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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

The Lord said to Abram: 'Go – from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house – to the land that I will show you.' (Gen. 12:1) These words are among the most consequential in the history of humankind. In that very moment a new faith was born, one that has lasted for two-thirds of the course of civilisation and remains young and vigorous today. Not only did Abraham give rise to what today we call Judaism. He was also the inspiration of two other religions – Christianity and Islam – both of which trace their descent, biological or spiritual, to him, and which now number among their adherents more than half the six billion people on the face of the earth. (These figures were accurate at the time of writing in August 2008, although today they would need adjusting when quoted, to account for the expanded world population.)

There was no one like Abraham, yet the Torah is exceptionally understated in its account of him. As children we learned that he was the first iconoclast, the person who, while still young, broke the idols in his father's house. But this is a Midrash, a tradition, inferred from hints in the biblical text rather than from explicit statement. In the pure text of the Torah, we are told nothing of his childhood, youth, his early days with Sarah, or any other time before the moment when God spoke these fateful words to him.

From what we do know, Abraham does not fit any conventional image of the religious hero. He is not, like Noah, the sole survivor of a world hastening to its destruction. He is not, like Moses, a lawgiver and liberator. He is not like the later prophets, people who spent their life confronting kings, wrestling with their contemporaries and "speaking truth to power."

To be sure, he is a man of exemplary virtue. He welcomes strangers and gives them food. He fights a battle on behalf of the cities of the plain in order to rescue his nephew Lot. He prays for them in one of the greatest dialogues in religious literature. He patiently waits for a child and then, when the command comes, is willing to offer him as a sacrifice, only to discover that the God of truth does not want us to sacrifice our children but to cherish them. But if we were asked to characterise him with adjectives, the words that spring to mind – gentle, kind, gracious – are not those usually associated with the founder of a new faith. They are the kind of attributes to which any of us could aspire. None of us can be an Abraham, but all of us can take him as a role-model. Perhaps that is the deepest lesson of all.

In Sincerity and Authenticity, Lionel Trilling made the following comment: Not all cultures develop the idea of the heroic. I once had occasion to observe in connection with Wordsworth that in the rabbinical literature there is no touch of the heroic idea. The rabbis, in speaking of virtue, never mention the virtue of courage, which Aristotle regarded as basic to the heroic character. The indifference of the rabbis to the idea of courage is the more remarkable in that they knew that many of their number would die for their faith. What is especially to our point is that, as ethical beings, the rabbis never see themselves – it is as if the commandment which forbade the making of images extended to their way of conceiving the personal moral existence as well.

Trilling is not quite accurate. The rabbis did speak of courage, gevurah. But he is right to say that Judaism did not have heroes in the way the Greeks and other cultures did. A hero is one convinced of his own importance. He or she is conscious of playing a part on the world stage under the admiring gaze of their contemporaries. The rabbis, said Trilling, "would have been quite ready to understand the definition of the hero as an actor and to say that, as such, he was undeserving of the attention of serious men." Abraham is the paradigm of an unheroic hero, one who (in Maimonides' lovely phrase) "does what is right because it is right" (Hilchot Teshuvah, Chapter 10, Law 2) and not for the sake of popularity or fame. If we were to define Judaism in Abrahamic terms it would be the heroism of ordinary life, being willing to live by one's convictions though all the world thinks otherwise, being true to the call of eternity, not the noise of now. Which brings us to the key phrase, the first words of God to the bearer of a new covenant: Lech Lecha. Is there, already in these two words, a hint of what was to come?

