

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA



שלמות אישית ושליחות לאומית

Personal Perfection, National Mission

The Prophecy of the Covenant of the Pieces

■ The Decree

We read in Parashat Lekh Lekha of the forging of the *brit* – covenant or pact – between G-d and Avraham Avinu, in which G-d promises the Land of Israel to Avraham's future generations. Such an event would appear to be a very joyous and uplifting occasion, and definitely a seminal one in the life of our great Patriarch. It certainly begins on a very positive note, as the Torah emphasizes that it happened “*after these events*” (B'reshit 15,1) – that is, after Avraham's great victory against the Four Kings. Hashem assures him that he need not fear that he may have conducted himself wrongly, and that, on the contrary, he will receive a most significant reward: “*Do not fear, Avram, I am your defender; your reward will be very great.*”

The story also ends on a very upbeat note: G-d's promise to Avraham of Eretz Yisrael: “*On that day, G-d forged a pact with Avram, saying, ‘to your descendants I have given this Land.’*” (verse 18)

Why, then, is this great forward-looking prophecy accompanied by fear and darkness?

וַיְהִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לָבוֹא וַתִּרְדָּמָה נִפְלָה עַל אַבְרָם
וַהֲגָה אֵימָה חֲשֹׁכָה גְדֹלָה נִפְלֹת עָלָיו.

*The sun was setting, and Avram fell into a trance, and behold,
he was stricken by a deep dark dread.* (verse 12)

This indicates that side-by-side with the promises of a great future, G-d is about to decree upon Israel a harsh decree of enslavement:

וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם: יָדַע תֵּדַע כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה זְרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם,
וְעֲבָדוּם וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה.

*G-d said to Avram: Know for sure that your seed will be strangers
in a foreign land, and they will be enslaved and oppressed for
four hundred years.* (verse 13)

No rhyme or reason is presented to explain this severe Divine decree. It is not likely to be a punishment for a sin, for the coming generations that are to suffer the enslavement have not yet been born and certainly did not yet sin! Could it be a necessary step designed to prepare Bnei Yisrael for their future role as G-d's Nation?

The Talmud (Nedarim 32a), well aware of this difficulty, quotes three Sages who participated in a discussion on this matter. Each gave a different answer:

- **R. Elazar** said, "Why was Avraham Avinu punished by having his children enslaved for 210 years? It was because he took advantage of the Torah scholars in his household and drafted them for war." (see 14,14)
- **Shmuel** said it was because Avraham doubted G-d's promise and asked, "*How will I know that I will truly inherit the Land?*" (15,8)
- **R. Yochanan** gave a third answer: It was because he allowed King Malki-Tzedek to take back his men, citizens of S'dom and Amora, instead of keeping them and teaching them about G-d.

All three Sages agree: the enslavement was truly a punishment for a sin, committed by Avraham himself and not by his descendants. In dispute is only the exact iniquity that triggered the terrible punishment.

The Ramban (Nachmanides), in his commentary to the Torah, tells us of another sin of Avraham: He left the Land of Israel because of the famine (B'reshit 12,10), even though G-d had told him specifically to go there. This sin led to his wife Sarah being taken by King Pharaoh. In the Ramban's words: "When Avraham left the Land he had been commanded to enter, because of the famine, this was a sin..."

The determination by the Sages of Israel that it was Avraham's sins that brought about his descendants' enslavement raises several searing questions.

■ Weakness and its Rectification

The first question is based on the words of the Mishna in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers, 5,3): "Avraham was tested with ten tests, and he passed them

all.” Among them were the hunger in the Land of Israel, mentioned by the Ramban, and the Covenant Between the Pieces, when Avraham asked how he could be assured that he would really inherit the Land (see Baraita Avot D’Rabbe Natan, 33). Both of these are listed as tests that he passed, yet were both mentioned above as sins he committed!

