

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L**

### Covenant & Conversation

**M**ark Twain said it most pithily. “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”

Whether Freud was right or wrong about the Oedipus complex, there is surely this much truth to it, that the power and pain of adolescence is that we seek to define ourselves as different, individuated, someone other than our parents. When we were young they were the sustaining presence in our lives, our security, our stability, our source of groundedness in the world.

The first and deepest terror we have as very young children is separation anxiety: the absence, especially, of the mother. Young children will play happily so long as mother or care-giver is within sight. Absent that, and there is panic. We are too young to venture into the world on our own. It is precisely the stable, predictable presence of parents in our early years that gives us a basic sense of trust in life.

But then comes the time as we approach adulthood, when we have to learn to make our own way in the world. Those are the years of searching and in some cases, rebellion. They are what make adolescence so fraught. The Hebrew word for youth – the root n-a-r – has these connotations of ‘awakening’ and ‘shaking.’ We begin to define ourselves by reference to our friends, our peer-group, rather than our family. Often there is tension between the generations.

The literary theorist Harold Bloom wrote two fascinating books, *The Anxiety of Influence* and *Maps of Misreading*, in which, in Freudian style, he argued that strong poets make space for themselves by deliberately misinterpreting or misunderstanding their predecessors. Otherwise – if you were really in awe of the great poets that came before you – you would be stymied by a sense that everything that could be said has been said, and better than you could possibly do. Creating the space we need to be ourselves often involves an adversarial relationship to those who came before us, and that includes our parents.

One of the great discoveries that tends to come with age is that we begin to realise that having spent what seems like a lifetime of running away from our parents, we find that we have become very much like

them – and the further away we ran, the closer we became. Hence the truth in Mark Twain’s insight. It needs time and distance to see how much we owe our parents and how much of them lives on in us.

The way the Torah does this in relation to Abraham (or Abram as he was then called) is remarkable in its subtlety. *Lekh Lekha*, and indeed Jewish history, begins with the words, “God said to Abraham, Go from your land, your birthplace and your father’s house to a land I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). This is the boldest beginning of any account of a life in the Hebrew Bible. It seems to come from nowhere. The Torah gives us no portrait of Abraham’s childhood, his youth, his relationship with the other members of his family, how he came to marry Sarah, or the qualities of character that made God single him out to become the initiator of what ultimately turned out to be the greatest revolution in the religious history of humankind, what is called nowadays Abrahamic monotheism.

It was this biblical silence that led to the midrashic tradition almost all of us learned as children, that Abraham broke the idols in his father’s house. This is Abraham the Revolutionary, the iconoclast, the man of new beginnings who overturned everything his father stood for. This is, if you like, Freud’s Abraham.

Perhaps it is only as we grow older that we are able to go back and read the story again, and realise the significance of the passage at the end of the previous parsha. It says this: “Terach took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there” (Gen. 11:31).

It turns out, in other words, that Abraham left his father’s house long after he had left his land and his birthplace. His birthplace was in Ur, in what is today southern Iraq, but he only separated from his father in Harran, in what is now northern Syria. Terach, Abraham’s father, accompanied him for the first half of his journey. He went with his son at least part of the way.

What actually happened? There are two possibilities. The first is that Abraham received his call in Ur. His father Terach then agreed to go with him, intending to accompany him to the land of Canaan, though he did not complete the journey, perhaps because of age. The second is that the call came to

Abraham in Harran, in which case his father had already begun the journey on his own initiative by leaving Ur. Either way, the break between Abraham and his father was far less dramatic than we first thought.

I have argued elsewhere (in my new book, *Not in God's Name*), that biblical narrative is far more subtle than we usually take it to be. It is deliberately written to be understood at different levels at different stages in our moral growth. There is a surface narrative. But there is also, often, a deeper story that we only come to notice and understand when we have reached a certain level of maturity (I call this the concealed counter-narrative). Genesis 11-12 is a classic example.

When we are young we hear the enchanting – indeed empowering – story of Abraham breaking his father's idols, with its message that a child can sometimes be right and a parent wrong, especially when it comes to spirituality and faith. Only much later in life do we hear the far deeper truth – hidden in the guise of a simple genealogy at the end of the previous parsha – that Abraham was actually completing a journey his father began.