Rashi, following an ancient exegetical tradition, translates the phrase as "journey for yourself" (Rashi, Gen. 12:1). He suggests that these words really meant, "Travel for your own benefit and good. There I will make you into a great nation; here you will not have the merit of having children." Sometimes we have to give up our past in order to acquire a future. God was already teaching Abraham that what seems like a sacrifice is, in the long run, not so. Abraham was about to say goodbye

to the things that mean most to us – our land, our birthplace and our parents' homes, the places where we belong. It was a journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar, a leap into the unknown. To be able to make that leap involves trust – in Abraham's case, trust not in visible power but in the voice of the invisible God. At the end of it, however, Abraham would discover that he had achieved something he could not have done otherwise. He would give birth to a new nation whose greatness consisted precisely in the ability to live by that voice and create something new in the history of humankind. Lech Lecha therefore means more than "Go". It means, "Go for yourself."

Another midrashic interpretation takes the phrase to mean "Go with yourself" – meaning, by travelling from place to place you will extend your influence not over one land but many: When the Holy One said to Abraham, "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house . . ." what did Abraham resemble? A jar of scent with a tight-fitting lid put away in a corner so that its fragrance could not go forth. As soon as it was moved from that place and opened, its fragrance began to spread. So the Holy One said to Abraham, "Abraham, many good deeds are in you. Travel about from place to place, so that the greatness of your name will go forth in My world." (Bereishit Rabbah 39:2)

Abraham was commanded to leave his place in order to testify to the existence of a God not bounded by place – Creator and Sovereign of the entire universe. Abraham and Sarah were to be like perfume, leaving a trace of their presence wherever they went. Implicit in this Midrash is the idea that the fate of the first Jews already prefigured that of their descendants. They were scattered throughout the world in order to spread knowledge of God throughout the world. Unusually, exile is seen here not as punishment but as a necessary corollary of a faith that sees God everywhere. 'Lech lecha' means "Go with yourself" – your beliefs, your way of life, your faith.

A third interpretation, this time more mystical, takes the phrase to mean, "Go to yourself." The Jewish journey, said R. David of Lelov, is a journey to the root of the soul. "Only in the holy land," said R. Ephraim Landschutz, "can a Jew find the source of his or her being." R. Zushya of Hanipol said, "When I get to heaven, they will not ask me, Zushya, why were you not Moses? They will ask me, 'Zushya, why were you not Zushya?'" Abraham was being asked to leave behind all the things that make us someone else – for it is only by taking a long and lonely journey that we discover who we truly are. "Go to yourself."

There is, however, a fourth interpretation: "Go by yourself." Only a person willing to stand alone, singular and unique can worship the God who is alone, singular and unique. Only one able to leave behind the natural sources of identity can encounter God who stands above and beyond nature. A journey into the unknown is one of the greatest possible expressions of freedom. God wanted Abraham and his children to be a living example of what it is to serve the God of freedom, in freedom, for the sake of freedom. What does this mean?

Alasdair Macintyre once pointed out that there are two kinds of atheist: one who does not believe in God, and one for whom atheism itself is a kind of religion. Of the latter, some of the greatest examples were (lapsed, converted, or non-believing) Jews – most famously, Spinoza, Marx, and Freud. Instead of merely denying the truths of Judaism, they set out to provide systematic alternatives.

Fundamental to the Torah are two freedoms: the freedom of God and the freedom of human beings. God is not, in Judaism, an impersonal force. He acts (in creation, revelation, and redemption) on the basis not of necessity but of choice. In choosing to make humanity in His own image He endowed us, too, with choice. There is no such thing as fate or predestination. "I call heaven and earth to witness," said Moses, "that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life."

It was this that Spinoza, Marx, and Freud set out to challenge. Each sought to show that we are not free. Man is a predictable animal. Our nature and character are subject to quasi-scientific laws. There is a science of human behaviour as there is a science of atoms. History, personal or collective, is a form of inevitability. We are what we are because we could not be otherwise. Against this, Judaism is a living protest. Abraham and his children were summoned to a life of radical freedom – and it is this that is at the heart of God's threefold call.

Marx said that man is a product of social forces, themselves shaped by the interests of the ruling class, the owners of property of which the most significant is land. Therefore God said to Abraham, "Leave your land."

Spinoza said that humans are made by innate instincts and biological drives (nowadays this is called genetic determinism) given by birth. Therefore God said to Abraham: Leave the circumstances of your birth.

