

Parshas Lech Lecha

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1. Avraham – the Progenitor of a New Existence

The Torah states at the end of the Portion of Noach, “The days of Terach were two hundred and five years, and Terach died in Charan.” Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Terach did not actually pass away at this time but rather many years later. Chazal ask if that is the case then why are we told that he died at this point. The Midrash answers that the reason for this is so that when Avraham leaves his father in Charan in order to follow the dictate of Hashem, “Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house...” it should not be viewed as if he is abandoning his father in his old age. This would not reflect positively on Avraham and would be the equivalent of a chilul Hashem (Desecration of G-d’s Name). In addition, Chazal tell us “A rasha (an evil person) is considered as a dead person even though he is alive.” Meaning, Terach – who was a rasha, was considered dead, although he was alive. Therefore, when the Torah tells us that Terach died before the departure of his son Avraham it is referring to his spiritual status.

The Torah states, “Hashem said to Avram, “Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” The Midrash tells us that Avraham was hesitant to leave because of the obligation to honor one’s father. Despite the evilness of Terach, Avraham felt bound to remain with him. Hashem told Avraham that he is absolved from his obligation to honor his father.

The Maharal of Prague asks – What is the basis for Hashem to absolve Avraham from his obligation to his father? The Maharal cites a Midrash, which interprets the verse “He (Hashem) extracted light from the darkness” referring to the fact that Avraham descended from Terach: Terach represents darkness and Avraham represents the light being extracted from it. Usually offspring inherit the characteristics and qualities of their parents. One may say that Avraham’s character and qualities also emanate from his father Terach. However, Chazal extrapolate from this verse, “light from darkness,” that this was not the case and that his attributes were completely unrelated to his father. Terach’s relationship to Avraham was solely biological in nature. The Maharal therefore explains that since Avraham (as a person) was not a beneficiary of his father to any degree, other than being sired by him, there was no obligation for Avraham to honor his father.

The Maharal concludes with a Midrash that the word “B’Hebarom - when He (Hashem) created them (existence),” used at the time of creation (the Portion of Bereishis), refers to Avraham because it contains the same letters that as in the name of Avraham. Therefore, the Maharal concludes that Avraham is not a continuation of the previous existence but rather the beginning of a new existence. Just as Adam was the father of mankind, Avraham (in the identical context) is the father of the Jewish people. He had no relevance to any existence that preceded him.

According to Maharal’s elucidation of the Midrash, Avraham leaving his father was an indication that he fully internalized the reality that he had no relevance to him. There are seventy root nations in existence and the Jewish people are the seventy-first nation. The seventy nations that exist are part of the existence that preceded Avraham; however, the Jewish people (according to the Maharal’s explanation) are not part of that same existence

because they descend from Avraham. Although we all share a physical commonality, the essence of the Jewish people and that of the nations of the world is not comparable. The essence of the Jew (because of Avraham our Patriarch) is our spirituality - that exists within a physical context. However, the substance of the nations of the world is their physicality, which happens to be infused with a spirituality - which is the soul.

2. Avraham's Level of Commitment

The Torah states, "Hashem said (vayomer) to Avram, "Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation; I will bless you, and make your name great..." The Torah tells us that when Avraham received this communication from Hashem he immediately embarked on this journey. As it is stated, "Avram went as Hashem had spoken to him (diber)..." The Torah initially uses the term - "Hashem said (vayomer)" which is an expression of communication and not a command. However when Avraham heeded the Word of Hashem, the Torah states, "Avram went as Hashem had spoken to him (diber)..." which is a term used in the context of a command. The question is - If Hashem initially did not "order" Avraham to leave but rather only communicated that leaving would be in his best interest, then why does the Torah later state (after Avraham left) that he followed the command of Hashem (using the expression "diber")?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that even an ordinary person would have left his land, birthplace, and family given the level of incentive Hashem offered (becoming a great nation, gaining wealth, and renown). If this is the case, then why is Avraham's departure from his homeland considered a test? The Ohr HaChaim answers that the test was not leaving one's homeland based on these unlimited incentives. Rather, it was whether Avraham would heed the Word of Hashem because it is His Will (unrelated to any self-gain and advancement). The Torah is telling us that Avraham succeeded because he left his homeland "... as Hashem had spoken to him (diber)..." rather than as "Hashem said (vayomer)" to him.