There is a line in the book of Joshua (24:2) – we read it as part of the Haggadah on Seder night – that says that “In the past your ancestors lived beyond the Euphrates River, including Terach the father of Abraham and Nahor. They worshiped other gods.” So there was idolatry in Abraham's family background. But Genesis 11 says that it was Terach who took Abraham, not Abraham who took Terach, from Ur to go to the land of Canaan. There was no immediate and radical break between father and son.

Indeed it is hard to imagine how it could have been otherwise. Abram – Abraham's original name – means “mighty father”. Abraham himself was chosen “so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord” (Gen. 18:19) – that is, he was chosen to be a model parent. How could a child who rejected the way of his father become a father of children who would not reject his way in turn?<sup>1</sup> It makes more sense to say that Terach already had doubts about idolatry and it was he who inspired Abraham to go further, spiritually and physically. Abraham continued a journey his father had begun, thereby helping Isaac and Jacob, his son and grandson, to chart their own ways of serving God – the same God but encountered in different ways.

Which brings us back to Mark Twain. Often we begin by thinking how different we are from our parents. It takes time for us to appreciate how much they helped us become the people we are. Even when we thought we were running away, we were in fact continuing their

<sup>1</sup> Rashi (to Gen. 11:31) says it was to conceal the break between son and father that the Torah records the death of Terach before G-d's call to Abraham. However, see Ramban ad loc.

journey. Much of what we are is because of what they were. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

**DR. ERICA BROWN**

## The Torah of Leadership

**W**arren Buffet famously said, “It takes 20 years to build a reputation, and five minutes to ruin it.” Digitally, we can ruin someone's reputation even faster than that. One negative tweet, Uber rating, restaurant posting, rate my professor rant, or newspaper comment can damage someone's reputation irrevocably. There are websites today that try to manage or defend reputations to “help professionals develop and promote a truthful and positive online image through proactive reputation management strategies.”

If it were only that easy. Gossip, cancellations, and trash talk doesn't just disappear, especially in this polarizing climate. Buffet, in his quote above, puts the onus on the person rather than his or her critics. “If you think,” he says, about how quickly your reputation can change, “you'll do things differently.”

Understanding the importance of a sterling reputation is as old as the first-Jew, Abraham. One of the most astonishing and understudied encounters between Abram, as he was then called, and his neighbors, appears in this week's Torah reading, parshat Lekh Lekha. In chapter 14, Abraham found himself amidst a battle between four kings and five kings when he tried to rescue his nephew Lot. The verses are not easy to follow given the number of leaders involved and the complex geography.

All war brings confusion and collateral damage. As the battle ends, “King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine” and blessed Abram. The Jewish ritual of blessing wine and breaking bread originates with a foreign king. Abram gave a tenth of what he owned to King Melchizedek, likely as a form of tax or tribute. Then the King of Sodom, another of the warring kings, said to Abram, “Give me the persons, and take the possessions for yourself.”

When wars are over, it's time to tally up losses and split rewards. Abram, however, was not willing to take a thing. “Abram said to the king of Sodom, ‘I swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, ‘It is I who made Abram rich.’” Rashi observes that Abram was confident that God would provide him with wealth, implied in Genesis 12:2. He did not, therefore, want a human being to take the credit.

Abram wanted nothing from these skirmishes. He gave a portion of what he had without taking as much as a shoelace. He did not even take a small and

insignificant item. The Talmud (BT Hullin 89a) concludes from this that Abram's descendants would merit two commandments that involve a string or strap: the thread of sky-blue wool worn on ritual fringes and the strap of the phylacteries.

Abram, it seems, wanted to make a statement to those around him about his personal integrity as a leader and about the kind of God he served. Abram attributed his success to God alone. War to him was not about bounty, captives, or exploitation of the vulnerable. It was about mediating unfortunate obstructions to the Divine promise he received. According to the King of Sodom, Abram was within his right to take what he wanted but gave away his money instead. By not taking the loot of war, Abram was making a positive character deposit in the minds of the leaders who surrounded him. Abram was forgoing short-term gains for the long-term investment that was his reputation. When it comes to our reputations, there are no short-cuts.

Later, in Genesis 34:30, after Dina was taken and violated by Shechem, Jacob chastises his sons Simeon and Levi for creating and implementing a devious plan to punish Shechem's community: "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land..." The Hebrew expression to make one odious, *akhartem oti*, literally means to make me smell bad. A smell is invisible but can leave a highly potent signature of one's presence. The medieval Spanish commentator, Abraham ibn Ezra, explains Jacob's fears: "They will hate me as one loathes something which gives off a horrible odor." While there are many interpretations of Jacob's behavior here, one message Jacob tried to teach his sons is that our reputations matter. Even when others hurt us profoundly, we must always seek higher ground.

