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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

This parasha series is dedicated
in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

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in memory of Howard (Haim) Greenspan z"l.

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

"Berit Bein Ha-betarim" – the Covenant Between the Parts
By Rav Yaakov Medan

"Your descendants will be strangers"...

The "Covenant between the Parts" begins with bad tidings: Avraham is presented with the prospect of a four-hundred year exile, including slavery and suffering. Chazal debate the reason for this affliction, and – as is their way – couch their explanation in terms of Divine retribution, reward and punishment:

"Rabbi Abahu said in the name of Rabbi Elazar: For what reason was Avraham punished, that his descendants would be enslaved in Egypt for two hundred and ten years? Because he pressed Torah Sages into service, as it is written, 'He led his trained servants, born to his house'....

Shemuel said: Because he exaggerated in [his demands on] God's Divine attributes, as it is written, 'By what shall I know that I shall inherit it'?

Rabbi Yochanan said: Because he kept people from joining the monotheistic faith, as it is written: '[The king of Sodom said to Avraham:] Give me the people, and take the property for yourself.'" (Nedarim 32a)

The three answers offered by the Gemara fall into two clear categories. One category includes those who follow the teachings of R. Yochanan of Teveria – R. Yochanan himself, R. Elazar, his colleague and disciple, and R. Abahu, his disciple. In the second group, the Rosh Yeshiva of Neharde'a in Bavel – Shemuel – sits alone.

The Amoraim of Teveria connect the "Covenant between the Parts" with the preceding parasha – Avraham's battle against Kedarla'omer and his company - and seek Avraham's sin within this context. Shemuel, in contrast, regards the episode of the Covenant as an independent unit, and seeks the sin within this unit itself, namely, in Avraham's words to God.

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

Shemuel's understanding of Avraham's sin sits well with the literal reading of the text. Avraham asks of God some guarantee for the fulfillment of His promise concerning the

inheritance of the land. This demand would seem to express a deficiency in his supposedly perfect faith, justifying a harsh punishment. Indeed, in Shemuel's view, Avraham's punishment was "measure for measure": because Avraham asked, "How shall I know" (bameh eda), he was informed of the future exile of his descendants with the words, "Know with certainty..." (yado'a teda.)

This interpretation raises two difficult questions.

Avraham is the father of monotheistic faith and the greatest believer. How can we attribute to him the sin of deficient faith?

The verses preceding the notification of future affliction represent a clear contradiction to the idea that Avraham's faith was anything less than perfect:

"He brought him outside and said: 'Look, now, to the heavens and count the stars – if you are able to count them.' And He said to him: 'So shall be your descendants.' And he believed in God, and He considered it righteous on his part. And He said to him: 'I am God Who brought you out of Ur-Kasdim to give you this land for a possession.' And he said: 'Lord God, how shall I know that I shall inherit it?'" (15:5-7)

The Torah speaks explicitly in praise of Avraham's faith. Why, then, would he not believe that the land would be given to him? [1]

It is possible that Shemuel's understanding is connected to that of the author of Seder Olam, as Rashi quotes in his name:

"'Four hundred and thirty years' – all inclusive. From the time of Yitzchak's birth until this point [the exodus], four hundred years had passed. From the time that Avraham [first] had offspring, the promise 'Your descendants will be strangers...' was fulfilled, and thirty years passed from the time of [God's] decree at the Covenant until the birth of Yitzchak." (Rashi, Shemot 12:41)

This is most surprising: How could the Covenant have taken place when Avraham was seventy years old, when we are told explicitly, at the beginning of our parasha: "Avraham was seventy-five years old when he left Charan" (12:7)?

Ramban (Shemot 12:40) addresses this question, and mentions the opinion of the Seder Olam that Avraham actually ascended twice from Charan to Eretz Yisrael: once at the age of seventy, and again at the age of seventy-five. This explanation is somewhat forced. In any event, his explanation implies that the narrative does not follow chronological order, and that the Covenant took place before the beginning of the parasha.

