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Parashat Hashavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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Le-zekher Nishmat HaRabanit Chana bat HaRav Yehuda Zelig zt"l.**

PARASHAT VAYERA

Avraham's Blessing Rav Yehuda Rock

This *shiur* will focus on three verses (18:17-19). We shall examine their function within the story, and also derive from them some more general principles pertaining to the relationship between God and Avraham and his descendants.

After the angels notify Avraham and Sara that a son will be born to them, the angels get up from the meal and look towards Sedom. Then we read the following:

God said: Shall I hide from Avraham that which I will do?
For Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed through him,
For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should keep the way of God, to perform justice and judgment, in order that God may bring upon Avraham that of which He spoke to him.
And God said: Because of the cry of Sedom and Amora, for it is great....
(18:17-20)

The rest is well known: Avraham tries to plead with God on behalf of Sedom, but God tells him that there is not even a group of ten righteous people in the city, in whose merit the rest of the population could be saved, and therefore He saves only the individuals – Lot and his family.

Our main focus, as stated, will be God's words in verses 17-19. However, let us first turn our attention to the framework of this brief monologue.

The syntactical structure of the opening statement is interesting: "*Va-Hashem amar*" – God said. The standard syntactical order in *Tanakh* is verb-subject-object. For example, "*Va-yomer Hashem el Avraham*" (literally, "Said God to Avraham"): *va-yomer* is the verb, *Hashem* is the subject of the sentence, and *el Avraham* is the object.

Sometimes either the subject or the object precedes the verb. This structure may serve one of two purposes:

- Focus: the unusual order stands out and therefore draws the reader's attention to the subject/object that appears early. This may serve to highlight a contrast (as, for example, in the verse: "God took note (*va-yisha Hashem*) of Hevel and his offering, but of Kayin and his offering He did not take note [*ve-el Kayin ve-el minchato lo sha'a*"]"), or for other purposes.
- Transition: the change in order creates a break the continuity of the narrative. A break in continuity defines a new literary unit. The new unit need not necessarily be a whole subject; more often the break signifies the beginning of a relatively brief unit. A sub-group of this function that is quite common serves to indicate the remote past. Here, the change in order breaks the chronological continuity and introduces a unit describing events from a different time – usually something that happened previously.

Our case would appear to belong to the second category. Rabbi David Hoffman understands God's words as being uttered not as the events are ordered in our *parasha*, but rather at an earlier time. They are meant as a general statement, rather than having specific reference to the plan to destroy Sedom. The reason why it appears here is simply because it explains the events that follow. God has established a general policy of revealing His plans to Avraham, and in light of this it follows that when God declares, "Because of the cry of Sedom and Amora, for it is great... I will now go down and see if it is like the cry of it...", He will also notify Avraham, or make the matter known in such a way that Avraham will "hear" (as Ramban suggests), and thus it is clear how Avraham comes to initiate a conversation with God concerning the punishment of Sedom.

Let us now return to the content of God's words.

The language of verse 18 - "For Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed through him" – is based on God's very first words to Avraham (12:1-3): "God said to Avram: Go forth from your land... And I shall make you into a great nation... and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." However, it is not entirely clear why this original blessing represents any reason for God having to reveal His plans (concerning Sedom

or otherwise) to Avraham. Likewise, we need to understand what this statement here has to do with what follows: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should keep the way of God, to perform justice and judgment...." What is the connection between the blessing to Avraham, promising his future greatness, and Avraham's educational path?

Rashi explains that these two verses express the love that God feels for Avraham. The blessing is the result of this love, and Rashi understands the term "I know him" as "I feel affection for him." He regards the continuation of the verse – "For he will command..." – as the reason for God's love and affection for Avraham. The problem here is that the parallels that Rashi brings for the word "knowing" meaning "affection" are not clear. We may solve this problem by accepting Rashi's general direction, but proposing – as Onkelos does – that the words "*ki yeda'tiv*" mean "because I know." Thus, we arrive at the following meaning: "I will not conceal My plans from Avraham, because he is beloved and blessed before Me, and the reason for this affection and blessing is because I know that is capable of and destined to educate his household in accordance with My way."

However, it is still not clear why this is the place for the Torah to justify God's love for Avraham. Furthermore, it is not clear why God's affection for Avraham requires that he be party to God's plans for the world. Is such intimacy some sort of reward?

According to Rashbam, the main reason for God declaring, "Can I hide from Avraham..." is not to be found in the phrase "Avraham will surely become..." but rather further on in the verse, in the words, "For I know him...." To his view, what the verse is saying is that since God knows, concerning Avraham, that he is going to educate his household in the ways of God, in order that God may bring upon Avraham all that He has promised to him (i.e., the inheritance of the land), therefore it is clear that *Eretz Yisrael* will belong to the descendants of Avraham. For this reason, Avraham must be made aware of the plan to overturn Sodom – which is part of Avraham's future inheritance.