Abram's defense of his personal integrity as a leader brings to mind another dramatic Biblical moment. As the prophet Samuel aged and effectively retired from service, he publicly pledged his honesty.

Then Samuel said to all Israel, "I have yielded to you in all you have asked of me and have set a king over you. Henceforth the king will be your leader. As for me, I have grown old and gray -- but my sons are still with you -- and I have been your leader from my youth to this day. Here I am! Testify against me, in the presence of the LORD and in the presence of His anointed one: Whose ox have I taken, or whose ass have I taken? Whom have I defrauded or whom have I robbed? From whom have I taken a bribe to look the other way? I will return it to you." They responded, "You have not defrauded us, and you have not robbed us, and you have taken nothing from anyone." (1 Samuel 12:1-4)

One view in the Talmud (BT Nedarim 38a) is that Samuel, like Abraham, was wealthy; he did not need to rely upon the bribes and handouts of his flock.

But there is something deeper going on in this odd summative speech.

Samuel was a steward of the Israelites from his youngest years. His mother Hannah pledged him to the Temple under the high priest Eli when he was a child. As he aged, he recounted a lifetime of devotion to his people, culminating with a testament about the many storms they weathered together: "Here I am!" Despite it all. Because of it all. I am still here with you. Samuel needed his flock to affirm that after he was gone, his noble reputation would stay intact. If there had been any misunderstanding or misuse of his authority, let it be known now. The people let it be known. Samuel, they responded in unison, took nothing. He was outstanding in character and in trustworthiness.

Reputations are fragile. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks affirms this in *Essays on Ethics*, "When people associate religiosity with integrity, decency, humility, and compassion, God's name is sanctified. When they come to associate it with contempt for others and for the law, the result is a desecration of God's name."

Leaders can control many things. But they cannot control what is said about them. What they can do, as Abraham, Jacob, and Samuel teach us, is protect the reputations they already have. So, too, with us all. We must work hard. Serve. Apologize often. Compensate for error. And, most importantly, assume others have good intent. The fact that someone may not judge us favorably does not mean we should do the same. And, in the worst-case scenario, we must remember that we are not the worst mistake we have ever made. Reputations, our reputations, are built on justice and a thousand small acts of kindness. ©2022 Dr. Erica Brown and Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### **Shabbat Shalom**

"**A**nd Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all of his possessions, and Lot went next to him to the Negev." (Genesis 13:1) The portion of Lech Lecha is a kaleidoscope of intriguing and exciting sequences—from the attempted rape of Sarah in Egypt to inter-family conflict to a major war to God's mysterious covenant with Abraham. Are these disparate stories held together only by a timeline, or is there a conceptual scheme placing them in a higher context? I believe that an examination of the portion's seven sub-divisions, or *aliyot*, will provide the uniting theme as well as Israel's most important – though often overlooked – role among the nations (see Elhanan Samet's *Biblical Commentary*).

The portion opens with God's command to Abram to move to the Land of Israel: "I shall make you a great nation, I shall bless you, and I shall make your name great; you shall be a blessing. I shall bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I shall curse;

all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3).

God is here promising Abram two things: national development and a spiritual greatness that will encompass the world. Abram is presented as a world leader who will influence all the families of the earth. After all, he is already teaching his future generations "compassionate righteousness and moral justice" (Genesis 18:18-19).

The Vilna Gaon suggests that the phrase usually translated "I shall curse" (Hebrew a'or) might actually mean "I will show the light" (or is light in Hebrew). Israel is to be a light unto the nations, a kingdom of priests/teachers who bring the message of ethical monotheism to the world.

Abram desperately requires progeny for both of these mandates. And so, the barren Abram and Sarai place their hope for the future in Lot, Abram's deceased brother's son. Hence the Bible records – in the verse following the blessing and the charge – "And Abram went in accordance with the way the Lord spoke to him, and Lot went with him... And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot the son [of his brother] and all the wealth they had acquired..." (Genesis 12:4-5).

