

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Leaders lead. That does not mean to say that they do not 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 God 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. (Gen. 12:1)"

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 God 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 God, to "teach your children and your household afterward to follow the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (Gen. 18:19).

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 into what Hobbes called "the war of every man against every man." (The Leviathan, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), part 1, ch. 13.)

We make a mistake when we think of idols in terms of their physical appearance -- statues, figurines,

icons. In that sense they belong to the ancient times we have long outgrown. The 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 what missiles and bombs are 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." (Thucydides, 5.89) 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 God. 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 2.3 billion Christians, 1.8 billion Muslims and 14 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 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, 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 correct answer for the first few cards, and then to answer incorrectly 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: 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, by which time even Zimbardo had found himself drawn into 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, 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." (Walter Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 49.)

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. He noted that when 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 up 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 counter-voice 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: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, / I took the one less travelled by, / And that has made all the difference." (The Road Not Taken)

It is what makes a nation of leaders. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

We are aware that one of the ten tests and challenges that confront our father Abraham is the Almighty's commandment to Abraham that forms the name of this week's Torah reading. Abraham is directed to, 'go, for your sake,' leave the comforts and familiar surroundings of your home and society, and to take a journey into a strange and unknown land.

According to Chassidic tradition, this instruction from heaven was not localized, to be heard only by the ears of Abraham. Many people also heard this directive, but they did not feel that it had any relevance to them, and they never acted upon it. It was the holy nature of our father Abraham that compelled him to realize that the message was truly meant for him, and he then undertook the journey with his wife, Sarah, that would make them the parents of the Jewish people for all eternity.

There is also another and perhaps deeper meaning into those two words of "lech lecha." This is not only an immediate instruction regarding a specific journey and trip, but it is also a general outline and pattern for the remainder of the life of Abraham and Sarah, that guides them long after this initial sojourn has been taken and its purpose accomplished.

Heaven, so to speak, is telling Abraham that the purpose in life is always to keep on going, never to rest on one's past accomplishments, but to always see that there is more to be done. The work of human beings in this life is never fully achieved. We are never allowed to quit, so to speak, in midstream. As long as the breath of life exists within us, we should continue to be devoted to furthering Torah accomplishments.

That is undoubtedly what the Mishnah in Avot wishes to communicate to us by saying that Abraham was tested ten times, and he able to with-stand all these trials. The Hebrew expression "to stand" not only refers to a physical description on two legs, but also implies that Abraham was elevated and made greater by each of the challenges and tests that he was able to overcome.

I have pointed out in previous articles that the rabbis saw that this was the main difference between

Abraham and Noah. There are many people in the world who accomplish noble and even holy tasks. But there are very few who do so on a consistent basis throughout their entire lives, no matter what circumstances they face. It is one of the reasons why we never find in the Talmud or Jewish tradition the concept of retirement as being a time of leisure, a time of not having to face new tasks or challenges.

There is no end to the accomplishments and challenges of life when there is life itself within our bodies. The challenges of age are far different from those of youth, in that there is no excuse for attempting to shirk them and avoid their rigors. Thus, we are always meant to keep on going to the extent that we are able to do so. That has always been the message of Abraham to us, for all our generations. ©2020 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 RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The Lord said to Abram: ‘Get out of your country, and from your homeland, and from your father’s home, to the land that I will show you.’ (Gen. 12:1) Abraham’s father, Terah, is often perceived as a primitive symbol of an outmoded religion, from whom his iconoclast, revolutionary son broke away to adhere to a new faith that would ultimately redeem the world. “Get out of your father’s home,” says God to the newly-penitent Abraham.

But what if there is another way of looking at Terah, more in accord with the actual words of the Torah? What if it was Terah who had discovered God first—rendering Abraham less a trailblazer and more a faithful follower? Perhaps Abraham was not so much a rebellious son as he was a respectful son, who continued and built upon the road laid out for him by his father?

After all, there is every reason to believe that when God tells Abraham to go forth from his country, his birthplace, to a land that God will reveal, God is communicating to a man who was already aware of Him, and of a mind-set that was most probably based on a religious perspective first learned at home.

