

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L**

### Covenant & Conversation

In an extraordinary series of observations on this week's parsha, Ramban (Nahmanides, 1194 – 1270) delivers harsh criticisms of Abraham and Sarah. The first has to do with Abraham's decision to leave the land of Canaan and go to Egypt because "there was a famine in the land" (Gen. 12:1). On this Ramban 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 God would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for God 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 God 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.<sup>1</sup>

According to Ramban, Abraham should have stayed in Canaan and had faith in God 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 the lie that she was Abraham's sister not his wife, and consequently 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.

Further in the parsha, Ramban also criticises Sarah's actions. In her despair that she might never have a child of her own, she asks Abraham to sleep with her handmaid Hagar in the hope that she might bear him a child. Abraham does so, and Hagar becomes pregnant. The text then says that Hagar "began to despise her mistress" (Gen. 16:4). Sarah complains to Abraham, and then "afflict[s]" Hagar (Gen.

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Mr. Shimon Wenger  
Simcha ben Avraham z"l  
by Ari Lasker

16:6), who flees 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 God 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. (Ramban, Commentary to Genesis 16:6)

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 do so. Abraham was not to know that God 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 to the household, later when Ishmael and Isaac were born Sarah once again banished Hagar. This time, though Abraham protested, God 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" (Commentary to Gen. 12:6), 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

<sup>1</sup> Ramban on Genesis 12:10, based on Zohar, Tazria, 52a.

reading of Jewish history. But this, too, is not without its difficulties. The Torah states explicitly that God may punish “the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” (Ex. 34:7) but not beyond. The Rabbis further restricted this to cases where “the children continue the sins of the parents.” (Rashi to Ex. 34:7, Jeremiah 31:28, and Ezekiel 18:2) 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 our biblical ancestors 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 the Rabbis’ systematic reinterpretation in Midrash so that black and white take the place of subtle shades of grey.

For example, the words “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian ... mocking” (Gen. 21:9), 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? He gives 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 God 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 Tanach 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 importantly, more than any other religious literature, the Torah makes an absolute distinction between earth and heaven, God and human beings. Because God is God, 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup> There never was a cult of Moses or any other biblical figure. That is why “no man knows Moses’ burial place to this day” (Deut. 34:6), 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 God. Yet none has been more honest about the failings of even the greatest. God 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

<sup>2</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 187–88.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188

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 towards others. This unique blend of idealism and realism is morality at its most demanding and mature. *Covenant and Conversation 5775 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©5775 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### **Shabbat Shalom**

"**N**ow I know that you are a beautiful woman, when the Egyptians will see you, they will say, 'This is his wife,' and they will kill me, while they will keep you alive. Please say that you are my sister, so that they will be good to me for your sake and that my soul may live because of you" (Gen. 12:11-13). The concept of "ma'asei avot, siman la'banim" (the experiences of the parents are an omen for the children), which runs throughout the Book of Genesis, is not limited to one or two generations; the great commentator Nahmanides notes continuous allusions to the events of subsequent Jewish history in the narratives of the Torah.

In the case of Abram and Sarai, who left Israel for Egypt because of famine, one sacred text records, "the first Hebrew couple committed a sin, albeit inadvertently," and it is because of this sin that their descendants had to be enslaved in Egypt [cf. commentary of Nahmanides].

A careful reading of these verses will reveal an even deeper connection between the earlier experiences of Abram and Sarai in Egypt and the eventual Jewish enslavement by the Egyptians, with major lessons for us today.

For example, in Genesis, Pharaoh takes Sarai into his harem, where he intends to enslave her. In Exodus, Pharaoh takes the Jewish people into Egypt, where he enslaves them. To ensure the conclusion of Sarai's enslavement before she is violated, God sends plagues (negaim gedolim) on the Egyptians. When God wants to put an end to the Israelite enslavement, he casts ten plagues upon Egypt. In Genesis, Pharaoh sends Abram away with gifts and material wealth; when Pharaoh finally releases the Israelites from Egypt, the former slaves carry off vessels of gold and silver.