Freud said that we are the way we are because of the traumas of childhood, the influence of our early years, our relationships and rivalries with our parents, especially our father. Therefore, God said to Abraham: Leave your father's house.

Lech Lecha means: Leave behind you all that makes human beings predictable, unfree, able to blame others and evade responsibility. Abraham's children were summoned to be the people that defied the laws of nature because they refused to define themselves as the products of nature (Nietzsche understood this aspect of Judaism particularly well). That is not to say that economic or biological or psychological forces have no part to play in human behaviour. They do. But with sufficient imagination, determination, discipline and courage we can rise above them. Abraham did. So, at

most times, did his children.

Those who live within the laws of history are subject to the laws of history. Whatever is natural, said Maimonides, is subject to disintegration and decay. That is what has happened to virtually every civilisation that has appeared on the world's stage. Abraham, however, was to become the father of an am olam, an eternal people that would neither disintegrate nor decay. Therefore, it had to be a people willing to stand outside the laws of nature. What for other nations are natural – land, home, family – in Judaism are subjects of religious command. They must be striven for. They involve a journey. They are not given at the outset, nor can they be taken for granted. Abraham was to leave behind the things that make most people and peoples what they are, and lay the foundations for a land, a Jewish home, and a family structure responsive not to economic forces, biological drives, and psychological conflicts but to the word and will of God. Lech Lecha in this sense means being prepared to take an often-lonely journey: "Go by yourself."

To be Jewish, to be a child of Abraham, is to have the courage to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, whatever the idols and whichever the age. In an era of polytheism, that meant seeing the universe as the product of a single creative will – and therefore not meaningless but coherent, meaningful.

In an era of slavery, it meant refusing to accept the status quo in the name of God, instead challenging it in the name of God. When power was worshipped, it meant constructing a society that cared for the powerless: the widow, orphan, and stranger. During centuries in which the mass of humankind was sunk in ignorance, it meant honouring education as the key to human dignity and creating schools to provide universal literacy. When war was the test of humanity, it meant striving for peace. In ages of radical individualism like today, it means knowing that we are not what we own but what we share; not what we buy but what we give; that there is something higher than appetite and desire – namely the call that comes to us, as it came to Abraham, from outside ourselves, summoning us to make a contribution to the world.

The (non-Jewish) journalist Andrew Marr once wrote that Jews "really have been different; they have enriched the world and challenged it" (Andrew Marr, The Observer, 14 May 2000). It is that courage to travel alone if necessary, to be different, to swim against the tide, to speak in an age of relativism of the absolutes of human dignity under the sovereignty of God, that was born in the words Lech Lecha. To be a Jew is to be willing to hear the still, small voice of eternity urging us to travel, move, go on ahead, continuing Abraham's journey toward that unknown destination at the far horizon of hope. First we hear of how he began his journey. Then we step forward to find our own destiny. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* *© 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Now I know that you are a beautiful woman, and when the Egyptians will see you, they will say this is his wife and they will kill me, and you they will keep alive. Please say you are my sister, that they will be good to me for your sake and that my soul may live because of you." (Genesis 12:11–12) Twice repeated tales in the Torah always alert our interpretive, intellectual faculties.

Famine in the Promised Land forces Abraham and Sarah to head for Egypt. Abraham suddenly understands that Sarah's beauty spells danger. Abraham's fears prove correct. Sarah is taken to the royal household and her brother receives gifts of cattle and slaves. Before she joins the harem, a plague strikes Pharaoh's court, arousing suspicion that this woman must be Abraham's wife, not his sister. Realizing how close he has come to violating another man's wife, Pharaoh sends Abraham away, flocks and all.

The similarity between the experiences of Abraham and those of his son in Parashat Toledot, when Isaac and Rebecca head for Gerar because of famine, illustrates the Torah's exegetical principle that maasei avot siman lebanim (what happens to the parents is a sign of what will happen to the children). However, this principle is not meant for one or two generations alone; the seminal occurrences of the patriarchs are to reverberate in the experiences of their descendants throughout Jewish history.

