

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

So familiar are we with the story of Abraham that we do not always stop to think about what a strange turn it is in the biblical narrative. If we fail to understand this, though, we may fail to understand the very nature of Jewish identity itself.

Here is the problem: Until now the Torah has been concerned with humanity as a whole. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel are human archetypes. The former represent the tensions between husband and wife, the latter the rivalry between siblings. Both are stories about individuals and both end tragically, the first with paradise lost, the second with bloodshed, fratricide and death.

Then comes another pair of stories -- the Flood and the building of Babel -- this time about society as a whole. Each is about the tension between freedom and order. The Flood is about a world where freedom (violence, lawlessness, "everyone doing what was right in their own eyes") destroys order. Babel is about a world where order (the imperialist imposition of a single language on conquered peoples) destroys freedom.

All four narratives are about the human condition as such. Their message is universal and eternal, as befits a book about God who is universal and eternal. God as He appears in the first eleven chapters of Genesis is the God who created the universe, made all humanity in His image, blessed the first humans, and who -- after the Flood -- made a covenant with all humankind. The God of the universe is the universal God.

Why then does the entire story shift in Genesis 12? From here onward it is no longer about humanity as a whole but about one man (Abraham), one woman (Sarah), and their children, who -- by the time of the book of Exodus -- have become a large and significant people, but still no more than one nation among many.

What is happening here? Does God lose interest in everyone else? That surely cannot be the case. At the end of Genesis, Joseph says to his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Gen 50:20)

It may be that the phrase "many lives" means no more than the lives of his own family (so Targum Yonatan understands it). But the plain sense of the phrase *am rav*, "a great people," suggests Egypt. Not

until Exodus are the Israelites called *am*, a people. Joseph is saying that God sent him not merely to save his family from famine, but also the Egyptian people.

That too is the point of the book of Jonah. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, the Assyrian city, to persuade the people to repent and thus avoid their own destruction. In its closing words God says to the prophet: "Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left?" (Jonah 4:11, and see Malbim ad loc.)

God is concerned not only with Israel but with the Assyrians, despite the fact that they would become Israel's enemies, eventually conquering the northern kingdom of Israel itself.

Amos famously says that God not only brought the Israelites from Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir (Amos 9:7). Isaiah even prophesies a time when the Egyptians will worship God, and He will rescue them from oppression as he once rescued Israel (Isaiah 19:20-21). So it is not that God loses interest in humanity as a whole. He feeds the world. He sustains all life. He is involved in the history of all nations. He is the God of all people. Why then the narrowing of focus from the universal human condition to the story of one family?

The philosopher Avishai Margalit, in his book *The Ethics of Memory*, talks about two ways of thinking: "i.e." and "e.g." The former speaks of general principles, the latter of compelling examples. It's one thing to talk about general principles of leadership, for instance -- think ahead, motivate, set clear goals and so on. It's another thing altogether to tell the story of actual leaders, the ones who succeeded, the role-models. It is their lives, their careers, their examples, that illustrate the general principles and how they work in practice.

Principles are important. They set the parameters. They define the subject. But without vivid examples, principles are often too vague to instruct and inspire. Try explaining the general principles of Impressionism to someone who knows nothing about art, without showing them an Impressionist painting. They may understand the words you use, but these will mean nothing until you show them an example.

That, it seems, is what the Torah is doing when it shifts focus from humanity as a whole to Abraham in particular. The story of humanity from Adam to Noah tells us that people do not naturally live as God would wish

them to live. They eat forbidden fruit and kill one another. So after the Flood, God becomes not only a Creator but also a teacher. He instructs humanity, and does so in two ways: i.e. and e.g. He sets out general rules -- the covenant with Noah -- and then He chooses an example, Abraham and his family. They are to become role-models, compelling examples, of what it means to live closely and faithfully in the presence of God, not for their sake alone but for the sake of humanity as a whole.