Perhaps we need not posit two journeys by Avraham to Eretz Yisrael; perhaps it is enough for us to move the Covenant to the end of parashat Noach, to the time when Avraham was living with his family in Charan. Charan is situated near the river Perat, which represents the border of the land promised to Avraham in the Covenant. In the Covenant between the Parts, Avraham was promised not only the land of Canaan, as in the covenant of his circumcision, but all of "this land" – including the Keini, the Kenizi, the Kadmoni and the Refaim.

Let us clarify the picture that arises from this hypothesis.

Avraham was living with his father's household and his family in Charan. There he receives a Divine revelation at the age of seventy, in which God shows him from a distance "this land," which lies on the south-western side of the river Perat, and promises him: "I am God Who brought you out of Ur-Kasdim to give you this land as a possession." In the wake of this message, God commands him – five years later, when he is seventy-five years old – to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's home, and to go to that land which He will show him. At this stage, Avraham has not yet become the father and greatest of believers. He is the son of Terach the idolater, and although he has discovered (through contemplation of the sun and moon) that it is God Who created the world, and although he has already withstood the test of the furnace in Ur-Kasdim, he still has questions and uncertainties as to his path and God's promises. Indeed, he is punished for these uncertainties in the affliction promised in the Covenant between the Parts: "Your descendants will be strangers"....

When Avraham reaches the land five years later, by God's command, and God is revealed to him at his tent and guides him in all his endeavors – only then, in the land of God's inheritance, the land that God desires, does he ascend from one spiritual level to the next, until he becomes the greatest of all believers in God. Only then are we told, "He believed in God, and it was considered righteousness on his part".

According to our hypothesis, the parasha should be divided into two separate parts [2:]

"After these things, God's word came to Avram in a vision, saying: 'Do not fear, Avram, I am your Shield; your reward is very great'.

And Avram said: 'Lord God; what can You give me, for I am childless and the steward of my house is Eliezer of Damesek?' And Avram said, 'Behold, to me You have given no children, and here, the one born in my house will be my heir'.

And behold, God's word came to him, saying: 'It is not he who will be your heir, but one who descend from your bowels will be your h.' And He took him outside and said, 'Look, now, at the heavens and count the stars – if you are able to count them.' And He said to him, 'So will your descendants be'.

And he believed in God, and it was considered righteousness on his part." (15:1-6)

"He said to him: 'I am God Who brought you out of Ur-Kasdim to give you this land for a possession'.

And he said, 'Lord God: by what shall I know that I shall inherit it'?

He said to him, 'Take me a three-year old heifer and a three-year old goat and a three-year old ram and a turtledove and a young pigeon'.

So he took all of these for Him and divided them in the middle and placed each half facing the other, but he did not divide the birds. And the eagle descended upon the carcasses, but Avram drove them away. And the sun began to set, and a deep sleep fell upon Avram, and behold – a great dark fear fell upon him." (15:7-12)

The first part takes place in the land of Canaan, following the war against the kings, when Avraham is already at least seventy-five years old. The second part precedes the other chronologically; it takes place in Charan when Avraham is seventy years old.

"Because he pressed Torah Sages into service"

As mentioned above, the Sages of Eretz Yisrael interpret the narrative in accordance with the order of the text. According to their understanding, the Covenant between the Parts takes place immediately after the war against the kings, and the narrative as a whole is introduced with the words at the beginning of chapter 15: "After these things"....

Let us first discuss the approach of Rabbi Abahu in the name of Rabbi Elazar. In his view, Avraham was punished with servitude for his descendants "measure for measure" because "he pressed Torah Sages into service." When I was a child, these words of R. Abahu used to be used as proof for the argument that Torah students should not be enlisted in the I.D.F. This claim proceeds from the exegetical assumption that Avraham is guilty of causing his "trained servants, born to his house" to neglect Torah, since the time spent in pursuit of the forces of Kedarla'omer and his company and in saving Lot was time wasted, in terms of Torah study. Avraham, then, should have conducted the pursuit alone or sent Eliezer – as indeed the Midrash teaches, in its assertion that the "three hundred and eighteen" fighters that the text describes Avraham as enlisting in fact refer to Eliezer himself (the numerical value of his name is 318). In other words, it is clear that Torah study needed to be put aside for the purposes of the pursuit and to save Lot – for, after all, Avraham is not punished for wasting his own Torah-study time. He is punished only for pressing into service a greater number of fighters than was necessary for the battle against the four kings and their armies.

