

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

This week's shiurim are dedicated by Leonard Balanson
in memory of Rose Balanson z"l

The Covenant Between the Parts

By Rav Zeev Weitman

" .1By what shall I know that I shall inherit it?"

After God promises the land to Avraham, he asks, "By what shall I know that I shall inherit it?" All of the commentators on the Torah have attempted to explain Avraham's question and how this response is consistent with the Torah's testimony concerning Avraham's response to God's promise of progeny: "And he believed in God." Another issue that must be addressed is in what way the covenant that is then forged with Avraham over the inheritance of the land is more binding than God's promise prior to his question.

The midrashim raise the possibility that Avraham's question did indeed reflect a weakness in his faith and that the Egyptian exile was decreed upon Bnei Yisrael as a result of this question. Many commentators find this difficult to accept and prefer a different explanation offered in the midrashim – that Avraham asks whether God's promise is absolute and final, or whether it might change in accordance with Bnei Yisrael's future conduct. As Ramban formulates it:

This is not like asking, "What is the sign [that the promise will be fulfilled]," nor does God perform a sign, showing him some wonder or miraculous things. Rather, Avraham was asking to know with certainty that he would inherit [the land], and that no sin of his own or of his descendants would cause it to be withheld from them, or that the Canaanites might repent and then see the fulfillment of the verse, "At one time I speak of a nation and of a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, or to destroy, but if that nation, concerning whom I have spoken, turns from its evil, then I repent of the evil that I sought to do to them" (Yirmiyahu 18:7-8). So God forges a covenant with him, that he will inherit [the land] no matter what.

Some opinions follow a different direction, explaining that Avraham's question was whether the inheritance of the land would be for eternity, as suggested by the use of the term "inheritance," or a temporary and conditional situation, wherein God might at some stage expel Avraham's descendants and cut them off from the land that had been given to them. God's response, according to this view, is that the inheritance will be upheld for his descendants forever by virtue of the sacrifices.

.2No questioning of the promise

A fourth interpretation is offered by Abravanel. To his view, Avraham is not asking God, "How can I know that I will inherit the land?" as the other commentators understand it, but rather, "When will that inheritance be realized?" Admittedly, Abravanel has difficulty fitting

this interpretation into the actual words of the question, but the direction that he proposes seems to reflect the plain meaning of the text. He proposes that the word "ki" be understood to mean "when," as in the verse, "When (ki) you come to the land..." His question, then, is, "By what shall I know when this inheritance will come about?" From God's promise, it is not clear whether the inheritance of the land will take place during Avraham's lifetime or for his descendants later on; Avraham asks which was meant, and if the latter, then at what time in the future.

We may take Abravanel's interpretation a step further and propose that what Avraham is asking is what exactly is meant by this promise of the inheritance of the land. Not only does he ask when it will be fulfilled, as Abravanel explains, but also in what manner. How shall I know, asks Avraham, that right now I am inheriting the land? When God promises that He will give this land to Avraham to take possession of it, Avraham – who does not know what we know about the course of Jewish history – asks: what is supposed to happen, beyond the fact that I am right now dwelling in the land, in order for it to be considered as a fulfillment of the promise of inheritance? In the promise of progeny, Avraham has no trouble understanding the meaning of the promise and the manner in which it is to be realized, and therefore, although the prospect sounds altogether extraordinary, he has no doubts; he believes in God and patiently awaits the fulfillment of His promise. When it comes to God's promise concerning the inheritance of the land, in contrast, Avraham does not understand how it will come about. What does God mean by this promise? Is something meant to happen beyond the fact that his descendants will continue to live in the land where he is already journeying about, building altars, pitching his tent, and tending his flocks? Avraham has no knowledge of any future events. Right now, he is living in the land and will give birth to his progeny there, and they will go on living in the land. What, then, is the event that God is referring to in the promise that he, or his descendants, are destined to inherit the land?

Thus, Avraham's question contains no hint of a lack of faith or any doubt in the sense of, "By what shall I know that You will indeed fulfill Your word?", but rather is an informative question. How will that take place, and what exactly will happen that will constitute the "inheritance of the land" that God is referring to in his promise?

.3Actions and visions reveal the future

God explains to Avraham that when He promises the inheritance of the land, He does not mean that Avraham's descendants will live on the land, as he does, as a continuation of the existing situation. Rather, He refers to a taking possession of the land and living as an independent nation in it. But this taking possession will take place only in another four hundred years, since the sin of the Emorites is not yet complete. In His response, God reveals to Avraham that the inheritance of the land by his descendants is not mere continuation of his presence, nor even further development of it; rather, there will be a lengthy severance from the land, after which there will come the inheritance that God is referring to.

