

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The call to Abraham, with which Lech Lecha begins, seems to come from nowhere: "Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father's house, and go to a land which I will show you."

Nothing has prepared us for this radical departure. We have not had a description of Abraham as we had in the case of Noah: "Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noah walked with G-d." Nor have we been given a series of glimpses into his childhood, as in the case of Moses. It is as if Abraham's call is a sudden break with all that went before. There seems to be no prelude, no context, no background.

Added to this is a curious verse in the last speech delivered by Moses' successor Joshua: "And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the Lord, the G-d of Israel: Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the river (Euphrates), Terach, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.'" (Joshua 24:2)

The implication seems to be that Abraham's father was an idolater. Hence the famous midrashic tradition that as a child, Abraham broke his father's idols. When Terach asked him who had done the damage, he replied, "The largest of the idols took a stick and broke the rest". "Why are you deceiving me?" Terach asked, "Do idols have understanding?" "Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying", replied the child. On this reading, Abraham was an iconoclast, a breaker of images, one who rebelled against his father's faith (Bereishith Rabbah 38:8).

Maimonides, the philosopher, put it somewhat differently. Originally, human beings believed in one G-d. Later, they began to offer sacrifices to the sun, the planets and stars, and other forces of nature, as creations or servants of the one G-d. Later still, they worshipped them as entities- gods-in their own right. It took Abraham, using logic alone, to realize the incoherence of polytheism: "After he was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. Day and night, he thought and wondered, how is it possible that this celestial sphere should be continuously guiding the world, without something to guide it and cause it to revolve? For it cannot move of its own accord. He had no teacher or mentor, because he was immersed in Ur of the Chaldees among foolish idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and

he worshipped with them. He continued to speculate and reflect until he achieved the way of truth, understanding what was right through his own efforts. It was then that he knew that there is one G-d who guides the heavenly bodies, who created everything, and besides whom there is no other god." (Laws of Idolatry, 1:2)

What is common to Maimonides and the midrash is discontinuity. Abraham represents a radical break with all that went before. Remarkably however, the previous chapter gives us a quite different perspective: "These are the generations of Terach. Terach fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot... Terach took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terach were 205 years, and Terach died in Haran." (Gen 11:31)

The implication seems to be that far from breaking with his father, Abraham was continuing a journey Terach had already begun.

How are we to reconcile these two passages? The simplest way, taken by most commentators, is that they are not in chronological sequence. The call to Abraham (in Gen. 12) happened first. Abraham heard the Divine summons, and communicated it to his father. The family set out together, but Terach stopped halfway, in Haran. The passage recording Terach's death is placed before Abraham's call, though it happened later, to guard Abraham from the accusation that he failed to honour his father by leaving him in his old age (Rashi, Midrash).

Yet there is another obvious possibility. Abraham's spiritual insight did not come from nowhere. Terach had already made the first tentative move toward monotheism. Children complete what their parents begin.

Significantly, both the Bible and rabbinic tradition understood divine parenthood in this way. They contrasted the description of Noah ("Noah walked with G-d") and that of Abraham ("The G-d before whom I have walked", 24:40). G-d himself says to Abraham "Walk ahead of Me and be perfect" (17:1). G-d signals the way, then challenges His children to walk on ahead.

In one of the most famous of all Talmudic passages, the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Metzia 59b) describes how the sages outvoted Rabbi Eliezer despite

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the fact that his view was supported by a heavenly voice. It continues by describing an encounter between Rabbi Natan and the prophet Elijah. Rabbi Natan asks the prophet: What was G-d's reaction to that moment, when the law was decided by majority vote rather than heavenly voice? Elijah replies, "He smiled and said, 'My children have defeated me! My children have defeated me!'"

To be a parent in Judaism is to make space within which a child can grow. Astonishingly, this applies even when the parent is G-d (avinu, "our Father") himself. In the words of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Creator of the world diminished the image and stature of creation in order to leave something for man, the work of His hands, to do, in order to adorn man with the crown of creator and maker" (Halakhic Man, p 107).

This idea finds expression in halakhah, Jewish law. Despite the emphasis in the Torah on honouring and revering parents, Maimonides rules: "Although children are commanded to go to great lengths [in honouring parents], a father is forbidden to impose too heavy a yoke on them, or to be too exacting with them in matters relating to his honour, lest he cause them to stumble. He should forgive them and close his eyes, for a father has the right to forgo the honour due to him." (Hilkhhot Mamrim 6:8)

The story of Abraham can be read in two ways, depending on how we reconcile the end of chapter 11 with the beginning of chapter 12. One reading emphasizes discontinuity. Abraham broke with all that went before. The other emphasizes continuity. Terach, his father, had already begun to wrestle with idolatry. He had set out on the long walk to the land which would eventually become holy, but stopped half way. Abraham completed the journey his father began.