Abram in Egypt certainly foreshadows the slavery of the Jews. If we are to find an ethical teaching in Abram's Egyptian sojourn, then the Egyptian enslavement must provide not only 'measure for measure' punishment, but also a moral message for all subsequent generations.

We have already seen that Nahmanides views Abram's leaving the land of Israel, even for reasons of

famine, as an inadvertent transgression. In light of the events that took place in Egypt, it is clear that no matter how tantalizing life in exile may appear to be from an economic point of view, a descendant of Abraham and Sarah must never move away from God's holy and promised Land of Israel. If it seems difficult to survive in our own land, it will be much more difficult to make it in a land in which we are strangers! This leitmotif repeats itself throughout the Torah.

As far as Abram's actions vis-a-vis Sarai are concerned, we may justify them by saying that had he said nothing, he would have been killed and Sarai would have ended up in Pharaoh's harem in any case. However, we cannot possibly justify his inelegant language, in which he asks that Sarai claim to be his sister 'so that they may be good to me for your sake.'

Apparently, Abram anticipates that Pharaoh will also give him gifts once the beautiful Sarai is harem-bound. Even if the profit he reaps was only a post facto dividend, his choice of words conveys the notion that Sarai is being used to further Abram's ends. I believe the Torah is teaching us that here, too, Abram sinned inadvertently.

Our interpersonal relationships, especially between husband and wife, must be devoid of any of the subtle ways used to take advantage of one another, even if done unintentionally. We tend to take advantage of people, or at least to take them for granted – especially those who are closest to us. We tend to forget that each person must be seen as his or her own ultimate reality, an end unto him/herself.

Using someone else as a means to our own ends, merely in order to fulfill our goals, is a subtle form of slavery. Slavery is made possible by dehumanizing a fellow human being, seeing him or her as an object for our purposes rather than a subject in his or her own right. Thus, the parallelism between the Egyptian experience of Abram and Sarai in the Book of Genesis and the Egyptian experience of their descendants in the Book of Exodus conveys two crucial lessons.

First, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah must learn that no foreign country will ever provide a political and cultural homeland for the nation of the covenant. Joseph's family settled in Egypt with great expectations for security and respectability, only to be enlisted in Pharaoh's slave-based systematic design that ultimately robbed them of their elementary rights to freedom and life itself.

Second, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah must have seared into their consciousness that slavery is fundamentally evil in any and all of its forms, and to always be mindful of the humanity of every person. "You must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt," declares the Torah [Deut. 10:19].

Faithfulness to our homeland and respect for every human being as an end in and of him/herself are

the principles upon which our nation was formed. Have we learned these lessons? ©2021 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**W**e recognize that in many ways our father Abraham is an innovator, a one-of-a-kind individual, someone who is original, unique, and fearless in his quest for the betterment of the human race and the creation of the Jewish people. Among all his other achievements, if we look carefully at the opening chapters of the Lech Lecha, we find that our father Abraham is also the first human being recorded as having a normal conversation with his Creator.

Adam, original man, makes excuses for his failings, but does not engage God in a discussion regarding the essence of sin, reward, and punishment. His son, Kayin, whines and complains to justify his murderous behavior, and does not understand the true nature of his sin, and cannot relate properly to the criticism of Heaven.

Even the righteous man, Noah, the father of the only family that survives the Great Flood, and through whom humankind will be rebuilt and repopulated, does not engage in a conversation with the Creator regarding the impending flood and its aftermath. In fact, we hear almost nothing from Noah, except for his statement about his future and destiny.

All the twenty generations, prior to Abraham's arrival, apparently have nothing to say to God. They may fear His power and even rebel against His rule, but they have no thoughts or communication about the relationship of how human beings can coexist with infinity and God.