This is a major principle in the various biblical interpretations of Nahmanides, who sees continuous allusions to the events of subsequent Jewish history in all of the stories of the Bible.

In the case of Abram and Sarai in Egypt, Nahmanides maintains that in leaving the land of Israel, even because of famine, "the first Hebrew couple committed a sin, albeit inadvertently." Continues Nahmanides, it is because of this sin that their descendants will be enslaved in Egypt. I would suggest that a careful reading of the Bible itself will reveal an even deeper connection between the earlier experience of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt and the later Jewish enslavement by the Egyptians with major lessons to be learned by us today. Let us review the parallelism.

Both Abraham and his descendant Jacob leave Israel for Egypt because of a famine. With Abraham, this departure leads to Sarah's enslavement in Pharaoh's harem. With Jacob, this departure eventually leads to the enslavement of the Jews.

Abraham fears that Pharaoh will kill him and allow Sarah to live in order to take her as his wife. When Jacob's descendants multiply in Egypt, Pharaoh decrees that all male Jewish babies be cast into the Nile to drown while the female babies will be allowed to live.

Abraham finds a way out of danger through his 'sister,' Sarah. Moses is saved by his sister Miriam, when she hides him among the reeds and the bulrushes. It is not an exaggeration to say that the redemption of the Jewish people began with a sister.

Pharaoh takes Sarah into his household, his harem, where he intends to enslave her. Pharaoh takes the Jewish people into his home, Egypt, where he enslaves them.

To conclude Sarah's enslavement before she is seriously 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.

Pharaoh sends Abraham away with gifts and material wealth, and when Pharaoh finally lets the Israelites out of Egypt the former slaves carry off vessels of gold and silver.

From a literary perspective, Abraham in Egypt certainly foreshadows the slavery of the Jews. If we are to find an ethical teaching in Abraham's Egyptian sojourn, a certain flaw in Abraham's conduct (as Nahmanides maintains), 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 Abraham's leaving the land of Israel, even for reasons of famine, as an inadvertent transgression. In light of the events which 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 child of Abraham and Sarah must never leave God's holy and promised land of Israel. If it is seemingly 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 is a leitmotif which repeats itself throughout the Bible.

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

Apparently, in addition to saving his life, Abraham anticipates that Pharaoh will also give him gifts once the beautiful Sarah is harem bound. Even if the profit he reaps was only a post facto dividend, his choice of words conveys the notion that Sarah is being used to further Abraham's ends.

I believe the Bible is teaching us that here, too, Abraham sinned inadvertently.

Our relationships, even between husband and wife, must be devoid of any of the subtle ways used in taking advantage of one another, even if it is not done intentionally. Often, 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 himself. Using someone else as a means to our own ends, merely in order to fulfill our goals, is a subtle form of slavery. This includes one's spouse. The broadest meaning of slavery is to use another person for one's own purposes as a means to further one's own end. This can be done even while speaking softly and in a gentleman-like way. In Martin Buber's terms, people must be seen as subjects, not as objects. Our relationships must be 'I-thou' rather than 'I-it.'

From this perspective, the parallelism in language between this first Egyptian experience of Abraham and Sarah and the seminal Egyptian experience of their descendants in the book of Exodus conveys two crucial lessons. First of all, the children 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 of security and respectability, only to be enlisted in Pharaoh's slave-based systematic design which ultimately robbed them of their elementary rights to freedom and life itself.

Second of all, the children of Abraham and Sarah must have seared into their consciousness the fundamental evil which is slavery in any and all of its forms. "You must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." 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? *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinBereshit.* *© 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"L

Wein Online

Rashi comments that the Lord assured Avraham that leaving his home and family in Aram and heading to a then unknown destination would somehow be to his benefit and ultimate good. Even though this may appear strange to the casual observer – leaving the known and secure and heading out to wander to an unknown destination – the ways of the Lord are inscrutable and often counter-intuitive to human logic.