This interpretation is problematic in every respect. Can three hundred and eighteen fighters possibly be considered an excessively large army for the military challenge that Avraham faces? Is he supposed to rely on a miracle? Are all those "born to his house" really engaged day and night only in Torah, never leaving Torah for a moment in order to help take care of the needs of Avraham's household? Who, then, were his shepherds; who dug his wells, who was responsible for setting up his tent during his wanderings? Did Avraham never press those "born to his house" into service; did they never do anything for him?

Let us attempt to understand Rabbi Abahu's words differently. It is possible that Chazal had reservations as to the merit of the aim of the war that Avraham is about to embark upon: saving the kingdom of Sedom from the hands of Kedarla'omer. Perhaps they do not consider this sufficient justification for endangering the members of his household. If we question why Chazal are concerned for the safety of these gentiles and servants who took care of Avraham's herds, the answer is given: Chazal point out that these servants were Torah sages and fulfilled the commandments, with Eliezer instructing them in the teachings of Avraham, his master. Avraham should not have endangered these people without good reason.

Why, then, do Chazal not present a similar claim concerning Avraham himself, for having endangered his own life in this battle? The answer is clear: A risk that a person takes upon himself is not the same as a risk that he places upon others – even if they are his servants. Avraham assumes the risk in order to save his relative, Lot, thereby fulfilling the commandment, "You shall not turn your back on your own flesh." He had a special obligation towards Lot, the son of his brother who was burned in God's name when he decided to accept the God of Avraham. But Lot was neither the relative nor even a friend of Avraham's shepherds and servants. On the contrary: he was their sworn adversary. Avraham therefore had no right to endanger them in order to save Lot.

I wish to add two further comments concerning the view of Rabbi Abahu.

The issue of "pressing into service" was familiar to Rabbi Abahu and his generation on the personal level. Roman soldiers would kidnap people indiscriminately in the streets and send them into the king's service and on all kinds of dangerous missions. Even Torah Sages were not spared this danger. R. Zeira recounts how he himself was pressed into service to bring myrtle branches to the king's palace:

"Anyone who makes mention of redemption immediately prior to his prayer – Satan does not prosecute on that day. Rabbi Zeira said: I mentioned redemption adjacent to my prayer, and yet I was pressed into service to carry myrtles to the palace." (Yerushalmi Berakhot 1:1)

As stated, the Midrash teaches that Eliezer alone pursued the kings in order to save Lot: "Reish Lakish said in the name of bar Kapra: 'The steward of my house' – Eliezer is a son of my household, for by means of him I pursued the kings up to Damesek. And Eliezer was his name, as it is written: 'He led his trained servants born to his house, three hundred and eighteen.' The numerical value of 'Eliezer' is three hundred and eighteen." (Bereishit Rabba 44:9)

Why does the author of this midrash contradict the literal meaning of the text, as well as simple logic, to introduce this strange legend?

As I explained at length last week, the Midrash appears in many instances to draw a parallel between Avraham and Gidon, the Judge. The well-known legend describing Avraham as smashing his father's idols, as a result of which he is sentenced to death by Nimrod, while his father Terach, with his wisdom, saves him from Nimrod's punishment – seems to be borrowed from the story of Gidon, who smashes the ashera and the altar to Ba'al belonging to the household of Yoash, his father. The people of Ofra want to kill him, and Yoash saves his son from them with his wisdom. The basis for the parallel is that Avraham takes just over three hundred members of his household to wage war against the mighty armies of four kings, employing the tactic of "dividing up at night, he and his servants, and striking them." He attacks suddenly in the middle of the night as the enemy camp is fast asleep, with different forces appearing from different directions, causing the armies to flee in confusion and panic, leaving all the spoils. Gidon employs exactly the same tactic with his own three hundred men in the battle against the camp of Midian. He, too, pursues the Midianite army in order to save his brethren from them, as he admits to Zevach and Tzalmuna, kings of Midian, at the end of the battle. This parallels Avraham's pursuit of the kings in order to save Lot, his nephew.