Rashbam's explanation is puzzling on several levels. Firstly, it fails to explain the function of the first part of the reason: "For Avraham will surely be...." Secondly, his interpretation contradicts our conclusions from the syntactical structure of the words "*va-Hashem amar*." (Our conclusion, as explained above, was that this was not a specific statement related to Sodom, but rather a general statement concerning Avraham being made party to God's plans.) A further difficulty arising from Rashbam's explanation relates to the conclusion of the verse: "In order that God may bring upon Avraham that of which He spoke to him." According to Rashbam's

explanation, the crux of God's reason is this, the fact that Avraham will receive the land as an inheritance. But if this were so, it would seem more appropriate for this reason to appear at the end of God's words, in the first person: "In order that I may bring upon Avraham that of which I spoke to him," rather than in the third person.

Other interpretations are offered (see Ramban, Radak, etc.), each involving its own set of difficulties.

In order to arrive at a new understanding of these verses, let us first consider a problem that occurs elsewhere in the text, but has relevance to our discussion.

In the original blessing that God gave to Avraham, at the time of His first command to him, we read:

God said to Avram: Go forth from your land... and I shall make you into a great nation, and I shall bless you, and I shall make your name great and you shall be for a blessing, and I shall bless those who bless you, while those who curse you – I shall curse them, and **through you** all the families of the earth **shall be blessed** (*ve-nivrekhu*). (12:1-3)

As noted, this blessing is repeated in our *parasha*. A similar formulation appears in God's blessing to Yaakov (28:14): "through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed (*ve-nivrekhu*), and through your descendants."

A different blessing is to be found at the end of *Parashat Vayera*, following the story of the *Akeida*. There we read:

He said: By Myself I have sworn, says God, that since you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son – your only one - therefore I shall surely bless you and greatly increase your descendants like the stars of the heavens and like the sand that is upon the sea shore, and your descendants will possess the gate of their enemies. And all the nations of the earth **will be blessed** (*ve-hitbarekhu*) **through your descendants**, because you have obeyed My voice. (22:16-18)

The commentators note the exchange of expressions, from "*ve-nivrekhu*" to "*ve-hitbarekhu*." Some conclude that it has no significance (Rabbi Yosef Ibn Kaspi), but others have sought to explain the discrepancy. It is not only the fact of the change that requires explanation, but also the linguistic form itself: the word "*ve-nivrekhu*" belongs to the passive case (*nif'al*), and the three appearances that we have cited above are the only instances of the verb *b-r-kh* in this form in all of *Tanakh*. The

most common active form of the verb is in the accusative case (*pi'el*), and thus if it is to be used in passive form, we would expect to find either the corresponding passive case (*pu'al*) ("*u-vorekhu*"), or the reflexive ("*ve-hitbarekhu*"), as we find in the story of the *Akeida*.

Rashi explains that "*ve-nivrekhu*" means that the nations will express blessing when they mention Avraham. He offers no explanation for "*ve-hitbarekhu*," nor does he address the issue of the unusual *nif'al* form.

Ibn Ezra explains "*ve-nivrekhu*" as meaning that the nations will be blessed in the merit of Avraham, while "*ve-hitbarekhu*" means that they will utter blessing in connection with Avraham (as Rashi suggests concerning "*ve-nivrekhu*"). The explanation for "*ve-hitbarekhu*" certainly seems reasonable, since the most common indication of a verb of this form is indeed a reflexive meaning based on the accusative case. Ibn Ezra's explanation for "*ve-nivrekhu*" is also a passive form, as the verse requires, although he fails to explain why the *nif'al* form (the passive form of the simple case) is used rather than *pu'al* (the passive form *pi'el*, which is a more common usage of this verb). However, the major deficiency of Ibn Ezra's interpretation is that it fails to explain the context: why is the specifically the word "*ve-nivrekhu*" used in God's first blessing to Avraham, and why is "*ve-hitbarekhu*" more appropriate to the blessing that follows the *Akeida*?

The root *b-r-kh*, in the active form of the simple case (*kal/pa'al*), appears twice in *Tanakh*, both times indicating kneeling rather than blessing. The two occurrences are: "He went down upon his knees (*va-yivraakh al birkav*)" (II *Divrei Hayamim* 6:13), and "Let us worship and bow down; let us kneel (*nivrekha*) before God, our Maker" (*Tehillim* 95:6; the *nun* here indicates not passive form, but rather the future tense). Rashbam apparently takes note of these appearances, and interprets the word "*ve-nivrekhu*" accordingly:

"The word '*ve-nivrekhu*' means causing to bend and to be grafted. I.e., [God tells Avraham,] 'the families of the land will mingle with your family' – since it is in weak [passive] form."