That is why five times in Genesis the patriarchs are told: "Through you all the families, or all the nations, of the earth will be blessed." (Gen. 12:2, Gen. 18:18, Gen. 22:18, Gen. 26:4, Gen. 28:14)

And people recognise this. In Genesis, Malkitzedek says about Abraham, "Praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand" (Gen. 14:20). Avimelech, king of Gerar, says about him, "God is with you in everything you do" (Gen. 21:22). The Hittites say to him, "You are a prince of God in our midst" (Gen. 23:6). Abraham is recognised as a man of God by his contemporaries, even though they are not a part of his specific covenant.

The same is true of Joseph, the only member of Abraham's family in Genesis whose life among the gentiles is described in detail. He is constantly reminding those with whom he interacts about God.

When Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him he says: "How could I do such a great wrong? It would be a sin before God!" (Gen. 39:9)

To the butler and baker, whose dreams he is about to explain, Joseph says: "Interpretations belong to God." (Gen. 40:8)

When he is brought before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, he says: "God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires." (Gen. 41:16)

Pharaoh himself says of Joseph: "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" (Gen. 41:38)

Jews are not called on to be Jews for the sake of Jews alone. They are called on to be a living, vivid, persuasive example of what it is to live by the will of God, so that others too come to recognise God and serve Him, each in their own way, within the parameters of the general principles of the covenant with Noah. The laws of Noah are the "i.e.". The history of the Jews is the "e.g.".

Jews are not called on to convert the world to Judaism. There are other ways of serving God. Malkitzedek, Abraham's contemporary, is called, "a Priest of God Most High" (Gen. 14:18).

Malachi says a day will come when God's name "will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets" (Mal. 1:11). The prophets foresee a day when "God will be King over all the earth" (Zechariah 14:9) without everyone converting to Judaism.

We are not called on to convert humanity but we

are called on to inspire humanity by being compelling role-models of what it is to live, humbly, modestly but unshakably in the presence of God, as His servants, His witnesses, His ambassadors -- and this, not for our sake but for the sake of humanity as a whole.

It sometimes seems to me that we are in danger of forgetting this. To many Jews, we are merely one ethnic group among many, Israel is one nation-state among many, and God is something we talk about only among ourselves if at all. There was recently a television documentary about one British Jewish community. A non-Jewish journalist, reviewing the programme, remarked on what seemed to her a strange fact that the Jews she encountered never seemed to talk about their relationship with God. Instead they talked about their relationship with other Jews. That too is a way of forgetting who we are and why.

To be a Jew is to be one of God's ambassadors to the world, for the sake of being a blessing to the world, and that necessarily means engaging with the world, acting in such a way as to inspire others as Abraham and Joseph inspired their contemporaries. That is the challenge to which Abraham was summoned at the beginning of this week's Parsha.

It remains our challenge today. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“Now the Lord said unto Abram, get out of your country, and from your kindred place, and from your fathers house, unto the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.” (Genesis 12:1–2) In these words we have the first of Abraham's ten tests – the difficult divine demand that the first Jew leave hearth and home and follow God into a strange and unknown land. In return, there is the divine promise of ultimate national greatness and international leadership. But why does God single out Abraham?

At this fateful moment, the Torah seemingly takes Abraham's faith and religious quest for granted without providing a clue as to how, where and why this particular nomad is worthy of divine trust and blessing. In the closing verses of Noach, we read about his genealogy, the names of his father, brother, nephew and spouse. We are provided with dry facts, travelogue locations on a map, ages at time of death. But there is nothing substantive telling us how the initiator and prophet of ethical monotheism arrived at the point where he even had a relationship with God. Is this the first time God speaks to him? And if it is, what makes the Divine believe that Abraham would heed His call?

What seems to be absent from the text is made

up for in a charming and famous midrash which identifies Abraham's father, Terah, not only as an idolator, but also as a wealthy businessman who actually trafficked in idols. His son Abram discovered the God of the universe by his own faculties of reason at a very young age.¹ When Terah had to go on a business trip, he left his young son Abram in charge of the idols store. The proprietor returned to find all of his idols but one smashed to smithereens. Abram explained that a woman had brought food for her favorite idol, whereupon all of the other idols fought over the sumptuous dish. The strongest one was the victor, having vanquished all the others. When Terah expressed skepticism, Abram mocked his father's belief by proving to him that even he was aware of the limitations of the works of his hands.