Terah himself was at one time an idolater, but may have turned to the One God while Abraham was yet a very young lad, or even before Abraham was born. I suspect that a subtle clue testifying to the correctness of this position is to be found in an enigmatic verse: “Terah took his son, Abram; his grandson Lot, the son of Haran; and his daughter-in-law, Sarai, the wife of his son Abram; and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they

settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran.” (Gen. 11:31-32)

Why does Terah set out for Canaan, the very place where Abraham himself ends up at the relatively advanced age of seventy-five at the behest of the call from God? Could Abraham have been completing the journey his father had begun decades earlier? And what was special about Canaan? Why would Terah have wished to journey there, and why does the Torah believe the journey significant enough to mention Terah’s effort to arrive at that destination?

Further on in this portion, Abraham (then Abram) wages a successful war against four despotic kings in order to save his nephew Lot, who along with others had been taken captive by them. Malkizedek, the King of Shalem (“Jeru” = city, “Shalem” = peace) and a priest of God on High, recognizes the justice of Abram’s battle against tyranny, and greets the victor with bread and wine, offering the benediction: “Blessed be Abram to God on High, Maker of heaven and earth, and blessed be God on High, Who delivered your enemies into your hand.” (Gen. 14:19)

Abram then gives Malkizedek, whom he clearly respects, a tribute of one tenth of his spoils. The city of Shalem (Jerusalem) was the capital city of Canaan—and this is the first time it is mentioned in the Bible. Malkizedek literally means “the King of Righteousness”, and Jerusalem is biblically known as the “City of Righteousness.” (Isa. 1:26) From whence did this Malkizedek, apparently older than Abram, hear of God on High (El Elyon)?

Nahmanides (on Gen. 14:18) maintains that from the very beginning of the world, the monotheistic traditions of Adam and Noah were preserved in only one place in the world—Jerusalem. Its king, Shem, son of Noah, also known as Malkizedek, was a priest to God-on-High. If this is the case, it is plausible that Terah was someone who had come to believe in this One God even in the spiritual wilds of Ur of the Chaldeans—and therefore set out for Canaan, the land of monotheism, where he wished to raise his family.

Terah may even have had personal contact with Malkizedek, who greets the son of his friend with religious words of encouragement to the victor of a religious battle in which right triumphed over might, a victory of the God of ethical monotheism. Like so many contemporary Jews who set out for Israel, Terah had to stop half way and didn’t quite make it. But all along God was waiting for Terah’s son to embrace the opportunity to continue where his father had left off.

The common view of Terah has Abraham defying his father’s way of life as he creates his own path, becoming in effect a model for many modern day ba’alei teshuva (penitents) who attempt to radically break away from non-believing parents, rejecting everything from their past.

According to the understanding we have

suggested here, however, Abraham is actually following in his father's footsteps, building on the foundation built by his father, redefining his father's way of life, and for the first time in history, paving the way for himself and others to move up the spiritual ladder by not only continuing, but also advancing. ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd Hashem struck Pharaoh with terrible afflictions, and his household, because of the matter of Sarai, wife of Avram." (Beraishis 12:17) When Avram and his beautiful wife Sarai went down to Egypt, Pharaoh's servants deemed her beauty worthy of a king, so they took her to the palace. Once there, Pharaoh was unable to touch her for Hashem sent painful afflictions upon him and his household – from ministers to servants to the pillars and walls themselves.

Rashi explains the words, "al dvar Sarai," to mean, "by the word of Sarai." It is based on the Midrash Tanchuma which says that Hashem sent an angel down, holding a large rod or scepter. When Sarai said, "Strike!" the angel hit Pharaoh, and when she told it to desist, it waited for her command. This is very unusual.

Rashi will generally choose the simplest explanation for an event. In this case, there are many other ways to explain this phrase. The Ibn Ezra says it means, "on behalf of Sarai," the reason being because of this event [when she was taken.] Other commentaries also say it means, "about this matter."

The Ramban does ascribe words to Sarai, and says that she told Pharaoh, "I am Avram's wife," but Pharaoh didn't listen to her, and for this he was punished and afflicted. No mention from him of an angel striking upon Sarai's command.

Since Rashi will almost always choose the simplest and most natural explanation, it is somewhat shocking that he chose to quote the Midrash in this fashion. So what's pshat? Why did he do this?

The Haamek Davar on this posuk focuses more on the mention of Avraham Avinu, and says that the Torah is teaching us a lesson to take with us throughout Sefer Beraishis, that the three Avos represent the three pillars of Hashgacha Pratis, Hashem's Divine Providence in dealing with us. Torah acts as protection from harm, Avoda is the gateway to Parnasa, and Chesed brings peace.