But then came the famine and the sojourn in Egypt. Our text (second aliya) highlights Egyptian exile as being fraught with both physical danger (Sarai is seized) and spiritual danger (the materialistic blandishments of Egypt). The Hebrew family survives the near-rape intact, but Egypt seems to have had a corrosive effect on Lot: "And Abram came up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that were his, and Lot next to him..." (Genesis 13:1).

This is very different from when the family first set out for Israel: then, Lot was mentioned right after Abram and Sarai (that is, before their possessions), and went with Abram physically and spiritually (ito) and not merely in physical proximity (imo), as here. At this juncture, however, the change in Lot is merely hinted at. The next aliya, which begins "And also Lot, going with Abram, had sheep, cattle and tents... And the land was not sufficient to carry both of them" (Genesis 13:5-6), leaves no room for doubt. Israel has become too small for the two of them – Abram's mission isn't materialistic enough for Lot, who has no desire to perfect the world; he wants to own it! So he leaves Abram's land and Lord in favor of the lush, Egypt-like Sodom to pursue materialism rather than spirituality, momentary vice rather than monumental vision.

The great message of Abraham's new name (earned in Genesis 17:5) is his universal mission ("Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made thee"). Hence, the second aliya concludes with "And Abram called out [to humanity] there with the name of the Lord" (Genesis 13:4), and the third aliya concludes with, "And Abram built there

an altar to the Lord" (Genesis 13:18).

The fourth aliya deals with Melchizedek (identified by the Midrash as Shem, son of Noah), the king of Jerusalem, who recognizes the universal God of peace. And the rest of the portion deals with God's covenant with Abraham – His promise of an heir who will make Abraham's progeny light the world like the stars of heaven. The structure and content of our Torah portion teach us why and how Lot cannot be considered a suitable heir for Abraham's mission.

We must wait many generations for Lot's return to the fold, in the person of his descendant Ruth (offspring of Moab, the son born to Lot and his daughter).

Apparently, God has cosmic patience, and so must we, if we are to be His emissaries. ©2022 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

There is much comment and many different interpretations regarding the first two words of the second verse of this week's Torah reading. The second word "lecha" – "for you" seems to be somewhat redundant in the construction of the sentence. Rashi therefore interprets it to mean "for your benefit and good." The Lord instructs Abraham to leave his homeland and family located in Mesopotamia, in order to achieve the greatness that is inherent within him, as the forbearer of nations and the founder of the Jewish people.

There is an alternative interpretation of the use of this second word "lecha" in the verse that has always fascinated me. Travel can be a very broadening and entertaining experience. The travel industry the world over is burgeoning as people crave to visit unseen shores and exotic locations. So why would the travel of Abraham and Sarah from Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan be considered by Jewish tradition to have been such a challenging test of Abraham's faith on the Almighty?

He simply was embarking on a travel experience and was one of many such travelers in his time and world. The answer lies in the fact that the word "lecha" implies permanence. Abraham, you are never going to return home to Mesopotamia again. You are not a visitor, a tourist, a traveler, but you are now a refugee, an alien, and a non-citizen.

And such a status in life is truly challenging and potentially dangerous. So, unlike the interpretation of Rashi, the word "lecha" has a certain ominous characteristic to it. Abraham and Sarah were to be truly challenged by this travel experience. They were not going on vacation.

Abraham's descendants, the Jewish people, have shared this test and challenge with him over our long history. We always were insecure and homeless

during the long night of our exile and dispersal. Even countries where Jews resided for centuries, such as Spain, Germany, Poland, etc., eventually no longer would accommodate our presence. We were always a positive part of any national society we found ourselves in but at the same time we were always the odd man out.

But somehow we were able to survive this enormous test and challenge because we always believed and knew that eventually we were going to go home. We prayed for it to happen and we struggled against all odds and enemies to make it happen. And in our time it has happened.

This belief of the return to Zion and Jerusalem sustained us in our darkest hours. It transferred us in our minds, though not in the minds of others, from the status of tolerated but unwanted aliens into mere visitors and sojourners who have a legitimate and permanent home elsewhere. This is the feeling I have every time I present my Israeli passport for inspection when I travel to a foreign destination. I am no longer a pariah, a refugee but merely a visitor, a tourist, perhaps even an honored guest. The children of Abraham have returned home. ©2022 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**O**ne of the most important concepts in Genesis is the idea of brit (covenant). Covenant is a contract between God and people – in the portion of Lech Lecha, between God and the founders of the Jewish People. It consists of three elements, together forming the very foundation of Judaism.