Terah's shop was not some fly-by-night affair rented in temporary quarters near the busiest section in town to get the crowd before the holidays. It was rather a thriving center for the idol arts – more like the luminescent chambers in any large museum with spotlights and acres of space to dramatize the repose of the idols and to explain the philosophy of idolatry. Abraham's action was not a mere childish prank. It was a revolutionary stroke which changed the way humanity perceived its own reality and the reality of the universe for all subsequent generations. In this midrash, Terah is seen as a primitive representative of an outmoded religion, whose iconoclast, revolutionary son broke with his father to create a new faith commitment which would ultimately redeem the world. 'Get out of your father's house,' says God to the 'born again' Abraham.

But what if there is another way of looking at Terah more in accord with the biblical text itself? What if Terah had discovered God first – and so Abram was not so much a path breaker as he was a path follower? Perhaps Abraham was not so much a rebellious son as he was a respectful son, who continued and built upon the road laid out for him by his father?

After all, there is every reason to believe that when God tells Abraham to go forth from his country, his birthplace, to a land that God will reveal, God is communicating to a man who was already in an advanced state of God consciousness, a mind-set that was most probably based on a religious awareness first glimpsed at home. Terah himself may at one time have been a believer in idol power but may slowly have turned to the One God while Abraham was yet a very young lad, or even before Abraham was born. I suspect that a subtle clue testifying to the correctness of this position is to be found in an otherwise completely superfluous verse, especially when we remember that the Torah is not in the practice of providing insignificant travelogues.

"Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had

come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran." (Genesis 14:18–20)

Why is it that Terah sets out for Canaan, the very place where Abraham himself ends up at the relatively advanced age of seventy-five at the behest of a call from God? Could Abraham have been completing the journey his father had begun decades earlier? And what was special about Canaan? Why would Terah have wished to journey there and why does the Torah believe the journey significant enough to be recorded even though Terah never made it to Canaan?

Further on in this parasha, Abram wages a successful war against four despotic kings in order to save his nephew Lot, who had been taken captive by them. The text then cites three enigmatic verses, which record that Malkizedek, the King of Shalem, a priest of God on High, greets Abram with bread and wine, and blesses him: "Blessed be Abram to God on High, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be God on High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." (Genesis 14:19–20)

Abram then gives Malkizedek a tribute of one tenth of his spoils. Now the city of Shalem, JeruSalem, was the capital city of Canaan – and this is the first time it is mentioned in the Bible. Malkizedek literally means the King of Righteousness, and Jerusalem is biblically known as the City of Righteousness [Isaiah 1:26]. From whence did this Malkizedek, apparently older than Abram, hear of God on High (El Elyon)? Nahmanides maintains that from the very beginning of the world, the monotheistic traditions of Adam and Noah were preserved in one place in the world – Jeru-Salem, Canaan. Indeed, the flood never damaged Canaan. Their king, Shem son of Noah, also known as Malkizedek, was a priest to God-on-High, teaches Nahmanides. If this is the case, it seems logical to suggest that Terah was someone who had come to believe in this One God even in the spiritual wilds of Ur of the Chaldeans – and therefore set out for Canaan, the land of monotheism, where he wished to raise his family. He may even have had personal contact with Malkizedek, who greets the son of his friend with religious words of encouragement to the victor of a religious battle in which right triumphed over might, a victory of the God of ethical monotheism. Like so many contemporary Jews who set out for Israel, Terah had to stop half way and didn't quite make it. But all along God was waiting for Terah's son to embrace the opportunity to continue where his father had left off.

