis 48:15,16). Parnassa, sustenance, is greater than redemption, and even greater than the splitting of the sea (Tehilim

136:13).

Avram made the spoils of this war into a song, as the Torah says after the sea split, "the G-d of our father (Avraham) and I will exalt Him" (Shemos 15:2). The Medrash (Bereishis Raba 43:9) links Moshe's "Aromimenu" with Avraham's "harimosi" -- just as we sang after the open miracle of kriyas Yam Suf, so Avraham attributed his victory to Hashem Whose Divine Providence vanquished kings, for which he sang and praised Hashem (Meshech Chochma).

In a remarkable interpretation, the Malbim (14:23) translates Avram's words "v'lo tomar", not as "you will not say", but "she [it] will not say." The third person feminine form refers to the aforementioned hand of Avram. If I will accept the spoils, as if my hand won the war and made wealth, my hand will tell me 'I made Avram rich', as it says 'my strength and the might of my hand made me wealth.' How can my hand say that she [it] made me rich if Hashem did all this and not my weak hand?

In an age of unprecedented prosperity in the American Orthodox Jewish community, we dare not forget, as Hashem warned us, that our success comes from Hashem. If we forget this, we can forget Hashem entirely, not only in thought but in deed (Or Hachaim, Devraim 8:18). We must reinforce our faith in Divine Providence to avoid the path that leads from wealth to nonobservance and assimilation.

The deeds of the patriarchs are a sign for their descendants (Tanchuma Lech Lecha, 9). Let us all learn the critical and timeless lesson from our founding father. ©2014 Rabbi M. Willig & The TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"And Avram was 75 years old when he left Charan" (B'reishis 12:4). Since he was 100 when Yitzchok was born (21:5), the move to Canaan from Charan must have happened 25 years earlier. However, when explaining how the verse (Sh'mos 12:40) could say the Children of Israel were in Egypt for 430 years, or Avraham could be told his descendants would be subservient to another nation for 400 years (B'reishis 15:13), if the exodus occurred only 210 years after Yaakov's son arrived in Egypt (see Rashi on 15:13), Seder Olam (1) tells us that Avraham was informed about the servitude in Egypt at the Bris bein HaB'sarim (BBhB) 430 years before it ended and 30 years before Yitzchok was born (400 years before the exodus). This would make Avraham 70 at the BBhB, which occurred in Canaan (see 15:7 and 15:16). In order to explain how Avraham could have been in Canaan when he was 70 if he didn't leave Charan until he was 75, Seder Olam says that he made more than one trip to Canaan from Charan; he was in Canaan when he was 70, when the BBhB occurred, returned to

Charan afterwards, and moved to Canaan permanently when he was 75.

If the BBhB occurred five years before Avraham moved to Charan, it would seem that the narrative(s) in Parashas Lech Lecha cannot be in chronological order. There are other explanations for the "430 years in Egypt" (see <http://tinyurl.com/mbd2rno>), with one of the main reasons others prefer a different explanation being to maintain a chronological order. Nevertheless, according to Seder Olam (and the numerous Midrashim and commentators who follow its approach), the BBhB, which is taught towards the end of Parashas Lech Lecha, occurred five years before Avraham moved from Charan to Canaan, which is taught at the very beginning of Parashas Lech Lecha. But where does this "switch," when the narrative goes back in time, occur?

The Talmud (B'rachos 7b) credits Avraham with being the first person to refer to G-d as "Master." However, the verse quoted (15:8) is not the first time in the Torah where Avraham referred to G-d that way. Just a few verse earlier (15:2), Avraham refers to G-d the exact same way, yet this is not the verse the Talmud quotes. Tosfos says that the Talmud quoted the second verse because Avraham actually said that one first, making it the first time G-d was called "Master." If so, the chronological switch must occur somewhere between these two verses.

Tosfos says it occurs after 15:6 (which is where we end the fifth Aliyah, although this could be for impact, ending on a positive note), adding that this addresses another issue too, as it was nighttime in 15:5 but daytime in 15:12; since these two pieces of narrative occurred years apart, the time of day has no chronological significance. Nevertheless, even if these weren't visions (where switching from seeing stars to the sun setting also has no chronological significance) it is still possible that there were two separate chronologically-intact communications, or that this communication lasted long enough whereby the second part happened at the end of the next day. It is therefore also possible that the switch occurs a bit earlier, after 15:2, which is between two similar statements made by Avraham without a response from G-d after the first. In 15:2, Avraham responded to G-d's reassurance that he will be rewarded by saying that no reward will have any real value since he has no progeny, and in 15:3, which starts a new statement, Avraham also tells G-d that he has no progeny. It would fit quite nicely if the Torah was putting together two separate instances -- separated by a significant amount of time -- when Avraham said the same thing to G-d, using it as the "jumping off" point to flash back to what happened previously when he mentioned his childless status.

When Tosfos uses the chronology issue to explain why the Talmud quotes the second verse where

Avraham called G-d "Master" rather than the first, we would have expected them to prove the point by bringing up the fact that Avraham was 70 at the BBhB and 75 when he left Charan. Instead, they prove that things are out of chronological order because Avraham was 73 when he fought the kings to rescue Lot (which immediately preceded the BBhB in the text's narrative) and 70 at the BBhB. Since Avraham was 75 when he left Charan, according to Tosfos there seems to be two times that things are stated out of chronological order, not just one. Where in the text did that one occur?

There is little room to pinpoint it, since Lot must have already moved to S'dom before he was captured, had moved to S'dom to separate from his uncle upon their return from Egypt, and went down to Egypt after they moved from Charan to Canaan, all things that must have occurred in chronological order. Besides, how could Lot have left Charan with Avraham when Avraham was 75, if at least two years earlier Lot had already separated from Avraham and moved to S'dom?