The purpose of Avraham's wandering journey is to reach the Land of Israel and to claim it for his descendants. For only in the Land of Israel will Avraham find personal fulfillment and realize his true spiritual, moral and holy potential. But while in Aram and Charan, Avraham and Sarah did good work, spreading the idea of monotheism and teaching the basic system of morality that is the core of the Torah's value system. Many people

were influenced by them and became followers of monotheism and began to worship only the one true God.

So, why not leave Avraham and Sarah in Aram to continue their good work? Why send them off to the Land of Israel, then inhabited by the fierce and pagan Canaanite nation, to a very uncertain and perilous situation? And in the Land of Israel, the wicked, powerful and influential cities of Sodom are present. Seemingly Avraham and Sarah can accomplish much more by remaining in Aram than by travelling to the Land of Israel. And because of this type of human thinking, Avraham has to rely on the Lord's counter-intuitive logic, so to speak, and unhesitatingly embark on this dangerous journey that will eventually change all of human history.

What is clear from all of this is that the fulfillment of Jewish destiny and influence, of the holy self-actualization of the Jewish people can only be achieved in the Land of Israel. The obstacles that the Land of Israel itself raises to this self-actualization are many and profound, but the actions of our forbearers remain as the guideposts for all future Jewish generations. If we look around at the Jewish world today the only significant demographic growth of Jews the world over, is in the Land of Israel. The millennia-long exile and the Diaspora generally is shutting down, whether from external pressures or inner weakness. Only in the Land of Israel will the Jewish people find their soul and destiny.

And, just as in the time of Avraham and Sarah, the Land of Israel is plagued with dangers, problems and fraught with apparent peril. There is still a touch of Sodom present there and the heirs of the Canaanites are in the land. Yet just as the Lord told Avraham many thousands of years ago, only there will you become great and blessed – blessed for yourself and for all of humankind. The opportunity to live a truly Jewish life and to help build a kingdom of priests and a holy nation is pretty much reserved to those who today live in the Land of Israel. The future of the Jewish people lies today in Chevron and not in Charan. *© 2013 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"The ministers of Pharaoh saw her, and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken to Pharaoh's palace." (Beraishis 12:15) Avraham Avinu didn't live the easiest of lives. He was tested from the time he was born, from when he was hidden away, unable to even see the sun or moon until he was thirteen years old, through being locked in a dungeon for years, having to leave his home, and enduring famines in the land where Hashem promised he would be successful. Now, his wife was taken from him and brought before Pharaoh to be his wife.

Like the others, Avraham passed the test, and thankfully, Hashem ended it quickly, but there is a subtle message here which could easily be overlooked. Avraham knew his wife was beautiful, so he hid her in a trunk. When the customs officials opened the box and saw her, they were in awe of her beauty. They said to each other, "Such a woman is fit for the king," and that's how she ended up being brought to the palace.

Rashi gleans the details from the phrasing of the posuk. The syntax indicates they didn't speak to Pharaoh directly and extoll Sarah's virtues. "El Pharaoh" indicates that they were speaking amongst themselves, and estimating that a woman of such beauty was fit for none less than the Pharaoh himself.

This means the catalyst for Sarah's kidnap and transport to the palace - as well as all the great afflictions that befell Pharaoh and his people on Sarah's behalf - was that people were talking about her. It wasn't an ayin hara, an evil eye, but rather, simple prattling and "harmless discussion" about her beauty, which led to her being abducted. At that point, Hashem protected her, and her husband Avraham, by giving Pharaoh painful punishment.

The near-hidden message here is that we should watch our mouths. Not only should we avoid speaking negatively, but even things which are just unnecessary can lead to great damage and harm. These men knew Sarah was out of their league, and none could hope to marry her (see also Malbim on this subject.) There should have been no reason for them to speak about her. But since they professed to be connoisseurs of feminine beauty, they wagged their tongues and pontificated. This led to nothing but trouble.