Throughout the description of Abraham's life, he seems to be constantly in communication with Heaven. He obeys its orders to leave his homeland and circumcise himself at an advanced stage of life. He proclaims the name God – one and only God – wherever he travels, no matter the risks involved in so doing. He even disputes the decision of Heaven regarding destruction of the cities of Sodom. He even argues that the God of justice in such a fashion that it be visible and understood by ordinary mortals.

We are witnesses that Abraham has a complete attachment with God, a relationship that cannot and will not be severed or compromised. That is the basis of Abraham's founding the Jewish people, who will also maintain such a relationship of attachment overall of the centuries of human civilization. Whereas previous generations were afraid to deal directly with the Almighty, this became the basis for oral paganism and other religions that always rely upon intermediaries,

Abraham and the Jewish people attach themselves inexorably and directly to the Creator for

good or for better, no matter what the circumstances are that exist at that very moment. This fundamental difference in approach to the relationship between human beings and their God remains, until today, the identifiable hallmark that differentiates Judaism from other philosophies and beliefs. ©2021 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT**

### **Circumcision (Brit Milah)**

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**N**ot 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 AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

In many ways, the Noah and creation stories are parallel, helping explain God's exhortation to Abraham: "Lech lecha me'artzecha" (Go for yourself from your land; Genesis 12:1).

- In both, water plays a central role. The deluge reminds the reader of that moment in the beginning of the Genesis narrative when "the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2).

- In both, light plays a central role. In the midst of the deep darkness of the deluge, the only light in the entire world was the tzohar (window) in the ark (Genesis 6:16). This again corresponds to the world coming into being, where in the midst of darkness God creates light (1:2-4).

- In both, animals play a central role. Many verses describe the entry of all the animals into the ark, reminding the reader of the Genesis 1 narrative wherein God creates all forms of life.

- In both, God's commands play a central role. When Noah leaves the ark, he is told to be fruitful and multiply, is reminded that he has the potential to have dominion over the world, and is given dietary laws (Genesis 9:1-3). This echoes what God tells Adam at creation (1:28, 29).

From this perspective, the story of Noah is nothing less than a second story of creation. Humankind – having failed once – is given a second chance by God. Thus, chapter 10 lists "the generations of the sons of Noah," representing all of humankind.

Tragically, this experiment is unsuccessful, as described in the narrative of the Tower of Bavel (11:1-9). In fact, the tower episode becomes the segue to yet a third beginning, whose centerpiece is God's election of Abraham and Sarah. Consider the parallel imagery between the paragraph dealing with the Tower of Bavel and what occurs to the Jewish People.

In the dispersion narrative, there is a city, a language, and a tower (11:1, 4), much like in the Jewish realm, where there would also be a city (Jerusalem), a language (Hebrew), and a "tower" (the Holy Temple). But whereas the goal of the generation that built the tower was self-serving, "v'naaseh lanu shem" (and we will make us a name; 11: 4), Abraham builds an altar not for himself but for God: "va'yikra b'shem Hashem" (and he called in the name of God; 12:8).

In a word, the first chapters of the Torah are universal. God chose humankind over all other species He created. But humankind did not fulfill the chosen role God had assigned to it on two separate occasions (Bereishit Rabbah 39:5).

And here begins the third story of creation, in

which God chooses Abraham and Sarah to be the father and mother of the Jewish People. Not coincidentally, after the tower narrative, the Torah traces the lineage of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 11:10-32).

Their mandate was not to be insular, but to be a blessing for the entire world. To do their share, as we should do ours, to redeem the Jewish People and the larger world (12:3). ©2021 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

## Migdal Ohr

"As they were about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, I now know that you are a beautiful woman." (Beraishis 12:11) One of Avraham's tests was to have to go to Egypt due a famine in Canaan, the land Hashem had promised to give Avraham and his children. On the journey, Avraham caught a glimpse of Sarah whose fabulous beauty had not faded a bit from the rigors of travel. He became uneasy that the beauty Hashem had given her would cause the Egyptians to kill him in order to marry her. He therefore requested that she tell people he was her brother. In this way, he would not be placed at risk of someone trying to take her away from him.