The common view of Terah has Abraham defy his father's way of life as he creates his own way, becoming in effect a model for many modern day penitents who radically break away from non-believing parents, rejecting everything from their past. In the alternate view that I propose, Abraham follows in his

¹ See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, 1, 1

father's footsteps, builds on his father's foundation, redefines his father's way of life and for the first time in history paves the way for himself as well as others to move up the spiritual ladder by not only continuing but also advancing. Abraham is the model for those spiritual idealists who – upon embarking on a journey of religious hope – look at their pasts with an eye for reinvesting what is salvageable, attempting to improve rather than reject. Whose path survives, thrives and becomes a link to the next generation? The revolutionaries, the evolutionaries, or a combination of both? It depends probably on who and what your parents happened to have been. ©2024 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

It is interesting to note that the Torah in its opening chapters deals with the lives of individuals with a seemingly very narrow focus. It portrays general society for us and tells us of the events that led up to the cataclysmic flood that destroys most of humanity, but even then, the Torah focuses on the lives of an individual, Noah and his family. This pattern continues in this week's reading as well with the story of human civilization condensed and seen through the prism of the life of an individual Abraham, his wife Sarah and their challenges and travails.

Unlike most history books which always take the general perspective and the overview of things, the Torah emphasizes to us that history and great events spring forth from the actions of individuals and even though Heaven preordains events and trends, they only occur when individuals actually by their choice, implement them and make them real. The prophet Isaiah described Abraham as "one" – unique, alone, individualistic... important and influential.

We often think that an individual really doesn't make much of a difference in the world of billions of human beings. However, all of history teaches us that individuals are the ones that shape all events, both good and better in the story of humankind. For every individual contains within him and her seeds of potential and of future generations, of events not yet visible or foretold.

The greatness of Abraham is revealed to us in the Torah through the fact that he was a person of strong and abiding faith. We are taught that his faith in God never wavered and that the Lord reckoned that trait of faith as being the righteousness that transformed him into being the father of all nations. However, faith in God carries with it the corollary of faith in one's self and one's purpose in life. There is a great difference between the poison of arrogance and hubris and the blessing of self-confidence and self worth.

Abraham describes himself as being nothing more than dust and ashes. Yet, as a sole individual standing against kings, armies, societies and the accepted mores of the time, he is confident in the

success of his mission, in calling out for the humankind to hear, over the millennia, the name and sovereignty of the Lord.

It is the sense of mission within us that drives our creativity and accomplishments in all spheres of our existence. The journey of the Jewish people through the ages of history and the countries of this planet are the journeys of our father Abraham and our mother Sarah during their lifetimes. Both sets of journeys are driven by this overriding sense of mission, of the importance and worth of every individual who shares that sense of purposeful existence. ©2019 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

At Sarah's insistence, Abraham marries Hagar. Soon after, Hagar becomes pregnant, and Sarah is enraged. Here, the Torah uses the word *va'te'aneha*, which is commonly translated, "and she [Sarah] oppressed her [Hagar]" (Genesis 16:6).

Rabbi Aryeh Levin, the late tzaddik of Jerusalem, insists that *va'te'aneha* cannot literally mean that Sarah oppressed Hagar. Sarah actually treated Hagar no differently than she had treated her previously. However, since Hagar had become pregnant and perceived herself as Abraham's true wife, the simplest request that Sarah made of Hagar was considered by Hagar to be oppressive.

Nachmanides disagrees. For him, *va'te'aneha* literally means oppression. So outrageous was Sarah's conduct that her children, until the end of time, would always suffer the consequences of this wrong. In Nachmanides's words, "Our mother Sarah sinned"; as a result, Hagar's descendants would "persecute the children of Abraham and Sarah."

But what is it that Sarah did wrong? After all, Sarah had unselfishly invited Hagar into her home. Soon after, Hagar denigrated Sarah. Didn't Sarah have the right to retaliate?

Radak points out that Sarah may have afflicted Hagar by actually striking her. It is here that Sarah stepped beyond the line. Whatever the family dispute, physically hitting the other is unacceptable – an important message especially in contemporary times, when the horror of physical abuse is too common in family life.