God reveals to Avraham that until the time comes when it will be possible to drive the Emorites out of the land, his descendants will be strangers in a land that is not their own and they will undergo servitude and hardship over many long years. Only after that will they return to the land and take possession of it. It is that time that God refers to in His promise of the inheritance of the land where Avraham himself already resides.

As we know from elsewhere in Tanakh, prophetic visions, as well as actions that prophets are commanded to carry out, are meant to depict and allude to future events. Here, too, the actions that Avraham is commanded to perform and the things that he sees in his dream reveal the future to him.

Avraham is commanded to take a heifer that is "meshuleshet," a goat that is "meshuleshet," a ram that is "meshulash" (the masculine form of the same word), and a turtledove and a young pigeon. The meaning of the word "meshuleshet/meshulash" is ambiguous; it has been translated as "3 years old" or as "three-fold" (i.e., three of each). It seems to me that the word "meshuleshet" here means "divided into three parts." This would explain why Avraham takes each of these animals and cuts them up, but leaves the birds intact. If we adopt the interpretation that there are three of each animal, that they are three years old, or are the third births of their mothers, it is difficult to understand how Avraham knew to cut them up without being told to, or how he knew to leave the birds intact. Only if we explain the term as meaning "cut into three parts" do we see that Avraham did exactly as he was told to: he cuts up the animals as stipulated, but leaves the birds, for with regard to them God does not say "meshulash" or "meshuleshet".

According to this interpretation, we must further clarify that the expression "va-yevater otam ba-tavekh" ("he divided them in the middle") does not necessarily mean splitting them in half. It can be understood as a three-way division, since two cuts create a middle part ("tavekh"), and when the parts are placed opposite each other, they create two pathways in between the parts.

This would also explain the expression that we find in the context of the cities of refuge, "ve-shilashta et gevul artzekha" - "You shall divide your land into three parts" (Devarim 19:3). A city of refuge is to be established at the center of each third. The conventional interpretation – that the distance between the border and the first city is to be the same as the distance between the first and the second, and the distance between the second city and the third is to be the same as the distance between the third city and the other border – actually means that the land is divided into four parts, such that the term "ve-shilashta" makes no sense. The gemara adds a further question: if we adopt the conventional view, it turns out that someone who lives on the border has to travel twice as far to reach the nearest city of refuge as a person living anywhere else would have to go. If Eretz Yisrael is 400 parsas long, the inhabitant of a border town would have to run 100 parsas to reach the nearest city, whereas from anywhere else, there is no way that he would need to go further than 50 parsas. If, however, we posit that the land is to be divided into three parts, with a city of refuge placed at the center of each part, then the term "ve-shilashta" makes perfect sense and the distances are better balanced – the distance between the border and the first town is half of the distance between the first town and the second and between the second and the third, such that the maximum distance from anywhere in the country to the nearest city of refuge is a sixth of the length of the country.[1]

From the city of refuge back to the Covenant Between the Parts. The significance of the actions that Avraham is commanded to perform, the descent of the eagle upon the carcasses, and the "horror of great darkness" that falls upon Avraham are all explained in God's words to him:

"Your descendants shall be strangers... and they shall serve them, and they will afflict them for four hundred years... but in the fourth generation they will return here... and also the nation which they serve, shall I judge... and you shall go to your fathers in peace".

Since Avraham asks what is meant by "inheritance of the land," God reveals the future and the bitter fate of his descendants.

Abravanel understands God's explanation to Avraham as the interpretation of the visual clues:

Avraham did not know or understand anything of the vision on his own, until God placed the deep sleep and great darkness upon him, such that his heart told him that it was a time of trouble and a great suffering that was befalling him. Then, as he cast about in his thoughts about this, the Divine word came to him and said, "Know surely that your descendants will be strangers..." – as if to tell him, "The darkness and horror that you feel in your heart reflect the difficult exile that your descendants will experience in a land that is not their own".

If we were to understand Avraham's question not in accordance with our interpretation above, but rather in the sense of "How do I know that I will indeed inherit the land," considering that future sins may change the situation, or "How do I know that I will inherit the land forever", etc., then it would not be clear why God reveals the future to him. Indeed, of what benefit is it for him to know that his descendants will suffer as strangers in a foreign land? This would in no way alleviate his concerns and doubts about the inheritance of the land.