When Avraham asked Sarah to say he was her brother, he said, "So that they should be good to me on your behalf and I shall be allowed to live because of you." While we understand the desire to save his life, of what importance is the "they shall be good to me"? Simply understood we can explain the goodness to be that his life would be saved, but Rashi doesn't say that. He explains that they will give Avraham gifts. If so, why does this figure into Avraham's conversation? In a matter of life-and-death, money is a non-issue!

The answer comes through an analysis of the situation. Remember, Avraham was the one who, at three years old, reasoned that there must be a single Creator in the world (Nedarim 32a). His keen analysis allowed him to come to conclusions others might miss, and this is key to understanding what was going on here.

Avraham knew that Sarah was beautiful. Perhaps that helped her in her mission of bringing women closer to Hashem, as followers are often attracted to good-looking leaders. However, her beauty even after traveling was putting them into jeopardy in Egypt. Why would Hashem make this happen? Why would she remain so attractive?

It must be that Hashem had intention for Sarah's beauty to play a role in their sojourn to Egypt. Had she not been so lovely, his life would not have been at risk. If Hashem put his life at risk, it must be that aside for saving his life, Avraham was to benefit

another way too. This would be the goodness he would experience on her behalf, such as receiving gifts from suitors, which would be in addition to the benefit of his life being saved.

Of course, Avraham understood that his logic could be flawed, so he took the additional steps of trying to hide her from the Egyptians. When those efforts were thwarted, he still had the backup plan of being called her brother to allow his life to be spared and for Hashem to shower Avraham with gifts.

We see the great lengths one should go to when trying to discern the goodness of Hashem and that he should never despair of seeing the light at the end of a tunnel. Perhaps that tunnel was the very thing getting him through and protecting him from harsher elements.

*When Hashem told Moshe to go to Egypt and redeem the Jews, Moshe was unsure he was the right fit. He argued, "But they won't believe me and will say You didn't appear to me." Hashem responded by asking, "MaZeh b'yadcha? What is in your hand?" Moshe replied, "Mateh, a stick." Hashem then commanded him to cast it down, where it became a snake.*

*There is much more going on here than a simple "parlor trick" miracle. R' Michel Twerski, Hornosteipler Rebbe of Milwaukee, explains what Hashem was teaching Moshe. He says that Moshe had reasons not to go. The question "What is in your hand?" was actually Hashem asking Moshe, "Is anything really in your control [that you legitimize refusing this mission]?"*

*To that, Moshe responded, "Mateh," from the language of turning. Moshe acknowledged that the only thing he could control was how he turned, i.e., his reaction, to what Hashem sent his way. One who can relinquish his control to Hashem is then worthy of miracles. ©2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr*

#### **RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## **Rejecting Hashem's Gifts?**

In the beginning of Parashat Lech L'cha, we read that Hashem makes several promises to Avram. "And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name big, and it will be a blessing." The promise of "and I will bless you" is explained as a blessing of money and wealth. In light of this promise, there are several incidents which take place in this parasha which are puzzling. We find contradictory behavior on the part of Avram when confronted with this blessing. Avram's reactions to wealth give us an insight into his greatness and demonstrate the importance of the entire Sefer B'reishit within the Torah.

Avram is challenged three times during this parasha concerning wealth. The first occurs early in his settlement of the land. We are told, "and there was a famine in the land." HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin points

out that it was only Avram who was so severely challenged by this famine as we do not see all of the population of Canaan travelling to Egypt to find food. He explains that food was available but at a sharp increase in price. Yet we are told that Avram came to the land with all of his possessions, so one might wonder how his money had become so depleted. Avram also brought with him "and the soul(s) that they made in Charan." Avram took it upon himself to provide food and shelter for all of the people who now believed in One G-d and accompanied him on his journey. This placed a huge burden on him which this new famine acerbated.