- Mission. The mission spells out in a few words the ultimate goal of Judaism. Abraham expresses that mission when he arrives in Canaan, where God has sent him, builds an altar, and calls out b'shem Hashem (in the name of the Lord), which Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides (to Genesis 12:8) explain is the code term for bringing ethical monotheism into the world (12:7–8, 13:4, 21:33).

The word that denotes this covenant is re'iyah. Re'iyah not only means seeing or empathizing but having a vision spelling out Judaism's essence. Not coincidentally, the place where Abraham builds his altar, beginning his mission, is Elon Moreh (12:6). Abraham's life reaches a pinnacle when arriving at Moriah in the Binding of Isaac narrative (22:2). The words Moreh and Moriah can be seen as associated with re'iyah.

- People. To promulgate a mission worldwide, one needs followers, people – in the Book of Genesis, children – who will keep alive the covenantal dream.

- Land. One needs a place from which the mission can be spread. Thus, right before Abraham builds the altar in Elon Moreh and calls out in God's name, God promises him, "To your seed I will give the land" (Genesis 12:7).

But Abraham, right from the start, experiences challenges. As it turns out, he travels too far south, to Egypt where each of the elements of the covenant – mission, children, and land – go awry (12:10).

- Mission. Egypt in the Bible can be called the anti-covenant. Notice, the text says that when the Egyptians saw (va'yiru) Sarah, they took her (va'tukach; Genesis 12:15). In ethical societies, one doesn't take everything one sees. Egypt of the Bible perverts the lofty goal of re'iyah.

- People. In Egypt, too, as the story unfolds, Abraham is given shefachot, which the Midrash identifies with Hagar, described later as shifchah Mitzrit (the Egyptian handmaiden), whom Abraham marries (Genesis 12:16, 16:1; Midrash Hagadol). But from that relationship comes Ishmael, who presents a serious challenge to the covenantal heirship.

- Land. Egypt, of course, is not Israel; the element of land has also been lost.

The power of Abraham, however, is that he returns; the covenant of mission, children, and land is restored.

- Mission. In the next chapter, Abraham and his family retrace their steps to Elon Moreh, where he again builds an altar and calls out in God's name (Genesis 13:4).

- People. While Abraham's life awaits twists and turns, Isaac will ultimately be born, serving as Abraham's covenantal heir, the second patriarch.

- Land. Returning to Israel, Abraham stops in the very places he had originally been (Negbah [Jerusalem]; Beit El – Ai; Shechem – Elon Moreh), reinforcing his connection to the land (Genesis 12:6–9; 13:1–4).

The lesson of these parallels is that covenants do not guarantee that the road will be smooth. After the covenant is proclaimed, there will inevitably be setbacks. But Abraham proves his spiritual mettle by righting his course, never giving up on his sacred task to bring the message of God into the world. ©2022 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**

## **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 zevach*)." The word *briti* clearly hints at *brit milah*, while the word *zevach* can be understood homiletically as "flowing (*zav*) on the eighth," another hint at *milah*. (The final letter of *zevach* 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**

## **A Sign to the Sons**

**T**he first time that we find that Hashem spoke to Avram (later Avraham) is at the beginning of this week's parasha. "And Hashem said to Avram, 'Go, for you, from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and it will be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you.'" Immediately after hearing this command from Hashem, Avram took his wife and his nephew and travelled to Canaan. Our Rabbis have many questions about this first

conversation between Hashem and Avram, both because of the nature of this conversation and because of the words that Hashem used.

Avram was tested at the age of seventy-five after he had already achieved success where he lived with his greater family. He was called upon to leave his entire family behind, except for his wife, Sarai, and his nephew, Lot, and to travel to a land which was left unspecified in Hashem's instructions. The Or HaChaim explains that Hashem spoke to Avram before He appeared to him as He would do with many future Prophets. He gives two reasons for this: (1) Hashem appeared to other Prophets so that they would know Him, but Avram already knew Hashem through his observation of the world as early as five years old, or (2) Hashem did not appear to Adam after the Creation and for ten generations, because He was unwilling to appear to those who would not accept all his commandments. When Avram accepted the first command to go from his land, only then did Hashem appear to him. With the other Prophets, they already had Avram's example to follow and most had also received the Torah and accepted the yoke of the Laws.