Hashem Himself said (after the Binding of Isaac, in B’reshit 22,12) that He knows that Avraham is G-d-fearing. G-d also praised Avraham’s righteousness when he told his son Yitzchak that Avraham had “*hearkened to My voice, and kept My commandments, My statutes and my laws*” (26,5). In light of all this, how could the Sages have ascribed to Avraham sins such as those mentioned above? The Torah certainly did not list them as such!

Our second question is this: How does the punishment fit the crime? The severe decree of 210 years of cruel bondage for an entire nation is totally out of proportion to any of the sins mentioned above:

- Did Avraham take Torah scholars from their studies, as R. Elazar said, for his own personal use? He took them in order to save Lot and his family!
- By asking for a sign that he would in fact merit the Land, as Shmuel said, did he commit such a terrible crime?
- Yes, he allowed the men of S'dom and Amora – not exactly the biggest tzaddikim – to return home. For this, his descendants deserve to be enslaved so torturously?

Where is G-d’s attribute of *midah k’negged midah*, proportionate punishment?

And of course, our third question, to which we alluded above, is this: Can it be that a man sins, and his innocent children and grandchildren are punished?

In order to deeply understand the words of our Sages and Rabbis, we must employ different terminology and definitions than those we have been accustomed to using. Specifically, instead of the word *sin* in this context, we must speak of *weakness*; and in place of *punishment*, we will say *rectification* or *correction*.

What this means is that a *sin* is actually caused by a *weakness* in faith, or by *giving in* to various fears or passions. It then follows that *punishment* is actually a form of *strengthening*, *correcting* and *perfecting*.

This way of understanding the concept of sin enables us to find logic and justification where we did not see it before. A *weakness* that is revealed in one generation – such as giving in to fear or lust, or a lack of complete faith – has an automatic effect on the succeeding generation; its “punishment” will involve a process of *repairing* and *strengthening*. We will see later on how this is manifest in the enslavement of Israel in Egypt.

We have answered the last question. But to answer the other two, regarding the seeming lack of proportionality in the punishment and the apparent contradiction regarding Avraham's righteousness, we must delve deeply into two new concepts: “personal perfection” and “national mission.”

■ Avraham's Two Missions

Yes, Avraham Avinu passed all the difficult tests he faced, and was found to be of perfect and complete faith. However, this applies to one facet of his personality and mission: that of perfecting himself and reaching the highest level of awe of G-d. As the angel of G-d told him after he passed the test of *Akedat Yitzchak*:

עֵתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי יִרָא אֱ-לֹהִים אֶתָּה...

I now know that you are a G-d-fearing man... (22,12)

But this was not the only task assigned to Avraham in his lifetime! He was also charged with a **national mission**, namely, to publicize G-d's Name in the world, and to “*repair and uplift the world under the Kingdom of G-d*” (from our daily prayers).

For this purpose, the Divine plan was to send Avraham to Eretz Yisrael, which was designated to be the site of the Beit HaMikdash and G-d's inspiration. There he was to travel from place to place, proclaim to all the name of G-d, and uproot the idol-worship of the Canaanite residents of the Land. This he began to do, as written:

וַיַּעֲבֹר אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ עַד מְקוֹם שְׁכֶם עַד אֵלוֹן מוֹרָה וְהַכְנִיעָנִי אִזְ בְּאֶרֶץ...
וַיַּעֲתֵק מִשָּׁם הָהָרָה... וַיִּבֶן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַה' וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם ה'.

Avram traveled in the Land, until the place of Shechem, Elon Moreh; and the Canaanites were then in the Land... He then went towards the mountain... and built an altar there to G-d, and he called in the name of G-d. (12,6-8)

If Avraham would have succeeded in this national mission, history would

have been totally different. His descendants would likely have become priests unto G-d, and the Canaanites all around them, including those of S'dom and Amora, would have been G-d-fearing people, observing His commandments. There would also have been no need, of course, for Avraham's descendants to be sent down to Egypt, nor for the terrible enslavement they suffered there.