Nehama Leibowitz, however, asserts that Sarah made a different mistake. By inviting Hagar in, she doomed herself to failure by "daring to scale unusual heights of selflessness." "When undertaking a mission," says Nehama, one must ask whether one can "maintain those same high standards to the bitter end. Otherwise, one is likely to descend from the pinnacle of selflessness

into much deeper depths." It is laudable to reach beyond ourselves, but to tread where we have no chance of success is self-destructive.

Sarah's wrong is compounded when considering the following. While in Egypt with Abraham, Sarah was afflicted by Pharaoh, the master of the land. She barely escaped (12:10–20). Instead of learning from her oppressor never to oppress others, she did the opposite, persecuting Hagar and causing her to flee. Having herself been victimized, Sarah should have especially been more sensitive. Hence, whatever her rationale, her retaliation was inappropriate.

The message is clear. Victims of oppression should reject rather than incorporate their oppressors' ways. Love the stranger, the Torah exhorts over and over, "For you too were strangers in Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34).

But whether one maintains the position of Nachmanides, Radak or Leibowitz, underlying this disturbing fact of Sarah's oppression is an extremely important message. In most faiths, leaders or prophets are perfect. They can do no wrong, and any criticism of their actions is considered sacrilegious. While strong sentiments within Judaism exist to defend biblical spiritual leaders as perfect, there is, at the same time, an opposite opinion in Jewish thought. It maintains that our greatest biblical personalities, while holy and righteous, were also human and made mistakes. They were real people...not God. ©2024 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

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 Abraham 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 Abraham 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 Abraham, 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And predatory birds swooped down upon the pieces, and Avram shooed them away." (Bereishis 15:11) Hashem told Avram He was going to give him and his myriad descendants the land of Israel, from the Nile to the Euphrates. Avram mustered the temerity to ask Hashem, "How do I know I will inherit [the land]?"

In response, Hashem told Avram to take a number of animals and split them in half, and lay them on the ground with a path between them. Avram and Hashem's countenance would pass between them. This was known as the 'bris bain habesarim,' the covenant between the parts. (Rashi points out that these animals represented various *korbanos* the Jews would sacrifice in the future.)

One would imagine that at such an august moment, when Hashem promised His protection to Avram and his descendants; that they would one day inherit them the land He had given them that day, there would be no vultures or carrion assaulting the animals, just as no flies were attracted to the blood of sacrifices in the Bais HaMikdash. Why would these birds come, and force Avram to shoo them away?

The Midrash in several places, and the Gemara as well, quotes Hashem as saying, "Chaval al d'avdin v'lo mishtakchin," "Woe upon [the loss of] those who are gone but not forgotten." He continued, "Many times I appeared to Abraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov with the Name which conveys restriction, and they never questioned Me." This was after Moshe asked Hashem about the plight of the Jews and the seeming indifference

of Hashem. Though the Avos experienced difficult times, they never questioned Hashem's attributes and trusted Him completely.

Avraham was told to go to Canaan, and suddenly there was a famine there. He went to Egypt where his wife was kidnaped. When they finally had a child, he was told to sacrifice him, and when Hashem stopped him, Avraham came home to find that his wife Sarah had died. Despite having been promised the land, he bought the land to bury her at an astronomical price and didn't have second thoughts about it.

This unshakeable faith is what Hashem missed with the passing of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and it is incumbent on all of us to try to emulate it. But what does that have to do with the vultures? Everything.

Avraham said, "How do I know that I will inherit the land?" Instead of doubting Hashem, Avraham was asking for confirmation that his children would merit this great gift. How could he be sure they would be good enough?

Hashem told him to split the animals. When he did, birds of prey came and Avram shooed them off. Hashem said, "There! You see? You didn't ask why I didn't protect you from these birds. Instead, you did what had to be done! It is precisely the unquestioning faith you have in Me in which will ensure your children inherit the land."

A twelve-year old boy decided that he would grow long payos, sidelocks, which are a fulfillment of the mitzvah not to 'destroy' the hair of the head at the temples. Though he came from a Chasidic background, this was still highly unusual at the time he did it, back in the 1950's. It wasn't common for Jews to be so "noticeably" Jewish.