Perhaps childhood itself has the same ambiguity. There are times, especially in adolescence, when we tell ourselves that we are breaking with our parents, charting a path that is completely new. Only in retrospect, many years later, do we realize how much we owe our parents-how, even at those moments when we felt most strongly that we were setting out on a journey uniquely our own, we were, in fact, living out the ideals and aspirations that we learned from them.

And it began with G-d himself, who left, and continues to leave, space for us, His children, to walk on ahead. © 2012 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Go out of your land, and from your kindred, and your birthplace and your father's house, to the land that I will show you." (Genesis 12:1)

Our Biblical tradition seems to live in a paradox between the universal and the particular, our obligations to the world at large and our obligations to our own nation and family. Is there a final resolution to the tension between these two polarities?

With Abraham, the paradox takes on an especially poignant human and familial dimension. At first G-d instructs Abraham, "Go out of your land, and from your kindred, and your birthplace and your father's house, to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). No introductions, no apologies, straight to the point: Abraham is to found a new family-nation in the specific location of the Land of Israel.

However, in the next verse the nationalistic fervor of going up to one's own land is somewhat muted by the more universalistic message of G-d's next charge: "...And in you shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). From this moment on, both of these elements - a particular nation guaranteed by G-d and the broader vision of world peace and redemption will vie for center stage in the soul of Abraham's descendants.

In the case of Abraham himself, it is the universalistic aspect of his spirit which seems the most dominant. He quickly emerges as a World War hero who rescues the five regional nations - including Sodom - from the stranglehold of four terrorizing kings. Abraham is likewise desirous of continuing his relationship with Lot - even after this nephew and adopted son rejects the Abrahamic teachings and the Land of Israel in favor of Sodom - and even remonstrates with G-d to save the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham is even initially against banishing Hagar and Ishmael, wishing everyone to find shelter under the Abrahamic umbrella.

The Midrash magnificently captures Abraham's concern with the world and world opinion in a trenchant elucidation of the opening verse in the portion Vayera, where the Torah records the moment of G-d's appearance to Abraham after his circumcision in the fields of the oak trees of Mamre (Genesis 18:1). Why stress this particular location, including the owner of the parcel of trees Mamre? The Midrash explains that when G-d commanded Abraham to circumcise himself he went to seek the advice of his three allies, Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre. "Now Aner said to him, 'You mean to say that you are a 100 years old and you want to maim yourself in such a way?' Eshkol said to him, 'How can you do this? You will be making yourself unique and identifiable, different from the other nations of the world.' Mamre, however, said to Abraham, 'How can

you refuse to do what G-d asks you? After all G-d saved all of your 248 limbs when you were in the fiery furnace of Nimrod. If G-d asks you to sacrifice a small portion of just one of your limbs, how can you refuse?" Because Mamre was the only person who gave him positive advice, G-d chose to appear to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre" (Bereshit Rabbah 42).

What I believe is truly remarkable about this midrash is that it pictures Abraham as "checking out" the advisability of circumcision with his three Gentile friends and allies, in order to discover just how upset they would be by his unique and nationalistic sign on his flesh.

The paradox of the universal - inclusivistic versus the national - exclusivistic takes on the most serious threat to Abraham's equanimity in terms of his relationship to Sarah. We must remember that theirs is a union of love and genuine cooperation. Commenting on the verse, "And Abram took his wife Sarai ... and all their substance that they had gathered and the souls that they had gathered in Haran..." (Genesis 12:5), Rashi explains what it means to 'gather souls': "Abraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women." They truly worked together as consecrated partners to accomplish the work of the Lord.

Indeed, Abraham is not only committed to Sarah, but seems to be aware of her higher gift of prophecy. When she, tragically barren after many years of marriage, suggests to her husband that he father a child with her maidservant Hagar, the text records "And Abraham hearkened to the voice of Sarah" - (Genesis 15:2) - suggesting that Abraham's role in this matter is entirely subject to the will of Sarah.