It is true that Avraham was very highly regarded and honored among the inhabitants of the Land. The people of the Hittite nation, from whom he came to buy the Machpelah plot for Sarah's burial, even called him a "*Prince of G-d amidst us*" (B'reshit 23, 6). But the bottom line was that they remained idol-worshippers, continuing their pagan ways of abomination before G-d.

Our Matriarch Rivka was well aware of their practices. When she explained to her husband Yitzchak why she didn't want their son Yaakov to marry a local girl, she said: "*I am disgusted with my life because of those Hittite women*" (27,46). Hashem Himself also said something similar:

וְלֹא תִלְכוּ בַחֻקֵּי הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְשַׁלַּח מִפְּנֵיכֶם, כִּי אֶת כָּל אֱלֹהִים עָשׂוּ וְאָקֶץ בָּם.

*Do not follow the laws of the nation
that I am driving out before you, since they did all those [sins],
and I was disgusted with them.* (Vayikra 20,23)

Not even Lot, Avraham's nephew who traveled with him to the Land of Israel, was totally influenced by Avraham. Yes, he learned the value of welcoming guests from his righteous uncle. But on the other hand, after the dispute between his shepherds and those of Avraham, he was given a choice as to which part of the Land he would like - and he chose the fertile region of S'dom, despite the evil people who lived there. This certainly does not indicate a high level of Avraham's positive influence!

Yishmael, too, Avraham's own son from Hagar: He chose the path of idol-worship, bringing about his banishment from Avraham's house.

In light of these developments, Hashem developed Plan B, as explained in the Covenant of the Pieces. Instead of working with and trying to affect all the people in the Land, the emphasis was placed only on Avraham's direct descendants: They would be carefully screened, and only those found to be worthy of a covenant with G-d would carry the banner of "G-d's Nation," and only they would eventually inherit the Land from the Canaanite peoples, who would never be worthy of it.

■ The War of the Kings

In the meantime, a powerful, historic event was unfolding, one with the potential of changing the entire course of Jewish history. This was the War of the Four Kings Against the Five.

King K'dorlaomer of Eilam gathered three other powerful kings, and together they came from the north to wage war against the five kings of the S'dom area who had rebelled against him. K'dorlaomer and his allies then proceeded to destroy all the giants of the Land of Israel. The Torah gives a long list of nations that the Four Kings defeated: Refaim, Zuzim, Eimim, Amalek, the Horites, and the Emorites (B'reshit 14,5-7). They had all been the bane and terror of the residents of the Land, as the Torah tells us: *"The Eimim lived there before, a large and abundant nation, and as tall as giants. The Refaim, too, were considered like giants... And in Se'ir, the Horim resided before..."* (D'varim 2,10-12)

The kings of S'dom and Amora, where Lot lived, could not withstand the might of the Four Kings, and they ran away and fell in the swamplands: *"The Valley of Sidim had many clay pits, and the kings of S'dom and Amora fled and they fell there, and [each of] the survivors fled to a mountain."* (B'reshit 14,10)

With great courage and daring, Avraham arose and took 318 of his men and allies, and fought valiantly against K'dorlaomer and his allies to save his nephew Lot. Let us picture the scene: Avraham launches a midnight attack from Hevron. With astonishing strength, momentum and Divine aid, he defeats the Four Kings, ending their string of victories. He then pursues them some 250 kilometers to the north, all the way through the Jordan Valley up to the area west of Damascus in Syria:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם... וַיֵּרְדֵּף עַד דָּן וַיַּחֲלֶק עֲלֵיהֶם לַיְלָה הוּא וְעַבְדָּיו
וַיָּבִיאוּם וַיִּרְדָּפֵם עַד חֹבֶה אֲשֶׁר מִשְׁמָאל לְדָמֶשֶׁק.