However, he says, there's something else. Sometimes Hashem deals with us in a natural way, and sometimes His providence is more supernatural and miraculous. That is in response to the way the person acts with Hashem. The more the person interacts and trusts Hashem directly, the more Hashem will do so with him.

Now we understand why Rashi chose this

explanation. This is poshut pshat! Sarah and Avraham lived with Hashem's personal interaction in their lives on a daily and hourly basis. If she needed something, she asked Hashem and He complied. When she told the angel to strike, it did! And then it waited for her next command. This is how our matriarch lived, and we can do it too. Plain and simple.

One Friday found the Baal Shev Tov with no money and no food for Shabbos. With no other choice, he realized that he needed to come onto the assistance of another.

He went to the home of a wealthy man, knocked almost imperceptibly, and whispered in a barely audible tone, "Ich darf af Shabbos – I'm in need for Shabbos," then left.

Suddenly, the door opened and the rich man ran after the retreating figure. Handing the Baal Shem some money, he asked, "Why didn't you knock louder or wait for me to answer?" Said the Baal Shem: "I had to make my effort, and I did that. Everything else I left to Hashem, and as you can see, He came through."

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Terach, Avraham's (Abraham's) father, is often viewed as an evil man and nothing more than an idol worshipper. A review of the literal text indicates otherwise.

First of all, Terach's son, Haran, dies during Terach's lifetime. The Torah's description of his demise – "in the face of his father Terach" – may express Terach'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, Terach acts with great responsibility toward his family. Rather than leaving Haran's child Lot to be raised by others, Terach takes him in. This is truly a noble deed, especially when considering the pain Terach felt upon losing his own child. Notwithstanding this suffering, Terach has the inner strength to raise his grandchild as his own. (Genesis 11:31)

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

Finally, Terach must have been a man of considerable spiritual energy, as all the patriarchs and matriarchs come from him. Avraham, his son, would be the first patriarch, from whom Isaac and then Jacob would emerge. A second son, Haran, was Sarah's (Yisca's) father. And Rivka (Rebecca), Rachel and Leah would descend from Nachor, Terach's third son.

Note, too that Lot fathers Moav from whom Ruth and King David were born, and from whom the Messiah will one day emerge.

Of course, Terach was no Avraham. God 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 Terach 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 "contributions" – too often taken for granted – made by their parents and grandparents.

Thus, it is important that we appreciate Terach, the father of the Jewish people. He seeded Am Yisrael. Hence his name, Terach – from the word ruach, spirit. It was from Terach, whose name begins with the letter taf, which grammatically denotes the future, that Am Yisrael would be born. ©2020 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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Brit Milah

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Not all *mitzvot* are followed by a festive meal, but this is the custom when celebrating a circumcision (*brit milah*). In fact, the *Shibolei HaLeKet* considers the meal at a *brit* obligatory. However, at this festive meal (*seudat mitzva*), we do not recite the blessing of *SheHaSimcha BiMe'ono* (joy is in His dwelling) as we do at a *sheva berachot*. Since the baby is in pain, it would be insensitive to say these words. This leads to the question: why at a *brit* do we have a festive meal at all?

Several reasons are suggested. One is that of *Tosafot* (*Shabbat* 130a), citing *Bereishit* 21:8. There we read that Avraham made a party "on the day that Yitzchak was weaned" (*beyom higamel et Yitzchak*). Though the verse does not seem to be referring to circumcision, some creative wordplay can help make the connection. The first letter of the word *higamel* is the letter *hey*, whose numerical value is 5. Add to that the numerical value of the second letter, *gimmel*, and we have an additional 3. The last two letters of *higamel* form the word *mal*, "circumcise." Thus the word *higamel* can be interpreted to mean "on the eighth (5+3) day, circumcise (*mal*)." Following this exegesis, the verse means that Avraham made a party on the day of Yitzchak's circumcision.

Rashi points to another source to show that *milah* is a joyful occasion. We read in *Tehillim* 119:162, "I rejoice over Your instruction like one who finds abundant spoils." What specific instruction is being rejoiced over? The very first "instruction" given to our forefather Avraham, i.e., *milah*.