Yet despite Abraham's total devotion to Sarah in one area they differed strongly. Hagar may have been brought into the picture by Sarah, but when Sarah realizes that the behavior of her son Ishmael constitutes a serious threat to her family, Sarah is not willing to compromise: Hagar and her son must be banished.

Now since Abraham's vision wants to embrace all of humanity, how could he see his own flesh and blood exiled to the desert? An expansion of this theme and a quintessential expression of the dual world view held by Abraham and Sarah respectively, is found in the Tosefta of Tractate Sotah, (chapter 5), on the verse spoken by Sarah in this week's Torah portion: "...I was slighted in her (Hagar) eyes. Let G-d judge between me and you" (Genesis 16:5). Our Sages in the Tosefta provide the following dialogue between Sarah and Abraham: "I see Yishmael building an altar, capturing grasshoppers, and sacrificing them to idols. If he teaches this idolatry to my son Yitzchak, the name of heaven will be desecrated, says Sarah. Abraham said to her: 'After I gave her such advantages, how can I demote her? Now that we have made her a mistress (of our house), how can we send her away? What will the other people say about us?' ("Habriyot mah omrot alainu?").

Sarah's position is indubitably clear. She is more than willing to work together with Abraham to save the world - but not at the expense of her own son and family. There is room to be concerned about the world - but not at the price of losing one's son and future identity. Our identity as a unique people must first be forged and secured - and then the dialogue with and the redemption of the nations will follow in due course. G-d teaches Abraham that Sarah is right: "Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for through Isaac shall your seed be called" (Genesis 21:12). Indeed, it is even possible that the subsequent trial of the binding of Isaac comes in no small measure to teach Abraham to properly appreciate - be truly committed to - his only son and heir Isaac. © 2012 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Rashi comments that the Lord assured Avraham that leaving his home and family in Aram and heading to a then unknown destination would somehow be to his benefit and ultimate good. Even though this may appear strange to the casual observer-leaving the known and secure and heading out to wander to an unknown destination-the ways of the Lord are inscrutable and often counter-intuitive to human logic.

The purpose of Avraham's wandering journey is to reach the Land of Israel and to claim it for his descendants. For only in the Land of Israel will Avraham find personal fulfillment and realize his true spiritual, moral and holy potential. But while in Aram and Charan, Avraham and Sarah did good work, spreading the idea of monotheism and teaching the basic system of morality that is the core of the Torah's value system. Many people were influenced by them and became followers of monotheism and began to worship only the one true G-d.

So, why not leave Avraham and Sarah in Aram to continue their good work? Why send them off to the Land of Israel, then inhabited by the fierce and pagan Canaanite nation, to a very uncertain and perilous situation? And in the Land of Israel, the wicked, powerful and influential cities of Sodom are present. Seemingly Avraham and Sarah can accomplish much more by remaining in Aram than by travelling to the Land of Israel. And because of this type of human thinking, Avraham has to rely on the Lord's counter-intuitive logic, so to speak, and unhesitatingly embark on this dangerous journey that will eventually change all of human history.

What is clear from all of this is that the fulfillment of Jewish destiny and influence, of the holy self-actualization of the Jewish people can only be achieved in the Land of Israel. The obstacles that the Land of Israel itself raises to this self-actualization are

many and profound. Nevertheless, the actions of our forbearers remain as the guideposts for all future Jewish generations.

If we look around at the Jewish world today the only significant demographic growth of Jews the world over is in the Land of Israel. The millennia-long exile and the Diaspora generally is shutting down, whether from external pressures or inner weakness. Only in the Land of Israel will the Jewish people find their soul and destiny.

And, just as in the time of Avraham and Sarah, the Land of Israel is plagued with dangers, problems and fraught with apparent peril. There is still a touch of Sodom present there and the heirs of the Canaanites are in the land. Yet just as the Lord told Avraham many thousands of years ago, only there will you become great and blessed-blessed for yourself and for all of humankind.

The opportunity to live a truly Jewish life and to help build a kingdom of priests and a holy nation is pretty much reserved to those who today live in the Land of Israel. The future of the Jewish people lies today in Chevron and not in Charan. © 2012 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

What makes the story of Avraham (Abraham) and Sarah going to Egypt important enough to be included in the Genesis narrative? (Genesis 12:10-20)

Ramban suggests that this is an example of the maxim that what occurred to our patriarchs and matriarchs will one day occur to the Jewish people. Note that Avraham migrates to Egypt because of a famine. There, his wife Sarah is taken hostage; G-d intervenes by smiting Pharaoh and his people-ultimately Pharaoh ushers Avraham and Sarah out of the country.