There is a posuk in Iyov (31:1) which states, "I have made a covenant with my eyes, why should I think about a maiden?" There, he says that not only does he not gaze upon married women, but even unmarried women, which would be permissible, he does not allow himself. Some commentaries say because, at some point, she will get married, but others say it's a slippery slope. What business do you have to look?

When we get into the habit of looking at things which aren't relevant to us, we will think about them and likely comment on them. This can bring about so much evil for ourselves and others. Instead, we should be like Iyov and Avraham, who focused only on what they had, not others. They didn't look, observe, or get involved in things that didn't concern them. That covenant is what protected Avraham, and can protect us all.

R' Shimon of Yaroslav lived to a ripe old age. When asked the secret of his longevity he replied:

"Everything Hashem does is good. However, when things happen to people that they consider bad, they question Him and say that it was unfair, or should not have happened. He therefore has to take them to the Olam HaEmes, the World of Truth of the next world, to

show them why what He did was not only just, but good and necessary.

I, on the other hand, am content with whatever Hashem does to me, because I know that all He does is for good. Since He has nothing to prove to me, He has no need to bring me to the next world just yet." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Reflections

When, as they approach Egypt, Avram asks Sarai to pretend she is his sister, he explains "so that it will be good for me and I will remain alive because of you." (Beraishis, 12:13)

Rashi's comment on the words "it will be good for me" " "so that they [the Egyptians] will give me gifts" " puzzled me, as they surely have many, for years. Avram, who later in the parshah (14:23) spurned even a shoelace from the king of Sdom, is concerned with gifts?

An intriguing understanding of Rashi's words may be suggested based on what Shlomo HaMelech, in Mishlei (15:27), teaches us: "He who who hates gifts will live."

It may be that the greatest expression of that attitude isn't only "in theory," in hating the idea of gifts, but in actual practice " namely, in one's attitude toward an actual proffered gift that helps ensure life.

And so, perhaps Avram wanted gifts to be offered to him, so that he could "hate" the fact that he was offered them... with the result being that, as he in fact continues, "I will remain alive..." " echoing Shlomo HaMelech's words.

Interestingly, the concept of shunning gifts as bolstering life is reflected in a snippet from a 1960s folk song: "Some people never get, some never give; / Some people never die and some never live."

There is, Chazal teach us, "chachmah bagoyim," wisdom among the nations. *© 2026 Rabbi A. Shafran*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Circumcision (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 *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 PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

God told Avram, "Leave...and I will make your name great..." (Bereishis 12:1-2). Wait, wasn't having a name the problem with the people who built Migdal Bavel (Tower of Bavel)?

"They said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name...' God said, '[They are] one people, and they all have one language, and this is what they have commenced to do?'" (Bereishis 12:4, 6)

The difference is subtle but important. God didn't say anything about making a name for Avraham, as the people of the tower planned to do for themselves. God only promised to make the name that Avraham already had bigger, greater. It's an important difference.

People often talk about making a name for themselves in this world. Similarly, they speak about leaving their mark on history. They seem to have this fear of being forgotten after death or overlooked while still living. Having a name for themselves becomes a form of self-validation. It is obviously not a foreign idea. The mishnah in Pirkei Avos addresses it: "If one acquires a good name, he has acquired something for himself." (Pirkei Avos 2:5)

"Rebi Shimon says: There are three crowns: the

crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty, but the crown of a good name supersedes them all." (Pirkei Avos 4:13)

This, of course, is not talking about the name your parents give you at birth, which, the Arizal says, is a function of Ruach HaKodesh -- Divine Inspiration (Sha'ar HaGilgulim). Parents may choose the Jewish names of their children, but it is Hashgochah Pratis that arranges it, in one way or another, for them to arrive at their choice. This shows that Jewish names are not random or mere convention, but some kind of description of the spiritual element of the person.