The Abudraham quotes a different verse from *Tehillim* (50:5): "Gather My devout ones unto Me, sealers of My covenant (*kortei briti*) through sacrifice (*alei zavach*)." The word *briti* clearly hints at *brit milah*, while the word *zavach* can be understood homiletically as "flowing (*zav*) on the eighth," another hint at *milah*. (The final letter of *zavach* is the letter *chet*, which has a numerical value of 8.)

Some say that a person who is invited to a *brit* and does not attend is rejected by heaven. Therefore, common practice is simply to inform family and friends of when and where a *brit* will take place, and not to issue personal invitations. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Separate and Divide

Avram was concerned that his giving away part of the land of his inheritance to Lot might have been misconstrued by Hashem that Avram was not treating the dignity of the land properly. The next words of the Torah make clear that Hashem accepted his actions and understood his motive. "And Hashem said to Avram after Lot had parted from him, 'lift up your eyes and see from the place that you are there to the North, to the South, to the East, and to the West. Because all the land that you see I will give to you and to your children forever. I will make your children like the dust of the land so that if one can count the dust of the land, he too will be able to count your children. Rise and walk the land through its length and its breadth for I will give it to you.'"

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch asks why the Torah used the words "hipared mei'imo, had parted from (with) him" when it could have said "mei'alav, from (near) him". He explains that this was not a mere departure from Avram physically but a spiritual departure as well. Avram had hoped that Lot would follow his spiritual example of devotion to Hashem and spread His Truth throughout the land. Lot abandoned this spiritual form of life for material gains. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin writes that all the time that Lot lived with Avram because he had no possessions of his own, he was willing to follow a straight path and support Avram in his endeavors. When Lot finally had flocks, his new wealth enticed him to seek more and abandon his dependence on Avram. This further explains the use of the word *mei'imo*, from (with) him.

The word "p'reidah (hipared)" has many different meanings including "parting." HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the word is used in a Midrash which discusses the conversation between Lot's shepherds and Avram's shepherds. Lot's shepherds claimed that Avram was "p'reidah" which here must be taken to mean "without children". When Lot departed from Avram he left him without children. It was only Avram's faith which convinced Avram that Hashem

would fulfill His promise and grant him children who would inherit instead of Lot. Avram had hoped to share his land with Lot as a relative who also followed Hashem, but it became clear that Lot's wealth led him on a different path. Another explanation of "p'reidah" is "pigeon". After the overturning of Sodom, Lot had two sons with his own daughters who became the nations of Moav and Amon. The B'nei Yisrael were not allowed to accept converts from either nation as they refused passage to the B'nei Yisrael through their land. Yet the B'nei Yisrael were told to remain close to these two nations. The Gemara (Baba Kama 38b) tells us that Hashem wanted "two fine pigeons" from Moav and Amon, Ruth (Moav) and Na'omi (Amon).

The Kli Yakar tells us that Avram first understood that the land would be divided between him and Lot as Lot was accompanying him on his mission. When Lot separated from him, Hashem made clear to Avram that the promise was not made to Lot and his children but only to Avram and his children. The Kli Yakar adds that the first promise was made only to Avram's children and not to Avram, himself. Our pasuk now clearly indicates that the land was given also to Avram. HaRav Sorotzkin approaches this from a slightly different angle. Hashem had decided to give land to both Avram and Lot but He could not begin until Lot chose which land he would take as his own. Once Lot separated from Avram and made his choice clear, Hashem could delineate the borders of Avram's inheritance. Hashem immediately showed Avram the rest of the land which would be inherited by him and his children.

The Ba'al HaTurim asks a question that is based on the Torah's break in consistency which is only for the purpose of teaching us one of the hidden messages of Hashem. The Torah many times uses these same directions from our pasuk but in a different order: "to the West, to the East, to the North, and to the South." He explains that, with Avram, the North was more important so it was placed first. Avram is given an outline at the Covenant of the split animals which animals were to be brought for sacrifices which would ensure Hashem's forgiveness of the people. The slaughter of these sacrifices in the Temple were always performed in the North of the Temple courtyard. Ya'akov (Yisrael) is associated with the West, for it was in his merit that the Red Sea parted. Yam is also water which is associated with Torah, and therefore with the B'nei Yisrael, Ya'akov's children. The Temple was always faced East to West with the Kodosh K'dashim, the Holy of Holies, in the West on the Temple Mount