This precisely mirrors what happens later on in Bereishit. Jacob comes to Egypt with his family because of a famine. In time, the Jews, like Sarah, are enslaved; G-d intervenes with plagues and Pharaoh, King of Egypt, insists that the Jews leave. (Ramban, Genesis 12:10)

Another observation. G-d's covenant with Avraham includes a promise of land and children. Relative to both of these commitments, Avraham is tested. Among all the lands, the one that is promised to Avraham, the land of Canaan, is stricken with famine. Later, G-d asks that the only child born of Avraham and Sarah, Yitzhak, be taken to Moriah to be slaughtered. (Rashi, Genesis 12:10, 22:12)

These two chapters are strikingly similar. In the Binding of Isaac story G-d steps in to save the child at

the last moment. The covenantal promise of family is secured. Here too, in the Egypt narrative, G-d steps in, punishing Pharaoh. Avraham returns to Canaan. The covenantal promise of land is sustained.

The upshot: Covenants do not guarantee that the road will be smooth. Sometimes, even after the covenant is proclaimed, there are set-backs. The test of belief is whether one can maintain belief during periods of challenge as did Avraham. This is a central message of the Avraham -Sarah story in Egypt.

One last thought. The importance of this chapter may be the beginning of the covenantal promise to Sarah. Up to this point, only Avraham was promised children. Was Sarah part of this commitment? After all, in this section, Avraham asks Sarah to proclaim she is his sister. Children are not born from sibling relationships. In fact, in Egypt Avraham is given shefakhot (hand maids). (Genesis 12:16) One of them is probably Hagar whom Avraham ultimately marries. (Genesis 16:1)

In the end, however, the Torah declares that G-d smites Pharaoh, "concerning Sarah, Avraham's wife." (Genesis 12:17) Here, for the first time G-d acts on behalf of the relationship between Sarah and Avraham. From Sarah and not from Hagar, would come the child who would be the second patriarch. This commitment from G-d makes this section extraordinarily important in understanding the unfolding of the Jewish people. © 2012 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“And Lot went with him" (B'raishis 12:4). Obviously, then, Lot accompanied Avra[ha]m on his journey to the Land of Canaan. In case this point wasn't made clearly enough, the Torah reiterates it in the very next verse, telling us that "Avram took his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and all of the belongings they had acquired and the souls they had made in Charan, and they left to go to the Land of Canaan." Why does the Torah mention twice, in back-to-back verses, that Lot went with him?

Ibn Ezra and Radak are among the commentators who say that G-d told Avra[ha]m to "go to the land that I will show you" (12:1) while Avra[ha]m was still in Ur Kasdim, and that this was the reason Terach (Avra[ha]m's father) left Lower Mesopotamia to go to the Land of Canaan (11:31). Although a straightforward reading of the text seems to indicate that this communication occurred after Avra[ha]m and Terach (et al) had already settled in Charan (11:31), which is how Rashi and Ramban understand the verses, a closer look at the context and flow seems to indicate that the narrative at the beginning of Parashas Lech L'cha didn't take place after the narrative at the

end of Parashas Noach was over, but was concurrent with it, with their narratives overlapping and describing some of the same occurrences.

Parashas Noach consists of the flood narrative, the aftermath of the flood, the Tower of Bavel narrative, and a listing of the ten generations from Noach till Avra[ha]m. For each of these generations, the only information provided is the name of the father, the name of the son, how old the father was when the son was born, and how long the father lived after the son was born. For Terach, however, we are given a bit more information, including the names of his three sons (not just Avra[ha]m), and some family history (the death of one of his sons, which left his grandson-Lot-an orphan, the marriage of his other two sons, Sarai's inability to have children, and his leaving Ur Kasdim and settling in Charan). So much so, that Terach has the "honor" of being one of the few biblical characters whose legacy is introduced by the expression "these are the 'toldos' of" (11:27). Since this narrative is about Terach, it is told from a perspective that has him at its center. It doesn't really matter (as far as Terach's life is concerned) why he left Ur Kasdim-whether it was because his son was being persecuted for his monotheistic beliefs, because (after his son Haran's untimely death) he felt it wasn't healthy for his family to stay there, or because Avra[ha]m had decided to leave (in order to follow G-d's instructions) and Terach decided to go with his son. From Terach's perspective, the point is that he moved his family from Ur Kasdim to Charan, and that's what is highlighted. Nevertheless, we are given strong hints that Terach left because Avra[ha]m had decided to leave. For one thing, since Terach never made it to Canaan, there would seem to be little reason to tell us that he originally intended to go there; what's relevant is that he moved to Charan. By telling us that his original plan was to move to Canaan, the very place that Avra[ha]m is commanded to go to (even if the final destination wasn't stated explicitly), the Torah indicates that it was really Terach who followed Avra[ha]m, not the other way around. Secondly, when they left (11:31), we are told that "they left with them." If everyone was going because Terach had decided to move his family, it should have been "and they left with him," as it was Terach who was calling the shots and everyone else went along with him. By telling us that "they" (i.e. Sarai and Lot) "went with them" (i.e. Terach and Avra[ha]m), the Torah is clearly indicating that Avra[ha]m was at least as much the one who decided to leave as Terach was. And since this is Terach's narrative, it is likely that it was really Avra[ha]m who started the process, with Terach's decision to follow his son being presented as his decision ("and Terach took") because (a) Terach didn't have to follow his son, and (b) it is Terach's life that is the focus here.