We are told twice that Lot went with Avraham (12:4 and 12:5). Previously (<http://tinyurl.com/ngyu5wf>), I suggested that the first time refers to the trip from Ur Kasdim to Charan, while the second refers to the trip from Charan to Canaan. Since Avraham made more than one trip from Charan to Canaan, it is also possible that they refer to separate trips to Canaan, with Lot accompanying Avraham the first time (returning with him to Charan) as well as when he moved there permanently. However, if Lot had already separated from Avraham before his permanent move to Charan, Lot couldn't have accompanied Avraham the second time. Yet, it is in-between the two mentions of Lot going with Avraham that the Torah tells us that Avraham left Charan (for good) when he was 75. Nevertheless, it is still possible to reconcile this possibility with Tosfos.

Midrash HaGadol (B'raishis 11:31 and 12:4) says that Avraham left Charan for Canaan when he was 70 (when the BBhB occurred), but traveled back and forth between the two for five years, moving to Canaan permanently when he was 75. Since Tosfos has Avraham in Canaan not only when he was 70, but also when he was 73, they likely understood things similarly. It would therefore seem that the words "And Avram was 75 years old when he left Charan" are [part of] an introductory summation, telling us that the end of the process of moving to Canaan from Charan happened when he was 75, followed by the details of his prolonged move (which started when he was 70 and culminated when he was 75). If the information that Avraham was 75 is not part of the narrative, but an introduction to the narrative describing what happened within the five year span that ended when Avraham was 75, there is no chronological inconsistency with giving his age at the end of the process (75) before describing what happened when he was younger (73), during the process. Therefore, Tosfos does not mention

Avraham being 75 when he moved to Charan regarding things being out of chronological order.

Although this works within Midrash HaGadol's framework of a five year process that began when Avraham was 70 and ended when he was 75 (with Avraham being in Canaan during those five years), Seder Olam says explicitly that after the BBhB Avraham went back to Charan for five years, returning for good when he was 75. If so, Avraham could not have been in Canaan when he was 73, and he must have rescued Lot either after he was 75 (and had moved to Canaan permanently) or before he was 70 (after he came to Canaan the first time but before he returned to Charan for five years). Either way, we have to account for the reason Tosfos says Avraham was 73 when he rescued Lot.

Avraham being 73 when he rescued Lot is based on (see Shabbos 10b-11a and Rashi and Tosfos there): The dispersion taking place when Avraham was 48; S'dom not being built until after the dispersion (as until then everyone lived in Bavel); S'dom being destroyed 52 years after it was founded; S'dom being ruled by the four kings for 12 years and rebelling against them for 13, with Avraham helped it gain its independence in the 14th year; and it never having been independent before Avraham rescued Lot. This last assumption is tenuous at best, as even if S'dom was built after the dispersion (and there were definitely cities built well before the dispersion; see Ramban on 11:28), it makes more sense for it have been founded independently and then forced to serve the four kings than for it to have been subservient to the four king from the outset. As a matter of fact, in order to explain Seder Olam saying that Avraham was not in Canaan after the BBhB until he was 75, Tosfos suggests that S'dom was independent for its first two years, thereby allowing Avraham's rescue of Lot to occur when he was 75.

If Avraham left Canaan when he was 70 (as opposed to first coming when he was 70 and going back and forth for five years), when did he get there the first time (before he left for five years)? Sefer HaYashar says that Avraham moved from Charan to Canaan when he was 55, and stayed there until he was 70 (when the BBhB occurred). Although Sefer HaYashar has Lot only coming with Avraham the second time, when Avraham was 75, there are several issues with its narrative, none the least of which being that it has S'dom rebelling in its 13th year of existence (not its 15th, which would leave two years of initial independence) yet Avraham being 75 years old when he rescued Lot from the four kings. Instead of Lot accompanying Avraham from Charan to Canaan only the second time, perhaps Lot only accompanied him the first time (when Avraham was 55), remaining in S'dom after he moved there, including during the five years Avraham returned to Charan and then moved

permanently to Canaan. If so, the entire Parasha could have occurred chronologically.

Rabbeinu Saadya Gaon, Radak and Ibn Ezra are among the commentators who follow Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel's opinion (B'reishis Rabbah 42:6) that S'dom only rebelled for one year (the year following the 12 years it was subservient) rather than for 13 years. This allows Avraham's rescue of Lot to have occurred up to 12 years earlier, when he was 61, six years after he moved to Canaan the first time. If S'dom was initially independent, we can add those years to Avraham's age. For example, if it was independent for four years, Avraham would have been 65 when he rescued Lot; if it was independent for nine years, Avraham would have been 70, i.e. right before the BBhB.

Lot moved to Canaan with Avraham when Avraham was 55. During Avraham's first stay in Canaan there was a famine in Egypt, Lot separated from him and moved to S'dom, the four kings attacked S'dom and took Lot captive, Avraham rescued Lot, and G-d appeared to him shortly afterwards, enacting the BBhB. All of this happened, in chronological order, before Avraham returned to Charan (without Lot) when he was 70. The first part of 12:4 describes either Avraham's trip from Ur Kasdim to Charan, or his first trip from Charan to Canaan. The second part of 12:4 introduces Avraham's prolonged move to Canaan, which culminated when he was 75. The verses from 12:5 all the way through 15:21 recap the first stage of this move, from the time Lot went with him, when he was 55, until the BBhB, when he was 70. Just as the Torah is silent about Avraham's years in Ur Kasdim and his years in Charan (including the five years when he returned), the Torah is silent about Avraham's first 10 years in Canaan, resuming the narrative when he was 85 when Sara insisted that Avraham marry Hagar (16:1). But what it does describe (at least in Parashas Lech Lecha), is in chronological order. © 2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