God offers Gidon an even more miraculous victory, similar to that of Yonatan and his attendant in their battle against the camp of the Pelishtim, in the war of Mikhmas (Shemuel I 13:)

"It was on that night that God said to him: Arise, go down to the camp, for I have given it into your hand. And if you are afraid to go down, go then – you and Pura, your attendant, to the camp." (Shoftim 7:9-10)

Reish Lakish is teaching us, in the midrash, that Avraham acted in a siway. He went down to the camp with Eliezer, his attendant, alone – just as Yonatan went with his attendant alone, for "there is nothing stopping God from saving by means of many or few." Gidon, in contrast,

withdraws and takes all three hundred of his men with him to fight. Perhaps, in R. Abahu's view, Avraham's sin lay in acting like Gidon and not, as Reish Lakish explains, like Yonatan.

Below, we shall discuss further the parallel between Gidon and Avraham.

"Give me the people, and take the property for yourself"

The final interpretation that we must address is that of Rabbi Yochanan, who also claims that Avraham's sin concerned the war against the kings. In his view, the problem was that Avraham prevented people from joining the monotheistic faith when the king of Sedom proposed, "Give me the people, and take the property for yourself".

Why should we expect Avraham to convert all the men of Sedom and bring them within the monotheistic fold? What good would come of a forced conversion of all these people? And since when are we commanded to make converts – especially when it comes to people like the evil sinners of Sedom?

From my teacher, Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, I learned that the approach of the teacher - Rabbi Yochanan - is the corollary of that of the disciple – Rabbi Abahu. The assumption that there was some justification for saving the people of Sedom from their captivity and servitude is closely connected with the assumption that it would be possible to convert them and bring them to monotheistic faith. For this purpose it was proper even for Torah sages such as the members of Avraham's household to endanger themselves in order to save Lot and the men of Sedom together with him. But if Avraham decided to leave the men of Sedom and Lot alone, to allow them to return to their former evildoing, then there was no real reason for the war, and he was guilty of pressing Torah Sages into service with no justification.

Let us explain Rabbi Yochanan's teaching in greater detail. After Avraham separates from Lot, who heads for Sedom, God appears to him and promises:

"Lift up your eyes and see, from the place where you are – northwards and southwards and eastwards and westwards. For all the land that you see – to you I shall give it, and to your descendants, forever. And I shall make your descendants like the dust of the earth, that if a person can count the dust of the earth – so shall he number your descendants. Arise and walk about in the land, its length and breadth, for I shall give it to you." (13:14-17)

This promise, as formulated here, applies not only to the land of Canaan, but to all of the great expanse from the river of Egypt up to the river Perat. We are accustomed to understanding this as a vision for the distant future, but it is not so. God's intention in these words is for the present. Indeed, immediately after God's promise, the war of the kings erupts, with the kings from the other side of the river Perat invading the eastern side of the Jordan River, attacking all the kingdoms there, and perhaps even gaining indirect control of the western side of the Jordan.

Along comes Avraham and, in an instant, defeats these conquerors. In banishing them and the remains of their forces to the other side of the river Perat, all the land up to the river Perat falls into his hands. As he returns, crowned with victory, from his battle, it is no wonder that Chazal teach that all the kings vied to appoint Avraham king over them, for he had liberated them from the yoke of Kedarla'omer. Similarly, hundreds of years later, all the tribes of Israel came to Gidon, following his victory over Midian, and pleaded: "Rule over us, both you and

your son and your grandson, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian" (Shoftim 8:23). Thus God fulfills His promise to Avraham to give the entire land into his hands.

But Avraham withdraws. He returns to his tent and chooses to relinquish his rulership over this vast area and over all that God has given into his hand. He obviously has his reasons: reigning over the land also involves assuming responsibility for its inhabitants – to educate them in the way of God, which is the way of righteousness and justice. Avraham sees before him the men of Sedom in all their wickedness, and concludes that he is not up to the task [3]. He wants to establish God's nation from his own seed, to educate them from childhood, and thereby to prepare the people that will bear the banner of God's Name in the world [4.]