Avram heard that his nephew had been taken... He pursued [them] up to Dan... and smote them, and pursued them until Hovah, to the left of Damascus. (verses 14-15)

The waging of such a battle and campaign against such strong foes, and the night chase, by foot, over such a large area, was a tremendous accomplishment. In essence, Avraham conquered half the length of the Land of Canaan! But the campaign was not over. Still needed is an extra push to maintain the momentum and, with G-d's ongoing aid, conquer the rest of Eretz Yisrael to the west, up to the Mediterranean Sea.

It could have happened, and it could have changed history. The Children of Israel would not have needed to be enslaved in Egypt. But it did not happen.

What did occur was that the King of S'dom appeared, asking Avraham to hand over his captured men, and in return, he will forego whatever property Avraham has taken.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ סְדֹם אֶל אַבְרָם תֵּן לִי הַנָּפֶשׁ וְהָרֶכֶשׁ קַח לָךְ.

“Give me the people, and the property you can take.” (14,21)

But Avraham sanctifies G-d's Name by both giving him the people *and* not taking the property! He declares that the entire world belongs to G-d, and that he does not need the King of S'dom to enrich him. This was of course a tremendous display of greatness of spirit on Avraham's part – on the personal level.

But in terms of his national mission, the story is very different. R. Yochanan, the Sage who gave the third answer in the Gemara quoted above, explained that Avraham's sin was precisely in not keeping the captives, converting them and “bringing them under the wings of the Divine Presence.” He would thus have continued and completed the physical and spiritual conquest of all of Eretz Yisrael!

Following the same approach, we can understand R. Elazar's answer, who said that Avraham's sin was in using Torah scholars in his war against the Four Kings. We asked above: Was this not a *milchemet mitzvah*, a Torah-mandated battle to save the life of his nephew? If so, Torah scholars are also commanded to take part! But again, the explanation is that yes, Avraham certainly did the right thing on the personal level. But in terms of his national mission, he missed a great opportunity. If he was already using Torah scholars in his war, he should have gone on with them to capture the entire Land of Israel!

In light of all this, let us review once again how this story unfolded, and we will understand the events anew in a different light – and also provide an explanation to the third answer above, that of Shmuel.

■ The Decree of Enslavement: Plan B

Immediately after the war, Hashem sends word to Avraham:

אַל תִּירָא אַבְרָם אֲנֹכִי מִגֵּן לָךְ שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד.

*“Do not fear, Avram, I am your defender;
your reward will be very great.” (15,1)*

G-d is preparing him in this prophetic revelation for the charge of completing the conquest and inheritance of the Land. This is why He tells him not to fear the strength of the ruling Canaanites. The words “*Do not fear*” are reminiscent of Moshe’s parting speech to Israel, in which he similarly encouraged them to inherit the Land:

רֵאָה נָתַן ה' אֶל־לִפְנֵיךָ אֶת הָאָרֶץ, עֲלֶה רֵשׁ ... אַל תִּירָא וְאַל תִּתַּח.

Behold, G-d has given the Land before you, arise and inherit it...

Do not fear and do not tremble. (D'varim 1,21)

In any event, Avraham interrupts G-d’s promise, noting that he has no children who will inherit him (B'reshit 15,2). G-d assures him that he will have descendants “*as numerous as the stars of the Heavens*” (15,5), and then continues where He left off:

אֲנִי ה' אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׁדִּים לָתֶת לְךָ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ.

*I am G-d Who took you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this Land
for you to inherit.* (15,7)

This is the first time we see the command “*to inherit*” the Land. Hashem is giving Avraham the green light to continue to fight and inherit the entire Land – the essence of the purpose of his coming there in the first place! How does Avraham respond to this great challenge, his national mission? He says: “*O G-d, the Lord, How can I be assured that I will inherit it?*” (verse 8)

Avraham asks for a Divine sign that he will succeed in the mission. What a terrible miss of a great opportunity! He should have known that the time was right to conquer the Land. Could there have been a greater sign of his success than the miraculous victory he had just scored over the Four Kings? Such a victory cannot be explained naturally; why did Avraham need to ask for yet another sign?