Our section continues with the words of Hashem, "I will make your children like the dust of the land so that if one can count the dust of the land, he too will be able to count your children." Were Avram not a man of total faith in Hashem, these words would have been appearing to mock him. Avram was married for

many years and yet had no children. He could have attributed that to his living among pagans which would not be the proper environment for his children. This is not the only such promise that Avram received from Hashem. Avram was later promised that his children would be like the stars in the sky, so numerous that they would never be able to be counted. An addition to Rashi says that just as "dust" is necessary for the production of trees and produce which keep the world alive, so too the B'nei Yisrael are necessary for the lives of all Mankind. Hirsch adds that there is a difference between yimaneh, he will number, and yisafer, he will count, which is used with the pasuk about the stars. Yisafer is simply counting things to know their amount. Maneh (yimaneh) also means "allot", which includes counting for a particular purpose. Hirsch takes this to mean that no one will be able to understand how to allot the Jews in the world and for what purpose.

Jews are blessed to be part of that unique group of Avram's children. Hirsch explains that every other nation is a combination of many different families from many different forefathers. The Jewish nation is unique in that we are all (except for converts) direct descendants of the same father, Avram. All of us share a small part of the same DNA, we have the same heritage stemming from the same, single forefather. That entitles us to one other thing. We are all owners and possessors of the Land of Israel. It is a gift to us from Hashem and we are once again the inhabitants of that land. May we go from our current level to the full possession and the full Redemption of our People and our land. May Hashem continue to bless His people and His land. © 2020 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI D. TZVI TRENK

Where are you going, Avraham?

The question has often been asked – b'pshuto shel mikrah, we know almost nothing about Avraham Avinu at the beginning of Parshas Lech Lecha. Without any rhyme or reason, Hashem chose Avraham and offered him the greatest blessings. This is in stark contrast to Noach, who is immediately introduced as "Noach Ish Tzadik," explaining why he was saved from the Mabul. But why did Hashem choose Avraham? What was his unique merit?

It helps to place Parshas Lech Lecha in the context of the immediately preceding Parsha, that of the Dor Haflaga. The consequence of the Dor Haflaga was that generation's dispersion across the globe, and in turn, the subsequent formation of countless new nations. Each went on its journey to explore and discover lush and exotic places in this new world and establish distinctive cultures, language, purpose, and direction.

Where though did Avraham, also a member of that dispersed Dor, turn? In a few sparse words at the end of Parshas Noach, we find the first hint of Avraham's passionate calling. "They [Avraham and his family] left the city of Kasdim to go towards Canaan."

This must have been astonishing to Avraham's peers. Canaan was a place so often beset by debilitating famine and suffered from the fearsome curse of Noach. Avraham, the born leader, known as 'Av HaMon Goyim,' and a prince of the nations ("Nesi Elokim Ata B'Socheinu", Breishis 23:6), could easily have chosen the most fertile lands for himself and his progeny. Why did he set his eyes on dejected Canaan?

Lech Lecha highlights the clear distinction between Avraham's journey and of the other nations in the Dor Haflaga. Avraham was not motivated by material riches, nor was he seeking lands possessing precious worldly resources. Instead, his sole desire was to infuse the land otherwise beset by Klala with bountiful Divine Bracha.

While the other nations ran in countless directions on a 'gold rush,' Avraham took another path – he began a humble journey to a place with the greatest spiritual void and, therefore, one with the greatest opportunity for Kiddush Hashem.

"On the path that a person desires to travel, is the path that [Shamayim] leads him- Molichin Oso" (Makkos 10b). Avraham began his journey to Canaan, the land immersed in Klala, hoping to use his blessed Semitic legacy (as a descendant of "Shem" ben Noach) to elevate its people. This was Avraham's desire and passion. In turn, Hashem was "Molichin Oso," helped him along that journey, with the words "Lech Lecha."

Here lies the secret of Avraham's enduring legacy. The lost nations of the Dor Haflaga and their progeny through the end of time will ultimately find blessing by looking up to and following the example of Avraham Avinu and his descendants. "V'Nivrachu Becha Kol Mishpochos Ha'Adama- And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." © 2020 Rabbi D. T. Trenk

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. Kamenezky & torah.org

RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG

TorahWeb

"**H**arimosi -- 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 "Aromimenhu" 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.



"Just imagine, our posterity will be as numerous as the stars -- and I'm going to put you in charge of remembering birthdays!"