.4Exile, servitude and oppression are not a Divine decree

In light of the above, we need not conclude that there is a Divine decree that Am Yisrael will be subjugated and afflicted in a foreign land; rather, there is a revelation of what is actually going to take place in the future. Thus, there is no need to try to explain why such suffering was decreed upon Am Yisrael; if it is a punishment, there is no need to explain why Am Yisrael deserved such harsh retribution. We therefore need not address the great difficulties with which all the commentators try to grapple: why God told Avraham of the decree that would apply to his descendants before they could inherit the land – servitude and affliction in a foreign land – and why those who fulfilled this Divine decree were ultimately punished.

God tells Avraham that "the sin of the Emorites is not yet complete." This explains why the inheritance of the land is postponed for four hundred years, rather than being carried out immediately, but of course it does not explain the affliction and servitude of Am Yisrael. In other words, God had decided that Am Yisrael would take possession of the land only after the sin of the Emorites was complete, such that they would be deserving of expulsion from the land, but there was no prior Divine decree concerning Am Yisrael going down to Egypt or being enslaved there. The reason for these developments must therefore be sought elsewhere. If there is no decree, then perhaps those who subjugate and afflict them are not acting as God's agents – and therefore it is not difficult to understand why God promises, "and also the nation which they serve, shall I judge".

Abravanel, who also maintains that there is no Divine decree here pertaining to the slavery, believes that the reason for Am Yisrael's subjugation is the sin of the brothers in selling Yosef into slavery. In our discussion of Parashat Vayigash we will be'ezrat Hashem elaborate on this idea, and there I shall propose a different view – that the exile was not decreed as a

punishment, but rather that Am Yisrael remained in Egypt for reasons of convenience, owing to the more comfortable conditions there, and the subjugation and affliction were intended to uproot them from there by causing Am Yisrael to realize that they had to leave Egypt and return to the land that had been promised to them.

" .5For the sin of the Emorites is not complete"

The fact that the inheritance of the land by Am Yisrael is delayed for four hundred years because the Emorites have not yet completed the measure of evil that will make them deserving of defeat teaches us a fundamental principle about Divine Providence: even though Eretz Yisrael is intended for Am Yisrael, God does not expel its inhabitants until they themselves are worthy of that, owing to their own sins. And even if Am Yisrael is supposed to take possession of the land and dwell in it, they are not permitted to set out on a war of conquest and dispossession of the inhabitants of the land if there is no reason, in terms of their own behavior, to uproot them.

.6The covenant over the inheritance of the land

If, in accordance with our discussion above, all that Avraham is asking is when and how the inheritance of the land will come about, then why is there a need for the covenant that is forged with him over this matter of the inheritance? Seemingly, God could simply have answered his question. What is the point of the impressive ceremony of the Covenant Between the Parts?

And it came to pass, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold – a smoking furnace, and a burning torch that passed between these pieces. On that day God forged a covenant with Avram, saying: "To your seed I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Perat; the Keni, and the Kenizi, and the Kadmoni, and the Chivi, and the Perizi, and the Refaim, and the Emori, and the Kena'ani, and the Girgashi, and the Yevusi".

Shadal explains in his commentary that since it now becomes clear that the promise of the inheritance of the land is directed hundreds of years hence, it is important that a covenant be made over it, so that future generations will know that the covenant exists. This will give them strength during the years of exile and bring about their return to the land when God makes this happen. Without this covenant, Am Yisrael would never uproot themselves from exile; they would lack the strength necessary to take possession of the land following so many years of exile, subjugation, and affliction:

Since the matter was for a long time off, God wanted the future generations to be certain and unquestioning in this regard, in order that during the four hundred years they would not become assimilated among the nations. And so it was, that this covenant which God forged with him was imprinted in the heart of all the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and throughout all those generations, they believed in God's promise. We find that Yosef, prior to his death, tells his brothers: "God will surely remember you and will take you up from this land, to the land which He swore to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and Yaakov." (Bereishit 50:24)

As to the covenant made with Avraham and the promise that God would give him the land "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Perat," it would seem that since the covenant relates to the same descendants concerning whom God declares, "Your descendants

will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they shall serve them, and they shall afflict them" etc., we conclude that the promise concerns Bnei Yisrael alone, and not all of Avraham's offspring – the children of Esav, or Yishmael, or of Lot. Therefore, if ultimately part of that land is given explicitly as an inheritance to the children of Esav (Mount Se'ir) or the children of Lot (Amon and Moav), we must question why it was that Am Yisrael did not inherit the entire land over which God made a covenant with Avraham. This question requires further study.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]See further in the Malbim's commentary on the verse, "ve-shilashta tered me'od" in Yehonatan's advice to David (Shmuel I 20:19). He maintains that the intention is to divide the field into three parts.