In this act, Avraham admits failure and foregoes the challenge that God has placed before him. His pangs of conscience over this decision are easily detected in his prayer to save the people of Sedom, some twenty-four years later. In our parasha, too, God needs to comfort him:

"After these things God's word came to Avram in a vision, saying: Do not fear, Avram; I am your Shield; your reward is very great" (15:1.)

Avraham had reason to fear that he had lost all his reward as well as God's promise, since he himself had decided to forego it. God once again promises him the land, and Avraham requests a covenant rather than just a promise, for the promise had been allowed to fall away:

"And he said: Lord God, by what shall I know that I will inherit it"?

"The eagle descended upon the carcasses"

According to the view of R. Yochanan, Avraham should have accepted rulership over the land; he should have forced upon its inhabitants the "way of God to perform righteousness and justice." His actions were deficient. Although it is difficult to regard his behavior as a sin, bringing in its wake Divine retribution and punishment, clearly he did something wrong. Indeed, as we shall discuss below, the same conclusion arises from the unfolding of the Covenant between the Parts.

For this covenant, Avraham is required to bring a three-year old heifer, a three-year old goat, a three-year old ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon, and to wait for God's appearance. Clearly, fire is supposed to descend from heaven onto Avraham's offerings, thereby sealing the covenant between him and God.

Let us depict the events here as described by my friend, R. Yisrael Sadiel of Kfar Etzion. Instead of the Shekhina, it was the "eagle" that descended upon the carcasses. The eagle (ayit) here is not a solitary bird. "Ayit" is a participle, like "tzayid" (hunting) or "dayig" (fishing). It appears, then, that a great flock of birds of prey – perhaps even of different types – descended upon the offerings that Avraham had prepared for the covenant. Avraham did not give up on fulfilling his part of the covenant: he lifts a thick stick and attacks this throng of menacing birds with all his strength. It is a battle that continues for many hours, a long, dangerous and exhausting fight described by the Torah in just a few words:

"The eagles descended upon the carcasses, and Avraham drove them away".

Throughout his desperate battle, Avraham must surely have his eyes raised heavenwards. He must be asking himself why God is holding back the descent of His fire upon the sacrifices that Avraham has painstakingly prepared in order to fulfill the covenant. But throughout the day, God is absent.

"The eagles descended upon the carcasses, and Avraham drove them away. And when the sun began to set, a deep sleep fell upon Avraham, and a great dark terror fell upon him. And He said to Avram: 'Know with certainty that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not their own, and they will enslave them and afflict them for four hundred years. But I shall judge also the nation that they will serve, and afterwards they will emerge with great wealth. And you will come to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. And the fourth generation will return here, for the sin of the Emori is not yet complete to this day.' And it was, when the sun went down and it was dark, behold – a smoking furnace and a fiery torch that passed between these pieces." (15:11-17)

The sun is setting – it has reached the tops of the trees; Avraham has prevailed over the birds of prey, but has collapsed with exhaustion, or has fainted [5.]

It is specifically then that God comes, finds Avraham sleeping, and schedules the next meeting between them for four hundred years' time!

Was the symbolism of Avraham's Sisyphean battle against the eagles? This battle would seem to symbolize his spiritual and physical battle against the nations surrounding him, and against their wickedness – a battle that reaches its climax in the war of the kings. With his victory and the spiritual challenge that it brings – to introduce the way of God, the way of righteousness and justice, over the nations of the land, from the river of Egypt to the river Perat – it is specifically at this point, at the climax of the battle, that Avraham shows signs of fatigue and doubt, and he withdraws.

As stated, in contrast to the two previous interpretations of his sin (as proposed by R. Abahu and by Shemuel), R. Yochanan proposes not a sin but a failure: the lack of courage to elevate himself to the level of repairing the entire world. Is this missed opportunity worthy of punishment?