Terach's narrative ends with his death (11:32), at which point the Torah switches perspectives, making Avra[ha]m the focus. Since the reason Avra[ha]m

decided to leave Ur Kasdim is primary to his narrative, the Torah recounts the same trip that was described at the end of Parashas Noach a second time, at the beginning of Parashas Lech L'cha, starting with the communication from G-d that Avra[ha]m should "leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house" (i.e. he should go whether or not his family decides to go too). Avra[ha]m's "going, as G-d had commanded him" (12:4) therefore refers to his trip from Ur Kasdim to Charan. Although the ultimate goal was to move to Canaan, the family settled in Charan (11:31), where Avra[ha]m developed a religious following (see Rashi on 12:5). He subsequently traveled to Canaan (see <http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5768/noach.pdf> and <http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5768/lechLecha.pdf>, pgs 7-8), but didn't move to Canaan permanently until he was 75 years old (12:4), perhaps because that's when he realized his father wasn't going to leave Charan, or perhaps because of another communication from G-d. From this perspective, this verse (12:4) is not focusing on Avra[ha]m's move from Charan to Canaan, but on his trip from Ur Kasdim to Charan, with the point of the second half of the verse being that he stayed in Charan until he was 75 years old, not that he left Charan to go to Canaan when he was 75. The move from Charan to Canaan is described in the next verse (12:5), followed by his experiences in Canaan.

Since there were two stages to Avra[ha]m's move from Ur Kasdim to Canaan, first from Ur Kasdim to Charan and then from Charan to Canaan, and Lot accompanied Avra[ha]m for both legs of the journey, the Torah first tells us that "Lot went with him" (12:4) from Ur Kasdim to Charan, making it clear that he was following his uncle Avra[ha]m and not his grandfather Terach (and would have left Ur Kasdim even if Terach had stayed), and then tells us (12:5) that Lot went with Avra[ha]m again when he moved to Canaan. © 2012 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

In Parshat Lech Lecha, among the blessings that Avraham was to receive for leaving all that he had, was the blessing that he himself should be a blessing (12:2). How does one become a blessing? Furthermore, Rashi comments that G-d promised Avraham that although he would be identified with Yitzchak and Yakov, any such blessings would end with Avraham's name at its conclusion. If the sages are correct that Yitzchak and Yakov reached higher levels than Avraham, what made him so special that any blessing would end with him?

Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that Avraham merited greater distinction because he was the first to establish faith in Hashem (G-d). Although those after him reached greater heights, Avraham's accomplishments were more worthy. Maybe this can

explain how Avraham himself became the blessing: Taking initiative and starting something you believe is important for society (or for any reason) is a blessing on its own, because it lays the framework for others to build on it. G-d promised Avraham, and in turn promised us, that, if we become leaders and initiators, our initial efforts will never be forgotten and we will always be remembered as a blessing. © 2012 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

Avrohom was tested ten times, each test bringing latent potential to the realm of realization, programming the spiritual DNA that would be passed on to his descendants, the nation of Israel.

Soon after Avrohom's arrival in Eretz Yisroel, a famine struck. According to Rashi, this was one of his tests, seeing if he would have complaints against Hashem who first instructed him to go to Eretz Yisroel and was now rendering it unfit for him to remain. Avrom, personifying the middah {attribute} of bitachon {firm trust} in Hashem, accepts the Divine decision, even though its understanding is beyond him, and descends to Mitzrayim.