In fact, inherent in the spelling of the word is a nice insight. The same letters of "shem -- name," Shin-Mem, also spell "shum -- there," as in, "over there." A name is a way to "locate" someone, not just in space and time, but in life itself. Hebrew words are comprised of Hebrew letters, each of which expresses a particular concept. We may not always know how, but a Hebrew name "locates" a person spiritually, hinting at their spiritual potential that may not yet have been realized.

Now, when most people talk about making a name for themselves, it usually means one they think is important. They think about doing something that impresses others and will draw attention to them and what they have done...something that is beyond ordinary so that people they respect will respect them too. It has little to do with their "personal" name, the one that may describe the uniqueness of their soul, and more to do with what other people admire. That's what the people of Migdal Bavel had in mind when they initiated their ambitious project.

Clearly, though, it was not a name that the one they needed to impress the most, God Himself, admired. On the contrary, not only did God have no interest in making their acquired name great, He didn't want any of it to actually happen and promptly dismantled the apparatus they had built to achieve it. And He has done the same to many similar others throughout history.

Therefore, when God promised to make Avraham's name great, He obviously referred to his real name, not the one he gave himself but the one he grew into by becoming Avraham Avinu. And by God Himself adding a Heh to Avram, a Heh to Sarai, and later revealing the Yud in Pinchas' name, God made it clear that they had truly made their name for themselves, earning it by growing into it through their service of God.

Someone once told me that he had known his Hebrew name since his days in a Conservative cheder. Being secular, he rarely ever used it, but on the few occasions he had to, he would cringe upon hearing it. He just didn't like the name he had been given, but he never used it enough to want to change it.

Many years later, he unexpectedly found his way to Torah Judaism and even to a yeshivah to learn Torah full time. He had still gone by his English name, but one of his Gemara rebis insisted on calling his students by their Hebrew names, which he begrudgingly divulged. His rebi smiled upon hearing it said, "It suits you."

It took a little time getting used to being called by his Hebrew name, but eventually he started to relate more to his given Hebrew name than his English one, and went by it. He had forgotten how he had once felt about his name and, instead, started to identify with the Biblical character of the same name. The more he did, the more he felt at home with himself and, today, being called by his English name carries the original effect that earlier had been attached to his Hebrew name.

The Arizal says (Sha'ar HaGilgulim) that when a person dies, angels come to his grave and ask him his name. If the deceased can correctly answer the question, then they are saved from a difficult transition to the next world. If not, they learn their correct name the hard way.

But, the Arizal explained, it is not the name your parents gave you at birth that they ask for. Because everyone remembers that. It is the name of their yetzer hara, of their personal weakness the person had reincarnated to rectify. Knowing that name means the person worked on themselves during their lifetime, and therefore they do not have to suffer much more in the grave. Not knowing the name means the person passed up personal rectification for the pleasures of the previous world and does not have to pass a very unpleasant "make-up exam" after death.

But part of knowing that name is knowing your soul's name. Because it is only by understanding who you are supposed to be that you can recognize when you have become something else. And God only builds relationships with real people, not imitation ones, and that is one of the first and most important messages we learn from the first few lines of this week's parsha. *© 2026 P. Winston and torah.org*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Dust, Stars and Sand

When Hashem told Avram that he was to move his family to the land that would eventually become the land of Israel, He made several promises to Avram, among which was the promise of many children. In the first sentences of the parasha, we are told: “I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.” And this is not the only time that Hashem promised many descendants to Avram. We find at the end of the next chapter, that Hashem said to Avram, “Raise your eyes and look out from where you are: northward, southward, eastward, and westward. For all the land that you see, to you will I give it and to your descendants forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring, too, can be counted.”

Several chapters later, Hashem repeated the

promise of many descendants after Avram was concerned that his servant, Eliezer, would be the one who would inherit him. "And Avram said, 'My Hashem, Elokim, what can You give me being that I go childless, and the steward of my house is the Damascan Eliezer?' Then Avram said, 'See, to me You have given no offspring; and see, my steward inherits me.' Suddenly, the word of Hashem came to him saying, 'That one will not inherit you; only the one who shall come forth from within you shall inherit you.' And He took him outside and said, 'Gaze now toward the Heavens, and count the stars if you are able to count them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your offspring be!'"