In other words, since the word "*ve-nivrekhu*" does not belong to one of the "strong" cases (*pi'el*, *pu'al*, *hitpa'el*), but rather appears here in a "weak" form (referring most often to *kal* or *nif'al*), it must be understood as arising from the root *b-r-kh*, and since it cannot be meant here in the sense of "kneeling," Rashbam proposes a meaning that is borrowed from the agricultural realm: "*havrakha*" refers to the bending of a branch (resembling the "bending of a knee") and covering it with earth, causing it to strike new roots.

Rashbam's view of the families of the earth mingling with Avraham's descendants as a blessing requires a discussion all of its own; it certainly represents an unusual perspective. Moreover, the use of the root *b-r-kh* in the sense of bending and grafting has its source in rabbinical literature; there is no instance of it in *Tanakh*. Therefore this solution would appear unsatisfactory.

Still, Rashbam's general direction would seem to be correct: the *nif'al* form is, indeed, most likely to be meant as the passive form of *kal*. And it would also seem that the literal meaning – that of kneeling – should be accepted. In the context of our verse, then, God is telling Avraham: I shall make you into a great nation, and through you all of the families of the earth will come to kneel before God and to accept the yoke of His Kingdom.

In light of this interpretation, God's first words to Avraham assume a completely different significance: this is no longer just a blessing given to Avraham, but also – and more importantly – a mission and destiny imposed on him. The fact that God will make Avraham into a great nation is meant not only for his own benefit, but will also make it possible for him to fulfill his mission and to achieve the objective of perfecting the world in the Kingdom of God.

Indeed, it is quite appropriate that this be God's first message to Avraham, and it sheds light on the stories of the forefathers in *Sefer Bereishit* and on the role of *Am Yisrael* in general. The first mission of the nation is God's first mission to Avraham: "All the families of the earth will be caused, through you and through your descendants, to kneel...."

We can now understand why, in the story of the *Akeida*, we find "*ve-hitbarekhu*" rather than "*ve-nivrekhu*." Here God is making an oath to Avraham, as reward for his act of faith. The context is not one of mission and destiny, but rather one of blessing to Avraham. The fact that the nations are blessed through Avraham is an expression of the realization of the blessing given to him.

[Incidentally it should be pointed out that it is quite possible that the primary meaning of the root *b-r-kh* is kneeling (as reflected in the "simple" or "weak" cases – *kal* and *nif'al*, and also in the noun derived from it – "*berekh*," meaning "knee"), and that the secondary sense, of "blessing," is derived or borrowed from it. The sense of "blessing" (as a verb – in the *pi'el* and *hitpa'el* cases, and also in the passive form – "*barukh*") is what a person expresses when he bends his knee: an expression of submission and acceptance of authority, or – conversely – that which is bestowed on

those who bend the knee by the one to whom they bow: love, gifts, and abundant blessing.]

Let us now return to our original question. "Shall I hide from Avraham that which I am going to do? For Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed/will be brought to kneel." We questioned why it is that God's blessing to Avraham should be a reason for God necessarily having to reveal His plans to Avraham, whether concerning Sedom or in general. We also questioned the connection between this statement and what follows: "For I know him, that he will instruct his children and his household after him, that they should keep the way of God, to do justice and judgment...." What does the blessing to Avraham have to do with his educational path?

Now we are better equipped to solve these questions. God is explaining the revelation of His plans to Avraham not on the basis of His blessing to him, but rather on the basis of the mission and the destiny that he has entrusted to him. It is Avraham who has been given the task of realizing the entire Divine plan of bringing the world to "bend the knee" before God and to accept the yoke of His Kingship. Hence, Avraham must be a full partner who is aware of the steps that God takes in the world towards the realization of this goal. And as a continuation of this idea, God reiterates the connection between the selection of Avraham and his educational mission, with an emphasis on the attributes that guide God's direction of the world towards the acceptance of His Kingship: the attributes of justice and judgment. "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should keep the way of God, to do justice and judgment." Indeed, the dialogue that is recorded between Avraham and God concerning Sedom represents an expression of the tension between justice (*tzedaka*) and judgment (*mishpat*). The fate of Sedom is born out of the conclusion arrived at through that discussion between God and Avraham, who are jointly responsible for introducing the way of God into the world.

What remains is for us to address the closing words: "In order that God may bring upon Avraham that of which He spoke to him." In light of the above it would seem that we are to understand this as follows: God singled out and chose Avraham, specifically, in order that He would be able to bring blessing upon his descendants. Avraham, for his part, is deserving of the blessing, "I shall make you into a great nation" but this blessing is meant for those who are entrusted with the responsibility and the mission of "through you shall [the nations] be caused to kneel." Therefore, Avraham has to make himself worthy of the blessing, by carrying out his mission. For this reason God chooses Avraham to be His emissary in this task. The function of this verse, then, is to avoid any possibility of us thinking that God's attitude towards Avraham is directed solely by the task that He wants fulfilled, and that He does not

care about Avraham himself. Instead, we understand from this that God selects Avraham specifically for this task because of His great love for him, in order that He will be able to bring upon him all (the blessings and goodness) that He spoke of.

Translated by Kaeren Fish