"And it was, as they drew close to Mitzrayim, and he (Avrom) said to Sarei (Avrohom's wife, name later changed to Sarah): Hineh 'na' yadati {I 'na' know} that you are a good-looking woman." [12:11] Afraid of what the Egyptians might do to the husband of such a woman, they agree to only mention that Sarah is Avrohom's (married) sister (she was actually his niece, however, with grandchildren called and considered children, a niece would also be called and considered a sister).

Much discussion is generated over the word 'na'-I 'na' know that you are a good-looking woman." The usual meaning of 'na' is please. However, Rashi here explains it to mean 'now'.

What is the meaning of Avrohom now being aware of Sarah's beauty?

Rashi explains that the simple understanding is that Avrohom, of course, was well aware of her beauty and had been for quite a long time. However, now that they were traveling to a place known for its adulterous ways (S'forno) where such beauty was not commonplace, Avrohom now needed to be concerned about that beauty and take steps to avert any harm that her beauty might cause.

The Gaon of Vilna writes that a very righteous person has what's called 'chut shel chessed' {a 'thread of charm'} surrounding them. The Talmud [Megillah 13A] teaches that Queen Esther actually had a greenish complexion. She did not have natural beauty, yet her righteousness gave off a beautiful glow.

The difference between a natural beauty and a 'chut shel chessed' can be discerned in a situation

where that beauty will cause others to stumble. In such a situation, the natural beauty will remain, posing its dangers, while the 'chut shel chessed' will dissipate.

The Vilna Gaon explains that when Avrohom saw that Sarah's beauty had remained, even as they were approaching the dangers of Mitzrayim, he now knew that (in addition to the beauty of her righteousness) she had natural beauty and he had better plan to stave off that danger.

Alternatively, Rashi offers a different explanation. He writes that the normal way of the world is that a person gets harried from the wearying effects of travel (ever try riding a camel for even five minutes?) and looks it. However, when Avrohom saw that Sarah's beauty was unaffected by the rigors of travel, he now understood just how beautiful she was and he knew that they had to make some preventative plans before they reached Mitzrayim.

Although there are many different interpretations as to Avrohom's awareness of Sarah's natural beauty, his appreciation of Sarah's innate beauty and qualities resounds throughout the story of their life together and her subsequent death.

As such, the relationship of Avrohom and Sarah stands as a beacon of light to us, thousands of years later...

I've witnessed many relationships. Some have been worn out and have lost their luster from the rigors of travel down the road of life while others have built on the hardship-tests that life invariably deals, becoming stronger and more beautiful with every jolt and bump along life's road.

I remember my father and I bringing my grandfather to the hospital to visit his wife, my grandmother. At the time, my grandparents a"n had been married over sixty years. While we were there visiting, a nurse came to take my grandmother out of her bed for some sort of treatment. My grandfather immediately jumped up to smooth out the sheets, making sure that my grandmother would be as comfortable as possible when she would again lay down.

Each Shabbos, my grandfather would walk the considerable distance to the hospital to spend the afternoon with her. My brother told me the impression it made on him when he went to pick him up after Shabbos and found him sitting next to her, stroking her arm. Seeing the beauty in each other, each of them in their eighties.

I've also witnessed tragically sad situations. Relationships where the surreal glow of the wedding smiles have become jaded over time.

Each relationship is, of course, unique and each has its particular hurdles and difficulties. However, a common denominator in any good relationship is the focus on the positive. Every one has faults and every relationship is begun with that realization. The early

glow comes from the focus being on the beautiful aspects of each person.

As we wind our way down the long and winding road of life, our focus must be on the positive qualities of those making the trek with us, allowing us to enjoy the constant surprise of 'na' {now} knowing and realizing just how beautiful our co-travelers are. © 2012 Rabbi Y. Ciner and torah.org

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

“**A**nd he said, 'My Lord, G-d, how can I know that I will inherit it?'" (Bereishis 15:8)

It was a valid question in Avraham's time, and it is a pressing one in ours. It wasn't that Avraham doubted G-d's promise, but as the Leshem explains, he doubted the Jewish people's ability to remain worthy of the promise down the road.

What about the fact that it says that whatever G-d promises for good is never rescinded (Brochos 7a)? That, explains the Leshem, is only if the promise is not the reason for the sin, that is, the promise of Eretz Yisroel does not make the Jewish people confident enough to sin, believing that the promise will protect them from expulsion. That would be like saying, "I will sin and Yom Kippur will atone for me" (Yoma 85b).