Indeed, my view is that R. Yochanan believes that the decree, "Your descendants will be strangers," is not a punishment, but rather a historical necessity in light of Avraham's withdrawal to his tent. R. Abahu emphasizes the slavery in Egypt – measure for measure for Avraham having pressed his servants into service. It is possible that Shemuel, who accuses Avraham of challenging God's promise, is emphasizing the "affliction" that is promised, namely, the literal suffering. In R. Yochanan's view, the emphasis should be placed upon the issue of being strangers. Had Avraham taken on rulership of the land and responsibility for the nations dwelling in it, to correct them and return them to God, they certainly would have joined themselves to the nation of the God of Avraham, and inherited the land forever. But since Avraham decided to withhold that potential sanctity from them and to bequeath the land only to his own descendants, a problem arose: to where would the nations, living in the inheritance that they had received from their forefathers in Eretz Yisrael, go? Could the native inhabitants of the land be banished for no justified reason, simply because God wanted to give the land to the descendants of Avraham? [6]

God informs Avraham that so long as the sin of the Emori is not complete, God will not banish them from the land. The children of the Emori were no saints in Avraham's generation; all were idolaters. But then – at the Covenant between the Parts – the accounting of their sins began, and God's accounting for idolatry lasts up to four generations, as we read in the Ten Commandments, in the prohibition, "You shall have no other gods before Me".

Until the sin of the Emori is complete, and until God visits their sin upon them after four generations, there is no land for the descendants of Avraham. Therefore, the nation of Israel that is descended from Avraham is destined to be a stranger in a land that is not theirs. Even if Avraham's children will dwell, for part of this time, in Eretz Yisrael, they will still be considered strangers, for the Emori inhabitants of the land will rule over them.

We may ask, then, why slavery and affliction are decreed upon Avraham's descendants. Why does God not suffice with, "Your descendants will be strangers," without adding that "they will enslave them and afflict them"? But in truth we must understand that the verse means only that the status of "strangers" will last four hundred years, while within those four hundred years there will be slavery and affliction for some undefined period. Indeed, this is what happened: the slavery and affliction did not extend throughout the four hundred years of "strangeness." Even the two hundred and ten years of exile in Egypt were not all years of slavery and affliction, for throughout Yosef's lifetime – and, according to Chazal, throughout the lifetime of his brothers – the slavery was postponed.

The slavery and affliction are a necessary historical result of being strangers for an extended period in the land of another nation. Naturally, there are hosting kings who are better and others who are worse, some more tolerant and others less so. Therefore, God set down a period for Avraham's descendants to be strangers, and declared that consequently there sometimes would also be periods of slavery and affliction. The status of being strangers arose, as stated, from the fact that there was not yet an available land for Am Yisrael, so long as the sin of the Emori was not complete.

Was Avraham justified in retiring to his tent and in relinquishing the opportunity to impose the way of God – the way of righteousness and justice – over all the nations of the land? Was he justified in his insistence that God's nation, destined to inherit the land, would be established from his seed alone?

These questions will occupy us in next week's shiur.

NOTES:

[1]The Maharal draws a distinction between Avraham's faith that he would have children and his lack of faith that the land would be given to them, but this is still a forced explanation.

[2]Admittedly, there is no traditionally accepted distinction between these parts.

[3]I also learned from Rav Bin-Nun that this prevented a real conflict between the two great legislators of the time: on one hand, Hammurabi, king of Babylon, author of the famous Hammurabi Code – identified by a number of important scholars as Amrafel, king of Shin'ar, against whom Avraham fought; and on the other hand – Avraham, legislator of God's way to perform righteousness and justice, who was destined to inherit Hammurabi's rule on the south-western side of the river Perat.

[4]Indeed, the history of nations distinguishes between nations that may be traced back to a single family, and those associated with a certain area where the common culture arose.

[5]Cf. Daniel chapter 10. There, too, the "deep sleep" refers to a faint resulting from exhaustion.

[6]Although there are those who learn from the first Rashi in the Torah that God – to Whom all the world belongs – does "whatever He wishes," this is a moral distortion as well as a distortion of Rashi's interpretation; the scope of this shiur does not allow for a more extensive discussion. In any event, our parasha proves that this is not so.

Translated by Kaeren Fish