He explained his reasoning. He loved Westerns but felt that the movies were a distracting force in his studies. He knew that if he wore long payos he would be too embarrassed to go into a theater. At the end, this young man grew to be a great Talmid Chacham - because he knew how to force his own hand. ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Dust, Stars, and Sand

The Torah will often use similar language when describing different events. We can understand from this that the Torah wishes us to compare and contrast these separate events. Sometimes these events are far apart and other times they are within the same parasha or within two adjoining parashot. Such a use of similar language occurs twice within this week's parasha and next week's parasha, Vayeira.

After Avraham had taken his nephew, Lot, to the land that Hashem had brought him, Lot became wealthy with grazing animals and began to let them graze on land belonging to Avraham's neighbors. Lot figured that Avraham had no children and he would inherit the land

from Avraham. Fights broke out between Avraham's shepherds and Lot's shepherds, so Avraham decided that he would divide the land to avoid any future conflict. The Torah states, "and Lot raised up his eyes and he saw the entire plain of the Jordan that it was well watered." Lot chose that land for himself, leaving Avraham with, what appeared to him to be, less desirable land. In that same chapter, Hashem spoke to Avraham after Lot had parted from him. Avraham was concerned that Hashem might be angry with him for giving away part of the land that Hashem had promised to Avraham's children. But Hashem said to Avraham, "Lift up your eyes and see from this place where you are, North, South, East, and West, because all the land that you see, I will give it to you and to your children forever." Avraham's children would still inherit all the land.

In both cases, the Torah uses the words "nasa, lift up, einecha, your eyes, and r'ei, see," although the form of the words change to accommodate the grammar for each sentence. In Lot's case, the Torah tells us, "And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw the whole plain of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before Hashem had destroyed Sodom and Amora, like a garden of Hashem (Eden), like the land of Egypt, until one comes to Tzoar." HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Lot was seeking a place that was rich and luxurious, "protected against famine and scarcity." Lot allowed himself to be guided, "undeterred by any consideration which would affect an Avraham, simply by what appealed to his sensuous eyes." Lot was not concerned with the words, "before Hashem had destroyed Sodom and Amora." Lot wanted a land that would be "well-watered," independent of the judgment of rain. Sodom, Amora, and Egypt were all so evil that Hashem did not bless them with rain. Still, Hashem gave them water through rivers and lakes, and that gave them sustenance. This is what Lot saw when he made his choice.

Avraham, however, lifted up his eyes and saw the entirety of the Land of Israel that Hashem was giving to him and his children forever as an inheritance. Avraham not only saw the land, but realized the holiness of that land. At this time, Avraham did not have any children; yet again, Hashem promised this Holy Land to Avraham and his children. The word for "see" can also mean "understand." Avraham understood that he would have sons, but also that those sons would be righteous or they would be unworthy of inheriting this land. This was the real message that Hashem was imparting to Avraham; Avraham and his sons and their sons after them would not only inherit the land, but they would eternally be worthy of inheriting it in spite of their occasional mistakes.

The second set of words which are repeated deal with Hashem's promise that he would increase Avraham's family to the extent that no one would be able to count their number. When Avraham gave Lot a

portion of his land, he suddenly became concerned with the other promises that Hashem had given him. Hashem told Avraham to look at all the land that He would give him. After this, Hashem reiterated the promise that He made to Avraham when He told Avraham to move to the Holy Land, "and I will make you into a large nation." Here, however, Hashem added the words, "I will make your children like the dust of the earth, so that, if one can count the dust of the earth, then your children, too, can be counted." The Midrash explains that dust will be blown from one place to another but will always exist, unlike those who tread on it. Hashem promised Avraham that his descendants would outlive all the nations that would prosecute them.