However, explains the Leshem, if the promise is not the reason for the sin, then the sin cannot cancel the promise for good (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 4, Siman 4). Hence, G-d's answer back to Avraham would have been: Sin alone won't cause them to be exiled, unless it is this promise of inheriting the land that will give them the confidence to sin. The Midrash says something similar regarding the Continual Offering the Jewish people used to bring twice a day every day during Temple times. One was brought first thing in the morning to atone for sins committed by the nation during the night, and a second one was brought at dusk to atone for sins committed during the day. If so, the Midrash asks, how could the Jewish people be exiled if they atoned for their sins 24 hours a day, seven days a week?

The answer, of course, is that it was the knowledge that atonement was forthcoming each day that made Jews careless and sinful. Once that was the case, the Continual Offerings no longer worked for the nation, and lacking atonement, the sins just piled up on a daily basis until the land could no longer support the people, and had to spit them out (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:6).

This would help to explain the situation today. Today, in Eretz Yisroel, so many Jews not only do not keep the Torah, they even indulge in activities that the Torah calls abominations. (CBS's "60 Minutes" did a 20 minute spot on Tel Aviv, calling it a "Modern Day Sodom," something with which the people living there seemed to have no problem.)

Yet the land does not spit them out (at least not yet). Indeed, some Jews living there even make it difficult for those who do observe Torah to live according to their traditions. Some despise Torah and those who learn it, and have gone out of their way to interfere with both, and yet, they remain in Eretz Yisroel living comfortable lives?

Is G-d just looking the other way? Is this merely a function of hester panim, the hiding of G-d's face? Or, is it just that the righteous people living on the land are so righteous that they somehow counterbalance the bad these people perpetrate against G-d and their own people? Perhaps it is a combination of both.

Perhaps. However, the Ramak (Rabbi Moshe Cordevero) explained this anomaly this way: "Anyone who lives in Eretz Yisroel is considered a tzadik even if it doesn't seem to be so. For if he weren't a tzadik, then the land would spit him out, as is written, 'And the land shall spit out its inhabitants' (Vayikra 18:25) Therefore, regarding even those who act as evildoers, if they aren't spat out of the land then G-d calls him a tzadik..." (Tuv HaAretz, The Advantage of Living in Eretz Yisroel and the Blemish of Living in the Diaspora)

The first time I read this remarkable statement, I immediately thought to myself, "Even the people living here who seem so evil?" The answer to my question came as fast as I thought it: "... Even if they are assumed to be evil."

Exclamation Mark! I had never heard that before, and I know from traveling and public speaking that few, if any at all, have heard it as well. What is this remarkable idea based upon, since it seems so counterintuitive from a Torah perspective? The Ramak explains: "This is what is meant by the verse, 'This is the Gate of G-d, the righteous shall enter it' (Tehillim 118:20); the Gate of G-d, refers to Eretz Yisroel, as we see from Ya'akov Avinu who called it, 'the gate of heaven' (Bereishis 28:17). Furthermore, the end of the verse in Tehillim '... the righteous will enter it-tzadikim yavo'u vo' has the first letters spelling tzvi, implying that Eretz HaTzvi is the gate to G-d and that all those that enter it are called righteous, for once they enter they don't leave." (Tuv HaAretz, The Advantage of Living in Eretz Yisroel and the Blemish of Living in the Diaspora)

If this is true for Jews who are doing what seem like evil deeds, how much more so is this true for Jews who are sincerely trying to serve G-d to the best of their ability, or even just close to it. How can that be? This is also explained:

"... If one were to be very precise we would find a statement later in the same Talmud that is seemingly contrary to the above: Rav Elazar says, 'All those the dwell in Eretz Yisroel remain without transgression (seemingly even intentional ones), as is said 'A dweller of Jerusalem shall not say, 'I am ill,' for the people dwelling there shall be forgiven of sin' (Yeshayahu 33:24). This seems to include even those sins done intentionally! But, how is it possible by merely sitting and

doing nothing that you can be granted forgiveness for intentional sins? We can find a solution to this from the Midrash: The verse, 'G-d, You have favored Your land, You have returned the captivity of Ya'akov' (Tehillim 95:2) can best be understood with the aid of the verse, 'A land which the Lord, your G-d, seeks out...' (Devarim 11:12), implying that G-d seeks out ways and places His eyes upon her, until her actions are deemed pleasing to G-d. The commandments that are fulfilled there, such as tithing and abiding by the laws of Shmittah, cause G-d to be pleased with the actions of the Jews (Yalkut Shimoni on Tehillim 115d). Likewise the Torah says, 'then the land shall be appeased for its Sabbaticals' (Vayikra 26:34); thus G-d will be appeased by the land. In other words, what bares the burden of the sins of the land in which they dwell... His land... carries the burden of those sins." (Tuv HaAretz, The Advantage of Living in Eretz Yisroel and the Blemish of Living in the Diaspora)