We now understand Shmuel’s answer given in the above-quoted Gemara passage. He explained that the reason for the enslavement in Egypt was because of Avraham’s sin in asking for a sign at this time, instead of recognizing the “greatness of the hour” for the fulfillment of his national mission.

We thus see that all three of the reasons given in the Gemara for the enslavement in Egypt – by R. Elazar, Shmuel, and R. Yochanan – all center around the same point: Avraham did not fulfill the original Divine national plan of conquering the entire Land of Israel and teaching its populace the ways of the Torah. Plan A had therefore to be shelved, to be replaced by

Plan B: the Covenant Between the Pieces (B'reshit 15,7-21), involving bondage and slavery in Egypt. This is why it was accompanied by such darkness and fear.

It means, as G-d tells Avraham (verse 16), waiting until the fourth generation of Yaakov's descendants, which will return and capture the Land from the Seven Nations then living there. The waiting time includes the growth and development of that generation elsewhere, in Egypt, a *land that is not theirs* (verse 13) - a crucible that will purge it of impurities and mold it until it reaches 600,000 men aged 20 and up. It is clear that a nation multiplying and developing in such a manner amidst another nation will be oppressed and humiliated, as the host nation attempts to smother its growth.

Normally, in order to reach this number of 600,000, 400 years would be required, as Hashem states as the "default" period: *"they [the Egyptians] will enslave and torture them for 400 years"* (15,13). But if they are blessed with miraculous amounts of offspring, as actually occurred, it will take less time. In the meantime, until Israel is ready to inherit the Land, the sins of the Land's current inhabitants will continue to pile up, until a critical mass is reached that will seal their fate for destruction at the hands of Israel, as is written: *"And the fourth generation will return here, for the sins of the Emorites will not be complete until then."* (verse 16)

Let us emphasize once again: From the personal standpoint, Avraham Avinu reached an unsurpassed level of perfection – and this is why G-d promised him:

וְאַתָּה תָּבוֹא אֶל אֲבֹתֶיךָ בְּשָׁלוֹם, תִּקָּבֵר בְּשֵׂיבָה טוֹבָה.

*And you will join your fathers in peace,
you will be buried in a good old age.* (verse 15)

Avraham's sin (noted by the Ramban) of leaving the Land because of the famine also touches upon his national mission. On the personal level, Avraham acted in accordance with the principles governing danger to life, and was right to leave and seek food elsewhere. But on a national level, because G-d sent him to the Land to teach the peoples there how to serve G-d, he should have served as a symbol of rock-hard strength and faith in Hashem, by not leaving the Land even in the face of hunger.

Let us conclude with this verse from the Prophet Yeshayahu, which speaks of Avraham Avinu's arrival in Eretz Yisrael from the east:

מי העיר ממזרח צֶדֶק יִקְרָאֵהוּ לְרִגְלוֹ יִתֵּן לְפָנָיו גּוֹיִם וּמַלְכִּים יִרְדּוּ,
יִתֵּן בְּעֶפְרָח חֲרָבוֹ בְּקֶשׁ נִדְף קִשְׁתּוֹ. יִרְדָּפֵם יַעֲבוֹר שְׁלוֹם...

*Who has raised up [Avraham] from the east, calling him in
righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him, and
has him rule over kings; his sword turns them to dust, his bow
turns them into windblown chaff. He pursues them,
and passes on safely...*

מי פָּעַל וַעֲשָׂה קִרְא הַדְּרוֹת מֵרֵאשִׁית...

*Who has wrought and done this? He that called the generations
from the beginning...* (Isaiah 41,2-4)

We have thus explained that the enslavement was not a punishment in the normal sense, nor did Avraham sin on a personal level. He did not fulfill the Divine national mission as commanded, and therefore it had to be carried out in a different manner by the entire nation, after years of enslavement and growth in Egypt.