After Lot was taken captive by the four Kings in their war against the five kings of the area of Sodom, Avraham recaptured Lot and the people of Sodom and returned them to the king of Sodom. Avraham would not accept any of the bounty for himself because he did not wish to be connected to the king of Sodom in any way. Again, Hashem could have been angry with Avraham because Hashem had also promised Avraham great wealth, and Avraham had rejected this gift of wealth. Instead, Hashem promised Avraham that he would have great wealth. Avraham explained to Hashem that wealth was unimportant without children who would inherit that wealth from him. Hashem told Avraham, "Look now towards the Heavens, and count the stars if you are able to count them ... so shall your children be." Here, the Midrash interprets the comparison to the stars as that of a nation which no other nation can truly dominate. The Ramban explains that the Midrash also indicates that Avraham's heirs would come only through Sarah, as the stars were lofty because both parents were lofty. In Gemara Megilla (16a), Hashem indicated that when the B'nei Yisrael follow His Will, they are above all others – like the stars.

The third time that the Torah uses the idea of the uncountable nature of the people is immediately after the test of the Sacrifice of Yitzchak in next week's parsha. The Angel of Hashem told Avraham that he would be rewarded for not holding back his son. "I shall surely bless you and surely increase your children like the stars of the Heavens and like the sand on the seashore." Although the main focus of this comparison is not countability, and, in fact, countability is not even mentioned, it is clear that this is an aspect of the comparison. Here, again, is a warning that accompanies this blessing; if one follows Hashem's Will, he will be like the stars in the Heavens, but if one does not follow Hashem's Will, he will be trampled upon like the sand at the seashore. It may also indicate that the sea may take the sand from one place to another, but the sand will never disappear.

Our task is clear. Like the dust, we may be blown from continent to continent; like the sand, we may increase or decrease; but like the stars, we must rise

above all by accepting Hashem's Will. May we learn from Avraham who clearly demonstrated that he had true faith in Hashem. © 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

Transcribed by David Twersky

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The Beis HaLevi (Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, (1820-1892)) notes that when Avraham Avinu received the mitzvah of milah in this week's parsha, it is the first mention of the name Sha-k-ai (Shin, Daled, Yud) of the Almighty in the Torah. HaKadosh Baruch Hu told Avraham, "I am Kel Sha-k-ai, walk before Me and be perfect." (Bereshis 17:1).

What is the specific connection between the Name Sha-k-ai and the mitzvah of milah? The Beis Halevi says that the connotation of the name Shin-Daled-Yud is that "I am the One who said to the world 'Dai' (Enough)". This name indicates that the Ribono shel Olam put the brakes, so to speak, on the act of creation.

The Medrash elaborates: Ma'aseh Bereshis (the Story of Creation) was an ongoing process. Had it not been for the fact that at a certain point, Hashem said to the world "Enough" (Dai -- Daled, Yud), the process of creation would have continued. As a result, instead of going out into the field to harvest bushels of wheat, a person would go out into the field and harvest loaves of bread. The seed would not only produce the wheat, but creation would continue and the wheat would independently go on to produce bread and other edible products. Likewise, creation would not stop with just flax and linen, but rather suits and ready-made garments of all sizes would be "manufactured".

The Ribono shel Olam said, "No. That is not the way I want My world to work. I am the One who said to My world 'Dai -- Enough!' because I want to leave something for man to do." This, says the Beis Halevi, is why the mitzvah of milah appears with the Divine Name of Sha-k-ai. As the Medrash relates, the wicked Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, "If Hashem wanted man to be circumcised, why was he born with foreskin -- why weren't we all born already circumcised?" The answer to that question is that Hashem wants us to perfect ourselves. We are not born perfect. No one comes into this world as a finished product. Man's charge in this world is to perfect himself. This is the underlying message of the mitzvah of milah.

When I was once in England, Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu (Av Beis Din of the London Beis Din (1932-2022)) told me a beautiful thought from his predecessor on the London Beis Din, Dayan Morris Swift (1907-1983):

We put a mezuzah on our door containing the Torah chapters: Shema Yisrael and V'haya Im Shamo. However, we do not see those chapters. The parchment is rolled up so it is impossible to see what is written

inside. The only part of the mezuzah that we see is the outside of the mezuzah's parchment where the name Shin Daled Yud is written. Dayan Swift said that the message is "I am the one who said to My world 'Enough!'" Just as at the time of the original creation, Hashem said, "I am going to create the world but I am going to leave something 'left over' for man to complete", so too, each man's creation is 'incomplete,' leaving over the removal of the foreskin as a covenantal task for man to thereby improve himself.