Our Rabbis discuss the content and the order of the instructions to leave and go to Canaan. Rashi begins with some history from the end of last week's parasha. Hashem had commanded Terach, Avram's father, to leave Ur Casdim, his birthplace and land, and travel to Canaan. We are told, "And Terach took his son, Avram, and Lot, the son of Aram, his grandson, and Sarai, his daughter-in-law, the wife of Avram, his son, and they departed with them from Ur Casdim, to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to Charan, and they settled there. The days of Terach were two-hundred, fifty years, and Terach died in Charan." Since our parasha begins with Hashem asking Avram to leave his land and his birthplace, Rashi asks why this was still part of Hashem's command to Avram. Rashi suggests that Hashem could have limited his instruction to leave only "your father's house." Ibn Ezra explains that Avram had already been instructed to leave his land and his birthplace years earlier when he was still in Ur Casdim. Only now Hashem wanted Avram to distance himself even further than those influences and separate even from his father's house and the influences found there. The Ramban disagrees with ibn Ezra, as he feels that Hashem would have instructed Avram from the beginning to leave his father's influence, as this was the key to Avram's future as a true follower of Hashem. The Ramban also disagrees that Ur Casdim was Avram's land and Avram's birthplace, as he shows that Charan, known also as Aram-Naharaim, was really Avram's birthplace and land.

Much is made of the fact that Hashem did not specify to Avram the land that would become his future home, but only told Avram to go "to the land that I will

show you.” The Bal HaTurim explains that the word “ar’e’ka, I will show you” is numerically equal to “ba’ananim, in the clouds.” He explains that Hashem led Avram to the land by means of a cloud which preceded and guided him. The Bal HaTurim explains that this was a fulfillment of the concept, “ma’asei avot siman la’banim, the actions of the fathers are a sign to their children.” Because Avram was led to Canaan by means of a cloud, the B’nei Yisrael were led by a cloud when they left Egypt with Moshe. The Or HaChaim tells us that Hashem withheld the name of the place from Avram as a test within a test to see if Avram would rush to do His Will.

The promises made to Avram were important, and they lead to many commentaries. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch justifies these promises: “Even looked at quite superficially, it is already evident that Avram was to receive back from Hashem everything that he had given up, and indeed in a considerably enhanced measure. By renouncing ‘from his land’ he gave up his nationality. But instead of having to attach himself to another one, Hashem says that he himself is to be the founder of a new one.” Hirsch goes on to explain that Hashem granted Avram civic rights and blessed him with prosperity. Hashem also informed Avram that his loss of “family ties” would be replaced with his forming a “new” family from his offspring.

The word “blessing” is used twice: once in relation to Avram’s name or person, and once in relation to other nations in the world. The Torah tells us that Avram or his name will be a blessing, and also that all the nations of the world would be blessed through Avram. Sforno explains that the blessing would be that Hashem would be happy with Avram’s actions. The Ramban focuses on the word “all,” explaining that Avram would be so important that his influence would reach throughout the world. It would not be only the nations that surrounded Avram who would be blessed through him, but all nations would turn to Avram and his descendants as the source of their blessings.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin refocuses us on the concept, “ma’asei avot siman la’banim.” He explains that we look upon the words which begin our parasha, “lech lecha, go, for you,” and these are often looked upon as the beginning of the Jewish people. The Jewish people follow in the footsteps of Avram, leaving its birthplace and land, traveling from place to place, country to country, from nation to nation, and from one governing body to another. This was the first test of Avram, a test that would be repeated by his descendants for generations before Hashem would return them to His Holy Land. But the B’nei Yisrael would also face the final test of Avram, the sacrifice of his son, Yitzchak, on the altar. This final test is even more important than the first. Through the years we have witnessed time and again where our sons have

been sacrificed because they remained loyal to serving Hashem. It is our willingness to be martyred in order to maintain our connection to Hashem that makes our lives and the lives of our children a blessing. May Hashem protect us from the evil around us, but may we be willing to withstand that evil even should His protection be withheld. May our serving of Hashem be a blessing throughout the generations. © 2022 Rabbi D. Levin

### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

"Avram took his wife Sarai, and his brother's son Lot, and all their wealth, and the people they acquired... and they came to Canaan." (Beraishis 12:5) When Hashem commanded Avram to leave his home and travel to the land He would give him, Avram gave up the position he had established for himself in Charan, having become a leader in outreach and teaching people about Hashem, the one Creator of the world. When he left, he took his nephew, Lot, who had fled Ur Kasdim with Avram and his father, Terach.