When Avram went with his family to Egypt, he worried that the Egyptians would kill him and take Sarai for Par'oh. He told Sarai to say that she was his sister "in order that it will be good for me for your sake and my soul will live because of you." Rashi explains that they would give him presents (money). The Siftei Hachamim explains that Avram did not wish to lie, so he told Sarai to tell the Egyptians that Avram was her brother, which could also mean a relative. The Kli Yakar and the Siftei Hachamim question why Avram would seek out gifts as this was hardly the fulfillment of Hashem's promise. Avram did not seek these gifts except as a means of saving his life. Sarai would say that she had a brother who was very poor. These strangers would then see Avram and guess that this was her poor brother and give him gifts. The Kli Yakar says that Avram gave many of these animal gifts to his nephew Lot. Here we see Avram giving away wealth that very well may have been a gift to him from Hashem. How could Avram give away this "gift" so quickly without first knowing that this was not from Hashem?

The brought about the second incident in our parasha concerning wealth. Lot had been very poor and Avram felt responsible for Lot. Lot went with Avram into Egypt and emerged from there a wealthy man. Lot's shepherds had conflicts with Avram's shepherds when they chose to graze on other people's land. Avram told Lot, "separate yourself from me, if you wish the left then I will take the right and if you wish the right then I will take the left." How could Avram give away land that had been given to him by Hashem?

Our third case comes when four kings invaded and attacked the five kings of the evil complex of Sodom where Lot lived. When Avram defeated the four kings, the king of Sodom told him to keep the wealth he had captured. Avram answered the king, "not even a thread or a shoelace (will I take) nor will I take anything from all that is yours, for thou should not say I have made Avram rich." Here our case is even more confusing. Avram had rights to the people of Sodom as servants and their possessions as his bounty. Hashem had rewarded his victory with great wealth, yet Avram refuses this "gift" from Hashem.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin asks why Avram accepted the gifts from Par'oh and yet rejected the gifts by the king of Sodom? Par'oh was a reigning king at the time, sitting on his throne and possessing great wealth. The king of Sodom had lost both his throne and his wealth to the four kings that had attacked his city. Since the king of Sodom possessed nothing, Avram was unwilling to take even what was rightfully his by law. Had Par'oh said, "I made Avram rich," it would have been the truth. But the king of Sodom would unjustly take credit for Hashem's gifts. Still, Avram appears to limit Hashem's opportunities to fulfill His promise.

Upon examination, we can see that there are three distinct cases taking place. Avram did not give any land to Lot, he was merely demarcating on which land Lot's shepherds would graze. Avram had not as yet taken possession of the land as this land was not promised to Avram but to his offspring ("to your children I will give this land"). Avram did not give this land to Lot as a permanent possession; it was only to be a temporary dwelling place for Lot. People would not wonder about Avram giving land to Lot as he did not possess it. In our third case, Avram was concerned with the evil origin of Sodom's possessions that he never really took ownership of those possessions. Avram did not reject a gift from Hashem because he naturally assumed that Hashem would not give him money that was tainted.

These three situations teach us a wonderful lesson. Each case of "rejection" can clearly be seen as a misjudgment on our part. Once we have examined each case, we find that our initial assumptions were incorrect. None of these cases demonstrate a rejection of Hashem's promises. Avram was very sensitive to the views of others and adjusted his behavior in each case due to the special circumstances involved. As observers of Avram's behavior, we are cautioned by our Rabbis to "dan l'chaf z'chut, judge every case and every situation with a positive view of a person's actions." It is very easy to judge people's actions in a way that places a negative view of their behavior. It takes effort on our part to judge each person's actions to their benefit. Yet we can clearly see in the three incidents in our parasha that Avram's behavior was justified in each case. It is easy to judge Avram well, as we know from our Torah about his fine character and behavior. We must create learn to judge others in the same positive way that we judge Avram. ©2021 Rabbi D. Levin

**RABBI YISROEL CINER**

## Parsha Insights

**T**his 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](http://torah.org)

#### **RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG**

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"**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 "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 & [TorahWeb.org](http://TorahWeb.org)