The Torah Portion of Eikev states, that Moshe said to the Jewish people, "V'haya eikev tishmeun eis ha'mishpatim... When you hearken to these ordinances and you observe and perform them... And you will merit all the bounty and reward." Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the reason the Torah uses the word "eikev" (which also means "heel") to mean "when" rather than the word "kaasher" to teach us that one will merit all the blessing and the bounty only when one observes even the mitzvos that one tramples upon with his "eikev" - heel. This alludes to the mitzvos that are taken lightly because of their perceived lack of severity and importance. The question is why is one deserving of such exceptional reward when keeping the seemingly less important mitzvos?

The question to ask is - if one's basis for observing the mitzvos is doing the Will of Hashem then why would one differentiate between more stringent and less stringent ones? G-d wants us to do His Will - which encompasses all of the mitzvos - regardless of the severity. If one differentiates between mitzvos, this is an indication that the basis and motivation for his performance is NOT to do the Will of Hashem, but rather to follow what is in his personal best interest. Therefore, the "less important" mitzvah is ignored and trampled upon by his heel.

With this explanation, we are able to understand why if one adheres even to the mitzvah that is taken lightly he will merit Hashem's bounty. This is because it is an indication that he is selflessly serving Hashem. However, the one who differentiates is selfishly serving Hashem and therefore does not merit Hashem's bounty.

Avraham heeded the Word of Hashem without any consideration for the incentives that were offered to him. As it is stated, “Avram went as Hashem had spoken to him (diber) ...” Avraham’s service of Hashem was never self-serving and therefore Avraham never asked the question - “Is it worth my while or is it too difficult for me?”

The Gemara in Tractate Rosh Hashanah tells us that if one makes a vow not to benefit from another individual, the person (from whom he is not permitted to benefit) can still blow the Shofar on his behalf. The question is if one made a vow not to benefit from that individual – how is it possible that he is permitted to fulfill his obligation to hear the Shofar through this individual. Is he not benefiting from the person when he has vowed against it? The Gemara answers that mitzvos were not given to us for the sake of benefit. Rashi in his commentary explains that Hashem did not give the mitzvos to us for our benefit, but rather the mitzvos were given as an obligation (a yolk) to be fulfilled. Therefore, when one hears the Shofar he fulfills his obligation and is not “benefiting” from the person.

We should emulate our Patriarch Avraham who heeded the Word of Hashem for the sake of doing His Will and not for all the incentives and personal gain.

3. The Unique Faithfulness of Avraham

The Torah states, “And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.” One interpretation cited by Rashi “...and you shall be a blessing...” is that Hashem endowed Avraham with the ability to bless whoever he chooses. Until this point Hashem was the only One able to bless – He blessed Adam, Noach, and Avraham. From this point onward, Avraham merited to be the transmitter of blessing. Why at this particular moment (when leaving Ur Kasdim to go to an unknown destination) was he endowed with this ability?

The Torah alludes to an event that occurred in Ur Kasdim. Chazal, tell us that Ur Kasdim is referring to the kiln that was located in the community of Kasdim. If this is the case – what is the meaning in the verse that Avraham “had gone out of the kiln of Kasdim”? The Midrash tells us that after Avraham destroyed all of his father Terach’s idols, he informed on his son to Nimrod, the king of Kasdim. Nimrod gave Avraham an ultimatum – either bow to the idol or be thrown into the fiery kiln. Avraham chose to die for his belief in an Omnipotent Being and he would not bow. Therefore, he was thrown into the fire. Hashem performed a miracle and Avraham emerged from the kiln un-singed.

There is a question among the commentators whether the incident of the Ur Kasdim is to be counted as one of the ten tests that Avraham was given by Hashem. Some have the opinion that Lech Lecha is the first of the ten tests. The question to ask is – how is it possible that Ur Kasdim not be counted as the first of the ten tests? If a man is willing to die for Hashem and not succumb to idolatry in order to save his life, this must surely be a test! The answer is – that because Avraham was at such an advanced spiritual level which gave him an absolute clarity, there was not even a moment of question or hesitation whether he would die for G-d. It never entered into the realm of choice for Avraham. Therefore, it is not counted as one of the ten tests. He was willing to go into the fire rather than perform a paganistic act – which was the equivalent of death for Avraham.

When one is dedicated at this level and is unswerving in his belief and conviction to Hashem, he is referred to as “neemonus – faithfulness.” The Midrash at the beginning of the Portion of Pikudei quotes a verse in Mishlei (Proverbs), “A man of faithfulness is abundant in Blessing.” The Midrash explains this verse to mean that whoever is “neemon

- faithful” Hashem will make a conduit for blessing. We see that Moshe Rabbeinu was also the conduit for blessing because he was faithful.