This is the real answer that Avraham Avinu needed to hear. G-d would have told him that even if his descendants did sin, the land had the capacity to atone for their sins. As long as they continued to tithe their produce and observe the Shmittah, and not rely upon the capacity of the land to atone for them, then Eretz Yisroel itself would maintain their merit to keep the land.

However, perhaps this is not what concerned Avraham Avinu. Perhaps what concerned him was how they would get into the land in the first place. Once there, the land would atone for all sins, but to get there in the first place if they were already sinners might have been a different story, as the Ramak adds:

"This is the opposite to those that arrive in Eretz Yisrael and don't pay attention to the fact that they are living in the palace of the King. They who are rebellious, transgressing, and abound in their drunkenness and feasts of vanity, frivolity, emptiness and hedonism, are described by the following verse, 'But you came and contaminated My land, and made My heritage into an abomination' (Yirmiyahu 2:7). The verse, 'When you come up to appear before Me, who sought this from your hands to trample in My courtyards' (Yeshayahu 1:12), also applies to them. These people shouldn't deceive themselves into thinking that they will remain in the Holy Land after their deaths. Rather even in their death they shall be cast out of the land like dogs, as it says: 'The souls of all evildoers who die in Eretz Yisroel will be cast out to the Diaspora' as is written in the verse, 'He shall cast out the soul of your enemy as a stone is shot out of a slingshot' (Shmuel 1:25:29). For in the future G-d will grasp the corners of the land, and will shake off all contamination to the Diaspora, as is written, 'To grasp the edges of the earth, and shake the wicked from it' (Iyov 38:13) (Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer, Ch. 33)... Therefore, any person coming to Eretz Yisroel should tremble upon his arrival to the Land, and should resolve himself to be doubly fearful of heaven than how he was in the Diaspora, and constantly be cognizant of

his dwelling in the King's palace." (Tuv HaAretz, The Advantage of Living in Eretz Yisroel and the Blemish of Living in the Diaspora)

Hence G-d showed him, through prophecy, that no matter what, his descendants would inherit the land. And, we have learned that as long as we don't rely upon our Divine right to the land to sin, the land will atone for our sins, so that we can keep it. So it was promised. So it has been. So it shall remain to be. © 2012 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

Near the beginning of our parashah, Hashem promises Avraham (12:2), "I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing." Rashi z"l quotes the Gemara (Pesachim 117b), which states: The phrase, "I will make of you a great nation," alludes to that which we say in shemoneh esrei, "Elokei Avraham"; "I will bless you" alludes to the phrase, "Elokei Yitzchak"; "I will... make your name great" alludes to, "Elokei Yaakov." One might think, the Gemara continues, that we should conclude the berachah by mentioning again the names of all the Patriarchs. The Torah therefore states, "You shall be a blessing"-meaning, with you (Avraham) they shall conclude the blessing and not with the other Patriarchs [i.e., "Baruch Atah Hashem, Magen Avraham"]. [Until here from Rashi]

Why, in fact, do we conclude by mentioning Avraham alone? R' Aryeh Finkel shlita (rosh yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Modi'in Ilit, Israel) explains: Each of the Patriarchs perfected a different trait. Avraham epitomized the trait of chessed / kindness, and it was through his acts of kindness that he spread knowledge of the One G-d. For example, our Sages say that after he fed guests, he taught them to thank G-d for their food. While each of the traits that the Patriarchs exemplified is important to learn from, the most important is Avraham's, because Avraham's chessed teaches us about the chessed of G-d, Who sustains the whole world.

R' Finkel continues: There is one day of the week which is particularly suited to reflecting on Hashem's chessed, and that is Shabbat, as we say in Tehilim 92, the psalm for Shabbat, "To speak of Your kindness in the morning." (Yavo Shiloh p.354) © 2012 S. Katz and torah.org