This is unusual, in that when Hashem told Avraham to leave his homeland, Avraham told his father. Since Avraham's brother Nachor didn't want to leave, but his brother Haran had died, Terach took along his grandson Lot, expecting him to aid him in his old age. When they reached Charan, they stopped, and settled there. Terach would live there another sixty years, even while Avram and Sarai moved on to Canaan.

Though Lot was Sarai's brother, we do not find him referred to as this. Rather, he is referred to as Avraham's brother's son. This is not by chance. The fact that Sarai was called his wife, not his niece, makes complete sense, as there is a much stronger and meaningful relationship with her as his spouse. For Lot, there is a similar rationale.

In halacha, there is no real consequence of being the brother of his wife, so Lot is not identified as such. The Torah isn't merely a history book, and that wouldn't matter in the story. However, as the son of Avram's brother, Lot stood to inherit him. This is a halachic relationship and that is the one that matters. And there is more.

Avram had spent his life bringing people closer to Hashem. He would continue to do so. Who could he feel a stronger obligation to than his own flesh and blood? He wanted to ensure that Lot grew up and lived a life of knowledge of Hashem. Indeed, when Og came to tell Avraham that Sarah was captured, the Sforno says he didn't know they were related, but knew they practiced the same religion.

But Lot wasn't as committed to Hashem as Avram. How could Avram get him to follow him to Canaan, where he could still have a positive influence on him, and leave his grandfather behind in Charan?

The way to Lot's heart was through his wallet, and Avram missed no chances to remind him that their relationship entitled him to inherit Avram, as at that point he had no heir.

Referring to Lot as Avram's nephew gives us an insight into how far Avram went to help his nephew. If the promise of wealth kept Lot learning about Hashem, it was worth it! Until someone appreciates Hashem on his own, it is reasonable to prompt and encourage him with things he desires, and eventually he will come close for the right reasons. Therefore, Lot is always referred to as Avram's nephew, because this was the source and catalyst for his acceptance of belief in Hashem.

*When I was younger, my grandfather would take me to get my hair cut. Each time, as I was looking in the mirror, admiring my appearance, he would comment, "And the best part is that the Tefillen (on the head) fit so much better!"*

*I would laugh to myself at this comment, knowing that the best part was how good I looked. However, as I got older, I came to appreciate his outlook, and indeed, I remember his positivity each time I put on Tefillen after a haircut and enjoy the feeling. It's the best part.*

*The way people will look at Hashem depends on how He is shown to them. If you make it a positive experience, you'll have better long-term results in helping others love Judaism. ©2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr*

#### **RABBI AVI SHAFRAN**

### **Cross-Currents**

The word "vayehi," famously, introduces something negative or unfortunate. Why, then, asks the Mei Marom (the polymath Meshullam Gross), does it introduce the pasuk stating that Avraham "owned sheep, cattle and donkeys" (Beraishis 12:16) -- the fact that our forefather had achieved great wealth?

The obvious answer, says Rav Gross, is that, to Avraham, wealth was a burden that could only negatively affect his service to Hashem. In fact, shortly thereafter, the pasuk describes how Avraham was "very laden" with livestock, silver and gold" (ibid 13:2). The word translated "laden" -- caveid -- literally means "heavy" and implies a burden.

And so, Rav Gross continues, that may explain why Avraham is described in several places (including in our parsha (ibid 12:9) as traveling southward.

Because, as Rabi Yitzchak (Bava Basra, 25b) says, one who wants to become wealthy should be yatzpin, face north, when he prays; but one who wants to become wise should be yadrim, face south.

Avraham wasn't a seeker of wealth. On the contrary, he saw it as a burden. He pined for wisdom.

Can one have both? Certainly, and Avraham did.

But, as is clear from Rabi Yitzchak's contention, one can only pursue one or the other; striving for both is futile. After all, it's impossible to face both north and south simultaneously. ©2022 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

#### **RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ Z"L**

### **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

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

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

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

When you look at another person -- particularly, a child -- realize that he is like a star. He might seem small to you. He might not appear as having accomplished very much. Gain an awareness of the great potential of each person. View each person as an entire world, as an enormous being in the cosmos.

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



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