We say every morning in the P’sukei D’zimra at the end of V’yivorach Dovid (and David Blessed Hashem...) “You are Hashem, the G-d, who chose Avram, took him out of Ur Kasdim, and gave him the name Avraham. And you found his heart faithful before You.” Meaning, because of Avraham’s level of faithfulness, Hashem rescued him from the fiery kiln of Kasdim. It is because Avraham was faithful “neemon” - unswerving in his conviction to Hashem that he merited to be the source of blessing. From the beginning of existence up until Avraham, no individual had this level of faithfulness.

If a person wishes to have blessing in his life and transmit that blessing he must have a level of commitment and faithfulness that is unswerving. Every day one must learn Torah and observe the mitzvos –without exception. There is no room for deviation. It should never be a question of regressing in our service of Hashem but rather one should always advance his level of commitment to spirituality.

4. The Potential of Man

The Torah states, “Hashem said to Avram,”...I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and all the families of the earth (adamah) shall bless themselves by you.” Rashi explains, “all the families of the earth (adamah) shall bless themselves by you” means that the world will use Avraham Aveinu as the standard of specialness and will bless their children by saying, “You should develop and emulate the life of Avraham.” The blessing Hashem gave was that he should be the role model for all the people of the earth (adamah). The fact that people would want to emulate his life is the ultimate in kiddush Hashem (sanctification of G-d’s Name). The question is why does the Torah use the expression “families of the earth (adamah)” rather than “families of the land (ha’aretz)”? The word “adamah” means the ground/soil of the earth while the word “aretz” refers to the location (land).

We find that Tanach (Torah, Prophets, and Scripture) presents the human being in contexts such as – “adam,” “ish,” “gever,” and “ehnosh”. For example, when Hashem wanted to give the Torah to the Jewish people, the angels in heaven protested by saying to Hashem, “Ma ehnosh ki sizkerenu? – Who is this man that is not even worth mentioning?” The Marasha in Tractate Shabbos explains that the term “ehnosh” refers to man in a deficient and undeveloped state. “Ish” is a reference to man who is of special status and fully developed. The human being was initially referred to by the Torah as “adam” because “he was taken from the earth (adamah)”. The Maharal of Prague explains that (“adamah” earth) represents potential. If one cultivates the (“adamah” earth) then it will bring forth all life; however, if it is left fallow and unattended then it is merely a clump of earth. This is the reality of the human being. The human being was formed from earth and therefore he was called “Adam” to indicate that he is a being of potential like the matter from which he is composed. If a person does not attempt to develop himself then he is no more than the clump of earth. If however, a person acts upon his potential and develops as it was meant to be - then he will become the “ish” - the spiritual being.

The Malbim in his commentary on Mishlei (Proverbs) explains that whenever Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon – the author of Proverbs) refers to man as “adam” he is identifying man as a being of potential.

Avraham Aveinu (Abraham our Patriarch) was the one to introduce monotheism into a paganistic world. Avraham was the model of spirituality. When the Torah refers to the

“families of the earth” (in the context of blessing their children), it uses the term “adamah” because the Torah is alluding to the spiritual potential of humanity and not the physicality and material make-up of existence. Therefore, the Torah refers to the families of existence as the “families of the adamah”.

The second paragraph of the Shema concludes, “.... In order to prolong your days and the days of your children upon the “adamah” earth that Hashem has sworn to your ancestors...” The Land of Israel is referred to as “Eretz Yisroel” not “Adamas Yisroel”. If the Shema is referring to the Land of Israel then why does it use the term “adamah” – earth? The answer is - the second paragraph of the Shema, in which this verse appears, deals with the prerequisite for blessing, which is to follow the Commandments of Hashem. Thus, the context in which the Land of Israel is mentioned is a spiritual one. The value of the Land of Israel is purely for its spiritual value. The Jew can only truly develop his spiritual potential in the Land of Israel. As the Talmud in Tractate Kesubos states, “The one who lives outside of the Land of Israel is as if he has no G-d.” The paragraph concludes – “so that your days should increase on the adamah rather than Eretz. The Torah refers to the Land of Israel with the term “adamah” and not “aretz”.