And in the spirit of *havei domeh lo* (man 'imitating' G-d's Actions), man too, in his own "Home Improvement" projects, does not need to complete every last detail, by building the greatest palace in the world. The message of Shin-Daled-Yud is He who said to His world 'Enough' -- so too, we need to say to our interior decorator "My 'world' is also 'enough'".

I told my handyman "We need a new shower rod" (because our old shower rod keeps falling down). He sent me the links to Home Depot shower rods. It is incredible how many different types and prices of shower rods there are. I am not even talking about the shower curtains. I am merely speaking of the shower rods! Chrome, brush nickel, this and that. Enough! There is a boundary.

That is why the part of the mezuzah that is visible is Shin-Daled-Yud: I am the One who said to My world 'Enough'. © 2024 Rabbi Y. Frand & *torah.org*

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

It's considered uncouth, or worse, these days to assign any sort of "national character" to peoples of different ethnic or geographical backgrounds. And we are well advised to not assume anything about any individual -- say, to assume that a German will be punctual or a Canadian, polite. But meticulousness is a prominent aspect of German society; and civility, a notable Canadian middah. Anthropological and sociological cultural norms exist.

Yishmael is commonly perceived as the progenitor of some Arab peoples, an association that would seem to dovetail disturbingly with how Avraham's first son is characterized in the parsha, as a "pereh adam," an "unbridled man" given to violence (see Rashi, Beraishis 21:9), someone whose "hand is against all others" and, as a result, causes "all others' hands to be against him" (ibid 16:12).

The striking savagery wrought by Arab terrorists, from the Hebron massacre of 1929 to October 7, 2023 (and countless attacks on innocents between those events) lend credence to the idea that Yishmael's middah persists in our world.

Strikingly, the Muqaddimah, a famous 14th century text by Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, seems to agree with the Torah's characterization of Yishmael. Ibn Khaldun engages in blunt judgments about various

populations, including his fellow Arabs, who, he writes, are the most savage of people; he compares them to wild, predatory animals.

The notion that violence is tolerated in -- or even embraced by -- parts of the Arab world, more than in other societies, is evoked by the flags of some modern Arab states. That of the largest one, Saudi Arabia, features a sword (and the country's official emblem, two crossed ones). Oman's and Hamas' flags also prominently feature swords. Hands clenching AK-47s are on the Fatah movement's flag, which also includes the image of a hand grenade and is graced with a blood-red Arabic text that probably (just guessing here) doesn't read "give peace a chance".

The Palestinian Authority's "national anthem," called "Fida'i," begins, "Warrior, warrior, warrior" and ends "I will live as a warrior, I will remain a warrior, I will die as a warrior..."

No individual Arab should ever be assumed to be a violent person, of course. But a proclivity for violence seems to be part of Arab culture, a tragic reality noted not only by Ibn Khaldun but presaged by, *lihavdil*, the Torah. © 2024 Rabbi A. Shafran and *torah.org*

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

"You shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you," (12:2-3) R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l (1903-1993) comments: The Torah says that man was created male and female and was commanded to procreate. This refers not only to physical activity, but to intellectual and spiritual growth as well. In the language of kabbalah, "male" refers to a giver and "female" refers to a recipient. A person who aspires to spiritual growth must be both male and female, able to impart to others whatever spiritual gifts he or she has to offer, and able to receive from others what they can contribute towards his or her (i.e., the recipient's) growth.

This was the blessing to Avraham recorded in our verses: You shall be a blessing to others, because you will give to them. And, those who bless you, shall be blessed, indicating that Avraham will also receive from others. (Yemei Zikaron p.32) © 2005 S. Katz and *torah.org*



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