At the end of next week's parasha, Vayeira, after the almost sacrifice of Yitzchak, Hashem, once again, made a promise of many descendants to Avram. "By Myself I swear – the word of Hashem – that because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only one, that I shall surely bless you and surely increase your offspring like the stars of the heavens and like the sand on the seashore; and your offspring shall inherit the gate of its enemy. And all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your offspring, because you have listened to My voice."

Here we see that there were three comparable passages in the Torah in which Hashem promised Avram that he would have many offspring. Each passage chose a different idiom for its message: dust, stars, and sand of the seashore. The question we must ask is what is the specific lesson of each promise, and is there any message concerning the order in which each idiom was introduced? The Torah begins with Hashem's promise, "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth." HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the word here used for counting is from "manah," which is connected to the negative term ending with the letter ayin, which connotates withdrawing from, denying or refusing. This indicates that there was a negative associated with the dust of the earth. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin indicates that "dust of the earth" only specified numbers, but not quality. This had an effect on the next conversation between Avram and Hashem.

Avram told Hashem, "V'anochi holeich ariri, I go childless." This statement can be understood in many ways. HaRav Sorotzkin quotes a Midrashic conversation in which Avram said to Hashem that he was not concerned with the numbers of children he would have, but with the quality of his offspring. The second most righteous man of his generation was Shem (One of Noach's sons), who was promised many children, however among them were primarily evil men. Avram was saying to Hashem that if his children were not righteous, then he would prefer to "go childless." Hashem took him outside and told him to gaze at the stars, saying that his children would give light to the world, the light of Torah.

The Meshech Chochmah's approach is different. He explains that Hashem "took him out of his astrological boundaries and limitations, which had determined that Avram was incapable of fathering children." Hashem elevated Avram to Avraham, above mazal, so that he would become capable of offspring. That is why all of Israel is above astrology, as their destiny was placed into Hashem's hands directly. That is not to say that mazal does not have an effect on the individual (one is affected by the month in which he is born), but the individual is capable of using Torah values to rise above any effect that might negatively influence his behavior.

The idiom of the dust indicated only quantity, while the idiom of the stars indicated quality. What do the sands of the seashore indicate? After the Akeidah (Binding of Yitzchak), Avraham was praised for obeying Hashem's command, a command that he could not possibly have understood logically or even theoretically. Avraham was promised the sand of the seashore for many different reasons. According to HaAmek Davar, the sands of the seashore have a quality of joining together for strength, a quality that protects and strengthens our unity. But there is another aspect of the sand that has not been discussed. The sand along the shore faces many challenges; when a storm comes, much of the sand can disappear, drawn into the ocean and spread around the world. Of course, the sand will eventually return to its shore, but in the meantime, it can be anywhere.

HaRav Sorotzkin speaks of the progression from the first stage promise of "like the dust" to the second stage promise of "like the stars." Avraham was not satisfied with quantity, but required quality. Hashem added the sands of the seashore as another step, that even if they were scattered around the world, they would remain strong, and they would also return in great strength if they followed His teachings. Our focus also matters; when we look at the land, the dust, we think of our material wealth through our crops. This was our livelihood, and when our livelihood becomes our focus, we can lose ourselves in our demand for more money. When we then step outside to look up and see the stars, we focus on elevating ourselves to be more like the stars and spread the light of Torah throughout the world by our example. When we are spread around the world like the sands of the seashore, our focus must be on our strength and our protection based on our adherence to Hashem's Torah, which will insure our safe and complete return to our land.

May we all choose to emulate the stars by studying Torah, observing its laws, and spreading its Truth through our actions and our teachings. *© 2026 Rabbi D. Levin*



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