At the end of the Portion of Ki Seitzei (which concludes with the portion of Amalek), the Torah states that a person who has honest weights and measures will have a length of days on the “adamah” because false weights and measures is an abomination to Hashem. Juxtaposed to the portion of weights and measures is the portion of Amalek. Rashi cites the Midrash, which explains the juxtaposition of these two unrelated portions. The Midrash explains that if one has false weights and measures it will bring the enemy upon himself and disgrace will come upon him. Therefore if one is connected to Hashem by doing His Will (in this case honest weights and measures), then he will have length of days upon the “adamah” because he is actualizing his spiritual potential. However if one does not conduct himself according to the Will of Hashem then he will be subject to the enemy.

The Torah continuously reinforces the fact that the human being is not merely an intellectual animal. Man is a spiritual being with an unlimited potential. This is the reason the Hashem called man “Adam” – because he was taken from the adamah. We should all seek to actualize our potential through the study of Torah and performing the mitzvos.

5. When is Man Most Susceptible to Failure?

We read in this week’s Portion about the Covenant Between the Parts in which Hashem promises Avraham that his decedents will inherit the Land Of Israel. In addition to the promise of the Land, the Covenant Between the Parts foretells all the exiles that the Jewish people will experience as well as the Egyptian bondage of the Jewish people. The question is – why at the same moment that Hashem promises Avraham the Land of Canaan does He also communicate to him the exiles and the bondage of Egypt.

The Torah states, “He (Hashem) said to him (Avraham),” I am Hashem who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land to inherit it. He (Avraham) said, “My Master, Hashem Elokeem: Whereby shall I know that I am to inherit it?” Meaning, Avraham questioned Hashem if his descendants would be worthy enough to retain the Land even if they should fail. After Avraham poses this question to Hashem, he is told that his children will experience the Egyptian bondage. The Torah states, “Know with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own, they will serve them, and they will oppress them four hundred years...” How do we understand this?

The Gemara in Tractate Niddarim tells us that when Avraham asked Hashem the question - "Whereby shall I know that I am to inherit it?" it was an indication of his lack of faith in Hashem's promise. It is because of this failing that Hashem told Avraham that his descendants would have to be slaves in Egypt for four hundred years. The question is - why did Hashem react so harshly to Avraham's question? One may answer that Hashem judges the tzaddikim with exactness and therefore if the tzaddik deviates as much as a hairbreadth, Hashem punishes him. For an individual of the dimension of Avraham Aveinu such a breach of faith is of serious consequence. One who made Hashem's existence known to the world through espousing monotheism, and was rescued miraculously from the fiery kiln in Kasdim should not have asked this question. Hashem reacted to Avraham not only because he was a tzaddik but especially because of his great accomplishments.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us Rabbi Yochanan in the name of Reb Shimon Bar Yochai states that from the day Hashem created the world until Avraham Aveinu there was no one who ever referred to Hashem as "Master (Adni)" as Avraham had done - "My Master (Adni), "Hashem" Elokim". Avraham was the first person to internalize to the core of his being the Mastership of Hashem. Adam understood that Hashem was the "Adon" Master because he was the handiwork of Hashem. Noach understood the Mastership of Hashem because he witnessed the Great Flood. However, Avraham was born into a pagan world that was devoid of Hashem's Presence and only through his own quest for truth was he able to reach a level of understanding that Hashem is "Adni". Therefore, Avraham was unique.

It is interesting to note that when Avraham referred to Hashem as "Adni" (Master) he posed the question - "Whereby shall I know that I am to inherit it?" Now that Avraham had achieved the greatest level of understanding of Hashem's Mastership he failed by questioning Hashem's promise. Avraham failed at the exact moment of this great spiritual achievement. Therefore, Hashem responded to Avraham's question by saying - since you have such an advanced understanding of Me as the Master - How can you ask such a question?

While it seems unusual that Avraham should fail at the moment of his great spiritual achievement, in actuality, we see that this is a common occurrence. For example, a person may become inspired and choose to commit himself to a Torah learning schedule. However, at the same moment that he makes such a decision because of his being spiritually inspired, he will experience every possible distraction that will dissuade him from embarking on his studies. Whenever a person reaches a new spiritual level there are always pitfalls that present themselves to undermine that level. Until the actual Akeidah (the binding of Yitzchak), Avraham experienced a serious obstacle such as the raging river. Even after meeting the test of Hashem with the Akeidah, the ram that was sent by Hashem to be an offering (in Yitzchak's place) was caught in the thicket by the Satan to prevent Avraham from actualizing his feelings vis-à-vis the Akeidah.

Whenever one is inspired to achieve a new level of spirituality by learning or performing mitzvos in a more perfect manner, one must always be careful at that moment. Because it is at that moment that one is more likely to fail. If one is aware of these possible pitfalls then Hashem will assist him to avoid them.